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CHAPTER 14

Coffins, Cartonnage, and Sarcophagi

Kathlyn M. Cooney

Beginning with the first complex civilization in Egypt in the mid fourth millennium BCE to the last days of paganism in the third and fourth centuries CE, ancient people crafted decorated coffins, cartonnages, and sarcophagi. These body containers served broad religious, social, and practical functions for their ancient Egyptian owners, and were created to enclose, display, protect, and transform a human corpse. The inclusion of human flesh and bone into a work of crafted visual art adds an additional layer of complexity to the object's functional meaning. Therefore, coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnage must always be interpreted with reference to the corpse inside; they acted as shelters, homes, or even as secondary bodies made of imperishable material like wood or stone. From the Predynastic to the Middle Kingdom, when body containers were rectangular in shape, the coffin was crafted as a kind of architectural element—a house for the dead person inside. From the New Kingdom onwards, when coffins took on an anthropomorphic shape, they functioned as a replacement body for the dead, meant to refashion him or her into an idealized and youthful form.

No matter what time period, the Egyptian body container was treated multi-dimensionally. Almost all ancient Egyptian body containers include external decoration that identifies the deceased on the inside by means of inscriptions with the name, titles, and some indication of the gender of the dead, as well as depictions of the deceased in an idealized human form. The inside of the container often contained representations of the realm of the dead as well as the tools and nourishment required to survive the journey there. Middle Kingdom coffins, for example, include labeled maps to guide the dead to their destination (Hermesen 1991; Backes 2003), in addition to lengthy text spells allowing the deceased to take on alternative forms, find loved ones, and provide protection from dangerous demons (Faulkner 1973–1978; Willems 1996a).

It is important to remember that the ancient Egyptians meant these body containers to have multiple viewers—first, the living audience left behind who viewed the coffin from

the outside during funerary rituals, and second, the deceased who the Egyptians believed was looking at the object from the space inside the coffin. These various perspectives encouraged careful decoration of the coffin interior that it was impossible for the living to see once the mummy was placed inside. Having said this, coffin decoration varies through the millennia, and there are periods when it was considered fashionable to leave the coffin interior unadorned. During the New Kingdom, for example, the interior of an anthropoid coffin was painted only with a shiny black resin, representative of the rich black earth of regeneration and the dark void of the underworld space.

The Function of the Body Container

Because an ancient Egyptian body container was understood to protect and transform the dead, most people were keen to acquire one if they could afford it. While it is impossible to get an exact count of all the surviving coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnages from ancient Egypt, it would be safe to say that tens of thousands of them endure, including some high-quality examples preserved in museums around the world and thousands more left in Egypt's graveyards, complete or in pieces. The sheer numbers of body containers are a testament to the ancient Egyptian belief in a kind of functional materialism—that a *physical* and *crafted* object could act for the deceased in a number of ways (Cooney 2008a).

First, the Egyptians believed the body container could protect the body of the dead, creating a material perimeter of sorts and keeping the delicate corpse intact. For example, coffins from Dynasties 18 to 21 usually include depictions of the goddess Nut on the chest of an anthropoid coffin, the four Sons of Horus, Thoth, and Anubis on the case sides, Isis at the feet, and Nephthys at the coffin's head, all of whom provided a kind of force-field against the powers of malice in the afterlife.

The Egyptian body container was also meant to magically provide for the dead in the afterlife by means of pictures of food, oils, linens, and other objects which could become real; also by means of inscriptions that included lists of offerings for the dead or magical spells which were thought to bring actual food, drink, and other luxuries into being.

Another of the body container's functions was to act as a physical portal between the worlds of the living and the dead. Most coffins have some means of connection placed on its surface such as a pair of *udjat*-eyes, which were painted on the exterior of coffins throughout Egyptian history. During the Old and Middle Kingdom, they were placed at one end of the rectangular coffin so that the dead could see out if laid on his or her side. According to Egyptian belief, these hieroglyphic eyes allowed the dead to see and move beyond the coffin space. A false door was often painted on the interior of such coffins right in front of the face of the deceased to provide a passage through which the soul could travel.

On anthropoid coffins of the New Kingdom and thereafter, *udjat*-eyes were retained on the coffin sides and front. However, the depiction of the deceased's face—with open eyes, nose, and mouth carved from wood—was understood to be the means of access between the worlds of the living and the dead. The mummy's actual face would have been directly

behind this ideal representation when the corpse was placed into the coffin, and the painting of facial features onto the coffin's surface allowed the dead to see, taste, and smell the living world. The *physical presence* of coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnage allowed the spirit of the dead to come into the world of the living, and likewise for the living to commune with the dead. The coffin was therefore used as a tool of communication, made of materials from this world but containing the body of the dead.

The body container was also believed to have transformative abilities. The coffin was meant to change the dead into a kind of divinity, into an *akh*-soul that had successfully passed into the afterlife unscathed. The deceased individual was equated with the god of the underworld Osiris and the sun god, because of these gods' ability to raise themselves from the dead. From Dynasty 6 on, the deceased's name and titles are written with that of Osiris in hieroglyphs on the coffin (Assmann (2005), 33, 74), essentially renaming the dead as an Osiris figure capable of rebirth. Spells invoking Osiris and the sun god were inscribed onto the body container enveloping the dead. During the New Kingdom, images of Osirian and solar divinities were painted onto the surface of the body container, creating a new reality for the dead man or woman in which he or she could dwell with these gods in the afterlife. On many Egyptian coffins, the deceased is pictured receiving offerings in the afterlife, seated before a table overflowing with food and drink. In later dynasties the dead appear in a pure white garment in the company of the gods, with hands raised in worship. From the ancient Egyptian point of view, to depict the dead in this way was to create such an actuality. The coffin's physical presence and decoration not only allowed the transformation of the dead into an eternal being, it depicted this state as a *fait accompli*.

The body container was also a physical entrance into the afterlife itself, a space that the Egyptians called the *duat*, believed to be inside the body of the sky goddess Nut, the mother of Osiris and the sun god (Allen 1988). Placing the dead into the coffin interior was therefore akin to putting him or her onto a fast track to the parts of the *duat* where the Blessed Dead dwelled. From the perspective of the deceased inside the coffin, he or she was believed to be inside Nut (Assmann (2005), 168–172). The coffin was therefore a kind of womb, which is reflected in the Old Kingdom word for sarcophagus *mwt* or “mother.” In later periods, inner body containers were often called *sukhet* or “egg,” equating the body container with this holder of new life (Cooney (2007), 17–43). In the New Kingdom and later, the most important text on the coffin lid read, “Words spoken by the Osiris NN, ‘Oh my mother Nut, stretch yourself over me that I may be placed among the Imperishable Stars.’” Late Period coffins often included the figure of the sky goddess on the interior lid stretched out over the deceased in a kind of embrace. Sometimes her body was decorated with five-pointed stars, representing the constellations of the night sky.

Body containers served a variety of religious purposes for the deceased, but we should not forget that coffins were also meant to perform social functions as the focus of public funerary rituals. Body containers were ideally commissioned and created during the lifetime of the deceased, who would have taken great care to put the best foot forward into the afterlife. The coffin displayed the social and economic situation of the dead man or woman, but it was also a reflection on the status of his or her family. In social terms,

ancient Egyptian body containers can be categorized as objects of conspicuous display meant to claim social status in this life and the next. They were luxury items that could be embellished with painting, relief, or even inlay and gilding.

Coffin ownership was reserved for the elite who could afford to buy and bury them in the ground, thus taking the wealth of wood, inlay, and gilding out of economic circulation. The creation of richly decorated body containers was a clever way of magically catapulting one's wealth into the afterlife. Not only did the coffin showcase the status of the dead in life, it enabled him or her to continue in an elite position in the afterlife. If we accept that only a small minority, perhaps less than 5 percent of ancient Egyptians, could afford a coffin of their very own, it is still likely that non-elites would have desired the protection, transformation, and communication provided by a coffin even though they could not afford their own discrete object. It is possible, therefore, that many body containers were used temporarily within ritual practice but were not buried with the deceased (Cooney (2007), 275–279).

Coffin Types

While the poor made do with simple textiles like palm-rib matting, roughly woven linen shrouds, or were simply interred in a pit in the sand (Grajetzki 2003), elite ancient Egyptians purchased all kinds of body containers such as coffins, cartonnages, and sarcophagi to surround and protect the deceased. The word “coffin” is generally used in current Egyptology to describe a wooden container that held the corpse, while the “sarcophagus” usually describes an object made of stone that was big enough to contain one or more coffins. For example, during the Old and Middle Kingdoms, it was common for a high elite individual to be buried in an inner rectangular coffin made of decorated wood which fit into an outer rectangular sarcophagus made of stone. The distinction between “coffin” and “sarcophagus” can be complicated, particularly because Egyptologists specializing in the New Kingdom and later often refer to an outer rectangular container as a “sarcophagus” even if it was made out of wood.

Some anthropoid wooden covers are called “mummy boards” by Egyptologists because they do not enclose the corpse but instead lie on top of it. The “cartonnage” usually refers to an innermost piece that enveloped the body, and is differentiated by its material, a kind of *papier maché* made of linen and plaster. “Cartonnage” can describe a mummy mask which covered the head and upper chest, a mummy board which covered the top of the body, or a shell which fit tightly around the entire corpse. There are still many disagreements about appropriate terms for body containers. For instance, many older publications used the word “sarcophagus” for what would now be called a “coffin.” It should also be noted that the term “coffin studies” is often used by Egyptologists to describe the study of all body containers, including sarcophagi and cartonnage.

The words used by western Egyptologists are not always appropriate in meaning from the Egyptian perspective. For example, the Greek word “sarcophagus” meaning “flesh-eater” does not fit with an Egyptian mindset of bodily preservation. The ancient Egyptians naturally had their own specialized vocabulary for different body containers, and these changed and developed over the 3,000 plus years of coffin use. The word *qerset* denotes the “burial” in a general sense, but it could also be used to describe a

rectangular sarcophagus with a vaulted lid. The word *afdet* means “chest” and seems to have denoted a wooden box-like container for the dead. The word *djebat* means “shrine” and described the rectangular outer sarcophagus of the New Kingdom. The word *wet* referred to the coffin or to the embalmed body inside, depending on how it was written, and during the New Kingdom it described the wooden coffin which took on bodily form. Another word for a coffin was *neb ankh* or “lord of life,” which seemed to refer to the potential of the container to transform the deceased into a form of Osiris. The word *sukhet* or “egg” usually denotes a mummy board or cartonnage piece that contains the dead like a cocoon, preparing him or her for rebirth. There are dozens of Egyptian terms for different body containers, and most end in a *-t*, indicating a feminine word, thus fitting with the Egyptian understanding of the body container as a womb-like enclosure or the body of Nut (Cooney 2008b).

Coffins and Ancient Egyptian Society

The ancient Egyptians crafted their body containers to nest inside one another to make a set that could fit into a tomb in a spatially efficient way. Wealthy Egyptians tried to include as many pieces in their coffin set as possible (Bettrum 2013). During the later Middle Kingdom, a rich official might have owned a stone sarcophagus, inside of which were a wooden rectangular coffin and a mummy mask covering his corpse. During the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, wealthy individuals commissioned nested wooden anthropoid coffin sets of three to five pieces, including as many as three coffins, plus a mummy board and mask. Lesser elites could usually afford only one coffin, maybe with an additional mummy mask of cartonnage. The ancient Egyptians who could afford to commission and bury coffins in their tombs were of elite status. In fact, a coffin buried in a tomb was clear evidence of disposable income. The vast majority of ancient Egyptians could not afford any kind of coffin, making do instead with simple wrappings for the body.

Despite the great expense of coffins, they were far more affordable than the decorated tombs, stone relief, or statuary of the wealthiest Egyptians. Coffins were accessible to a broad swath of society, which resulted in significant variations from coffin to coffin in the quality of materials and craftsmanship. Many ancient Egyptian coffins were poorly painted and constructed. However, a tiny minority of body containers display impeccable craftsmanship, made from precious metals with delicate inlay work like the golden coffin set of King Tutankhamun. Nonetheless, every single coffin is indicative of an exclusive place in society that most Egyptians could not attain.

For the Egyptologist, coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnage are precious clues to the place of a given individual within elite society. For example, when archaeologists uncovered the tomb of Iurufef, a semi-intact tomb of the New Kingdom used until the Third Intermediate Period in Saqqara, they found only a few wooden coffins among dozens of other corpses buried only in textile wrappings. The researchers were quickly able to conclude that those individuals with coffins had the highest social status among their social group (Raven 1991). In the same way, Egyptologists can assume that if an individual owned a sarcophagus of hard stone like granite, as we often see at the Old Kingdom necropolis of Giza, then the owners were of very high status because granite found its source in the

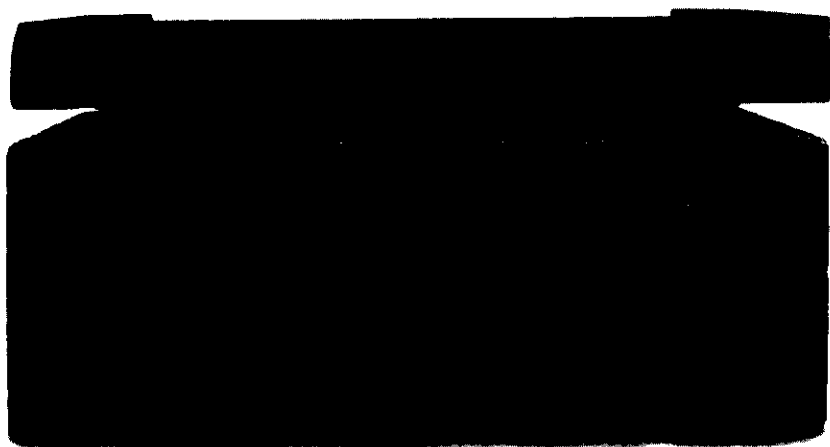


Figure 14.1 Old Kingdom red granite sarcophagus from Giza with palace facade decoration, British Museum EA 71620. © Trustees of the British Museum.

royal monopoly of state quarries (Figure 14.1). In comparison, limestone was cheaper, more readily available and easier to cut. In the same way, a coffin of imported cedar from the Levant, such as the early Middle Kingdom coffin of Djehutynakht (Freed et al. 2009; see Plate 3), also falls into a higher value category compared to another coffin of the same date made of local sycamore, tamarisk, or acacia wood. Cedar had a pleasant aroma and an even grain, allowing the carpenter to use large planks, while local Egyptian wood was knotty and had to be pieced together from small scraps (Nicholson and Shaw 2000).

Coffin Studies Methodologies

Coffin studies are invariably very specialized, making it difficult for the non-Egyptologist art historian or anthropologist to participate in the discourse. It requires time and training for a researcher to understand the visual differences between coffins of Dynasties 11 and 12 or between mummy masks of Dynasties 18 and 19, for instance, and dating disagreements will always haunt the discipline. In addition, the sheer number of body containers turns many potential researchers away. There are thousands upon thousands of coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnage objects spread about hundreds of institutions in Egypt, Europe, the Americas, and Asia, necessitating an encyclopedic approach and further specialization *within* the field of Egyptian coffin studies. In fact, the study of body containers is generally divided into chronological divisions to which researchers devote their energies: (1), Archaic Period and Old Kingdom; (2), First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom; (3), Second Intermediate Period and New Kingdom; (4), Third Intermediate Period; (5), Late Period; (6), Ptolemaic Period; and (7), the Roman Period. Most studies are limited to one period, and it is rare that a scholar can master the visual markers, typology, and meaning of body containers throughout all of the different time periods.

Provenance issues are a constant worry to Egyptian coffin specialists, partly because coffins were so portable and reusable. Tomb robbery and usurpation were common practices in the ancient world (Baines and Lacovara 2002; Cooney 2011). Adding to those issues, every Egyptologist has heard tales of early nineteenth-century campfires made of ancient coffins or even mummies (Ikram and Dodson 1998). From the eighteenth century until quite recently, coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnage considered aesthetically pleasing or materially valuable were taken from their tombs and shipped off to collectors all over the world with no thought of recording a findspot or other associated objects. Not only have we lost provenance information for many of the coffins in institutions around the world, but this kind of collecting has ignored the coffins and containers of lower elites. Any funerary objects considered ugly, provincial, or poorly made were passed over by collectors or even used for other purposes, thus removing them from the archaeological and scholarly record (Grajetzki 2003). Even when coffins were found intact, like the caches of Dynasty 21 coffins belonging to the Amun priesthood in western Thebes (Niwinski 1988) or the Dynasty 19 tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina (Shedid and Shedid 1994), objects were not removed by controlled excavations. Exact findspots and associations were usually not recorded by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century archaeologists. Additionally, these coffins were then sold off to dozens of different collections, splitting up each burial deposit. Coffins from intact tombs were also lost or sold to a buyer with no interest in showing the piece to the public. Occasionally, a coffin will pop up in a very unlikely place, such as in the private museum of landed gentry in a castle basement or in the living room of a private collector in a large city. Egyptian coffins are still traded on the antiquities market and, for most of them, there is little information about their original provenance in Egypt beyond the general region.

The problem of provenance demands that Egyptologists use other clues to establish a coffin's origin, including decorative styles, individuals' names and titles, or even the past history of divisions and sales. For example, if the deceased's title was connected to the court of King Khufu, then his sarcophagus likely comes from the Old Kingdom necropolis of Giza. Or, if a coffin has the name and title of a High Priest of Amun, it is likely from Dynasty 21 Thebes (Figure 14.2). Likewise, if that coffin entered a museum collection in 1893, then it probably belonged to the Bab el-Gassus cache in Deir el-Bahri found in 1891. Still, without controlled excavations and recorded data about its findspot and association with other objects, a body container becomes an isolated piece of data without the tomb in which it was interred, without the other coffins and objects that were there, and even without the deceased individual that once inhabited it. In fact, many institutions have removed (and even de-accessioned) the mummies from the coffins they own, because it was determined that human bodies do not fit with museum aesthetics or missions. Thus, not only have coffins been removed from their tombs, but they have also been separated from their very reason for being, from the dead owner him or herself. The mummy is an essential part of the coffin ensemble, allowing a researcher to work with forensic specialists, determining health, gender, age of death, cause of death, and reuse, all invaluable information for researchers with an interest in the social circumstances of a given coffin (e.g., David 2008).

The field of coffin studies is also complicated by issues of ownership in ancient times, particularly reuse and theft. Because coffins and sarcophagi were in such short supply

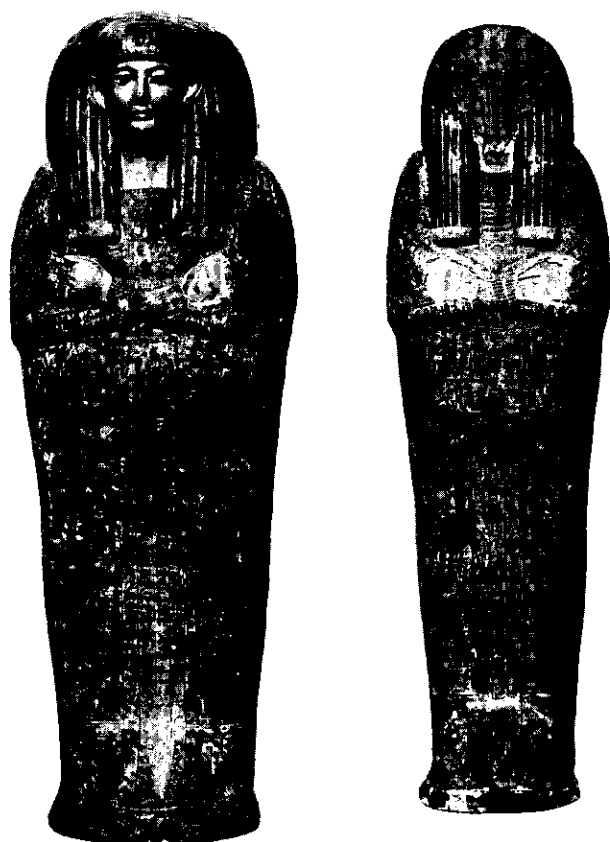


Figure 14.2 Yellow coffin set of Masaharta, from the Deir el-Bahari cache DB 320, Dynasty 21, Egyptian Museum Cairo, CG 61027 (after Daressy (1909), pl. XXXVI).

for the ancient Egyptians, they were often reused during times of economic stress and upheaval (Cooney 2011). Sometimes the names and titles of the original owner were rubbed out to make room for the identifying information of a usurping owner, or the entire surface was replastered and repainted, covering all trace of the painting underneath. In other cases, there was little attention paid to matching or keeping up with current styles when reusing coffins, and coffin sets were pieced together from a number of different pieces such as a mummy board from one previous owner, a coffin from another, and a mummy mask from a third. Even the Dynasty 21 royal burial of King Psusennes included a reused granite sarcophagus once belonging to King Merneptah of Dynasty 19 (Montet 1951). And the hastily assembled burial of King Tutankhamun of Dynasty 18 included reused funerary material, including his second gilded coffin, which once belonged to another ruler whose name was rubbed out (Reeves 1990).

During some periods, Egyptian body containers were decorated with a dizzying array of figural scenes and texts. Ironically, this very richness is another complicating factor for coffin studies. One densely decorated coffin can justifiably demand the attention of a scholar for years. A Middle Kingdom coffin replete with tiny columns of Coffin Text spells

and colorful friezes of objects can take years of work to document, process, compare, and analyze (Willems 1996). A Third Intermediate Period coffin with colorful decoration on the interior and exterior can demand two volumes (van Walsem 1997). Not only that, but the scholar must become a jack of all trades, able to deal with materials sciences, religious studies, social history, art history, and archaeological methods. For example, materials like wood and paint can tell us a great deal about economy and the status of the coffin owner, but so can the study of the deceased's administrative titles and genealogy.

Coffins, cartonnage, and sarcophagi represent many things to the researcher. They are documents about the social status of the person contained inside. They record the economy of the time, including the availability of certain resources or trade networks, as evidenced by a red pigment from Spain on the wrappings and cartonnage of a Roman Egyptian mummy (Walton and Trentelman 2009). Body containers are a means to understand the makeup of Egyptian society, particularly as a tool by which to examine differences of status or gender (Meskell 1999; Willems 2001; Grajetzki 2003; Richards 2005; Cooney 2007, 2010). Coffins of particular elites can instruct the researcher about political and status history (Schiaparelli 1927; Dodson 1998; Taylor 1999). Coffins are a window into Egyptian beliefs in rebirth after death with complicated religious spells, maps of the underworld, and protective iconography (Assmann 2005; Manassa 2007). The decorated coffin can also be considered an object of art (Terrace 1968). Still, because body containers come from a wider section of society than most other formal Egyptian art forms like tomb painting or sculpture, many art historians have discounted the art historical value of coffins, cartonnage, and sarcophagi. The execution, type, and richness of decoration on a coffin of a lower elite may pale in comparison to its elite companions; however, it is this very comparison that tells us about the unequal makeup of Egyptian society and its connections to visual media as a form of social display (Cooney 2007).

Coffin Development

Coffin studies demand detailed descriptions of stylistic development so that researchers can understand the changing Egyptian perspectives on death and rebirth, social structures, economic systems, and funerary fashions from the fourth millennium BCE (the time of the earliest ancient Egyptian elite coffin burials) to the fourth century CE when some of the last ancient Egyptian body containers were produced. Many coffin studies are primarily typological, meaning that the researcher focuses on detailed information about style, material, and craftsmanship in order to determine the dating of a given body container (Taylor 1985; Niwinski 1988; Willems 1988; Lapp 1993). Egyptologists have been known to argue *ad nauseum* about contested dating for a particular coffin, and for good reason. Without the establishment of typologies, Egyptologists would be unable to date an unprovenanced coffin to a particular time period and would thus be unable to apply any larger conclusions to the context in which the coffin was a part. Coffin typology is well established in Egyptology, and many excellent surveys have been written (Niwinski 1976; Taylor 1989; Lapp 1993; Ikram and Dodson 1998).

Coffin development can be tied to political and social contexts. Some coffins were produced during times of great wealth and excess, others in times of social upheaval and

economic constraints. In general, during time periods of political centralization and economic prosperity, elites owned extensive nesting coffin sets with many pieces that were part of complicated burial assemblages placed in monumental tomb complexes. Such prosperous time periods include Dynasties 4–5 of the Old Kingdom, Dynasties 11–12 of the Middle Kingdom, Dynasties 18–19 of the New Kingdom, Dynasties 25–26 of the Late Period, and the first and second centuries CE during the Roman Period. Prosperity often encouraged a faster turnover of coffin styles, because elites were able to actively compete with each other in their funerary displays. In other words, during years of plenty, coffin styles might be discarded much quicker in favor of something newer and flashier and thus more prestigious amongst fellow elites. Naturally, most of the world's collections of coffins, sarcophagi, and cartonnages on display in museums come from prosperous time periods, not only because more body containers were produced during economic booms, but also because these objects are usually of higher material value and craftsmanship and thus more sought after by modern collectors.

On the other hand, during times of political decentralization and concomitant economic upheaval, elites were not as concerned with the latest coffin fashion, returning instead to known styles that they reproduced to the best of their ability. During lean years, burial assemblages usually became simpler, more contained, and less extensive in number, and were rarely marked by sculpture or monuments on the surface of the tomb. Such burials might belong to Dynasties 9–10 of the First Intermediate Period, Dynasties 13–17 of the Second Intermediate Period, Dynasties 21–24 of the Third Intermediate Period, the Persian Period during Dynasty 27, and the late Roman Period. Coffins produced during difficult economic times are often distinguished by provincial, regional styles that are not shared throughout Egypt due to political decentralization and a lack of communication amongst elites. Because royal workshops lacked funding during hard times, craftsmen had limited access to training or comparanda pieces, which produced coffins displaying naive craftsmanship and unusual or innovative designs that deviated from the traditional canon.

The first ancient Egyptian body containers were developed at the end of the fourth millennium BCE during the Predynastic Period. These body containers were created by a new social group of emergent elites who wanted to differentiate their burials from the mass of society. Predynastic body containers were usually very simple, and most did not yet constitute coffins or sarcophagi as we understand them. It is important to remember that early elite coffins were meant to be mobile recreations of the earth as a container for the corpse, because, at this time, most people were buried in the earth or sand. The most basic body container at this time period, even for the very wealthy, was an oval or square pit in the earth, but as social inequality became more established during the Predynastic Period, wealthy people began to line burials with reed basketry, textile matting, animal skins, or, for the highest status individuals, wooden planks. Eventually, this expensive wooden veneer took on a mobile form as a rectangular wooden coffin, an object capable of being carried and displayed within funerary ritual before it was placed in a tomb. The corpse was generally flexed into a kind of fetal position inside the coffin, usually with the head oriented towards the south so that the dead could look to the west, towards the setting sun and the entrance to the *duat*, the realm of the dead. By the Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1–2), these rectangular wooden body containers had vaulted

lids, understood to be a kind of shrine or a small house for the dead inside. These early coffin boxes were embellished with false doorways through which the dead were believed to travel.

One of the biggest shifts in Egyptian coffin development happened at the beginning of the Old Kingdom in Dynasty 3 when some elites began to favor body containers that allowed the corpse to be stretched out. Within a few generations, Early Dynastic fetal position boxes soon became old-fashioned. This change was accompanied by another innovation in Egyptian funerary culture: mummification. Embalming a corpse was a time-consuming and awkward process that demanded full access to the body, something that was only possible when it was laid out in an extended position. Longer rectangular body containers would also have been easier to carry and maneuver. Furthermore, longer body containers were easier to build because they required only one axis of long wooden planks instead of two.

With the rectangular box came nested coffins as wealthy Egyptians devised multi-piece coffin sets that fit inside one another. In fact, many elites were now including stone sarcophagi to enclose their wooden coffins. Only the wealthiest of Old Kingdom elites could afford a three-piece set of two nested wooden coffins inside a stone sarcophagus. Once the tradition of nesting began, it became the norm throughout Egyptian history for elites, who tried to include as many body containers in their set as possible (Bettum 2013). It was believed that a high number of body containers were not only capable of providing additional protective layers around the corpse, but that they also allowed elites to compete and show off their funerary displays.

Most Old Kingdom coffins have been uncovered in the graveyards of Giza and Saqqara when officials clustered their tombs near the pyramids of the kings they served in life. Some of the coffins and sarcophagi from these necropoleis have no decoration whatsoever. Others bear vaulted lids which remade the box into a shrine, ostensibly elevating the dead to a kind of demi-god status. Other coffins and sarcophagi have recessed false doors carved onto the surface of the stone or painted onto the wood, through which the spirits of the dead were believed to move. Some of these coffins had hieroglyphic inscriptions. It was thought particularly important to include offering texts, which were believed magically to provide bread and beer, in addition to the names and titles of the deceased. A standard text might read: "An offering which the king gives to Osiris, Great God, Lord of Abydos, so that he might give an invocation offering of bread, beer, oxen, fowl, incense, clothing, and every good and pure thing to the soul of the venerated one NN."

By Dynasty 6, a more complicated coffin type emerged, this one with a flat lid, offering texts on the coffin exterior, and a pair of *udjat*-eyes on the coffin sides where the head of the corpse rested which were believed to allow the deceased to see and participate in funerary rituals. These coffins were carefully oriented so that the painted hieroglyphic *udjat*-eyes faced east allowing the dead to awaken and view the sun's rebirth in the horizon every morning and thus to partake in any offerings that the living might bring to the tomb during the precious daylight hours. A false door was drawn onto the coffin's interior, and the corpse was usually laid on its side so that its face would be directly in front of this passageway. This new coffin type also included offering texts and images on the coffin interior, all meant to provide sustenance and comfort within easy reach of the deceased. As the Old Kingdom drew to a close at the end of Dynasty 6, Egypt entered

into a time of political decentralization and civil war which Egyptologists call the First Intermediate Period, and the coffins of this time retained much of the late Old Kingdom styling including *udjat*-eyes, false doors, and offering texts. During this period of unstable kingship, it became difficult for elites to acquire stone sarcophagi because no king was funding the quarries. In addition, even the rich were forced to turn to local sycamore and acacia woods for wooden coffins because trade in imported cedar was disrupted by war and political turmoil.

As soon as the political situation stabilized during Dynasties 11 and 12 of the Middle Kingdom, more elites were able to include stone sarcophagi and cedar coffins in their burials. As prosperity increased, coffin styles began to develop again in favor of new, complicated designs on both the interior and exterior surfaces. In fact, the Middle Kingdom is known as an apex of intricate polychrome coffin decoration, with changes spurred on by elites competing with one another for the most beautiful and/or eye-catching coffin. Despite these innovations, the essentials of the Egyptian coffin including the false door, *udjat*-eyes, and offering texts, were retained. In fact, this retention is a key characteristic of stylistic change in Egyptian coffins; innovations were usually added to a traditional core design.

Thus, the Middle Kingdom coffin's left side was still painted with *udjat*-eyes on the outside and the false door on the inside as it was in the Old Kingdom (Figure 14.3). However, the interior was now filled with religious texts and drawings, all within easy reach of the dead individual who lay within. On the interior bottom of the coffin, craftsmen carved small-scale hieroglyphic inscriptions that Egyptologists call Coffin Texts, spells that granted the deceased powers and protection in the next world (Faulkner 1973–1978). They painted other parts of the coffin interior with carefully labeled maps of the underworld, known as the Book of Two Ways, to guide the deceased on his ultimate journey to a lake of fire and a glimpse of the god Osiris (Figure 14.4). Another



Figure 14.3 Middle Kingdom inner coffin of Sobekhotep, from the tomb of Sebekhetepi in Beni Hasan, Dynasty 12, British Museum EA 41572. © Trustees of the British Museum.

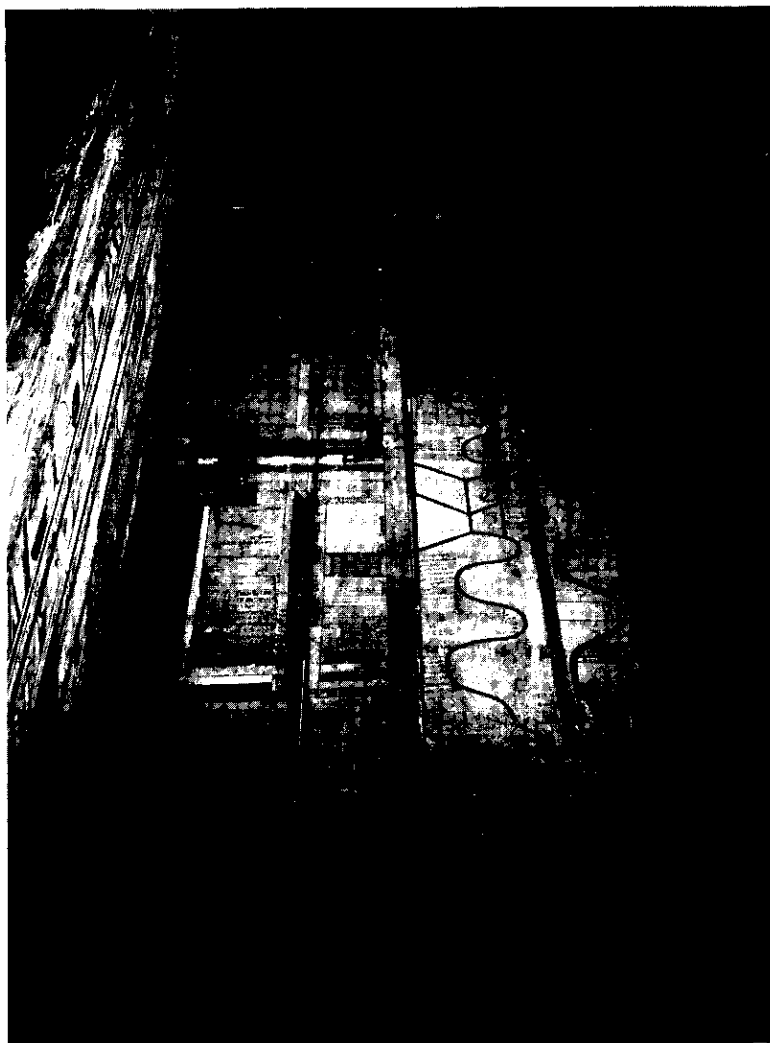


Figure 14.4 Middle Kingdom outer coffin of Gua, showing depiction of the interior with Book of Two Ways decoration, from the tomb of Gua, Deir el-Bersha, Dynasty 12, British Museum EA 30839. © Trustees of the British Museum.

innovation was the addition of object friezes, now painted on the coffin's interior, showing pictures of clothing, sandals, jewelry, oils, headrests, furniture, weapons, staffs, and other essentials for a comfortable afterlife. Craftsmen included an offering list and a picture of a funerary meal next to the false door on the coffin interior, providing sustenance right next to the face of the dead as he or she lay in the box. The Coffin Texts and Book of Two Ways represent the first religious funerary spells to which non-royal individuals had access, and elites made sure to include as many of these small-scale texts as possible on their coffin interiors.

Some of the highest quality sarcophagi of the early Middle Kingdom, such as those on the coffins belonging to the wives of Mentuhotep II buried at Deir el-Bahari, show astounding new innovations, including the depiction of human figures in various poses (Spencer 1999). These finely crafted stone containers are most famous for images of royal ladies at their leisure. Non-royal coffins and sarcophagi, on the other hand, do not have such large-scale pictorial representation. Middle Kingdom elites seemed more concerned with the inclusion of as many small-scale images as possible, including spells, offering friezes, and labeled maps.

The necropoleis themselves experienced a change during the Middle Kingdom; elites felt less obligated to be buried near the pyramid of their king in the capital necropolis. Instead, it became fashionable to be buried in a grand tomb in one's hometown. For this reason, elite coffins have been found throughout Egypt, not just in the royal graveyards of Lisht, Hawara, and Dahshur. Egyptologists have even been able to differentiate different regional styles for elite coffins, in particular a northern or Memphite type for the elites who chose burial near the king, and a southern type, centered around Assiut, for elites who were interred in local necropoleis in the Nile valley. The southern style allowed for more innovation, probably because elites were able to engage in display and competition away from the strictures of the royal court and its more traditional workshops. In fact, some of the Assiut coffins show intricate and inventive astronomical depictions on the lid's underside meant to guide the deceased through the time and space of the *duat*.

Towards the end of Dynasty 12, two important coffin innovations appear, both of which are more apparent in the south. First, elite Egyptians invented cartonnage mummy masks—idealized depictions of the deceased's face which fit snugly onto the mummy's head and upper chest. Second, they developed the anthropoid coffin, a wooden case which took the form of a wrapped human body. The anthropoid coffin was placed on its side into a larger rectangular coffin, oriented so that the face of the deceased could look out the false door and the pair of *udjat*-eyes painted on the coffin side. In other words, the face of the corpse was still oriented towards the east and the rising sun, but it was now covered with a mask that provided the eternal features of eyes, nose, mouth, and ears that would never decay. The anthropoid coffin was meant to depict the deceased as a wrapped mummy, but it had the additions of a head cloth, beard, beaded collar, and, often, a text column that extended down the front of the body naming the deceased. This human-shaped container was a fundamental style change in Egyptian coffin development that signaled the use of new rituals identifying the deceased with the corpse of Osiris. Because Osiris needed his body to create himself anew, perhaps elite Egyptians thought it necessary to provide a body-shaped coffin as the ritual manifestation of that physical rebirth.

Whatever the reasons for the innovation, towards the end of the Middle Kingdom elites increasingly preferred anthropomorphic containers to hold the mummy. This innovation was accompanied by new texts and rituals, particularly a rite called the Opening of the Mouth that activated the coffin and the mummy inside so that it could see, hear, smell, and eat in the afterlife. With the advent of the anthropoid coffin, the body container essentially became a perfected human body made of materials that would last for all eternity. From this point on, the Opening of the Mouth ritual became an essential part of religious texts (Faulkner and Goelet 1994).

During the crisis of the Second Intermediate Period and into the early New Kingdom, elites continued to utilize the anthropoid coffin. Almost all of the surviving coffins from the New Kingdom into the Third Intermediate Period find their origins in the Theban region. At the end of the Second Intermediate Period and during Dynasty 17, a particular anthropoid coffin type was developed for Theban royalty and high elites known as the "*rishi*" coffin, so called by Egyptologists because of the feathered pattern depicted on the coffin surface (Miniaci 2011). These feathers may be evocative of the protective embrace of the sky goddess; or, they might represent the deceased as a *ba* (spirit of mobility) flying to and from the tomb. These *rishi*-coffins were large and were usually not contained within an outer sarcophagus.

As the New Kingdom continued into Dynasty 18, the anthropoid coffin was the favored shape. In fact, once the anthropoid coffin caught on, it was never abandoned throughout all of Egyptian history. Sometimes it was contained within an outer rectangular sarcophagus either made of wood or stone, but the anthropoid coffin remained the focus of funerary rituals like the Opening of the Mouth. The anthropoid shape of the coffin evoked a secondary body, or an Osirian body of transformation; however, the traditional features of the rectangular coffin were still retained. For example, *udjat*-eyes were still depicted on the sides of the anthropoid coffin, even though the corpse was no longer lying on its side inside looking out. The ancient Egyptians were loath to part with such an essential and trusted coffin element, and, in typical fashion, they layered the innovations of the human body shape and modeled face onto old forms. Text columns were also retained, but now they were drawn within bands that evoked mummy bandages extending down the front of the body and crossing transversely, as if binding up the corpse. The hieroglyphic inscriptions were modified to reference the corpse as Osiris; the text column on the front of the body invoked the sky goddess Nut, mother of Osiris, asking that she place the deceased within her embrace in the heavens.

In some ways, the New Kingdom coffin can be understood as a material depiction of Chapters 151 and 161 of the Book of the Dead, both of which invoke deities who were believed to protect the body of Osiris, including Anubis, Thoth, Isis, Nephthys, and the Four Sons of Horus (Lüscher 1998). The layout of the New Kingdom coffin follows the Book of the Dead Chapter 151 quite closely, taking elements from a two-dimensional illuminated papyrus and placing them onto a three-dimensional coffin, effectively wrapping the body of the deceased in protective spells and iconography. Nephthys' image and invocation graces the back of the deceased's head within the coffin, while Isis is placed on the bottom of the feet, as these two goddesses would have stood at the head and foot ends of Osiris' bier, respectively. The image of Anubis is found on the coffin lid's legs. Thoth holding a standard is located on the four corners of the case sides. Two of the Four Sons of Horus are placed in the middle of each case side, and meant to protect the internal organs and the inviolability of the body. An image of Nut, the mother of Osiris, covers the mid-body, thus containing the deceased in the *duat*-realm believed to be inside of Nut's body. To be inside the coffin was to be inside the goddess Nut, and thus in the afterlife space from which the sun was reborn every morning. The New Kingdom anthropoid coffin usually included a wide collar of leaves and flowers on the chest, as if the deceased were dressed for a festival or a banquet.

Interestingly, because the New Kingdom coffin was human-shaped, these body containers could now display the gender of the deceased for the first time (Cooney 2008b).

Deceased women could be depicted with feminine wigs and modeled breasts, while men wore tripartite head-cloths and beards. Because each coffin likened the deceased to the corpse of Osiris, the anthropoid shape created an interesting problem for the ancient Egyptians. The coffin was meant to transform the dead into Osiris and thus into a body capable of self-regeneration by means of the god's masculinity. Coffins of female individuals therefore had to include masculinizing elements, either in the Book of the Dead texts or within the depiction of the deceased herself on the coffin surface. It was vitally important that she too identify with and become Osiris, the god of transformation from death, even though her human body was female (Cooney 2010).

As the New Kingdom progressed, coffin fashions quickly changed. Egyptologists are able to date coffins within the New Kingdom by their background color. A white color evocative of pure mummy bandages is more typical of early Dynasty 18, while a glossy black finish (associated with the fertile earth and Osiris's flesh) usually dates mid to late Dynasty 18 (Thutmose III and after). During late Dynasty 18, the coffin finish changed to yellow, the color associated with the sun god. This yellow color was achieved with gilding on the most expensive coffins, shiny pistacia resin varnish on high-level elite coffins, or yellow ochre on the cheapest lower elite coffins. It was also at this time period that arms and hands were carved on the wooden coffin surface for the first time. Yellow became the typical background color until early Dynasty 22 in the Third Intermediate Period.

Beginning with Dynasty 19, the decoration on yellow coffins becomes more complicated, including polychrome scenes of the tree goddess on the feet of the coffin lid or images of the deceased with arms upraised in worship before Osiris. By later Dynasty 20, it became common to crowd intricate Book of the Dead and Amduat imagery onto the coffin surface, particularly on the case sides. By the end of the New Kingdom, we see another novelty: the anthropoid coffin interior was now decorated with polychrome scenes for the first time. By Dynasty 21, coffins had become three-dimensional conceptions of the afterlife space, a necessary innovation when even the elite could no longer afford tomb chapels (Cooney 2011) (Figure 14.2). The Dynasty 21 coffin's exterior was covered with protective texts and imagery about rebirth, including the stages of the sun god's journey, Osiris reborn in the afterlife, the Hathor cow emerging from the western necropolis, or the Judgment Scene of the deceased in the *duat*. The interior decoration included depictions of the *duat* space, including images of protective underworld demons, solar snakes, iconography associated with Osiris like the *djed*-pillar, and the deceased in the company of the gods.

Nesting coffin sets became the norm by mid Dynasty 18, and this trend continued into the Third Intermediate Period. Elite individuals could be buried in as many as four body containers that fit one inside the next, the most ideal set included a mummy mask, one or two coffins, and an outer sarcophagus. Some elites owned two or even three coffins, nesting inside one another like Russian dolls. Sometimes elite families would include a mummy board made of wood or cartonnage instead of a second coffin, which lay on top of the corpse rather than enclosing it. During Dynasty 19, the mummy board might depict the deceased in a pure white garment, in the form of an *akh*-spirit, the manifestation of the deceased after he or she had successfully passed the afterlife judgment. Sometimes, the deceased as an *akh* was represented on the lid of an inner coffin. The mummy mask was the innermost covering in a New Kingdom coffin ensemble, and it could be fashioned out of wood or cartonnage.

Gilding and inlay were common features for the rich on all of these coffin pieces, but lower elites made do with painting of red and yellow ochres, black carbon, gypsum white, and blue and green made of frit pigments. Only the wealthiest individuals were buried with an additional rectangular sarcophagus made of stone or wood and decorated with Book of the Dead texts. A Dynasty 18 elite Theban craftsman named Kha was buried with a gilded coffin, a mummy mask, and a rectangular wooden sarcophagus, all in the glossy black style (Schiaparelli 1927). During later Dynasty 19 of the Ramesside Period, it became fashionable for very rich officials to include an anthropoid stone container in their burial ensemble, something quite innovative as all previous stone boxes had been rectangular in shape. By Dynasty 21, sarcophagi were no longer commissioned. Not only were the quarries closed, but these objects could no longer fit into the crowded, secret cache tombs favored by the Theban elites at this time.

By Dynasty 22, the yellow coffin suddenly went out of fashion, a shift that was accompanied by a clear political change: the ascension to the throne of a king named Osorkon I. The reasons behind this sudden style change are unclear, but it is important to remember that all coffins and body containers were the prerogative of the elite. It is possible that Osorkon I pushed a new group of elites into high-level Theban official and priestly posts who then wanted to differentiate themselves from the previous incumbents with new, more fashionable, funerary styles. After Osorkon I, elite individuals were buried in coffins with white or plain wooden backgrounds. Arms were no longer carved onto the surface. Lid decoration was quite variable, ranging from the simple depiction of the goddess Nut with a vertical text inscription to a series of scene panels showing winged goddesses, veneration scenes of the sun god or Osiris, and the purification of the deceased wearing the white pleated garment. The decoration of a Dynasty 22 coffin was not as crowded as it had been in Dynasty 21, and text was at a minimum. The coffin interior usually included the wings of the goddess Nut spread out, as if embracing the deceased. Another important Dynasty 22 development was the full cartonnage body container, which acted as the innermost piece that enclosed the mummy quite tightly with lacing of twine up the back. This was an essential innovation during hard economic times when wood was scarce and trade with the Lebanon had all but stopped.

Royal burials form a special category of body containers in design and shape. Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom royal sarcophagi were rectangular pieces of hard stone, like granite, and were usually undecorated. However, during the New Kingdom and later, royal body containers were richly decorated. The late Dynasty 18 burial of Tutankhamun is our only example of a semi-intact New Kingdom burial, and it reveals that a king, even a lesser king buried in haste, could be interred in nine body containers, fitting one inside the other. Tutankhamun's corpse was surrounded by four gilded rectangular shrines, a hard stone rectangular sarcophagus, three gold anthropoid coffins, the innermost one made of 269 pounds of solid gold, and a solid gold mummy mask. Every other New Kingdom royal tomb has been looted, so it is not clear if Tutankhamun's burial is representative of the norm. Some sarcophagi belonging to other New Kingdom kings do survive, and the numbers suggest that other, more established, kings were able to include more than one stone sarcophagus in their ensemble, and thus may have included larger coffin sets in their tombs compared to Tutankhamun's.

Interestingly, an outer red granite sarcophagus of the Dynasty 19 King Merneptah was found reused in the Dynasty 21 tomb of King Psusennes I at Tanis. This leads us to

the other semi-intact royal burial from ancient Egypt: the royal tombs of Dynasty 21 and 22 kings found in the temple enclosure at Tanis. Just at the start of World War II, French archaeologists found these northern kings buried with gilded wood coffins, gilded mummy masks, silver coffins with hawk heads and ram-headed falcons on the chest (Montet 1947, 1951, 1960). These tombs provide a glimpse of the relative poverty of these monarchs during a time of political decentralization and economic collapse. Not only did the craftsmen make do with gilded wood, rather than solid gold or silver, but the kings shared a small burial space with one another and included relatively few body containers in their coffin ensemble. During hard economic times, even kings had to make do with less.

No royal tombs of the Late Period (Dynasties 25 and 26) or later survive, but we have many non-royal examples (Figure 14.5). Late Period elites no longer found cartonnage

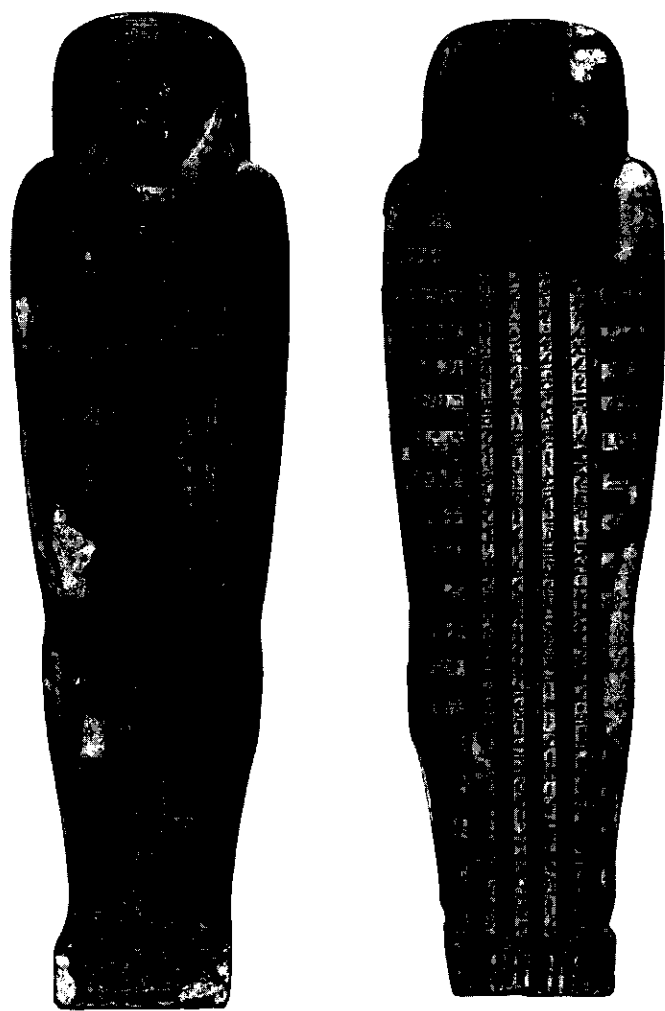


Figure 14.5 Late Period coffin belonging to Wennefer, a Dynasty 25 Monthu priest, Egyptian Museum Cairo, CG 41046 (after Gauthier, 1913).

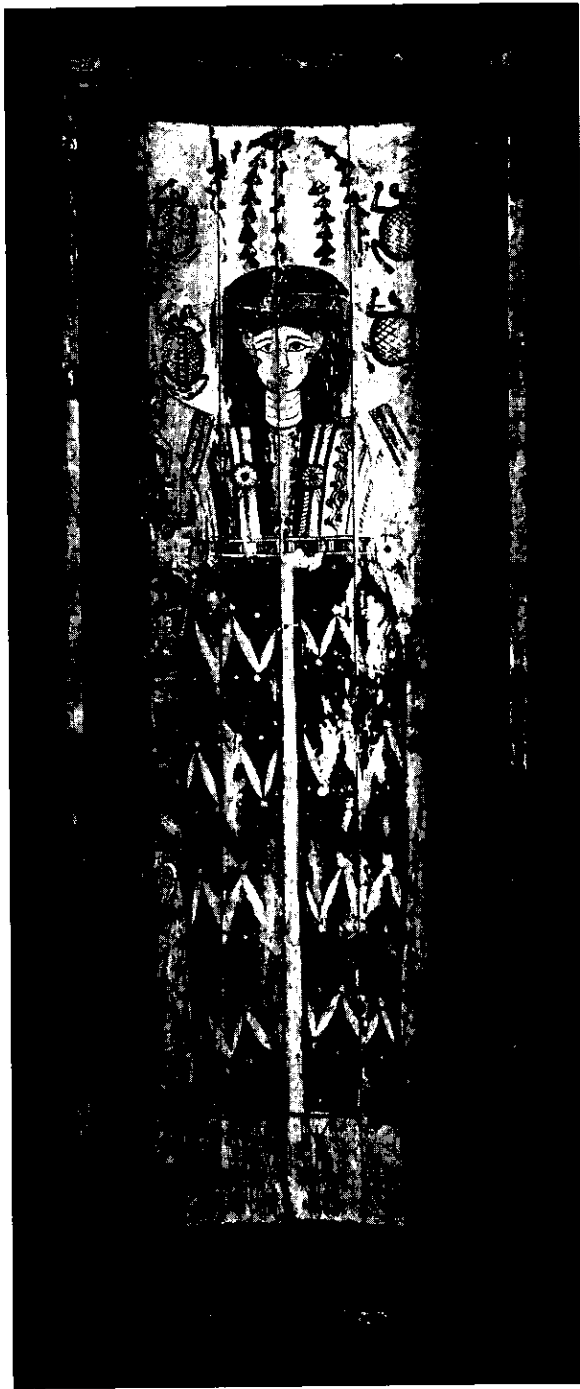


Figure 14.6 Coffin of Cleopatra (interior), from Qurna, Thebes, Roman Period, early second century CE, British Museum EA 6706. © Trustees of the British Museum.

fashionable, probably because when the political and economic situation improved they wished to avoid coffins so associated with scarcity. Instead, Late Period elites favored coffins that showcased the wood, particularly if it was imported cedar. Elites created more innovation to display their conspicuous consumption of wood, paint, and gilding: the coffin was mounted on a square wooden pedestal at the feet so that it could stand tall when displayed upright. These coffins were then enclosed in a new style of rectangular outer sarcophagus—one with a vaulted lid and four posts at the corners, emulating the vaulted coffins of the Old Kingdom. The figured decorations on the Late Period coffin included winged goddesses, divinities enclosed in shrines, the deceased worshipping Osiris, the judgment scene, and the now essential image of the corpse on a mummification bier above four canopic jars. Late Period elites included something else on their coffins to differentiate themselves from the previous Dynasties 21 and 22: lines of funerary text in neat columns and rows. The coffin interior was decorated with large-scale images of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, a hawk-headed god of the underworld, and/or the sky goddess Nut. During the Late Period, the backside of the coffin was decorated for the first time—with figural depictions of the *djed*-pillar, representative of Osiris, or with text columns from the Book of the Dead—suggesting that an audience stood all around the upright coffin during funerary rituals.

As we move into the Dynasty 30 and Ptolemaic period, coffin decoration was simplified and streamlined. The lid depicts the deceased wearing a burial collar with text columns, although sometimes imagery with the Four Sons of Horus and the winged Nut were retained. During this period, large stone anthropoid sarcophagi were common for high elites, and it became fashionable to depict the faces of the deceased hieroglyphically, with exaggerated and enlarged visages.

During the Roman period, the ancient Egyptians used a wide variety of body containers. The most distinctive and innovative are the cartonnage masks and body covers, many of which have fussy plaster detailing, gilding, and inlay on the headdress lappets and chest (Figure 14.6). Other Roman examples include modeled portraits of the deceased as they would have appeared in life, with fashionable hairstyles, jewelry, and clothing.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

General surveys are the most important starting place for the beginning researcher of coffin development and meaning (Schmidt 1919; Taylor 1989; Ikram and Dodson 1998). However, most coffins are published in museum catalogues with a number of other object types (e.g., Van Haarlem 1990; Berman and Bohac 1999; Jørgensen 2001; Lacovara and Trope 2001). For predynastic burials and body containers, the most important publications are site analyses (Castillos 1982; Bard 1991). For the Old Kingdom, the most synthetic works are Günther Lapp's surveys (Lapp, 1983, 1993). Because of the more complicated text and pictorial decoration, Middle Kingdom coffin studies are quite extensive and move the field beyond typologies (Terrace 1968; Willems 1988; Hoffmeier 1991; Willems 1996a, 1996b; Locher 1998; Willems 2001; Grajetzki 2010). New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period coffin publications are quite extensive, covering the body container from art historical, religious, social, and historical perspectives (Niwinski 1976, 1988; Taylor 1989, 1999, 2001a; van Walsem 1997; Dodson 1998, 2000; Taylor and Strudwick 2005; Cooney 2007; Aston 2009; Miniaci 2011). For clay coffins of the eastern Delta, desert regions, and the Levant, see Sabbahy (2010). Royal sarcophagi are often treated separately in the literature (e.g., Eaton-Krauss 1993; der Manuelian and Loeben 1993; Wilkinson 1994;

Brock 1996; Verner 2000). Because of the sheer number of Third Intermediate Period coffins, the researcher is encouraged to start with catalogues and surveys (Niwinski 1988; Taylor, 2003), moving on to more specific studies (Niwinski 1981, 1984; van Walsem 1997, 2000; Taylor 2001b). Late Period and Ptolemaic coffins and sarcophagi have only recently drawn the attention of serious scholarship (Elias 1996; Manassa 2007; Bierbrier 1997). For the Roman Period, the researcher is directed first towards Riggs (Riggs and Stadler 2003; Riggs 2005).

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