The Ongoing Study of Coffin Reuse in 21st-Dynasty Egypt

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THE ENDURING NATURE OF the material record of ancient Egypt elicits a sense of wonder for those who experience the monuments along the Nile and the vast museum collections that house Egyptian artifacts. Everyone, from the casual museumgoer to the lifetime scholar of Egyptology, can appreciate the seemingly permanent, everlasting material culture that appears to have won the battle over time. With exhibition titles like the British Museum’s Eternal Egypt, the National Gallery of Art’s Quest for Immortality, and the Brooklyn Museum’s To Live Forever, it is easy to stress the continuity, durability, and longevity of Egyptian culture, particularly in the realm of funerary goods.

It is shocking to think of the coffins, amulets, and offerings that fill museum collections worldwide as temporary products of ritual function. When I entered UCLA’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures three years ago, imagine my surprise in learning that the research of my advisor, Dr. Kathlyn (Kara) Cooney, focused on coffin reuse. Indeed, the Egyptians perceived their funerary materials as commodities and at times chose to lessen the importance of material permanence in exchange for momentary ritual impact.

By systematically studying the corpus of 21st-Dynasty coffins from Thebes (Figure 1), Kara has shown that in times of scarcity, funerary goods from earlier dynasties were recommodified and reused in order to perpetuate the elaborate burial rituals that the Theban elite had come to expect.

In my first year as Kara’s student, I learned that her 21st Dynasty Coffins Project, as it is now known, was long in the making. During her graduate career, Kara noticed that there seemed to be many more coffins from the Ramesside (19th-20th Dynasties) than from the 21st Dynasty. At its core, her current research question asks, “Where did all the Ramesside coffins go?” A study of 21st-Dynasty coffins revealed that a large number of them were described in the literature as “archaizing” to an earlier time period (Niwinski...
1988). A study of the texts on some of the coffins revealed the names of multiple owners.

The time period itself warrants a closer look due to the unique social organization that defined the era. The 21st Dynasty (circa 1070 to 945 B.C.), which marked the beginning of the Third Intermediate period, was politically defined by the split rule of the weakened Tanite kings in the north and the consolidation of power by the High Priesthood of Amun in Thebes to the south (Trigger et al. 1983). With the absence of the pharaohs’ influence in the south, the patriarchal lineage of the High Priesthood of Amun assumed control of the area. Economic hardship and political fragmentation characterized the 21st Dynasty, and the much-valued trade routes that allowed wood from the Levant to flow into Egypt shut down. In addition, the cultivation of native sycamore and acacia trees within Egypt was interrupted. As a result, all aspects of Egyptian life, including funerary culture, were affected, prompting reactionary measures by the Egyptian populace.

Kara realized that much more was happening during this time period than the occasional choice of an archaizing style. Unquestionably, one reaction to the economic hardship was both the (partially) sanctioned reuse of funerary equipment and, in extreme cases, tomb robbery (Cooney 2011). How much reuse was actually taking place, however? This question prompted a systematic study of coffin reuse from the 21st Dynasty and became Kara’s next research goal, as well as my introduction into the realm of museum-based research projects.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

As Kara’s project grew and more museum collections were added to the data set, I was tasked with being the registrar for the project. This was an excellent opportunity for a first-year graduate student, and I was certainly ready and willing to gain experience. Being able to work and study alongside Kara on an established project was absolutely the best way for me to learn how to plan, manage, and execute a research project on such a scale (Figure 2). Aside from the research goal of documenting coffin reuse, the main aim of the 21st Dynasty Coffins Project is to create a complete photographic record for each coffin to the extent that such is possible. Although sometimes restricted by museum display or storage conditions,
complete documentation should include the tops and undersides of all coffin lids and mummy boards, as well as the interiors, exteriors, and undersides of all coffin troughs. Sometimes museum conditions or the instability of a coffin prohibits complete documentation, which results in earlier photographic evidence becoming invaluable to the project. At other times, museum conditions include tea and biscuits (Figure 3). The photography and the organization of the photographic record in the database take place simultaneously; photos are uploaded to our dedicated computer server as they are taken, and I tag and organize the photographs with a view of the coffin being studied. This way, errors in documentation can be easily corrected, additional photos can be requested, and more detailed photos based on personal observations can be incorporated.

While the photographic record is being assembled, Kara studies each piece in detail (Figure 4), looking for telltale signs of reuse. She defines coffin reuse as the reappropriation of an ideologically charged object within the context of economic and social crisis, and she recognizes that such an action assumes priority of short-term ritual use over material longevity (Cooney 2012). With oftentimes nothing more than her own eyes, Kara documents this reuse within the framework of both a gradient of the type of reuse for each piece and a scale of her own confidence that the piece was reused.

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The gradient of reuse is complicated by the fact that both ends of the spectrum leave no record to be documented. On one end, there is the simple reuse of a coffin for a new body with no modifications made to the coffin at all. Without knowing the full history of the coffin, there is no way to know how many times it was used if no changes were made to its appearance. On the other end of the spectrum is the situation where a coffin was completely dismantled for the wood and metals to be reused in the creation of another object. Again, we have no way of documenting this most intensive type of reuse. We can assess only what falls within the middle of the spectrum, and these types of reuse are many.

First, a coffin may show the reinscription of a name. Oftentimes this is visible because the new name is written in a different type of ink or paint that is quite obvious, the varnish or background paint is smudged around the new name, or the gender of the name does not match the gender of the titles or
pronouns used in the text on the coffin. Sometimes, multiple names are present, indicating that some names were changed or added; sometimes the original owner’s name was either overlooked by the usurper or was allowed to remain on the coffin in order to ritually connect the two deceased individuals who used the coffin at different times.

Second, redecoration of part of the coffin, most often the lid, is often evident. Oftentimes this includes the erasure and rewriting of text, the use of different paints or pigments that do not quite match the rest of the decoration, or the overlapping of old and new decoration in a way that suggests multiple use phases. This redecoration can be very localized, focusing on just a particular text, image, or area of the coffin, such as the repainting of the pectoral (Figure 5), or it can be more extensive and spread throughout the decoration of both the lid and the case.

The third type of reuse, which we see quite frequently, is the complete replastering and repainting over old decoration. Here, multiple layers of decoration are preserved, and we can stratigraphically document the layers into different use phases. Sometimes the old decoration layers were not preserved but were scrubbed off, exposing the bare wood before the coffin was replastered and repainted. In this situation, it is difficult to address how many times a coffin was used. In other cases, however, we can still see parts of old decoration and plaster that remain after a not-so-thorough cleaning.

Fourth, sometimes the coffin itself is remodeled. Most commonly, this involves the hands and face on the lid of the coffin. Traditionally, a male depiction on an anthropoid coffin has fisted hands. A woman will have flat hands, as well as earrings and breasts. In cases where a coffin was reused by a person of the opposite gender, new hands had to be affixed to the lid, and earrings and breasts had to be either added or removed. This almost always left damage marks on the
face and chest of the coffin, and there are frequently clear outlines of hands, earrings, or breasts that have been removed. This type of reuse also necessitated redecoration of the affected areas, and it is usually obvious where touchup paint has been applied. Such gender modifications must have been time-consuming and expensive, but they are quite common, suggesting that most reuse happened within the legal context of the family rather than via theft. It seems that a given family group was forced to modify its only coffin, or one of its limited number of coffins, when another family member died. If a family had acquired reused coffins at a (black) market instead, it likely would have purchased a coffin of the correct gender, and we wouldn’t find as much gender modification.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

To carry out this research, Kara, photographers, research assistants, myself as registrar, a babysitter, and Kara’s preschool-age son travel on monthlong summer trips to museum collections worldwide. This group, affectionately dubbed Team Kara by fellow scholars and friends (Figure 6), has visited major collections in Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, and the United States. At each museum we have been welcomed and supported by incredible museum staff, curators, and scholars, who have been more than willing to help us advance this project.

Reuse rates appear well over 50 percent for all coffins included in the study. That percentage, however, could certainly increase with the systematic incorporation of other analytical techniques. During the past research season, we experimented with several methods that will help both corroborate the visual evidence of reuse currently documented and expand identification of instances of reuse that currently cannot be seen with the naked eye. Two basic methods that show promising results are ultraviolet and infrared photography. The use of an infrared camera has revealed pigments that were mostly erased or covered by additional decoration. One example of a coffin set held in a private collection in Bodrhyddan Hall, Wales, revealed the name of the original owner of the coffin (Figure 7). This name was mostly erased, and a new name was added over the old text. We would have been unable to read this original name without the aid of infrared photography.

A second technology we are exploring is ultraviolet light. Using special UV flashlights, we have been able to distinguish ancient paint from modern restoration (when it is not already apparent) and document the use of orpiment in both paint and varnish layers. Also, a delightful result of the use of the UV flashlights was the discovery of many fingerprints left behind in the ancient varnish layers. We jokingly speculated about craftsmen who were in such a hurry to finish the decoration that they could not wait for the varnish to dry. Witnessing those fingerprints was also a reminder of the many people involved in the creation of these stunning pieces of funerary art.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As an accompaniment to infrared and ultraviolet photography, Kara intends to incorporate the use of a portable X-ray fluorescence (XRF) device, which allows for the detection of metals in paint layers. This would enable us to identify pigments such as orpiment, realgar, and huntite, which would provide valuable information regarding the production techniques and economic expense of these coffins. In addition to XRF analysis, Kara is interested in incorporating both terahertz imaging and wood sampling into the study. Using high-frequency electromagnetic waves, terahertz imaging allows one to detect and virtually isolate the thin layers of wood, plaster, paint, and varnish that compose the coffins. Wood sampling can provide a plethora of information, including the species of wood used in coffin construction and the age of the wood by radiocarbon dating.

Our next research trip will take us to the Egyptian
Museum in Cairo, where Kara plans to undertake the first systematic study and documentation of the Royal Cache coffins of the 21st Dynasty. These eleven coffin sets, published by M. Georges Daressy in the Catalogue Général in 1909 (Daressy 1909), have never been subject to an extensive photographic survey. This is the first time that Team Kara will study the famous collections of the Egyptian Museum. We hope it will be the first of many successful trips as we work our way through all the available 21st-Dynasty coffins on display and in storage. In the meantime, Kara is working on the publication of several articles that focus on the interesting history of several coffin sets studied during our last research meeting. “Coffin Reuse in the 21st Dynasty: A Case Study of Objects in the British Museum” will be published by the British Museum Press in a forthcoming volume edited by John Taylor, and “Reuse of Egyptian Coffins in the 21st Dynasty: Ritual Materialism in the Context of Scarcity” will be published by the Gregorian Museums, Vatican, in The First Vatican Coffins Conference, 19–22 June, 2013 Conference Proceedings, edited by Alessia Amenta.

REFERENCES


