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## Egyptian Clay Anthropoid Coffins

Liza Kuchman  
Royal Ontario Museum

Throughout Egyptian history, clay was utilized as a coffin material. Clay existed as an alternative to wood and stone and, as late as the early Old Kingdom, to woven reeds. It was the most readily available and least expensive of ancient Egyptian materials, and one would expect that clay coffins would have been the most common. Perhaps it is for this very reason that clay coffins are the least published of Egyptian coffin types; they undoubtedly attracted little attention from excavators.

In the New Kingdom when coffin style switches from the rectangular to anthropoid shape, stone, wood, and clay anthropoid coffins are all found. The coffins in wood and stone are well illustrated in the literature on Egyptian archeology, but seldom are the clay versions referred to, much less published. This paper will present a summary of these clay anthropoid coffins, surveying their almost two thousand years of use. It would be impossible to present evidence from the approximately fifty Egyptian cemeteries with clay coffins here. Instead, a representative sampling of these coffins will be discussed.<sup>1</sup>

The presently accepted interpretation of clay anthropoid coffins in Egypt is that they belonged to Philistines or another foreign group settled in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Because no Egyptologist has ever before assembled and considered the clay coffins from Egypt, the Egyptian coffins have always been

explained by Palestinian archeologists on the basis of similar coffins found in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Since this burial custom is not one indigenous to Palestine, it must be explained there by the presence of a foreign people. This explanation has then been extended to the clay anthropoid coffins in Egypt. The unfortunate result has been that this coffin, a common and characteristic Egyptian type of burial, has been considered a burial type foreign to Egypt. That this is no longer possible will become clear in this and future publications.

Clay anthropoid coffins are first found in the Eighteenth Dynasty and appear continually and in increasing numbers down through Roman times. They are distributed in cemeteries throughout Egypt and Nubia, and their quantity is proportional to the amount of cemetery excavation conducted in a given area. The greatest number of these coffins is known from the East Delta, the Memphite region, and the mouth of the Fayum, all areas where extensive cemetery excavation has been carried out. Fewer of these coffins are known from Middle and Upper Egypt, which is reflected in the fact that fewer cemeteries of the New Kingdom and later have been excavated there. In Nubia, where extensive surveys have been done, clay anthropoid coffins are ubiquitous. They appear in the two periods when Egyptian activity there is most intensive—the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties and the Ptolemaic-Roman era. Nubia was apparently deserted in the Late Period, and no cemetery material would be expected.

Several problems are encountered in researching clay anthropoid coffins.

The first drawback is that these coffins have been seemingly disregarded by excavators. Many site reports mention that clay coffins were found, and found in large numbers, but seldom are details given. Since excavation reports are often inadequate, it is difficult to know whether the total number of these coffins mentioned is the total number of them found in the cemetery. It is also possible that at some sites they were not regarded as noteworthy, since they are generally held to belong to the "lower classes." It is also difficult, if not impossible, to reexamine the dates assigned these coffins since the associated grave goods are seldom described and illustrated. These restraints on the material must be kept in mind in the following discussion.

#### *Earlier New Kingdom*

The clay anthropoid coffins dated by excavators to the Eighteenth Dynasty are few, but they are some of the finest examples of this type of coffin. One found by Petrie in the Tell el-Yahudiyah cemetery is described in detail.<sup>4</sup> It has the so-called "slipper" or "cigar" shape typical of this coffin type. The removable face-piece has a handle below the beard, a very unusual detail. As many of these clay coffins, it is painted with the type of decoration found on contemporary wooden coffins. The background color is yellow with white stripes in imitation of mummy wrappings. Details of the funerary deities are added in blue, red, white, and black. Funerary formulae are painted on the stripes in black. Petrie dates this coffin to the reign of Tuthmosis III on the basis of the pottery associated with it and a scarab of Tuthmosis III in a pottery coffer found at the foot of the coffin.

Other coffins dated by Petrie to the Eighteenth Dynasty were found at Rifeh in Middle Egypt. Petrie reports that there were three cemeteries in the area of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties; except for dating the clay coffins to the Eighteenth Dynasty, he gives no details. The coffin shown in figure 1, described as "of better than usual work," is one of only two illustrated in the site report.<sup>5</sup>

At Aniba in Nubia twelve tombs containing twenty clay anthropoid coffins were discovered. One tomb which must date to the very beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty is S32. In the west chamber of the tomb two clay coffins were found with an assemblage of grave goods from the end of the Second Intermediate Period. These included scarabs from the end of the Hyksos Period, five Kerma beakers, and two examples of Tell el-Yahudiyah ware. The slipper-shaped coffins are flat at the foot end and rounded at the head with an oval face-piece. As shown by breasts modeled above the crossed hands, the coffins belonged to women. The coffin itself was covered by a whitewash, while the face was painted yellow and the hair and eyes black.<sup>6</sup>

Another coffin, which should date in the Eighteenth Dynasty, was found by the Reisner Nubian Survey in cemetery 23 at Dabod.<sup>7</sup> The coffin from tomb 60 is described as painted black with inscriptions on yellow bands and figures painted in yellow. This type of decoration is found on wooden anthropoid coffins beginning in the reign of Tuthmosis III.

Clay anthropoid coffins of the Nineteenth Dynasty have been found at sites in both the East and West Delta and in the region of the Fayum. A

quantity of decorated clay coffins was excavated by the Department of Antiquities at Kom Abou Billou in the western Delta.<sup>8</sup> The site was badly plundered in antiquity, but considerable material, including scarabs of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties, was found with the coffins. Coffins with two types of facial representation were found at Kom Abou Billou: the natural and the so-called "grotesque." Analyses which have been done on clay coffins show that there are two methods of manufacturing the face-pieces, and that this accounts for the two distinct facial types.<sup>9</sup> The smaller and more natural faces were made separately and then added to the lid before baking. The larger and more grotesque faces were made by adding individual pieces of clay to the lid for each facial feature. In this way the features tended to spread across the entire lid.

At Riqqeh near Meydum five cemetery areas were found with burials of the Nineteenth Dynasty. The majority of the burials were in clay coffins, either plain or painted in black, blue, red, and yellow. One such coffin from tomb 407 in cemetery area D is shown in figure 2. Engelbach claims that these coffins were "by no means confined to the lower classes, as some of the burials contained very good amulets and the bodies were well-mummified."<sup>10</sup> Clay coffin burials of the Nineteenth Dynasty were also found at Sedment.<sup>11</sup> One particularly fine example of a face-piece from one of these coffins can be seen in figure 3.

*Later New Kingdom*

The tombs at Nebesheh and Tell el-Yahudiyah in the Delta have been published in greater detail than perhaps any other clay coffin burials. This undoubtedly accounts for the importance given them by Palestinian archaeologists dealing with this burial type. There are actually two sets of tombs at Nebesheh with clay coffin burials. The first group is Ramesside, and the second probably dates as late as the Twenty-second Dynasty. Interesting enough, the scholars supporting a non-Egyptian origin for these coffins never mention the coffins in the first group.

Petrie published many of the grave goods from the Ramesside burials, for the most part simple pottery and shawabti figures. The coffins are described as made of good hard pottery and painted yellow, black, and red.<sup>12</sup> Architecturally, the tombs of the two groups are quite similar, but the grave goods are quite different. The later tombs contained pilgrim flasks and bronze spearheads and butts.<sup>13</sup> One thing which is never made clear in Petrie's report is exactly how many anthropoid coffins he found in these later tombs. The coffin lid from tomb 17 is the only one illustrated in his report and the only one indicated on his tomb plans as anthropoid. A fact overlooked by scholars propounding the Philistine theory is that no foreign pottery was found in tomb 17, and tomb 33, which was the one with the most foreign pottery, had no clay coffin burials. The combination of a clay anthropoid coffin with an eclectic pottery assemblage is the basis for the Philistine interpretation of these tombs.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the date of the publication, Griffith reported quite carefully on the clay coffin burials in the basalt tumuli at Tell el-Yahudiyah.<sup>15</sup> There were eight tumuli built of basalt blocks, seven of which contained clay anthropoid coffins. In tumulus 6 alone were twenty such burials. As was also found at Kom Abou Billou, brick arches had been constructed above the coffins to protect the face-pieces. The adult coffins had all been plundered, but the children's were intact. In one of these burials Griffith found three pottery scarabs of Ramses III. Some of the coffins had been left unpainted, while others had the usual four colors: yellow, black, blue, and red.

Clay coffins from the end of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period have been found in the Delta, the Memphite region, and Middle Egypt. Based on the finds at Beni Hasan, Garstang states that the clay anthropoid coffin "is characteristic of the latest dynasties, and occurs in numerous instances."<sup>16</sup> An interesting group of clay coffins was found between the two walls on the south side of the Shuneh es-Sebib at Abydos. These are infants' coffins, and one example shown in figure 4 clearly shows a Bes head rather than a human one. Holes had been hollowed out in the walls and these coffins, with stelae invoking "Osiris, the lord of birth," were placed in the recesses. They are dated by Ayrton to after the Nineteenth Dynasty.<sup>17</sup>

Anthropoid coffins were found in large numbers at Sakkara and at Asfûnel-Maṭâneh north of Esna in Upper Egypt. The coffins were discovered in four areas of the Asfûnel-Maṭâneh region, the most important being site B and the Asfûn cemetery.<sup>18</sup> At site B the coffins were found in pit-graves, while in the necropolis of Asfûn they were in rectangular brick-lined



graves. The bodies were mummified, and beads and amulets were placed on them. In site B Bes-pots were placed at the head and sometimes at the foot of the coffin.<sup>19</sup> Some of the mummies in the Asfûn cemetery were found in multiple clay coffins. In the New Kingdom multiple wood coffins or sometimes an outer stone coffin with an inner one of wood or cartonnage were used, but this is the only known example of multiple clay coffins.

Unlike the wood and stone anthropoid coffins which were always divided into two halves, a bottom and a lid, the clay coffin was slipper-shaped with a removable oval at the head. By the Late Period, however, the clay coffin changes and is made with a full length lid. The lid is not always made of one piece, but it is always completely removable and separate from the bottom half of the coffin. This change in lid causes a change in the coffin itself, and from now on the clay anthropoid coffin is shaped exactly like those in wood and stone. The cylindrical slipper-shape is no longer found.

The clay coffins at Sakkara can be confidently dated to the Persian period because fourteen of them had Aramaic inscriptions naming the dead person and his father. These names were also found on pieces of wood and stone placed on the mummy. Those buried with Aramaic names comprised only a tenth of the total; the rest of the names are Egyptian. The facial representations on the lids can be divided into the natural and the grotesque. The lids with natural faces are fairly flat, and the modeled face and hair stand out at one end of the coffin, and feet at the other. The lids with grotesque faces are

completely flat, however, and the face is impressed into the lid rather than built up on it. What appears grotesque is not so much the face itself, but the elaborate hairstyle which spreads across the top end of the lid. No feet are shown at the bottom end of the lid.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Ptolemaic-Roman*

Ptolemaic clay anthropoid coffins have been found in the Eastern Delta, the Memphite region, and throughout Lower Nubia. Three clay coffins discovered by the Firth Nubian Survey at cemetery 89 in Awam illustrate the variations in this coffin type.<sup>21</sup> All have the full-length lid, but in two cases it is divided in half across the middle. Two of the coffins are plain; one is painted. The painted coffin has an elaborate broad collar, and the body of the coffin is covered with floral designs. At the foot end is a checkered pattern. One of the unpainted coffins has the contour of the head and shoulders delineated, while the other coffin is simply rounded at the top end. The face of the first coffin is somewhat realistic. The second coffin has hair schematically represented by a raised ridge around the face, and breasts are simply shown by dots.

A continuous use of clay coffins from the Ptolemaic period down through early Christian times was discovered by the Reisner survey on the island of Hesa near Elephantine.<sup>22</sup> These are the burials of the priests of the temples of Philae. In all, twenty-three clay coffins were found in twelve tombs. The bodies have been well-mummified and also placed in cartonnage.

Roman period coffins have been found at Malkata in Western Thebes in a cemetery north of the Roman Isis temple.<sup>23</sup> Some of the coffins were painted

in imitation of mummy wrappings, while one had floral designs like the coffin from Awam discussed above. The full-length lids, usually divided into sections, are flat except for a head modeled at one end and feet modeled at the other. The hair is represented by a ridge which runs around the top of the coffin and ends in hands at approximately the shoulders of the coffin.

As is clear from the above survey, the home of the clay anthropoid coffin is Egypt. Clay anthropoid coffins appear at the beginning of the New Kingdom, when this form appears in other materials, and last as long as the anthropoid shape was used—almost two thousand years. These coffins are found not only in Egypt, but in Nubia, which for all practical purposes was part of Egypt at this time, and Palestine, which in the New Kingdom was heavily under Egyptian influence. These clay coffins are a common and characteristic Egyptian burial type, and it is no longer possible, as was done for so long, to attribute them to a foreign people living in Egypt.

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1. The substance of this paper was presented in Detroit on April 30, 1977, at the annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt. A definitive study of Egyptian clay anthropoid coffins is in preparation for future publication. I wish to thank the Department of Egyptology, University College, London, for permission to use the photographs in figures 1 and 2, and the Egypt Exploration Society for those in figures 3 and 4.

2. This interpretation is based on the work of three scholars: W. F. Albright, "An Anthropoid Clay Coffin from Sahab in Transjordan," *American Journal of Archaeology* 36 (1932): pp. 295-306; T. Dothan, "Archaeological Reflections on the Philistine Problem," *Antiquite and Survival* 2 (1957): pp. 151-64; "Philistine Civilization in the Light of Archaeological Finds in Palestine and Egypt," (in Hebrew) *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): (English summary p. 86); G. E. Wright, "Philistine Coffins and Mercenaries," *Biblical Archaeologist* 22 (1959): pp. 54-66. This was first challenged by E. D. Oren, *The Northern Cemetery at Beth Shan* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1973). Oren shows that clay anthropoid

coffins and a mixed pottery repertoire, the two tenets of the Philistine theory as set forth by Dothan, are grave goods characteristic in Egyptian cemeteries of the New Kingdom. This is acknowledged by Dothan when she admits that the clay anthropoid coffins from Deir el-Balah must be Egyptian. See T. Dothan, "Anthropoid Clay Coffins from a Late Bronze Age Cemetery near Deir el-Balah (Preliminary Report)," *Israel Exploration Journal* 22 (1972): pp. 65-72 and "Anthropoid Clay Coffins from a Late Bronze Age Cemetery near Deir el-Balah (Preliminary Report II)," *Israel Exploration Journal* 23 (1973): pp. 130-45. What Oren failed to do however was to point out the extent of the Egyptian material and to place the coffins contemporary with the Philistine period in their proper perspective as part of a continuum of this coffin type from the Eighteenth Dynasty to Roman times.

3. There are fifty coffins from eleven funerary deposits at Beth Shan; see Oren, *The Northern Cemetery at Beth Shan*. Two coffins were found at Beth Pelet (Tell el-Far'ah), see W. M. F. Petrie, *Beth Pelet I* (London, 1930). There are two from tomb 570 at Lachish; see O. Tufnell, *Lachish IV* (Oxford, 1958).

4. W. M. F. Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities* (London, 1906), pls. XIV and XV and description p. 16.

5. W. M. F. Petrie, *Gizeh and Rifeh* (London, 1907) p. 22.

6. G. Steindorff, *Aniba*, vol. 2 (Glueckstadt, 1937) description p. 170. Coffins are illustrated in vol. 2, pls. 39c and 40,2.

7. G. A. Reisner, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Report for 1907-1908* (Cairo, 1910) p. 166. Coffin is illustrated on pl. 36a.

8. Summary of work is given by J. Leclant, "Fouilles et travaux en Egypte et au Soudan, 1969-1970," *Orientalia* 40 (1971): pp. 227-8. Two types of coffins are illustrated on pl. 22, figures 8 and 9.

9. Oren, *The Northern Cemetery at Beth Shan*, pp. 133, 135; Dothan, "Anthropoid Clay Coffins from a Late Bronze Age Cemetery near Deir el-Balah (Preliminary Report II)," p. 131.

10. R. Engelbach, *Riqqeh and Memphis VI* (London, 1915) p. 18, further description p. 10.

11. E. Naville, *Ahnas el Medineh* (London, 1894) pl. IX.

12. Both groups are published in W. M. F. Petrie, *Tanis II* (London, 1888).

13. The flasks were the basis for Petrie's mistaken attribution of these tombs to Cypriote mercenaries in the time of Psammetichus I. It is also on the basis of the grave goods that Albright called these tombs Palestinian and Dothan and Wright called them Philistine.
14. The illustrations of grave goods from Nebesheh (as well as those from Aniba and Tell el-Yahudiyah) given in Dothan's articles are replete with errors and should not be used as evidence.
15. F. Ll. Griffith, *The Antiquities of Tell el-Yahudiyeh* (London, 1890) published in the same volume with E. Naville, *Mound of the Jew and the City of Onias*.
16. J. Garstang, *The Burial Customs of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1907) p. 209. He illustrates one coffin in figure 226.
17. E. R. Ayrton, C. J. Currelly, and A. E. P. Weigall, *Abydos III* (London, 1907), p. 1. Two other coffins are on pl. XXVIII, #5 and #6.
18. H. Bakry, "Asfûnel-Matâneh Sondages," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* (1968): pp. 37-53. Numerous photographs are included.
19. The Bes-pots are redware drop-shaped jars, one of two Late Period Bes-pot types. These are found throughout Egypt at this time, almost always in a burial context.
20. G. Jéquier, *Deux Pyramides du Moyen Empire*, (Fouilles à Saqqarah, Cairo, 1933). Coffins are illustrated on pls. XI and XII. Inscriptions are on p. 51, figure 40.
21. C. M. Firth, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Report for 1908-1909* (Cairo, 1912), see pls. 28, 31, 32.
22. Reisner, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Report for 1907-1908*, p. 76.
23. K. Kawamura, "A Preliminary Report of excavations by the Waseda University Expedition Party at Malkata, Luxor, Egypt," (in English) *Orient* 9 (1972): pp. 109-23. See continuing reports after this (all in Japanese).





Fig. 1. Clay coffin fragment from Rifeh

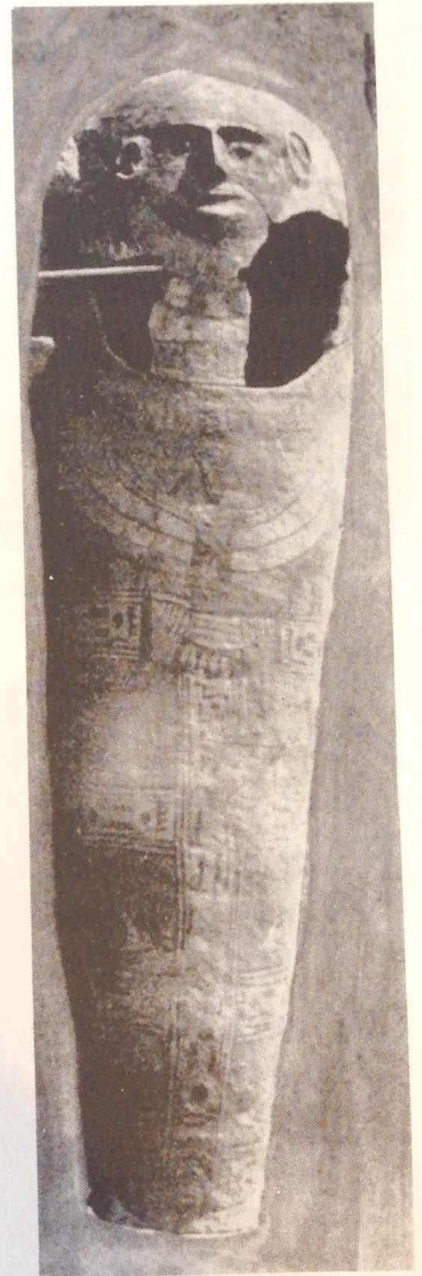


Fig. 2. Clay coffin from Riggeh



Fig. 3. Coffin lid from Sedment

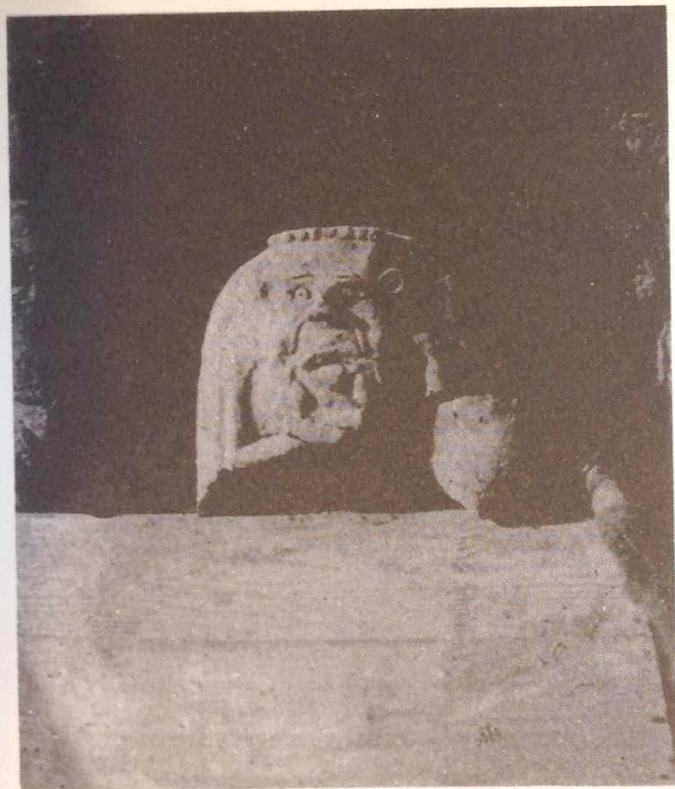


Fig. 4. Infant's coffin from Abydos