

Foreword

A few years ago, in 2013, the Gate of the Priests Project was set up, with the joint support of a team gathering members from various museums and universities who, for different reasons, had all in common the drive to know more about the find of the Tomb of the Priest of Amun, also known as Bab el-Gasus. Unearthed in 1891 by Eugène Grébault and Georges Daressy, the tomb revealed 153 burials of the priests and priestesses of Amun that lived in Thebes under the 21st Dynasty (1076-944 BC).¹ From the beginning, the goal of the Project was to launch a research program that could make possible the integrated study of the find, as a whole. With hundreds of coffins, shabtis, papyri and a wealth of other materials currently dispersed in many museums around the world, the team aimed at studying these materials so that, regardless of their physical location, the objects from this find could be analysed, described and published, as much as it is possible, with a common protocol.

The adoption of such methodology has the advantage of enhancing the perception of the find as a whole, allowing a better understanding of the phenomena involved in the craftsmanship and use of these objects, as well as reconstructing their relation within the same burial assemblage, which during the 21st Dynasty could involve an anthropoid coffin set of the “yellow” type, a shabti-box, a decorated shroud, a variety of objects disposed of over and inside the mummy (amulets, small wax statuettes, pectorals, jewels, and Amduat papyri). Occasionally, a wooden stela and an Osirian statuette containing a papyrus with a selection of chapters from the Book of the Dead were added to the burial assemblage.

The variety and quantity of the materials found in the tomb, and most of all, the complexity revealed in coffin decoration, makes the study of this find a very challenging endeavour. The primary goal of the Project was focused on the integrated study of the coffin assemblages found in the tomb, which are formed by nearly 240 coffins and a still undetermined number of mummy-covers.

The coffins found in Bab el-Gasus are of the so-called “yellow” type. They are anthropoid in shape and they normally display a glossy coating of varnish over a multi-coloured decoration featured against a yellow ground. This type of coffins was crafted in wood and used in nested funerary assemblages comprising one or two coffins and a mummy-cover, which consisted of a smaller version of the lid that was put over the mummy.

Crafted during a critical period in the Egyptian History,² the “yellow” corpus of anthropoid coffins stands out not only as the most complex in terms of decoration but also as one of the most extensive in number. Hundreds of coffins dating to the 21st Dynasty had already been recorded in museum collections around the world, but many are still to be identified. Andrzej Niwiński is the Author of a seminal work on the “yellow” corpus. Published in 1988, this book included the reference of 1125 objects including coffins (some consisting of sets), mummy-covers and fragments.³ Besides compiling this large database, he described the evolution of designs (layout and iconography) on lids and cases. In addition to acknowledging a sequence of styles, the Author proposed a typology for the lids and the cases. Moreover, he tried to assign absolute dates to some of the coffins using biographical or historical information found in coffin inscriptions or in the names of Kings or High Priests of Amun embossed on the tabs of mummy braces on mummies from intact burials.

René van Walsem focusing on the coffin of Djedmontuiufankh in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden carried out a systematic study of coffin decoration in the context of the so-called “stola coffins”⁴ dating from the 22nd Dynasty.⁵ He compiled data on 129 stola coffins (or sets), thus providing a valuable resource for comparative studies. His publication documents in detail the great variability in design (layout and iconography) of this later development of “yellow” coffins. Moreover, the Author established a detailed and careful terminology, as well as ground-breaking methods for comparative studies in coffin decoration. Resulting from this analysis, the Author presents a conceptual framework where the concept of “architectonization” stands out. This idea implies that coffin decoration in “yellow” coffins performs a variety of roles, including creating spacial dimensions intending to associate the coffin with a sacred space. This understanding of the coffin was remarkably developed by Éva Liptay, who has been carrying out iconographical studies on coffin decoration of the “yellow” type.⁶ Iconographic studies focusing on the coffins of the 21st Dynasty is a rich area of research with important inputs.⁷ Over the years, a wealth of descriptive studies had come to light, mainly on catalogues, which are decisive tools to enhance comparative studies.⁸

¹ Chronological references are taken from Hartwig 2015.

² Cooney 2014. Broekman 2017.

³ Niwiński 1988.

⁴ Coffins showing red mummy braces crossed over the chest.

⁵ Walsem 1997.

⁶ Liptay 2017. Liptay 2014.

⁷ Araújo Duarte 2017. Araújo Duarte 2014. Abbas 2014.

⁸ I can only present a small selection of the work that has been carried out in this subject. Roswitha and Elfriede Hauslauer. 1994, Niwiński

During the last decades, non-invasive imaging methods have contributed to revealing the carpentry techniques and materials used in the craftsmanship of a coffin, which allowed an in-depth understanding of the processes used in ancient funerary workshops.⁹

The research carried on “yellow” coffins by Kathlyn Cooney¹⁰ has led to the increasingly stronger conviction that “yellow” coffins had been used, re-used and recycled several times during the 21st Dynasty. Therefore, only exceptionally mummies can be used as a dating criterion, which makes the task of dating a particular coffin extremely difficult.

Besides, this phenomenon did make artificial the study of the coffins found in Bab el-Gasus as an independent group. To better understand this corpus of coffins we have necessarily to study them in the context of the “yellow” type as a whole, a task to which I have been dedicating myself ever since the project has been set up. In 2018, I published a study on the decoration of the lids and mummy-covers.¹¹ Based on the concept of “architectonization” by René van Walsem,¹² I carried out this study using a wide corpus of “yellow” coffins. I use a morphological approach to study coffin decoration, i.e. the form and structure of the different compositions displayed on coffins are the main focus of my analysis. In my approach I isolated the different decorative sections of the lid and studied them separately, aiming at defining the principles of composition, the symbolic significance and the typology of each one of them. This study was carried out using the seriation method: each section was examined in all the objects of the corpus to showcase “genealogical lines”, i.e. to distinguish older models and how they were transformed, re-interpreted and passed along during the 21st Dynasty.

The present book has come to light as a complementary work of this study. Here, I present a small selection of coffins. Each one of these burial assemblages illustrates a particular stage of evolution of the “yellow” type and it can be seen as a “model”.

Most of the coffins here presented are discussed exclusively from an art-historical perspective. Today, when so many technical advances have been put forward, this approach to the subject risks to be seen as “old-fashioned”. However, I have been witnessing from my own experience that also in this field much is yet to be done.

There is no doubt that, from an art-historical perspective, the study of coffin decoration needs to be grounded on the formal description of the object. We may wonder why

we should develop such lengthy descriptions when the photographic records allow direct access to the information contained in the object. The answer is that the difference between the formal description and the photographic records is epistemological. Photographic records provide rough, unprocessed data, while the description results from a scientific procedure that reads the object according to a certain conceptual framework. It is true, however, that if the conceptual framework is lacking in the description, then it will inevitably remain a common-sense discourse with little impact in terms of scientific knowledge. Although I have dealt with this subject in previous publications,¹³ it is never too much to emphasize the importance of the process of describing coffin decoration, when our goal is to understand the significance and meaning of these objects.

In other words, fundamental for the formal description of an object is the underlying concept that we use to describe it. As observers of ancient artefacts, we need to realise that this process is not as simple as it may seem. From a scientific standpoint, we necessarily have to “see” ancient artefacts through a conceptual lens, otherwise the object remains nothing but a “curiosity” or a “relic”. This conceptual framework mediates the formal description of the object and determines how the information it contains is processed (or not) henceforth. The problem is that, far too often, we tend to work with untold concepts more or less unconsciously borrowed from the methods used in the study of other objects. In coffin decoration, in particular, some publications show a clear association between these objects and the concept of “stela”.¹⁴ This association determined that only the inscriptions were recorded and most of the remaining information was simply ignored. If in some objects, such as those making exclusive use of writing in their decoration, this underlying assumption may have not been particularly harmful, in the “yellow” coffins this approach prevented that a massive amount of information could have been processed.

More often, anthropoid coffins had been also frequently associated with the concept of “statue”. In some objects, this association may have been useful – such as most of the anthropoid coffins produced until the mid-18th Dynasty – but the “yellow” type, with its richly decorated interiors, would hardly be suitably described in that way. The untold association of the “yellow” type with the concept of “box” has prevailed, allowing a more or less effective record of visual information from both the outer and inner areas of the coffin.¹⁵

Andrzej Niwiński was one of the first scholars to pay a great deal of attention to the description of iconography, but still his documentation methods remained little adapted to the complexity of the visual information conveyed

1996, Niwiński 1997, Liptay 2011, Niwiński 2004, Jamen 2016, Sousa 2017, Sousa 2018b.

⁹ Serpico and White 1998, Asensi Amorós 2017, Dawson and Strudwick 2019.

¹⁰ Cooney 2019.

¹¹ Sousa 2018.

¹² See van Walsem 1997, 358-359.

¹³ Sousa 2017a.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the description of the coffin of Nespenethe, in Berlev, Hodjash, 1998: 5-8. See also Daressy, 1909.

¹⁵ Daressy 1909, Gasse 1996.

by “yellow” coffins.¹⁶ From the visual point of view, the catalogues by Roswitha Egner and Elfriede Hauslauer stand out as the first accomplished attempts to document coffin decoration in a consistent manner, already showing the concern for dividing the object into well-defined areas.¹⁷

However, the full acknowledgement of the “yellow” coffins as highly complex and multidimensional entities only emerged with the specific association of these objects with the concept of “building”, an idea put forward with the concept of “architectonization”.¹⁸ This idea implies that coffin decoration in “yellow” coffins performs a variety of roles, including creating spacial dimensions intending to associate the coffin with a sacred space. In this process, the coffin ceased to be decorated as a whole piece and was formally divided in different, one can say “semi-autonomous”, areas.¹⁹ Each of these areas not only has a repertoire of its own, as it forms a composition ruled by its own principles. From the art-historical perspective, these compositions form one of the most distinctive aspects of the “yellow” type, as they witness the extensive use of features previously used in the decoration of tombs or temples, such as block friezes, floral patterns, or the organization in registers, in the decoration of coffins. Moreover, the compositions that resulted in this manner, exhibit layouts borrowed from the decoration of walls, ceilings or doors.²⁰

Necessarily, this wealth of information is largely overlooked if the description of “yellow” coffins fails to adapt the concept of “architectonization”. A crucial step of this process is the obvious acknowledgement of the different sections, which implies the adoption of consistent terminology and the description of these sections as independent formal units,²¹ and not as a loose association of features.

Interestingly, studying each section independently sheds light into new phenomena. For example, when examining the layout of a particular coffin we can perceive variations of the weight that each section presents in the global program of the object. Moreover, these changes do not simply result from an individual variation, but follow a broader pattern, in which we detect consistent traces of what can be perceived as a “rise of complexity”. This development affects the coffin as a whole but it is generated within every single section. The value and significance of each section thus changed significantly along the period during which “yellow” coffins remained in use and that necessarily implied a dynamic process with obvious implications in workshop processes and decoration choices.

With this discussion, I would like to show how important are our methodological choices and how they impact the phenomena that we can perceive when studying a particular object. Therefore, whenever I examine a “yellow” coffin, my first concern is to describe it using the methodology that, in my point of view, better grasps the specific features of this object and, in a way, reveals what can be seen as its “fingerprint”.

The adoption of this methodology necessarily collides in some aspects with previous methods, concepts and typologies. In my regard, one of the main problems that the study of the “yellow” coffins have to address lies precisely in its definition, as Ramesside coffins have been persistently conflated with the “yellow” type.²² To understand the boundaries between these coffins, in Chapter I it is presented an overview on the evolution of coffin decoration from the Middle Kingdom down to the early 20th Dynasty.

Methodological aspects are further debated in Chapter 2. The typology that has been created under this framework is crucial for the subsequent interpretation of the data, as it helps us to identify the position of a particular coffin within the broader spectrum of the changes that affected coffin decoration from the late Ramesside period to the early 22nd Dynasty. In 2018, in the first volume of my systematic study on coffin decoration of the “yellow” type,²³ I published a short overview of my typology of the lid/mummy-covers. I take this chance to further develop and update this typology, aiming at making clear to the reader its mechanics of use. It would have been interesting to add a quantitative input in this chapter in particular, but this will be dealt with in a future work.

My goal in writing this book is to enhance the perception of the reader to the importance of using a sound terminology and a consistent methodology of description for the treatment of the data and its interpretation. The typology, in particular, reveals important clues on dating, but also helps to give visibility to ancient workshop practices and to social patterns regarding property and commission of funerary goods.

In my previous publications, I have been focusing on particular collections of antiquities that had been found in the Tomb of the Priests of Amun and had been sent away to museums out of Egypt. Even in these small samples a wide stylistic and formal diversity can be found, but of course, in this context it is hardly possible to explore the evolution of coffin decoration as a whole.

In this volume, I gathered a sample of nine burial sets in an attempt of illustrating the main trends that affected coffin decoration during the 21st and early 22nd Dynasties. Each coffin set presented in this book represents a particular

¹⁶ Niwiński 1996. Niwiński 1999. Niwiński 2004.

¹⁷ Egner, Hauslauer 1994. Egner, Hauslauer 2009.

¹⁸ See van Walsem 1997, 358-359.

¹⁹ Sousa 2017a.

²⁰ Sousa 2018.

²¹ Sousa 2017.

²² Niwiński 1988, 68-70.

²³ Sousa 2018.

arrangement, showing an ensemble of features that helps us to situate it in a long evolutionary stream, which, of course, had not always been linear. Thus, the goal of this book is presenting to the reader a sample of objects displaying what can be considered “typical” layouts. At first glance, most of the objects here presented have in common the observance to the normative scheme of decoration, and thus they can hardly be considered particularly “exceptional” artefacts. And yet, each one of them represents a unique achievement in terms of coffin decoration and generates a specific set of questions that allows us to have a glimpse on the dynamics of Theban funerary workshops during the 21st Dynasty.

The first five sets presented in the book have been examined by myself resulting directly from my work in the Gate of the Priests Project. The descriptions are differently supported in photos and drawings for the simple reason that not always I had enough time to carry out the full documentation of the object in drawing. The most complete documentation is presented with the coffin set of Tabasety (Chapter 4) which was only possible thanks to a fellowship financed by Aarhus University Research Foundation and the generous support of the Antikmuseet of the University of Aarhus in October of 2016.

Others result from short study missions carried out to document a specific sample of coffins. This is the case of the coffin sets of Heretueben (Chapter 3) and Henuttaui (Chapter 7), both kept in the Staatliche Sammlung für Ägyptische Kunst in Munich.

The two mummy-covers discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 had been chosen to be part of this sample, not only because they superbly illustrate a certain stage of development of the “yellow” type, but also because they have remained unnoticed in the Egyptological records, thus preventing any reconstruction of its original context to be attempted. Based on the currently available data, a possible match for the anonymous mummy-cover from Bab el-Gasus currently kept in the Bohusläns Museum in Uddevalla is proposed in Chapter 5. The publication of these objects is therefore important to confirm this association or to find new ones.

These coffin sets form the core of the book, each one showing a layout that can be considered more or less “canonical” of a certain stage. Given the nature of the English language, the description of iconography can be an ordeal when dealing with Egyptian gods, which make abundant use of animal forms. As a guiding rule, I take the subject as an “animal” when it is fully featured in animal form (ex: scarab, ram, etc). Otherwise I deal with him as a “human” entity.

Thanks to the contacts of the Project, other teams and researchers have been invited to publish the results of their studies on “yellow” coffins in this book. We have tried as much as possible to display a common protocol in our texts

but of course each paper presents its own specificities. Luca Miatello and Mahmoud M. Ibrahim examined the coffin set of Amenniutnakht. Originally found in Bab el-Gasus, this coffin set (A.81) provides a superb case study of an “archaizing” trend of coffin decoration. The coffin set is thoroughly examined by this team, together with the whole funerary assemblage.

Also from Bab el-Gasus is the coffin set of Hori (A.143), here presented by Hala Moustafa. Too complex to be here fully described in a single chapter, this coffin set was approached differently, with the Author focusing on a particular sample of exceptional scenes illustrating the complexity achieved by coffin decoration in its latest stages of development.

The burial ensemble of Ankhef, kept in the Collection of the Ivanovo Regional Art Museum (Russia) is presented in Chapter 10 by Vladimir Bolshakov. This peculiar coffin set allows us to see how the Theban tradition of coffin decoration was reinterpreted elsewhere shedding light into a process that remains poorly known.

Ideally, each time our Project selects a collection to be studied, documented and published, I would like to carry out an extensive study, not only in coffin decoration but in all the structures and materials of the objects. However, this has never been possible due to financial and institutional constraints. For this reason, the studies elaborated on an anonymous coffin kept in the Wayne County Historical Museum were an important addition to this volume. The coffin is thoroughly described not only in terms of coffin decoration, as well as in terms of carpentry work by Bonnie M. Sampsell (Chapter 11). The pigments used in this coffin are also analysed by Corinne Eloi Deibel *et alli* (Chapter 12). Additionally, this anonymous coffin presents important features to understand the processes that mediated the transition from the “yellow” type towards the new patterns of coffin decoration detected in Thebes during the 22nd Dynasty.

All the elements collected through the description of the coffins are integrated by myself in Chapter 13, giving, as much as it is possible, a comprehensive view of the multiplicity of aspects involved in coffin decoration. This sample of objects, as small as it is, allows the reader to engage in the critical assessment of the coffins from the “yellow” type, as each assemblage here presented points out to a certain layout that may be considered as “typical”. At the same time, these assemblages show how diverse “yellow” coffins can be, and how important it is a thorough observation of their features, as each assemblage opens its own set of questions. Such multiplicity indeed creates many difficulties to anyone trying to study “yellow” coffins but it is exactly this complexity that truly makes these objects so fascinating to research.

Rogério Sousa
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