

## **Coffin Fragments in the Stuart L. Wheeler Gallery of the Ancient World**

Dayle Wood, '11

When Dr. J.L.M. Curry, a professor at the University of Richmond, journeyed to Egypt in 1876, his travels left him experienced in the acquisition of Egyptian antiquities. In all probability, Dr. Curry secured two coffin fragments for the University's collection on this trip along with other assorted antiquities still on display in the gallery, including the mummy of Ti Ameny Net, the two relief fragments, and the small sphinx. Serving as excellent examples of Egyptian burial mythology, these coffin fragments are a valuable addition to the gallery's collection and much about the history of Egyptian art, particularly in relation to mortuary practices, can be learned from the scenes depicted on them.

After Stuart Wheeler initially observed the two coffin fragments, he dated them to the Twenty-second dynasty (approximately 950-730 BC) due to their use of cartonnage and to the stylistic similarities that he noted between the fragments and the mummy case of Ti Ameny Net. Cartonnage is a material that was used for mummy coffin cases as early as the Twelfth dynasty. Made from linen or papyrus that was soaked in gum and layered in plaster, its composition was malleable when wet and allowed for the coffin to be formed and molded. Because of this, cartonnage became fashionable with the use of contoured inner cases by the Twenty-second dynasty. Wheeler's primary reason for dating the fragments in the Twenty-second dynasty appears to have been due to the notion that they are made from cartonnage, however, stylistic analysis can deduce that his prediction seems accurate within the realm of Egyptian art after 1550 BC.

The New Kingdom in Egypt was a time of economic prosperity and far-reaching influence abroad, thanks to a succession of extraordinarily capable kings and queens. The reign of Eighteenth dynasty kings such as Ahmose (1550-1525 BC) and Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC) laid the foundation for a strong and flourishing Egypt, which allowed for a revolution of artistic excellence that encouraged realism and individual expression in art. This significant modification to the artistic code was crucial for the creative development of coffins and sarcophagi in the New Kingdom and, later, the Third Intermediate Period because it enabled the production of new variations and designs on well-established themes and subjects.

Early in the Eighteenth dynasty, coffins were massive in size, fairly simple and often were decorated to represent the actual mummy in its outermost wrappings. Painted across the white background of the coffins were vertical and horizontal bands made to symbolize the bandages in which the mummy was enclosed. These bands provided a place for inscriptions as well as formed frames for the different religious and mortuary vignettes that were painted throughout the surface of the coffin. The scenes painted in these registers often depicted representations of the deceased with deities, offerings, or burial rites to project the Egyptian notions of rebirth and eternal life. As the New Kingdom was succeeded by the Third Intermediate Period, painted scenes and texts that decorated the surface of the coffins became more overflowing with ornamentation. Coffins of the Twenty-first and later Third Intermediate Period dynasties began to feature

more complex designs and painted religious motifs, and became crammed with groupings of figures, symbols, and patterns. The bands, which previously served as a place for hieroglyphic inscriptions, were reduced in width and became little more than divisional bands for the different registers to present their scenes. Instead of on the bands, the primary inscriptions were now positioned in single vertical columns down the front of the coffin. The extensive use of gilding and colored inlays also became commonplace in the Twenty-first and Twenty-second dynasties for the coffins of those with means. Although it is difficult to date them on a stylistic basis without access to the entire coffin, the gallery's fragments' overall design, banded division of the surface, and use of cartonnage are indicative of the Twenty-second dynasty.

The unifying quality of the post-Eighteenth dynasty coffins is their anthropoid shape, which became standard throughout this time. Anthropoid coffins were created first in the Middle Kingdom to closely resemble the body of the deceased. Using cartonnage, the Egyptians were able to shape the linen and plaster to form a carefully molded rendition of the face and body of the deceased, enabling a portrait of the mummy inside the coffin. As the shape of the anthropoid coffin became more established in Egypt, the coffins began to more closely resemble the human form by incorporating realistic human properties. The mask covering the mummy's face, for instance, had eyes and eyebrows inlaid with precious stones, while the arms were sculpted in relief and crossed over the body. Although, it is unsure to what extent the coffin was formed, it can be assumed that the coffin fragments originate from an anthropoid coffin because they are from the period where the anthropoid shape was standard in creation.

The fragments in the gallery's collection belong to the coffin of a priestess of a god, as identified in the inscription featured on one of the fragments. To learn more about each coffin fragment, click on the following links:

**[Coffin fragment featuring deceased before Osiris](#)** (link to section below)

**[Coffin fragment featuring sun god, Ra, and other deities](#)** (link to section below)

*Suggested Reading for Further Study:*

Brier, Bob. *Egyptian Mummies: Unraveling the Secrets of an Ancient Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.

Clark, Robert Thomas Rundle. *Myth and symbol in Ancient Egypt*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.

Remler, Pat. *Egyptian Mythology A to Z*. New York: Facts of File, 1996.

Spencer, A. Jeffrey. *Death in ancient Egypt*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.

Wilkinson, Richard H. *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

### Coffin fragment featuring deceased before Osiris

The illustrated scene on this fragment features the deceased in a long white tunic standing before Osiris, the god of the afterlife, in a position of adoration. With her hands forward and uplifted, one in front of the other, as was a typical Egyptian artistic convention, the deceased is depicted as worshipping the powerful gods in her presence. Her thick, kohl-rimmed eyes and the gold jewelry flanking her wrists are elements of distinctive Egyptian dress and costume that suggest the luxury and beauty that was highly valued at the time. On top of her head is a cone of incense that is believed to have been made from a mixture of aromatic perfumes and fat. In the heat, the wearer would be both cool and fragrant as the incense would melt and run down their elaborate wigs and clothing. The exact identity of the deceased is unknown, however, an inscription on the coffin fragment featuring sun god, Ra, and other deities suggests that she was a priestess to a god.

The gods surrounding her are fairly typical for a mortuary scene. In front of her is Osiris, depicted in his usual mummy form with his hands projected through the wrappings to hold the *was* scepter as a sign of his power and dominion. Behind him is one of his four sons, Horus, the falcon-headed god of the sky. Buto, the cobra goddess, standing to the right of the deceased, is wearing the crown of Upper Egypt. An interesting design characteristic on this fragment to be noted is the cobra's tail, which turns upward from the bottom to form a new geometrically patterned band that rises to the top of the register. This new band, in alternating shades of red, yellow, and blue, seems to fit in conjunction with the rest of the bands, serving an architectural-like purpose for the scene.

Above the vignette of the deceased standing before Osiris, the edges of the outstretched wings of a falcon deity can be seen intersecting with the divisional bands that frame the scene. The oversized wings of a falcon were a customary element to New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period coffins because it meant to symbolize the protective embrace of a goddess watching over the deceased. Using the shape of the falcon's wing as a guide and the notion that the protective falcon was most often situated in the very center of the coffin, it can be assumed that this register is from somewhere on the left side of the coffin. The solid blue, red, and yellow bands that frame the scene carry no inscriptions and most likely continued throughout the surface of the coffin breaking up the space for other painted registers portraying other important mortuary scenes.

### Coffin fragment featuring sun god, Ra, and other deities

The coffin fragment is divided into two main registers, separated by a grouping of yellow, blue, and red bands that most likely frame the entire surface of the coffin. On the top register, a painted illustration of a falcon, or the sun god, Ra, is featured in a scene with reoccurring themes of the protection of the deceased. Ra's outstretched wings seem to envelop a depiction of a *Udjat*, or the eye of Horus, that was a sign of both healing and protection for the Egyptians. The *Udjat* was commonly painted on coffins for this reason as it was thought to ward off evil in the afterlife. On top of Ra's head is a sun disk with the cobra emblem, *Uraeus*, serving as a yet another protective symbol for the coffin. The

goddess known as the great protector, Isis, is wearing a blue crown and is located to the left of the falcon. With her right hand up to her face, her seated position is suggestive of mourning in an act of remembrance for the deceased. This top scene is incomplete on the fragment as it appears to have been separated from the rest of the coffin. Without the rest of the image, it is difficult to say for certain what the artists of the coffin were attempting to fully portray other than the matter of protection over the deceased.

Below the middle geometric bands, a small but significant portion of hieroglyphic inscription can be seen to the left of the fragment. As it is difficult to translate the inscription completely without the remainder of the text, the main fact from the text that can be determined is that the deceased was a priestess to an unknown god. The hieroglyph for "god" can be seen in this inscription as the shape of a banner or a flag in the middle of the text. To exactly what god the priestess was committed has yet to be determined, however, another hieroglyph that has been cut off at the edge of the fragment looks to resemble the character representing the god Ptah.

Next to the inscription are two deities that mirror one another in both action and position. Separated by another grouping of bands, the deities here appear to be holding the feather of Ma'at, a tall ostrich plume that bends over at its tip as a sign of truth and order. The fact that the deities are each holding the feather indicate that a successful judgment has passed and that the deceased was deemed of good character to continue on to the afterlife. The deity on the left is difficult to identify, but is recognized as a goddess in the inscription. The deity on the right, on the other hand, is more easily distinguished and looks to be an ape-like figure and is, thus, most likely Hapi, another of the four sons of Horus.

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- Dunand, Françoise, and Roger Lichtenberg. *Mummies and Death in Egypt*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
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[http://www.egyptologyonline.com/wigs\\_&\\_hair.htm](http://www.egyptologyonline.com/wigs_&_hair.htm) (accessed August 17, 2009).
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