UPDATE FROM ARCE

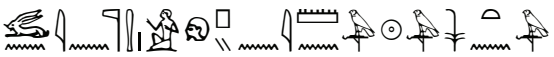
CURRENT RESEARCH, EXCAVATION AND CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN EGYPT

PHOTO: MARISSA STEVENS. BY KIND PERMISSION OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

ARCE's support of Kara Cooney's 21st Dynasty Coffins Project is helping to deliver surprising results. Just one example is at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, where 60% of the 21st-Dynasty coffins examined (above) showed evidence of reuse.

Egypt's 21st Dynasty saw her neighbours fall under a confederacy of invaders, and luxury wood imports halted. No coffin meant no rebirth, so now, reusing an ancestor's coffin became the only possible option for the spiritual well-being of one's loved ones.

At the same time, Theban elites abandoned the ostentatious tomb complexes that had become beacons to thieves. Instead, burials became communal and more easily guarded. Expensive tomb decorations and lavish funerary goods decreased, and the focus now went on the minimum essentials for rebirth: the coffin and the mummy. As tomb decoration decreased, coffin decoration increased, and the interiors of 21st-Dynasty coffins were decorated for the first time (above). Coffins effectively became discrete tombs into which the body was placed.



"The High Priest of Amun-Re, King

of the Gods, Khonsuemheb, sat down and wept…."

The High Priest was clearly rattled. He had just listened to a heart-wrenching tale from a man who had once lived almost 500 years earlier. In the late 20th-Dynasty tale known as *Khonsuemheb and the Ghost*, the High Priest is haunted by a distressed 17th-Dynasty *akh,* who appears to be cold, hungry and homeless, and faces a bleak eternity.

For the ancient Egyptians, this story reinforced a familiar warning of what happens when the living fail the dead: their name forgotten, their offerings neglected and their coffin and tomb damaged or destroyed. The happy ending in this story is that Khonsuemheb promises the unhappy *akh* to rebuild his tomb, commission a replacement coffin of gold and precious wood, and reestablish his offering cult.

The importance to the Egyptians of a secure spot to become an aspect of Osiris and enjoy immortality was still powerful a thousand years later, when, in the 1st century B.C., Greek writer Diodorus Siculus wrote:

> "For the inhabitants of Egypt consider the period of this life of no account whatever, but place the greatest value on the time after death when they will be remembered for their virtue… consequently they give less thought to the furnishing of their houses but in the manner of their burials they do not forgo any excess of zeal."

BRITISH MUSEUM. ACC. NO. EA 29579. PHOTO: REMY HIRAMOTO
COURTESY TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The inner coffin lid of Muthotep was found in Thebes in the late 19th century and was soon shipped off to the U.K. and made its way to the British Museum. This wasn't, however, the first time that the coffin had been pulled into the daylight since first being interred.

One of the easiest ways to spot coffin reuse is by spotting old decoration underneath later styles. Here, the broken plaster on the coffin of Muthotep in the British Museum shows the older 19th-Dynasty decoration below the newer 20th-Dynasty surface.

THE MYSTERY

Today it makes headlines when a tomb is discovered that appears to be untouched: having escaped the ravages of tomb robbers and stocked with the necessary funerary assemblage to ensure a comfortable forever-after. However, ongoing research by Kara Cooney at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) suggests that even when an "intact" tomb is unearthed, it may not quite be as untouched as we had once thought.

A big part of ARCE's mission is to support leading research on Egyptian history and culture. Its important support of Kara Cooney's 21st Dynasty Coffins Project is helping to shift the long-established narrative surrounding tomb robbery in ancient Egypt.

Today, Kara Cooney is Associate Professor of Egyptian Art and Architecture at UCLA. As a PhD student, however, she became intrigued by something others had noticed before, but not explored to any great depth: the overwhelming number of surviving Egyptian coffins from the 21st Dynasty (ca. 1069–945 B.C.). Only about eighty 19th and 20th Dynasty coffins survive (from a period lasting some 225 years). In contrast, over 800 coffins dated to the 21st-Dynasty remain in museums around the world—and this was from a 120-year period known for political instability, economic crisis and rampant tomb plundering.

The intrigue deepened when it was observed that some of these 21st Dynasty coffins showed obvious signs of reuse: a new owner's name was inscribed over the original occupant. In the past, some of these coffins had been described as bearing an "archaizing" style, i.e. with antique design features. However, a closer look sometimes revealed the names of more than one owner, or a hint of old decoration beneath later remodelling. Rather than being built in an old-fashioned style, it seems they indeed *were* old-fashioned coffins that had been reused. Were the great numbers of 21st-Dynasty coffins simply older coffins that had been reemployed?

THE 21ST DYNASTY COFFINS OF DB 320

In late 2016, Dr. Cooney's curiosity led to Cairo's Egyptian Museum to examine the most famous (and understudied) collection of 21st-Dynasty coffins anywhere: those of the High Priests of Amun from DB 320. Thanks to amazing access provided by museum staff, and assistance provided by ARCE for the volumes of paperwork and permissions required by multiple government agencies, "Team Kara" was able to study this assemblage of coffins more thoroughly than anyone had for over a century.

These belonged to the powerful clergy and their families who assumed control over Thebes and Upper Egypt when the last Ramesside king died at the end of the 20th Dynasty. The Amun priesthood shared strong family links with the new "official" dynasty—the 21st—which now ruled from the northern Delta, and the two connected houses entered into a power-sharing arrangement to govern the whole of Egypt. The Theban priestly elite became the effective kings of Upper Egypt.

Their communal family tomb, DB 320 in Western Thebes, eventually became a Royal Cache, also holding the battered mummies of many of the great New Kingdom rulers whose burials had been plundered by the Theban priesthood to fund their administration.

What Cooney and her team discovered when examining the coffins of the 21st Dynasty priestly elite was astound-

BRITISH MUSEUM. ACC. NO. EA 29579. PHOTO: REMY HIRAMOTO
COURTESY TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A detail of the exposed 19th-Dynasty decoration on Muthotep's coffin in the British Museum.

While coffin reuse was largely driven by the responsibility to provide one's dearly departed the materials necessary to live forever, there were social motivations as well.

Funerary rituals often involved noisy, public processions that often included musicians, singers and professional mourners paid to fill out the crowd and wail convincingly. The funeral was a great opportunity for the deceased's family to display their wealth and social standing.

During earlier periods, the funeral procession would include the lavish furniture and gilded shrines being carried to the tomb—very conspicuous displays of wealth. In the 21st Dynasty, however, with a much smaller budget and leaner attitude to funerary goods, the attention shifted to one essential item: the coffin.

ing. For the 31 coffins they studied, the reuse rate was 100%!

A COFFIN'S JOB

A reused coffin suggests an extreme situation: the blessed dead being hauled from their places of rest to free-up something more valuable: their rich funerary goods.

For the chance to live forever, an ancient Egyptian with means needed more than thoughts and prayers. They needed *things*: tangible, material devices infused with magic. The most important of these was a coffin—a vessel for rebirth as an Osiris, able to explore eternity as a transformed spirit.

The fact that every single coffin from the DB 320 cache had been appropriated from prior burials paints a vivid picture of desperation; the wealthiest, most powerful, most privileged families in Theban society were forced to enter the afterlife in second-hand coffins. What had created this crisis? Historians call it the Bronze Age Collapse.

THE END OF AN ERA

Around 1150 B.C., during Egypt's 20th Dynasty, almost every major Bronze Age civilisation around the Mediterranean and the Middle East collapsed—in less than the span of a human lifetime. Its beginnings may have been a withering drought across Europe, leading to widespread hunger and desperate people on the move. It ended with devastating conflict as state after state fell under swathes of dispossessed foreigners.

Egypt repelled waves of "Sea Peoples" and Libyans intent on making Egypt their home, but the kingdom became increasingly isolated and the economy struggled. For Thebes, somewhat quarantined from the worst of the "action", one of the biggest impacts was the loss of lucrative trade routes. The city's elite had long relied on luxury imported materials to make the coffins which were essential for a successful afterlife. Eternity was now at stake and some tough choices needed to made.

THE CHOICE

For a culture that relied on magically-infused materials to access the afterlife, the collapse of the trade networks was a disaster. It is at this point that we realise that Kara Cooney's work on 21st-Dynasty coffins is equally a study of human behaviour—how the Theban elites reacted and adapted as the world they knew changed around them.

With fresh materials in short supply, the Thebans were faced with two options: abandon the creation of coffins, or adapt: move towards less materialist burial practices—and *find* coffin material somewhere. It probably wasn't a tough choice. Faced with the prospect of "going it alone" into the afterlife without the benefit of a coffin to be ritually re-activated, or reusing an older coffin.

We usually look upon tomb robbery as deviant behaviour and a crime. Indeed, official records of sacked tomb inspections and the interrogation and subsequent confessions of thieves, such as in the *Tomb Robbery Papyri*, have informed us of the Egyptian ideal: an elaborate burial in a robust, secure tomb where the deceased could see out eternity. Yet, when times got tough, rather than shift their

PHOTO: MARISSA STEVENS. BY KIND PERMISSION OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

Kara Cooney closely examines a coffin lid and case ensemble in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. The join between the two parts can reveal important clues regarding the coffin's reuse.

As the 21st Dynasty continued, the craftsmen charged with adapting reused coffins became more skilled, and their improved techniques became more difficult to detect. One telling sign that a coffin has been reused is when a coffin lid doesn't fit the case. They have been brought together from different funerary assemblages.

The evidence for reuse between coffins can vary widely. Some reusers simply inscribed a new name onto an otherwise unchanged coffin. Others replaced the name and altered the decorations to reflect a gender reassignment.

In some cases, coffins may have been scrubbed of decoration and fully dismantled to provide material for new coffins. Alternatively, the deceased may have been given their new (temporary) home without any changes to the coffin whatsoever. There's no way of telling the extent to which this happened, but we can safely assume that it happened at least some of the time, so reuse rates are no doubt higher than what the visible evidence reveals.

funerary rituals, they chose to tap into a precious resource buried in the Theban hills.

For us today, it's hard to get used to the idea of coffin reuse. After all, a coffin bearing the face and name of an individual seems such a personal thing. But perhaps we have become so used to the idea of a coffin providing the continued protection of the dead that we have forgotten a coffin's primary purpose: the ritual transformation of the dead—right after death. Coffins provided an immediate function that didn't need to last forever.

While a permanent home in the West was certainly the ideal, during times of scarcity, coffins could easily be reused to provide the same function for the next person. Simply put, the needs of the newly dead took precedence over the older dead.

IT'S SHOWTIME

The chance to give a deceased loved one a successful rebirth as Osiris was not only a powerful motivator to access a "pre-loved" coffin, it was a family obligation. It wasn't the only driving factor, however. Many Egyptian tombs display scenes of long, noisy funerary processions, designed to showcase the material wealth of the deceased's family. A funeral was an ostentatious opportunity to showcase a family's social standing.

As Dr. Cooney told NILE Magazine, for a culture that relied on magically-infused materials to not only secure the afterlife needs of a family member, but also to boost the social status of the living, it would have been a bigger "crime" not to access an available supply of previously used wood.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Thanks to funding from ARCE, Kara and her team have studied coffins in major collections around the world, with reuse rates averaging 60%. Some coffins reveal two reuses or more! With such a high proportion of reuse, Dr. Cooney proposes that most funerary reuse was "legal", that is, "most occurrences happened in family tombs, by the owners of those tombs, reusing ancestors' coffins. . . . or was performed by high officials [in older, unclaimed tombs]. . . ." This wasn't the work of a back-alley operation by a handful of thieves; tomb "robbery" and reuse was a part of life. As Dr. Cooney puts it, "this was a community-wide cultural agreement to continuously break the link between the person and coffin, to conventionalise a coffin's transformation from sacred to commodity and back again."

Rather than securing coffins in tombs with the intent that they never again see the light of day, the evidence shows that some coffins have enjoyed the sunshine many times over—and collected the admiring gazes of onlookers during showy funeral processions.

It is this conspicuous display of wealth that may explain

The outer coffin of the High Priest of Amun, Pinudjem I, has been the recipient of both reuse and blatant theft.

This coffin lid and the matching base formerly belonged to the 18th Dynasty's Thutmose I, who ruled some 400 years earlier. The lid had been redecorated and re-inscribed by Pinudjem I for his own use.

However, when found in the Royal Cache tomb (DB 320), Pinudjem I was in a different coffin entirely; one belonging to Queen Ahhotep (Cairo Acc. No. CG 61006), the mother of King Ahmose, founder of the 18th Dynasty. The coffin that Pinudjem I had appropriated from Thutmose had, in the end, served its purpose; the mummy of Thutmose I was found in his own coffin that had been returned to him, although bearing Pinudjem I's name.

It was Pinudjem I's grandson, Pinudjem II, who established DB 320 as a family cache tomb, and it may have been when Pinudjem I's coffin was being moved into it that the gilding on the face was adzed off.

With trade and tribute at a stand-still, the High Priests of Amun turned to a rich resource to fund their regime: the royal burials in the Valley of the Kings. Pinudjem I's coffin may well have lost its gold as part of this state-sponsored looting.

Although the attack on the gilding on Pinudjem I's coffin was thorough, the perpetrators appear to have been careful to avoid overly-damaging the face. The coffin's eyes, nose and mouth have been treated lightly, evidently to allow the ruler to continue to see, smell and eat in the afterlife.

CATALOGUE GÉNERAL DES ANTIQUITÉS ÉGYPTIENNES DU MUSÉE DU CAIRE, 1909. ACC. NO. CG 61025.

the scarcity of contemporary references to coffin reuse. After all, why document the fact that Grandma Meryt's shiny new coffin was actually a family hand-me-down?

WHERE ARE THE BODIES?

One curiosity that Dr. Cooney mentioned to NILE was the number of coffins they have examined with a blank space where the deceased's name should be. Cooney suspects that these pieces may be examples of what she calls "parish coffins", rented out by a temple or priest to families without the means to purchase a coffin outright. Once again we see the focus on what Cooney explains as "the value of short-term, transformative ritual activity at the expense of the permanent protection a coffin might provide.

It would also serve to explain some of the uncoffined mummies that are often found in tombs—particularly in communal burials. Previously, it has largely been thought that uncoffined mummies belonged to people with family connections to a tomb, but without the finances to fund a coffin for eternity.

THE GUILT FACTOR

How did the Egyptian *feel* about disinterring their deceased ancestors and reusing their funerary materials? One on

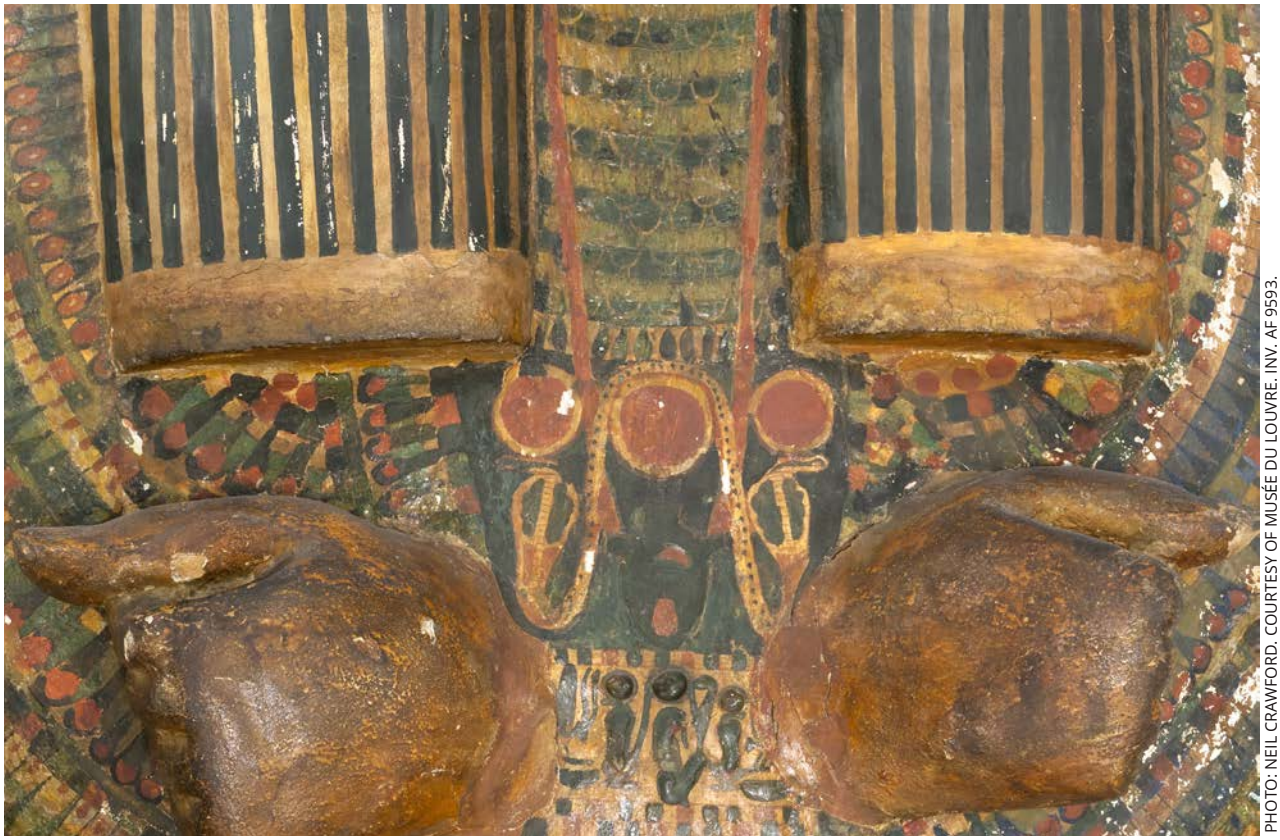


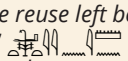
PHOTO: NEIL CRAWFORD. COURTESY OF MUSÉE DU LOUVRE. INV. AF 9593.

Modifying the gender was another common result of coffin reuse. It often didn't take a lot of changes to turn a female coffin, for example, into a male one: modify the wig, lose the earrings, get rid of the breasts and change the hands.

Female hands are typically shown open and flat against their chests. Popularly thought to portray a woman's more "passive" role, the flat hands could have a link to the goddess Hathor, resembling the ivory clappers used in her rituals. The male clenched hand was connected with expressions of power and authority, and perhaps symbolically linking the deceased with Osiris, who is shown holding his distinguishing symbols of crook and flail.

Interestingly, while the old name was usually scrubbed off, the name of the new owner didn't always replace it. Kara Cooney reports that "there are many such reused coffins which retain a varnished blank where the name should have been inscribed."

The above coffin (Louvre AF 9593) belonged initially to a woman and was redecorated for a man. The hands were changed and the pectoral and collar repainted after the breasts were removed. The touch-up work is of much lower quality and a tell-tale sign of reuse.

Most of the rest of the decoration was left untouched. In fact, while the name of the previous female owner was removed, the people responsible for the reuse left behind the feminine title "Shemayet en Imun"  *, "Chantress of Amun" on the lid. Perhaps the reusers didn't have the time, funds or energy to change it.*

hand there is the official record of inspections of sacked tombs and the brutal interrogation of suspected thieves, such as the *Tomb Robbery Papyri*. But written references of private robbery are rare and veiled. This is surprising in a society where those most able to afford coffins (and thus prone to become the target of thieves) are also the most literate. As Cooney suggests, however, if legitimate reappropriation was the norm, then there would have been no reason to document it, "unless there was a dispute or problem among those engaging in such activities that demanded a record."

Regardless of whether the practice was widespread or not, it's hard to imagine that no one was ever uneasy about taking from the dead to serve the living. Despite assurances that Uncle Kenamun was already an *akh* spirit and didn't need his coffin anymore, were any of his relatives fearful that he might be upset about having his body disturbed and that nice, expensive coffin hauled away? Perhaps one way of managing the risk of an unsettled spirit causing trouble was with magical spells and rituals.

When the family tomb of the High Priests of Amun at Deir el-Bahari (DB 320) was discovered in 1881, one of the original occupants found inside was Princess Nesykhonsu. She was a daughter of Smendes II, and niece (as well as wife) of Pinudjem II, both of whom were successive High Priests of Amun during the 21st Dynasty.

Inside Nesykhonsu's coffin was a papyrus roll and a writing board which both contained a text that may hint at measures taken by Pinudjem to protect himself from an angry, deceased wife. Part of the document, now known as the *Funerary Decree by Amun for Princess Nesykhonsu*, sees Nesykhonsu's spirit being deified and receiving the eternal blessings and protection of Amun-Re. Cooney explains that it then goes on to demand "that her afterlife manifestations, particularly her ba spirit and heart, cause no harm to her husband…"

"Her heart shall not turn away from him."

ANONYMOUS MUMMY COVER. ACC. NO. 25020. © VATICAN MUSEUMS. PHOTO: REMY HIRAMOTO

Looks can be deceiving. The breasts on this anonymous mummy board were created in plaster, and appear, upon close examination to have been added after the headdress. However, this isn't necessarily a sign of reuse. It may be that the original craftsmen decided to switch the board's gender after much of it had been completed, or perhaps that was simply the process they used: adding the breasts after the headdress.

Amber Myers Wells, research associate for "Team Kara", told NILE Magazine that this mummy cover "is an example of the nuance and attention to detail required in Kara's study of reuse."

Why did Pinudjem II feel the need to curtail the afterlife powers of his deceased niece/wife? Cooney suggests that this Funerary Decree "could represent a rare written attestation of the kinds of verbal temple rituals performed when harm (intentional or not) was done to a given person's funerary ensemble or tomb."

It appears that something might have happened (or was about to happen) to Nesykhonsu's funerary equipment, and Pinudjem II felt it was important to keep her afterlife self at peace. Whether this was out of guilt or self-preservation, we'll probably never know.

ARCE'S SUPPORT

Kara Cooney still has a lot of coffins to look at. Thanks to ARCE's Antiquities Endowment Fund and UCLA, her team headed back to Cairo's Egyptian Museum in September. This time it was to study the coffins into which the royals had been placed before being rounded up in the 21st Dynasty and hidden in DB 320. These coffins were replacements for the golden originals that the pharaohs and their family members were likely interred in.

We look forward to keeping you updated with Kara Cooney's research on "legal" coffin reuse in ancient Egypt, and how the Thebans adapted to one of the greatest crises their world had ever seen.

You can learn more about the conservation, excavation and research projects supported by ARCE's Antiquities Endowment Fund throughout Egypt at *www.arce.org*.