

PROCEEDINGS
FIRST
VATICAN
COFFIN
CONFERENCE
19-22 JUNE 2013

VOLUME 1



VATICAN COFFIN PROJECT

Reparto Antichità Egizie e del Vicino Oriente

Laboratorio di Diagnostica per la Conservazione ed il Restauro

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Scientific Text Editing

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Coffin lid of Djedmut and details, inv. MV25008

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LOUVRE



Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

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edited by **ALESSIA AMENTA** and **HÉLÈNE GUICHARD**



EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI





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Coffin reuse: Ritual materialism in the context of scarcity

Kathlyn M. Cooney

In my book *The Cost of Death*, I introduced the concept of ‘functional materialism’, suggesting that ancient Egyptian elites were inclined to perform rituals in conjunction with materiality, including coffins.¹ Many elite funerary texts, not to mention the thousands of surviving objects themselves, indicate that objects like body containers were believed necessary to effectively transform the dead. From an economic perspective, this ancient Egyptian materialist approach to ritual allowed a steady demand for coffins and other ritual objects throughout Egyptian history, even during times of economic scarcity and political upheaval, if, that is, the crisis was not so profound as to destroy the very elite power structures and economic systems upon which funerary production depended. If this supposition bears out, we should expect to see a high rate of coffin reuse during the Bronze Age Collapse and early Iron Age (mid-20th to early-22nd Dynasties) at Thebes, where elite power systems were maintained despite the profound social chaos in Egypt’s North.²

A quick look at the number of surviving coffins from the Theban region suggests steady coffin reuse during the Bronze-Iron Age transition. Only about 70 Ramesside (19th or 20th Dynasty) coffins survive from Thebes³ in comparison to as many as 900 surviving 21st and early 22nd Dynasty (1069-945 BC) coffins – more than ten times the amount, and that despite the economic turmoil of the Bronze Age collapse.⁴ It was Andrzej Niwiński who first suggested that Ramesside coffins might have been reused in the early Third Intermediate Period to create the mass of 21st Dynasty funerary objects preserved today in museums around the world, but he was never able to follow up with a systematic study.⁵

My ongoing research on 21st Dynasty coffins is attempting just such a wide scale examination of coffin reuse to understand the scale and methods, concentrating on large collections of coffins in museums and research institutions.⁶ These body containers find their origins within arenas of intense elite social competition and religious-ritual display,⁷ but 21st Dynasty coffins also come from a time of profound social crisis when raw materials to build them were in short supply.⁸ Coffins represent an ideal dataset representative of elite Theban society, allowing a study of funerary economics in the light of elite demands for public rituals using religiously charged funerary materiality. Ongoing research questions are: What were the different methods of reusing another person’s coffin? Who was reusing it? And perhaps, most significantly, but more difficult to answer: How did funerary arts reuse and theft impact the way that ancient Egyptians approached funerary materiality and ritual action during times of social crisis and after?

1 Cooney 2007a, 259-283; Cooney 2007b.

2 In comparison to Thebes, recent work by Maarten Raven (in this volume) on the lack of elite coffins from Northern necropoleis suggests that political and economic systems in the North were almost completely destroyed.

3 Cooney 2007a.

4 The exact number of 21st and early 22nd Dynasty ‘yellow coffins’ must remain in doubt. As I do my analysis, I continue to find new coffins to add to Niwiński’s already extensive list. For another examination of the inexact (and growing) number of coffins from this time period, see pp. 10-12 of van Walsem, 1993, 9-92.

5 Niwiński 1988, 13.

6 Cooney 2011; Cooney 2012a.

7 Cooney 2007a; Graeber 2001.

8 O’Connor 1983.

The evidence

I am currently working my way through many of the 900 or so 21st Dynasty coffins spread about the globe. About 300 coffins are still in Egypt (in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, the Luxor Museum, the Mummification Museum, or in regional museums), and the rest are now found in European and North American museums. In July of 2009, I studied coffins on display in Carlsberg Glyptotek and the Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen, but I was unable to visit those in storage. I also examined the pieces on display at the Medelhavsmuseet in Stockholm. In June of 2011, I obtained close access to 49 coffins in Italian collections, in storage and in vitrines (the Museo Egizio of Turin, the Museo Egizio of Florence, the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della Città in Cortona, and the Museo Gregoriano Egizio in the Vatican). In June of 2012, I also visited the collections of the Louvre in Paris, the Kunsthistorischesmuseum in Vienna, and the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, adding another 51 coffins to the study. In June of 2013, I worked with the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin, the British Museum in London, the Petrie Museum, and the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge.⁹ In June of 2014 I worked with (but have not yet finalized my analysis of) coffins at the National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh, Leeds City Museum, Manchester Museum, Liverpool World Museum, Warrington Museum, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, Swansea University Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in Brussels and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Thus far, I have examined about 300 21st Dynasty coffins in person, looking specifically for reuse, but also photographically documenting each piece as thoroughly as varying circumstances allow, building up a database of photographs for future research.¹⁰

Methodology

Finding evidence for coffin reuse demands up-close and in-person examination of all available surfaces with the aid of a flashlight, enhanced photography, and, in some cases, Infrared Photography.¹¹ This study cannot and does not treat every coffin the same. Circumstances of museum display, access, and past interventions (like restoration or repainting) always temper analysis. Studying a coffin that is in a vitrine is difficult, but not impossible. A coffin in storage, however, usually allows study of both the inside and outside of the piece. A proper reuse study includes examination for:

- 1 Older plaster and paint decoration underneath the current surface.
- 2 Older style modeling visible under a broken plastered surface.
- 3 Markers of gender reassignment (beard hole covered, breasts added, fist'd hands changed for flat hands, earrings added, etc.).
- 4 Two or more personal names on a given coffin.
- 5 Evidence of erased names.

9 Thanks to Alessia Amenta at the Vatican, Christian Greco in Turin, Maria Cristina Guidotti in Florence, Fredrik Helander in Stockholm, Anne Haslund-Hanssen at Copenhagen's Nationalmuseet and Mogens Jørgensen at Copenhagen's Carlsberg Glyptotek, Hélène Guichard at the Louvre, Regina Hoelzl in Vienna, Christian Greco in Leiden, John Taylor in London, Frederike Seyfried in Berlin, Margaret Maitland in Edinburgh, Katherine Baxter in Leeds, Campbell Price in Manchester, Ashley Cooke in Liverpool, Craig Sherwood in Warrington, Amber Druce in Bristol, Jenny Durant in Exeter, Carolyn Graves-Brown in Swansea, Luc Delvaux in Brussels, and Janice Kamrin in New York. Thanks are also due to Yasmin el-Shazly in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo who is helping us with preliminary research for future work on the 21st Dynasty coffins from the Royal Cache.

10 Sincere thanks also to Remy Hiramoto, who has done photographic work and donated his extensive engineering knowledge to our little *Coffins Project*. Thanks also to Marissa Stevens, Deborah Shieh, Rose Stevens, and Meryl King. Funding has been provided by the UCLA Academic Senate through multiple Faculty Research Grants and by the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

11 I am currently working with the Engineering Department at UCLA, Remy Hiramoto of Boeing and conservator Elsbeth Geldhof to include terahertz technology in this research, which can scan below the plaster layer on a given coffin, allowing a count of the number of layers (too high a count indicating reuse) and possibly an image of the older decoration underneath the current plaster layer. I have also started a new project of radiocarbon dating of the wood with Pearce-Paul Creasman, Elsbeth Geldhof, and Carrie Arbuckle. Both of these projects are in their infancy, but both will supplement my current art historical techniques.

- 6 Different artisan's hands in text inscriptions, particularly around the name
- 7 Ramesside coffin markers, including 19th and 20th Dynasty style decoration, arm modeling, black pitch interiors and undersides, relief lotus flowers on the back of the head, etc.

The evidence for reuse is not black and white – partly because the ancient Egyptians themselves practiced it within a gradient, some interested in veiling the practice, others ostensibly unconcerned about showing the obvious proof of coffin recycling to any discerning audience members at the funeral. The reuse of funerary arts represented a spectrum of possible appropriative actions. Some coffin reusers only inscribed a new name without altering the coffin in any other way. Others put in a new name and redecorated parts of the coffin lid. Others went further and redecorated all surfaces over the old plaster and paint. Some went the extra step to scrub away old plaster and paint before starting new decoration, even though they still retained old modeling in the wood. Some presumably scrubbed the coffin down, dismantled it, and started a new coffin from scratch, using only the wood and thus providing no trace of an older coffin except by means of further scientific examination.¹²

The more thoroughly a coffin was modified to fit with current styles, the harder it is to find evidence for that reuse. Another way of putting it is: the more comprehensive the reuse, the harder it is to see it. It is when the artisan attempted a shortcut – like leaving the old decoration underneath the new plaster, or when only the name was changed leaving the old decoration intact – that evidence of reuse is most clear.

Reuse on 21st Dynasty coffins

Space does not allow me to list all of the details of my research, but my analysis thus far shows a reuse rate of just over 50% (Table 1). In other words, half of the coffins showed some kind of evidence that they were produced for a previous owner and had been modified for the latest owner in some way. If I remove those coffins with only circumstantial evidence of reuse, then the reuse rate drops to 35%, still a substantial percentage.

Total rate of reuse 53, 82 %

The rate of the reuse is so high as to normalize this recommodification of funerary arts – at least during times of crisis – as a creative negotiation that prioritized the coffin's short-term materialist value in ritual use over the long-term value of its perpetual use in a grave by the dead. In other words, ancient Egyptians were reusing coffins because they wanted to *continue* materially driven funerary rituals, rather than discontinue them. If taking and reusing an ancestor's coffin was the only way to participate in the socially expected funerary ritual, then we have new evidence of the higher perceived value of the coffin for short-term ritual display.

The ancient Egyptians engaged in many different kinds of coffin recycling and reappropriation. In fact, some 21st Dynasty coffins likely contained dead people for whom the coffin was not originally commissioned and for whom no changes in decoration were made. This means that many coffins were probably appropriated through no physical action to the coffin itself – beyond taking the previous owner out of it and placing a new one inside. This kind of reuse is difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate given the poor level of archaeological information acquired before these coffins were moved to museum ownership. However, if a poorly mummified body was documented found inside of a high quality coffin set, then we might have a circumstantial marker for coffin reuse. For example, the body found inside the coffin inscribed for Henuttawy F at Deir el-Bahari tomb MMA 59 was not mummified, although the accompanying coffin was of high quality. The mummy was, however, interred with gold jewelry, making any conclusion of coffin recycling difficult.¹³ Although the situation remains suspicious, if a museum has disposed of or deaccessioned the mummies inside the coffins (which is

12 van Walsem 1993, 38.

13 Aston 2009, 198-199.

normally the case outside of Egypt and which certainly happened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), then all evidence of such reuse is irrevocably lost.

If a reuser was willing to put minimum time and effort into modifications on the coffin, then the old name could be scrubbed away, and a new name inscribed, without changing any of the other surface decoration at all. Name re-inscription was also often re-varnished, ostensibly so that it would blend with the rest of the yellow coffin decoration. A name modification often retained the titles of the previous coffin owner, something that is often seen with the common feminine title *nbt pr šmꜣyt n ꜥmn* 'Mistress of the House, Chantress of Amun'. Still, when the reuser redid a name, he often applied only a single colour of ink – black or red or blue – instead of matching the original polychrome inscriptions, making the re-inscription easy to differentiate.

For example, a coffin in the Vatican (Inv. MV 25035.3.1; Fig.1)¹⁴ shows the name of Ikhy applied in blue ink in the text on the top of the feet in a space where the name of the old occupant had previously been, in this case over the varnish.¹⁵ The titles of this previous owner were not touched, and one can only assume that leaving them served the purposes of the reusers. Ikhy's reuse did not touch other parts of the coffin. In fact, another name – *M-dydyt* – remains on the lower lid's seam inscription. Did the reusers not notice that this older name was still present on the coffin's surface when they reinscribed it for Ikhy? Did they feel it would not be necessary to change? Or was Ikhy related to *M-dydyt*, given that both of them had unusual Libyan names, thus linking both dead women in the afterlife by means of this coffin? This coffin provides circumstantial evidence that much reuse occurred in the context of the family – from the family tomb, reused for later family members who may not have been averse to the presence of a known relative's name on his or her coffin.

Modification of gender was another common action of coffin reuse. A gender modification required limited decorative changes on the upper body of the coffin lid, including wig type, earrings, hands (fisted for men, flat for women), and beard. In fact, gender changes were so commonly practiced that it provides another circumstantial clue that most coffin reuse happened in the context of the family, as opposed to theft. Why else would one engage in the expensive and time consuming practice of changing the wig, hands, earrings, and beard, if a coffin of the right gender could have been purchased on the market instead? Interestingly, a gender modification was not always accompanied by a complete name change, as there are many such reused coffins which retain a varnished blank where the name should have been inscribed. One coffin in the Louvre (Inv. Louvre AF 9593) was redecorated for a man on the upper body of the coffin lid, changing the wig, ears, hands, and pectoral, but leaving most of the rest of the decoration untouched. The name of



Fig. 1. Coffin of Ikhy, Musei Vaticani, Inv. MV 25035.3.1-3 (photo by Remy Hiramoto © Musei Vaticani).



Fig. 1.2. Coffin of Ikhy, Musei Vaticani, Inv. MV 25035.3.1-3, name of *M-dydyt* on side (photo by Remy Hiramoto © Musei Vaticani).

¹⁴ Gasse 1996, 81-97.

¹⁵ Many thanks to Giovanna Prestipino and Alessia Amenta for sharing their analysis of how blue paint was applied over varnish on this coffin.



Fig. 2. Anonymous coffin of a Chantress of Amun, Musée du Louvre, Inv. AF 9593 (Photo © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Les frères Chuzeville, photo by Remy Hiramoto).



Fig. 3. Anonymous coffin of a Chantress of Amun (detail of blank for name), Musée du Louvre, Inv. AF 9593 (photo by Neil Crawford).



Fig. 4. Detail of fist and flat hand, Museo Egizio of Florence, Inv. 2157 (photo by Remy Hiramoto).



Fig. 5. Detail of old striped wig under current wig, Museo Egizio of Florence, Inv. 8524 (photo by Neil Crawford).

the previous owner was carefully removed, but the reusers left the feminine title *šmꜣyt n'Imn* 'Chantress of Amun' on the lid seams untouched. Those responsible for the decorative reuse ostensibly did not understand or just ignored that the title was feminine and thus incongruous (Figs. 2 and 3).

Another coffin, this one in Florence, Museo Egizio (Inv. Florence 2157, Fig. 4),¹⁶ betrays the clear addition of earrings and breasts in a second layer of plaster and the redecoration of the headdress in a checkerboard pattern. The reusers also changed the hands: one of the hands has broken off of this coffin, revealing the outline of the previous fist and masculine hand, before the flat, feminine hand was added to the piece. Although there is a blank for a new name, no such name was added, at least not before the new layer of varnish was applied.

Other coffins show a more thorough redecoration, covering over older plaster and paint with new. For example, a coffin in Florence, Museo Egizio (Inv. Florence 8524; Fig. 5),¹⁷ betrays its earlier origins

16 Niwiński 1988, 139.

17 Niwiński 1988, 139.

with the remnants of a blue and white striped headdress about 1 cm underneath the current plaster layer at the back of the head on the coffin lid. There is no evidence of older paint anywhere else on this coffin, and thus it is likely the artisans scrubbed away the old decoration but did so roughly, leaving some remnants underneath the current head dress. This evidence is only visible because some of the plaster at the top of the head has broken away. Another coffin, this one an unpublished 20th Dynasty example, Vienna (Inv. Vienna ÄS 6066), belonging to the Chantress of Isis Meretenakhet shows black (or blue) pigment remnants on the back of the head a few centimeters under the current black painted plaster layer (Figs. 6 and 7).

Other coffins were completely replastered and repainted while still retaining old fashioned surface modeling. A coffin in Turin, Museo Egizio (Cat. 2228; Figs. 8 and 9), for instance, has been categorized as archaizing by Andrzej Niwiński because it shows the hips and thighs of the female form modeled in the coffin wood.¹⁸ I suggest, however, that this is not archaizing, but the remnants of a reused Ramesside coffin. In the 19th Dynasty, it was very popular for women's coffin lids to show the undulations of the female body covered with the white pleated garment of purity, like the coffin of Iset from Theban Tomb 1, now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.¹⁹ The arms on such coffins are typically not crossed in the Osirian fashion, but were positioned holding one fist to the chest and the other flat on the thigh. To see a coffin with such feminine curves and daily life arm positioning covered with 21st Dynasty solar/Osirian decoration is incongruous, and a remnant of reusing a 19th Dynasty coffin. To claim archaization erroneously enhances the perceived agency of a given coffin commissioner to choose whatever style he or she wanted, rather than being compelled to work within the restrictions of fashion and scarcity simultaneously; it also overcomplicates coffin typologies. This Turin coffin lid represents a short cut by coffin commissioners with no access to new sources of wood the piece. Even the bare feet typically carved on such 19th Dynasty coffins were retained in this who paid for redecoration work without also investing in the carpentry work needed to update 21st Dynasty reuse, modified by the draftsman with the addition of sandal straps.

Some commissioners saved money by charging draftsmen to redecorate the lid only, leaving the box decoration untouched. A coffin in Florence, Museo Egizio (Inv. Florence 7450; Fig. 10) which has been erroneously called archaizing²⁰ shows clear 19th Dynasty features on the box, including the Four Sons of Horus, Anubis and Thoth in the traditional positions. The interior of the box is painted with black pitch, rather than the polychrome



Fig. 6. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Inv. ÄS 6066 (photo by Neil Crawford).



Fig. 7. Detail of decoration under current wig, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Inv. ÄS 6066 (photo by Neil Crawford).

18 Niwiński 2004a, 117-129.

19 Cooney 2007a, 435-437, Figs. 59-62; Desroches-Noblecourt 1976, 170-171.

20 Niwiński 1988, 139.



Fig. 8. Museo Egizio of Turin, Inv. 2228 (photo by Neil Crawford).

decorations that were common during the 21st Dynasty, another clear Ramesside marker. Even though the reuser only had the lid repainted, the standard Egyptian colour palette allowed a match with the varnished box. The draftsman also retained the old-fashioned relief work of the lotus flower on the forehead and back of the head, clearly of 19th Dynasty style, indicating he only partially reworked the lid, leaving the head dress and face as it was. One wonders if the audience at the funerary ceremony noticed the older decoration, and, if they did, if it affected the social position of the coffin owner's family in any way. Other coffins show more careful reuse and the presumed intent on the part of the recycler to veil their work. The coffin set of Tjententiuhereru (Inv. Louvre E 13027 outer; E 13034 inner; E 13035 mummy board), for example, reveals that the thick black pitch previously painted on the coffin interior was ordered chiseled away. The bare wood was then painted a dark red, a feature of other early 21st Dynasty coffins. Because small remnants of this black pitch survive on the inner coffin lid, I suggest that the set probably found its origins in the 19th or 20th Dynasties.



Fig. 9. Detail of coffin lid, Museo Egizio of Turin, Inv. 2228 (photo by Remy Hiramoto).



Fig. 10. Museo Egizio of Florence, Inv. 7450 (photo by Remy Hiramoto).



Fig. 11. Detail of blank for the name, Museo Egizio of Florence, Inv. 8524 (photo by Remy Hiramoto).

Some coffins even betray two reuses, meaning that at least three different mummies had been placed within this one body container during its existence. A Florence coffin mentioned above, (Inv. Florence 8524, Fig. 5), with remnants of a striped headdress underneath the current plaster surface, seems to have been given a gender modification as well. Earrings and breasts that do not match the surface decoration were added in plaster and paint; the hands were probably changed from fist to flat; the headdress seems modified; and a beard was likely removed, the beard hole covered with plaster and paint. It seems a masculine coffin was replastered and repainted to transform it from the striped headdress version to something updated. At some point after this work, it was decided to change it into a feminine coffin, updating the

lid. Curiously, despite the extensive gender modifications, the area for the name was left blank (Fig. 11).

Interestingly, it seems the inscription of a name was not required for a successful reuse. Many coffins, including Inv. Florence 8524, show decorative changes, from male to female gender for example, but with no inscription of a new name, or at least none that is now visible. It seems that an old name was removed from the surface of Inv. Florence 8524, and new varnish was added before a new name was placed in the gap.

A blank space for the dead individual's name seems odd, given that the Egyptian coffin was meant to link the deceased to Osiris by means of the name and the image of the deceased with crossed arms and *wsekh*-collar. But maybe this blank was purposefully created so that coffins could be used multiple times for short-term ritual activation of the dead by those who could not afford the cost of a coffin. I argue that such pieces may have functioned as so-called 'parish coffins,' indeed as rental objects easily assigned and re-assigned for the dead as time and money demanded.

I have argued elsewhere that functional materialism was so compelling that many ancient Egyptians who could not afford to buy coffins outright and thus take them out of economic exchange were still driven to acquire such objects for short-term use, effectively renting a coffin when needed. In *The Cost of Death*, I had despaired of ever finding evidence for such a thing – because it seemed that multiple, short-term uses could not be archaeologically documented in any way. However, many 21st Dynasty coffins with evidence of decorative updating also retain a varnished blank for the coffin owner's name. Such a varnished space would have provided the perfect short-term writing surface – for a village or an extended family – because the surface acted like a modern dry-erase board. The name of one individual could be added in black ink over the varnish before funerary rituals and then quickly wiped away after the burial, ready for the next individual. Such a practice would imply that many ancient Egyptians were actually ritually transformed in a coffin that they did not personally own, one which they perhaps 'rented' from a temple or priest or which was owned collectively by the extended family. The fact that Inv. Florence 8524 was found in a burial space (probably Bab el-Gasus) is interesting, because buying such a 'parish coffin,' if indeed it was one, would have been like buying the 'floor model' in an electronics store.

Table 1. Rate of reuse for 21st Dynasty coffins analyzed thus far²¹

Rate of reuse for 20th-22nd Dynasty coffins analyzed thus far								
Museum/Institution	Coffins	0	.5-1	2	3	TBD	Excluded	Reuse %
Berlin, Germany, Ägyptisches Museum	23	11	4	1	4	1	2	39.13%
Bodrhuddan, UK	2				2			100%
Bristol, UK, City Museum and Art Gallery	4	2			2			50.0%
Brussels, Belgium, Musée Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire	13	3		6	3	1		69.23%
Copenhagen, Denmark, Copenhagen Nationalmuseet	6	2	2		2			66.67%
Copenhagen, Denmark, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek	2	1			1			50.0%
Cortona, Italy, Museo dell'Accademia	2					2		TBD
Edinburgh, UK, National Museums of Scotland	5	2	1		2			60.0%
Exeter, UK, Royal Albert Memorial Museum	1	1						0%
Florence, Italy, Museo Archeologico	17	4	3	2	8			76.47%
Houston, TX, USA, Houston Museum of Natural Science	1	1						0%
Leeds, UK, City Museum	2	2						0%
Leiden, Netherlands, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden	22	5	4	1	4	4	4	40.91%
Liverpool, UK, Merseyside County Museum	4		3		1			100%
London, UK, British Museum	43	27	8	2	6			37.21%
London, UK, Petrie Museum	1				1			100%
Manchester, UK	2		1				1	50.0%
New York, NY, USA, Metropolitan Museum of Art	24	7	6		9	2		62.5%
Paris, France, Musée du Louvre	33	10	7	8	6		2	63.64%
Perth, Scotland, UK	2				2			100%
Stockholm, Sweden, Stockholm Medelhavsmuseet	8	1	1		1	1	4	25.0%
Swansea, UK, The Wellcome Museum	1		1					100%
Turin, Italy, Museo Egizio	20	6	4	4	5	1		65.0%
Vatican City State, Museo Gregoriano Egizio	16	9	1	1	5			43.75%
Vienna, Austria, Kunsthistorisches Museum	19	6	4		7		2	57.89%
Warrington, UK, Warrington Museum & Art Gallery	2				2			100%
Totals	275	100	50	25	73	12	15	53.82%
Totals for reuse with high confidence				25	73			35.64%

Typological implications

For Egyptologists, repercussions of wide scale coffin reuse are obvious and even disturbing. It means much of the decoration we see on 21st Dynasty coffins may actually be a mélange of styles put together – with coffin lid decoration of a later date than the accompanying box decoration on a given coffin, or perhaps with interior painting of an older date than the exterior painting that belongs to it, or with different lid sub-types in a given coffin set. The *Vatican Coffin Conference* of 2013 revealed continued and ongoing disagreement about coffin dating. Indeed, many Egyptologists have found the currently accepted typology for 21st Dynasty coffins confusing and overly complicated, and I suggest a simple reason for it: the widespread (and often incomplete) reuse of older coffins. How can one create iron-clad and precise seriation, when throughout are scattered older forms, outdated layouts, and archaic decorative content? Evidence for widespread coffin reuse throws our accepted dating typology into doubt. Not only should we re-evaluate terms like ‘archaizing,’ with the understanding that archaizing markers might indicate reuse instead, but we should now expect to see coffins with features from different time periods. It is time to abandon the fiction of precision in our 21st Dynasty coffin typology and attempt a correction, based on a limited set of ‘key variants’ like the presence or

21 A score of 0 indicates that no evidence of reuse was found on a given coffin. A reuse score of 0.5-1 indicates that the evidence of reuse is only circumstantial. A score of 2 indicates that the reuse is well indicated but demands further testing to be conclusive. A score of 3 indicates that the reuse on a given coffin is well demonstrated with the available evidence. TBD indicates ‘to be determined’ and that the coffin has yet to be analyzed for reuse.

absence of carved and painted arms, primary layout, the length of the collar, the presence or absence of stola, the presence or absence of a ledge on the coffin seams, wig shape and type, and coffin proportion.²² In his review of Andrzej Niwiński's chronology.²³ Indeed, widespread coffin reuse now provides sound reasons why different subtypes of decoration might occur on one and the same coffin set and why superficial decoration often does not line up with base types as expected. The dating of 21st Dynasty coffins is by no means hopeless, but only if we rely on key variants and expect them to even occur on one and the same coffin or coffin set.

The meaning of coffin reuse

Examining how the ancient Egyptians reused coffins is one thing. But asking why they did it and how it actually worked in social and religious terms is another matter. Coffins are very special commodities. They depict the face and body of the deceased. They name the dead and link him or her to Osiris. The texts inscribed on the coffin's surface tells us that eternal protection was provided. Thus when we are confronted with the reuse of funerary arts, it may represent a very troubling practice to us – morally and emotionally. We are left wondering if such activities were disconcerting for the ancient Egyptians as well. Examination of funerary arts reuse therefore demands some theoretical examination – so that we can try to understand how and why human beings could be capable of taking from the dead to serve the ritual and display purposes of the living, how they could erase the names of ancestors so that the freshly dead's name could be put in its place and how they could display the dead in a coffin that everyone could see was produced generations before its time.

Funerary reuse essentially involves the reappropriation of ideologically charged objects, and in the case of 20th and 21st Dynasty coffins, this reuse occurred in the context of economic and social crisis. Even though we might want an explanation from the source community itself, the Egyptians did not directly communicate how they justified or negotiated monument reuse and appropriation. They only openly discuss the practice of reuse in very negative terms – as we see in the Tomb Robbery Papyri that document the torture and interrogation of men accused of stealing coffins or reusing temple wood to make coffins, or as we see in tomb curses which condemn to a horrible death anyone who harms the monument.²⁴

A coffin was essentially meant to make a functional link between the thing and the person – to transform the dead into an eternal Osirian and solar version of him or herself. The coffin was believed to ritually activate the dead. Thus, the wood, paint, and plaster were meant to provide an inviolable, idealized, permanent depiction of the person inside. The Egyptian coffin is a particularly fetishized commodity, from the Marxist perspective, meaning that we in the modern world (and almost certainly in the ancient world as well) ascribe value to it from its own side.²⁵ This fetishization is why coffin reuse is so disturbing to us. These objects have faces and hands and feet, and thus they seem to be human. The ritual spells inscribed on the surface imply that the human stakes were very high: nothing less than providing an eternal afterlife for the dead. Thus, removing a body from the inside and redecorating the coffin for another seems profoundly wrong to us – because we have created an inherent value for that object.

But during the 21st Dynasty (and probably during many other time periods of economic crisis), the Egyptians were able to de-fetishize these objects. They were able to separate the coffin from the essence of one dead body and modify it for another. Despite the perceived dangers and moral problems with such reuse, the Egyptians did it nonetheless. Indeed, a reuse rate of 50% suggests that there was a cultural agreement amongst an entire community of elites to continuously break

22 van Walsem 1993, 13.

23 Niwiński 1988.

24 Baines and Lacovara 2002.

25 Graeber 2001, 65.

the link between the person and coffin, to conventionalize a coffin's movement from the sacred to the commodity sphere and back again, and to focus on the value of short-term, transformative ritual activity, at the expense of the permanent protection a coffin might provide.

Igor Kopytoff's essay in Appadurai's *Social Life* is helpful when thinking about objects that are not meant to move back into the commodity sphere after their initial production.²⁶ Kopytoff discusses objects that are set aside by a given culture as sacred and taken out of circulation. He states that, "In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized." Kopytoff continues, "... in any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structure of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things²⁷." Thus, in ancient Egypt a few individuals went against the stream of society and just took what they needed, clashing with the larger culture.

According to Kopytoff's model, coffin reuse was anti-cultural or counter-cultural, and indeed this is how Egyptologists have approached reuse – as something aberrant and immoral, and thus infrequent in its occurrence. However, my research is showing a reuse rate that suggests most Egyptian elites (i.e. people who could afford coffins or rituals including coffins) were deciding *en masse* to recommodify the funerary arts of their elders for contemporary use. In other words, a culture can only follow morality when it can afford to do so. Kopytoff's essay suggests that when people move sacred objects back into the commodity sphere, they are breaking the rules.²⁸ Indeed there is something to this perspective from the Egyptian side, because so many reusers did attempt to mask their reuse (and many were probably so successful that I cannot see any trace of it during my analysis). However, the practice of reuse is quite complex because just as many reusers did so by removing only the personal name and putting in a new one, not shrouding the action at all. This method implies that a large part of ancient Egyptian society in the 21st Dynasty was complicit and accepting of the practice, perhaps indicating a shift in social norms.

Our own expectations of coffin reuse are very important if we are ever to understand the practice from an emic perspective. If a reuser was able to hide older decoration and pass off a coffin as fashionable and new for his time, then this is something that modern Western society accepts and understands. The motivations behind the masking of such ritually charged resources are clear to us, because we assume that the Egyptians also believed such reuse activities to be aberrant, like most of us in the modern West do. However, given the high percentage of coffin reuse, and given that reuse was commonly performed by just erasing the name of the previous owner for the name of the freshly dead, we can ask: How did the ancient Egyptians perceive the efficacy and value of a coffin that was made for someone else? Did it matter in any way that it was taken from another person?

The motivation to acquire a coffin seems to have been so great that reuse rates skyrocket in Dynasty 21 as access to resources plummets. Much of this was ideologically driven: The dead needed ritual transformation, and the elite Egyptian mindset demanded materiality to create that transformation through a complicated set of funerary rituals that included the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. But the reuse was also economically driven. Access to high quality wood from the Lebanon or elsewhere was impossible, and people had to look elsewhere for this most basic coffin resource. Social drivers were also essential: Funerary rituals took place in a public or semi-public forum, inviting an intertwined socioeconomic agenda. The families of the dead wanted to display their social place to the world, and they needed funerary materiality to do it.²⁹

Was the value of a coffin lowered in the eyes of witnesses of funerary rituals because it had been reused? This is more difficult to answer, but I think the answer depends on the level of distance a given

26 Kopytoff 1986.

27 Kopytoff 1986, 76.

28 Kopytoff 1986, 88.

29 Cooney 2007a, 259-283.

reuser was able to create from the previous coffin owner. In other words, the more modifications one was able to pursue in a given coffin, the more it may have seemed to belong to the recently dead. The very fact that there was a gradient of reuse – from simple name reassignment to thorough refashioning – implies a gradient of attitudes towards the practice, probably partly depending on one’s social rank, status in the world and knowledge of ritual orthodoxies. The wealthier one was, the more an individual would have known how important it was to cover one’s tracks. The lower-ranked may not have had such scruples. But these are socioeconomic notions of value. If we think of the ritual use and religious meaning of these coffins, we might then ask: What did it mean for an ancient Egyptian to reuse a coffin that had previously belonged to another soul? In the end, it seems the Egyptians decided that the value of a reused coffin lay in its ability to perform transformational and protective rituals with the deceased inside of it – whoever that was at the time.

In David Graeber’s book *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, he questions “What if one did try to create a theory of value starting from the assumption that what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions?³⁰” This is a useful perspective for this research, because a coffin is the embodiment of ritual action, concretized in a three-dimensional, decorated object.³¹ Essentially, the coffin represents a material abstraction of ritual activity. Assuming the practical, material approach that Graeber insists on, if all abstractions have a material base, then the production of a reused coffin could limit how efficacious it was perceived to be.³² Again, the dataset of 21st Dynasty coffins shows gradients of reuse, and those gradients could be associated with perceived levels of ritual and religious functionality.

The Egyptian coffin gained its most important value through action, in this case, the action of funerary ritual, which was perceived as necessary for the effective transformation of the dead in elite circles. If ritual transformation and materiality were thus connected in ancient Egypt, then there would have been a strong drive to acquire coffins for the people who had just died, over and above a motivation to protect the coffins of ancestors who had been dead for generations because these souls had already benefitted from the transformation of funerary ritual. Some Egyptologists may consider coffin reuse to be an immoral crime that happened rarely, but the ancient Egyptians may have considered the *non-performance* of ritual transformation for those who had just died to be an egregious cultural and social failure. Coffin reuse was a creative negotiation of this economic-social-religious crisis. In other words, it was not the reuse of a coffin that was aberrant; if anything was aberrant, it would have been refusing to provide the recently deceased with transformative ritual activity by means of funerary materiality, just because there was no access to wood that had not been previously used.

30 Graeber 2001, 49.

31 Lüscher 1998.

32 Graeber 2001, 54.

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