

JOURNAL  
of the  
American Research Center in Egypt



VOLUME 46

2010

# The Coffin of an Anonymous Woman from Bab El Gasus (A.4) in Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa

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## Abstract

*The coffin discussed in this article was found in 1891 in the main corridor of Bab el-Gasus, the collective tomb of the priests of Amun in Deir el-Bahari, just at its entrance, thus being in close proximity with the shaft. The coffin integrated the lot of antiquities presented to Portugal in 1893 by the Egyptian authorities. This lot consisted of 188 shabtis, one outer anthropoid coffin, four inner anthropoid coffins, and three mummy-covers. All these objects were given to the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa where they still remain today. Although not particularly luxurious or exceptional either on its decoration or craftsmanship, nevertheless the anthropoid coffin A.4 presents us some interesting questions related to the social and material context that evolved the production of the funerary art in the late 21st Dynasty.*

## Description of the Lid (Length: 185 cm; Max. Width: 49 cm)

### *Decoration*

The outer multicolored decoration of the lid is preserved in relatively good condition (photographs 1–2).<sup>1</sup> It portrays a young woman with a blue tripartite wig. Two molded lappets frame the face and neck terminating just above the breasts of the lady. Each lappet is adorned with a tress drawn in yellow ink against the dark blue background of the wig. Above the face a colorful hair-band adorns the wig. It consists of flower petals forming at least six rows of different colors: yellow, white, blue, red, black, and yellow (from above to below). Three lotus blossoms hang down in the center of the hair-band. With its red and yellow petals the hair-band provides good visual impact to the head on the lid. The face was carefully painted—the eyebrows are dark, as are the framing lines of the eye and the pupil. A thin trace of red was sketched between the eyebrow and the eye. The lips are painted in the same yellow varnish as the rest of the face. The nose is flattened. The earrings are positioned on each side of the face, adorned with a rosette. They were molded separately and then attached to the wig.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank to Andrzej Niwinski, Luís Manuel de Araújo and René Van Walsem for their contribution to this study, reading the text and improving it with many suggestions. I am also in debt with the staff of Chicago House in Luxor, namely to its Director, Raymond Johnson and to its Librarian, Marie Bryan. I also would like to give special acknowledgment to Susan Osgood, Senior Artist of Chicago House, for a good number of critical suggestions concerning the technical improvement of my drawings. Finally I would like to address my gratitude to the team of Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, namely to Professor Luís Aires-Barros, its President, to Manuela Cantinho, Curator, and to Carlos Ladeira, photographer and senior artist, for the endless support that they have been able to provide me.



Photograph 1

Photograph 2

Courtesy of Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa. Photographs by Carlos Ladeira (SGL).

The naked breasts of the woman, decorated with small rosettes, emerge visibly from the large *usekh* necklace that covers the arms, chest, and abdomen of the coffin. As the wig and the face, the breasts were molded to clearly suggest their volume. Between the lappets of the wig is a colorful feathered pattern with black and yellow motifs suggesting the shape of a smaller collar or a shirt. The hands of the deceased are represented open: they were carved separately and attached to the lid. Each finger of the right hand presents two rings. The red mummy-braces cross the area of the chest. They present an outer yellow border. A large black heart amulet is depicted in the area where the mummy-braces cross each other (fig. 1). It presents the inscription: *Wsir nb nhh hnty* with no reference to the name of the deceased. Outside this area, covering the shoulders and the abdomen, spreads a larger and colorful *usekh* necklace painted with red, white, and blue motifs. The interposition of contrasting rows gives the collar a strong visual effect. Three types of rows can be identified: one decorated with small red circles attached to black straws, another decorated with a geometrical pattern (red and black) similar to a chess board (an imitation of a leather funerary cover), and a third type of row decorated with petals (white and blue). The outer row of the collar is decorated with open lotus flowers intertwined with



Fig. 1.

sign *ankh*. Her green face is molded on a rough relief (as well as the wig), while her torso and feet are yellow, which obviously is a mistake. Her dark dress is molded. On the right side the depiction of the eye of the goddess is blurred. Between the osirian throne and the deceased stand a *imiut* totem and two vases with lettuces. A duck stands above these objects which are capped by several hieroglyphs representing the titles of Osiris: *Wsir nb nhh*. Nearby stands a *schetjit* chapel and a vulture goddess grasping *was* and *ankh* signs.

#### Second register

The second register comprises a large squatting figure of the (unnamed) goddess Nut outstretching her winged arms towards each side of the coffin (fig. 3). Her skin is green and the wings are also colored with green and dark blue pigments. The goddess is kneeling on a reed mat and raises a feather in each hand. Nut is clad in a dark robe (slightly molded on relief) and wears a red hair-band. Over her head she wears a red solar disk. Above her arms an array of symbols forms a symmetrical secondary

geometrical patterns. Although not depicted, the elbows were slightly molded both on the lid and on the case surface.

#### Lid—middle section

The middle part of the lid comprises three horizontal registers. The figures, sometimes very roughly sketched, were painted over a yellow background.

#### First register

The first register consists of a symmetrical composition with a large black scarab on its center (fig. 2). Slightly molded in plaster, the scarab is depicted with a green and red solar disk on its posterior legs. Over it stands a large red solar disk surrounded by a dark green outer circle. At both sides of the disk, two pendent cobras wear *ankh* signs on their necks. The scarab is flanked by the signs *djed*, *was*, and other small hieroglyphs. The scenes depicted on the both sides of the scarab are almost identical.<sup>2</sup> These scenes depict the adoration of Osiris by the mummiform deceased. The later one wears the divine beard and raises her arms towards the enthroned Osiris. The body of Osiris is dark and it is slightly molded in relief, as well as his green *atef* crown. Behind him stands a goddess wearing an incense cone and a lotus flower on her head. While she embraces Osiris with one arm, with the other one she holds the

<sup>2</sup> Due to a crack on the wood, some of the original features of the right side of the lid are lost.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

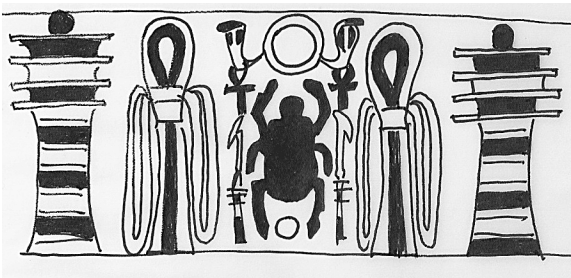


Fig. 4.

register: a falcon holding a *nekhakha* scepter, a sacred cobra wearing the *hedjet* crown, and a coiled cobra holding the signs *was* and *ankh*. Below each of the wings of the goddess figures is a long and twisted cobra decorated with black dashes. At each corner of this composition images of the kneeling deceased face the goddess. The left side of the composition is damaged due to a crack and to the erasure of the painted surface.

#### Third register

The third register depicts a version of the iconographical composition of the first register (fig. 4). The central motif is the same: a solar disk stand over the sacred scarab. The signs *ankh*, *was*, and *djed* flank the scarab which also holds the solar disk between its posterior legs. On both sides of this central

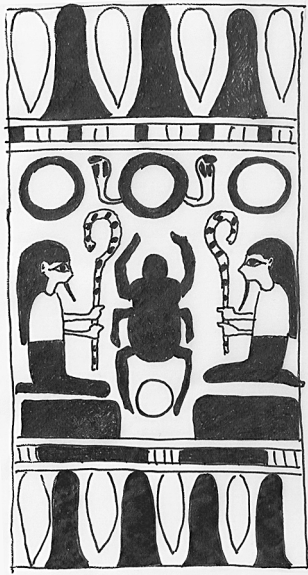


Fig. 5.

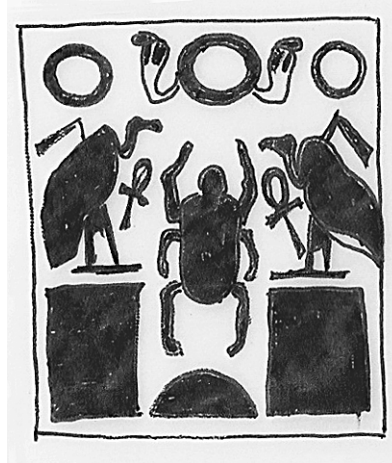


Fig. 6.

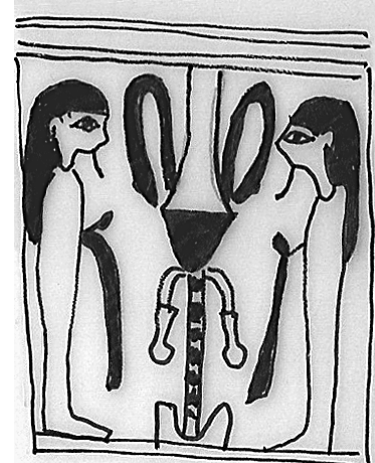


Fig. 7.

composition stand alternatively two signs *tjet* and *djed*, symbols of Isis and Osiris, respectively. These large signs were first drawn in red and later filled in with dark blue and green pigments. No change of patterns on the coloration of these symbols is noted.

#### *Lid—lower section*

The lower part of the lid presents three vertical sections divided by two columns of hieroglyphic text. Each section presents three or more registers. In the central section, the several registers are divided by panels of geometrical decoration composed of alternate green and black motifs. The lateral sections are composed of three registers divided by horizontal hieroglyphic inscriptions.

#### *Central partition*

##### First register

The first register consists of a symmetrical composition with a large black scarab at its center, surrounded by two seated gods facing inwards and holding the *heka* scepter (fig. 5). Each god, including the scarab, is represented with a solar disk over his head. The central green/red solar disk is flanked by two sacred cobras. Between the posterior legs the scarab holds a single red colored solar disk. All the figures, including the solar disks, were molded on plaster before painting.

##### Second register

The second register is also a symmetrical composition. The scarab is depicted over a *t* shaped hieroglyph (fig. 6). The sacred insect is surrounded by two vulture goddesses holding the sign *ankh* and the royal scepter. Each goddess is positioned over a large black square. Above these figures stand a composition of three solar disks similar to the one depicted on the first register.

##### Third register

As in the second register, the third register is a symmetrical composition with a *sekhem* scepter at its center. It is surrounded by two mummiform gods wearing a divine beard and a black *maetic* belt (fig. 7). The scepter is positioned over the sign of the horizon, *akhet*, and is decorated with two *menat* necklaces and its counterpoises.

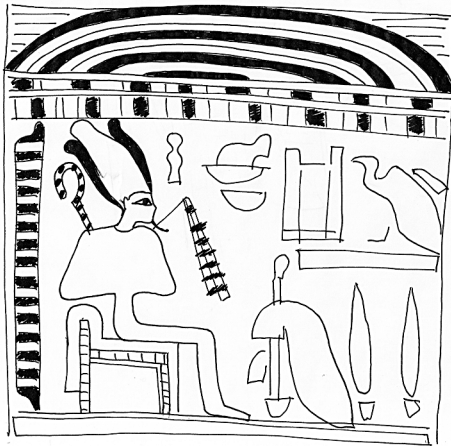


Fig. 8.

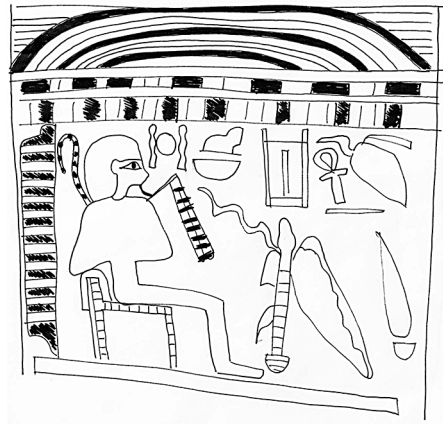


Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.

### Lateral partitions

The right and left vertical sections are disposed symmetrically to each other and they have a similar composition. Each lateral column presents three vignettes. Each compartment that frames the vignettes is crowned with a frieze of sacred cobras surmounted with sun disks and a vaulted roof (polychromatic concentric semi-circles), except for the third register, which only presents the *uraei* frieze.

### First register

This vignette depicts a chapel inside of which Osiris can be seen holding the royal scepters, *heka*, and *nekhakha* (fig. 8). He wears the *atef* crown and is seated on a throne. The dark mummiform body of the god and the throne are molded on plaster before painting. Behind the god a sacred door is depicted, also presenting a slight relief. Before the god we find depictions of the *imiut* totem, lettuces, the sacred vulture, and the *shetjit* shrine. Traces of the name of Osiris and the title *neb neheh*, incorrectly written, can be seen.

Traces of the name of Osiris and the title *neb neheh*, incorrectly written, can be seen.

### Second register

Inside of the vignette stands a mummiform god seated on a throne holding the scepters *heka* and *nekhakha* (fig. 9). Behind him there is a sacred door and in front of him we see rough depictions of the *imiut* totem, the *shetjit* shrine, the sacred vulture, the name of Osiris, and his title *neb neheh*.

### Third register

Depiction of a mummiform god with a head of a serpent wearing a divine beard (fig. 10). He is seated over the *heb* sign and holds the *heka* and *nekhakha* scepters. Behind him stands a sacred door, while before the god is the *imiut* totem and a vase with lettuces and the title *neb neheh*. The vignette is distorted in order to fit in the available space of the lower part of the lid.

The decoration of the area of the feet below the third register of each column is not possible to identify given the present condition of the lid.

## Texts

Inscriptions 1 and 2 on the lid are painted in yellow pigment over a black background thus creating a strong visual effect. The columns and lines of hieroglyphic inscriptions frame the decoration of the lower part of the lid, creating three sections by means of two vertical inscriptions, each one consisting of one column of text, descending to the edge of the foot-board.



*Inscription 1.*



*Inscription 2.*



*Fig. 11.*

The lateral sections are composed of three registers divided by horizontal inscriptions that run from the center to the periphery. These secondary inscriptions are also written on yellow ink over a black background. All of them repeat versions of the same text: *im<sup>3</sup>hy hr Wsir*.

Description of the Case (Length: 185 cm;  
Max. Width: 49 cm; Max. Depth: 28 cm)

*Exterior decoration*

The outer multicolored decoration of the case is preserved in relatively good condition. Along the upper edge of the case the scenes are framed with a frieze composed of two horizontal bands: one monochromatic and the other decorated with a multicolored geometrical pattern. Over this double band were disposed alternate images of feathers and sacred cobras. The columns of texts are separated by two vertical bands: one painted in dark ink while the other presents multicolored geometrical decoration. Unlike the inscriptions of the lid, all the texts of the exterior walls of the case were written against yellow background. The exterior surface of the bottom of the case is not decorated.

*Right side*

Scene 1 (head)

The falcon god is crowned with the *pa-sekhemty* (fig. 11). The god is depicted with the *nekhakha* scepter on his back. A sacred cobra, wearing the *hedjet* crown, is depicted at his feet, while a winged *wedjat*-eye extends its wings over the falcon. The *hedjet* crown of the falcon is blue while the red



Fig. 12.

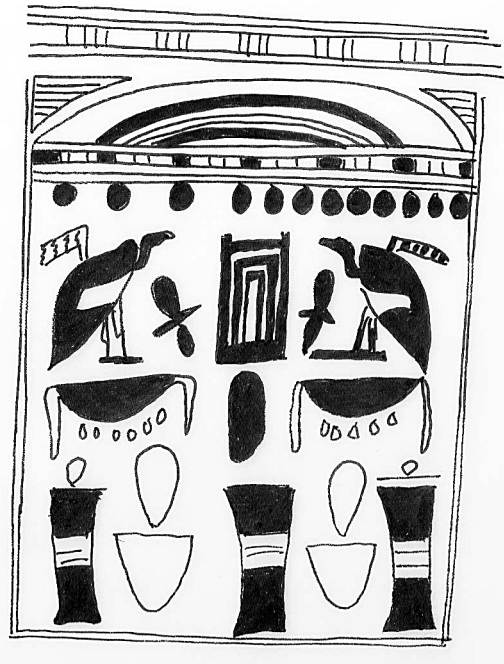


Fig. 13.

crown is painted with a thin, almost invisible, layer of red ink. Several unidentified motifs were disposed quite randomly between the available spaces, one of them roughly suggesting the sign of the East, *iabet*.<sup>3</sup>

#### Scene 2 (shoulder)

A female *ba*-bird raises her arms in a gesture of adoration towards a mummiform god crowned with the *hedjet* crown (fig. 12). The god exhibits a human face while his hands and arms are hidden within the wrappings of the mummy. The *ba*-bird wears an unusual headdress resembling the double feathered headdress of Amun. Although faded away, some signs such as the *imiut* totem, the sacred vulture, the *iabet* sign, and a star are still visible.

#### Scene 3 (breast)

The entire scene depicts a sanctuary resembling the shape of the *shetjit* shrine, inside of which are depicted several symbols forming a symmetrical arrangement (fig. 13). The focal point of the scene is a smaller *shetjit* shrine flanked by two sacred vultures surmounting *nub* signs. Both avian goddesses hold *ankh* signs very roughly painted and a *nekhakha* scepter appears on their backs. The lower register is composed of a frieze composed of vessels and lamps.

#### Scene 4 (abdomen)

The deceased is depicted as a mummiform god, wearing divine beard and dark wig (fig. 14). An unguent cone and lotus button adorns her head and a *maetic* belt is knotted on the mummy's hips.

<sup>3</sup> On the case from the inner coffin of Tabakenkhonsu (CGT 10104.b—Turin Egyptian Museum), a similar but by far more sophisticated composition informs us that the avian god is “Ptah-Sokar, great god.” In that composition the god is positioned over the *sema-tauti* sign and is crowned with the *atef* crown. See Andrzej Niwinski, *Sarcophagi della XXI dinastia (CGT 10101–10122)* (Turin, 2004), 52, pl. 9. Also on the outer coffin of Nesikhonsu, CGT 10110, a similar composition refers to the god as Ptah-Sokar, “Lord of the shrine *štyt*,” in Niwinski, *Sarcophagi della XXI dinastia*, 83, pl. 12.



Fig. 14.

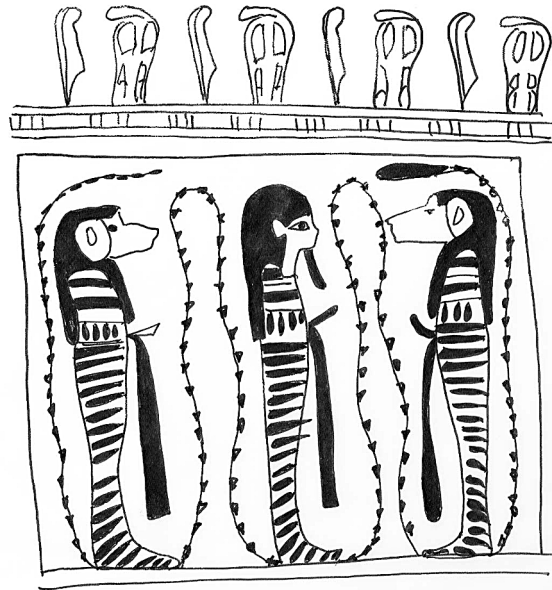


Fig. 15.

A compilation of symbols stands in front of the deceased: the *imiut* totem, the *djed* and *nub* signs, the vulture goddess wearing the *was* sign, the *shetjiti* shrine, among other symbols.

#### Scene 5 (legs)

Three mummiform gods stand over the twisted body of a serpent (fig. 15). The central human-headed god resembles the deceased depicted in the previous scene and wears a divine beard. The two other gods have baboon heads.<sup>4</sup> It is the only scene that does not use additional decorative elements such as the *shetjiti* shrine or the sacred vulture.

#### Scene 6 (legs)

A winged scarab stands over a *nub* sign (fig. 16). A solar disk flanked by two rising cobras is depicted above a winged scarab. On the lower register, the *nub* sign is flanked by the vulture goddesses and the *shetjiti* shrine.<sup>5</sup>

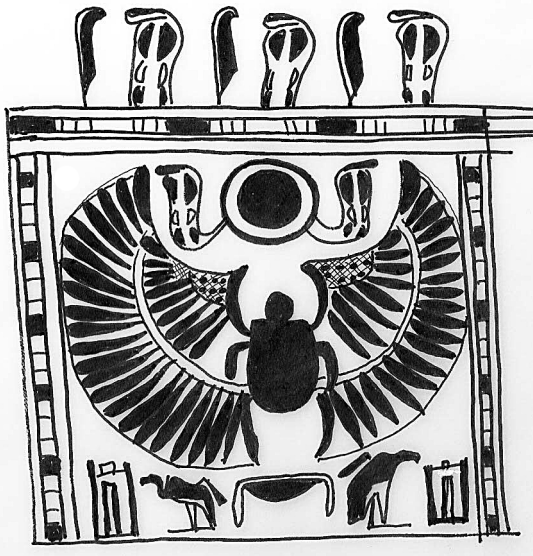


Fig. 16.

<sup>4</sup> A similar depiction can be found on the inner coffin of Ikhy, inv. 25035.3.3. See Annie Gasse, *Les Sarcophages de la Troisième Période Intermédiaire du Museo Gregoriano Egizio* (Vatican, 1996), 86, pl. 16.

<sup>5</sup> A similar depiction is found in the inner case of Bakenkhonsu, CGT 10111.b. See Niwinski, *Sarcophagi della XXI dinastia*, 91, pl. 21, who suggests it is a symbol of the victory over Apopis.

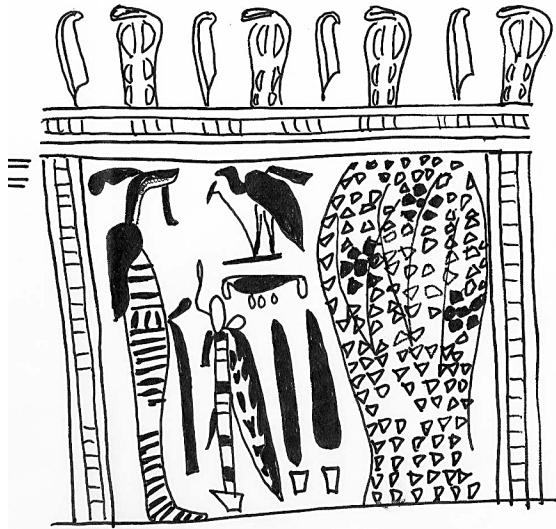


Fig. 17.



Fig. 18.

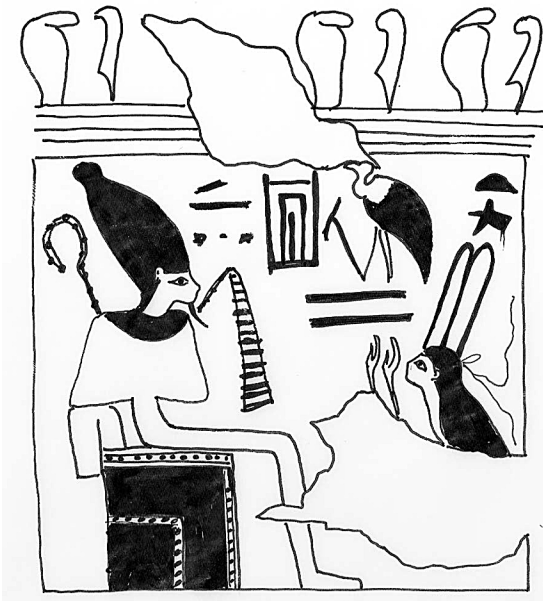


Fig. 19.

#### Scene 2 (shoulder)

Mirroring the scene positioned on the opposite side of the case (fig. 12), this image portrays the *ba*-bird adoring a mummiform god seated on a throne (fig. 19). The space between the two figures is filled with a vulture goddess holding the *was* sign, the *shetjrit* shrine, and a star.

#### Scene 7 (feet)

A sacred tree and a serpent-headed mummiform god are depicted in this scene (fig. 17). The god wears the divine beard and a feather on the top of his head. The *imiut* totem stands before the god, followed by two vases containing lettuce, the vulture goddess is represented above the *nub* sign, grasping the *was* sign. The tree is roughly drawn in a geometrical shape rather than an organic one. Some red fruits or flowers are inserted among the very un-naturalistic composition of the tree.<sup>6</sup>

#### Left side

#### Scene 1 (head)

This scene mirrors the image positioned on the opposite side of the case, also depicting the falcon god (fig. 11). However, the quality of this image is slightly better: decorative motifs, like the star are distinctively drawn, while on the opposite side they can hardly be recognized (fig. 18).

<sup>6</sup> A similar but more sophisticated depiction can be found on the inner coffin of Ikhy (inv. 25035.3.3) with goddess Nut, *ba*-bird, and swallow. See Gasse, *Sarcophages*, 86, pl. 16. Also in the coffin of an anonymous lady, from Deir el-Bahari (inv. 25016.2.2). See idem, *Sarcophages*, 113, pl. 25.

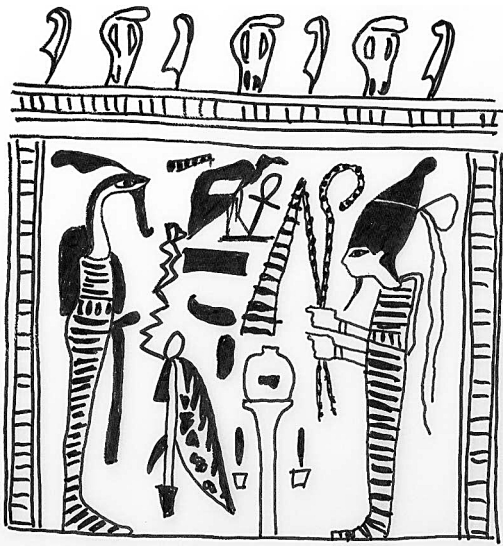


Fig. 20.

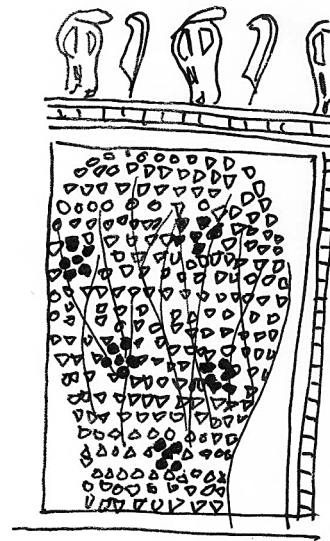


Fig. 21.

#### Scene 3 (breast)

This scene seems to mingle elements from the second (fig. 12) and seventh (fig. 17) scenes depicted on the opposite wall of the case. It depicts two mummiform deities (fig. 20): the human-headed god wears a white crown and holds the *heka* and *nekhakha* scepters, thus resembling to the depiction of the god Osiris. The other deity exhibits a head of a serpent, with divine beard and a feather on his head. Between these two gods stand the *imiut* totem, an offering vessel on a all stand, two lamps, a vulture goddess with the *ankh* sign, among other signs.

#### Scene 4 (legs)

Identical to the fifth scene of the right side of the case (fig. 15): three mummiform gods stand over a twisted serpent. The central god has a human face and wears a divine beard, while the two other gods have baboon heads.

#### Scene 5 (legs)

Identical to the sixth scene of the right side of the case (fig. 16): depiction of a large winged scarab. The only distinction may be found on the lower register where the central motif is now the *shetjit* shrine. Two vulture goddesses lean towards the inner side of the image instead of the outer side, as in the image of the opposite wall of the case.

#### Scene 6 (feet)

Identical to the seventh scene of the right side of the case: depiction of the sacred tree (fig. 21). This time, however, the scene is fully dedicated to the depiction of the tree. As previously, the tree is roughly drawn in a geometrical shape exhibiting red fruits.

### Texts

Inscriptions 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the case are painted over a yellow background. The first sketches are traced on red ink to which details roughly painted were added in dark blue ink. The inscriptions are positioned between the vignettes forming columns of text. The right side of the case presents eight

vertical inscriptions (twelve columns of text) and the left side presents six inscriptions (fourteen columns of text). Nevertheless only four different texts were written.



*Inscription 3.*



*Inscription 4.*



*Inscription 5.*



*Inscription 6.*

## Interior Decoration

### *Walls*

Above the head, although badly damaged, the colorful depiction of a *ba*-bird outstretching his wings to both sides of the coffin is clearly visible. The human face of the bird is represented frontally. Above each of the wings is the *per*-sign. At the level of the shoulders, it is still possible to recognize, in each side of the coffin, the depiction of one seated mummiform god holding the *heka* with *nekhakha* royal scepters on his knees. Before the god an offering is depicted: on the depiction of the left side figures a lotus flower, while on the right side an offering vase is seen. Beneath these figures, although almost invisible, it is possible to distinguish in each side of the coffin the traces of a standing mummiform god. The rest of the decoration is not possible to identify.

### *Bottom*

At the present moment, due to its poor condition, it is not possible to distinguish any decoration at all.

## Commentary

The features of the lid, namely the depiction of the mummy-braces, correspond to a later typology (type V)<sup>7</sup> which identifies this coffin as a product of a last generation of craftsmen working for the individuals buried within the collective tomb of Bab el-Gasus.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, this coffin is a pivotal piece in understanding the atmosphere that preceded the deep change in coffin decoration after the 21st Dynasty.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrzej Niwinski, *21st Dynasty coffins from Thebes: Chronological and typological studies* (Mainz am Rhein, 1988), 68–69.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrzej Niwinski, "The Bab el-Gasus tomb and the Royal Cache," *JEA* 70 (1984), 73–80. Also idem, *21st Dynasty coffins from Thebes*, 28–29.



Fig. 22. Position of the eyes as it was initially conceived by the sculptor (compare with the actual position of the eyes in Fig. 1).

As to the quality of the craftsmanship in the production of this coffin, this is clearly not a carefully crafted work. The face reveals a difficult articulation between the sculptural work of the eyes and the eyebrows and its subsequent painting procedure. In fact, the eyes and the eyebrows were sculpted above the area where they were actually painted, resulting in the distortion of the usual proportions of the face (see figs. 1 and 22).

However, we are not, as it is more usual, before a correction of the painter.<sup>9</sup> If we look only at the sculptural work, it seems to follow perfectly the traditional Egyptian canon of proportions for the face. For some reason, the painter made the decision to pull down the area of the eyes, although this can hardly be explained by careless work since the sculptural rendering both of the eyes and eyebrows is easily distinguishable. Therefore, we can assume that the distortion of the proportions of the face resulted from the decision of the painter to include a new element that probably was not yet defined when the sculptor was working on the lid. This element cannot be other than the yellow tresses depicted above the face, which in fact were not molded but simply painted over the lappets of the wig. With the introduction of this new element the position of the eyebrows collided with the upper line of the hair, which probably led the painter to lower the position of the eyes within the face.

If this assumption is correct, the inclusion of the tresses was regarded as sufficiently significant to motivate the distortion of such an important depiction as the face. Besides, tresses were not a common feature among these coffins. On the contrary, they are an archaizing feature typical from the Ramessid Period and as such they appear among the finest coffins from Bab el-Gasus.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously enough, other details of the decoration of the coffin inform us of a hasty atmosphere in which the coffin was being made. The surfaces of the exterior walls of the case seem to have been painted over a very thin layer of plaster surface and in some places it is even possible to see the irregularities of the wood surface. In other areas, the layer of ink was so thin that it is now almost invisible. As to the vignettes depicted on the case they are over-simplified and seem to be inspired by earlier and far more complex versions of the same themes. On the lid, which displays work of slightly better quality, the first register of its middle section presents a complicated composition intended to be richly decorated suggesting the molding of the body of the divinities in plaster. However, the quality of the painting is surprisingly poor, particularly in the depiction of the goddesses, with the details of their faces largely ignored and reduced to just a blur. The palette of colors used on the outer decoration of

<sup>9</sup> For example, the lid of the coffin of the chantress of Amun Tay-hery, in Copenhagen National Museum (A.19 from Daressy's list), presents a similar feature: the eyes were painted below the area where the eyes were actually sculpted but in this case, the painter seems to be "correcting" the work previously done by the Ramessid sculptor since the original position of the eyes would be far from the Egyptian canon of proportions of the face.

<sup>10</sup> See decoration of the inner lid CG 6191 (Cairo Egyptian Museum). Also A.109 (both outer and inner lids) and coffin A.109 from Daressy's list.

the case is reduced to red, dark blue, or black and sometimes green. The drawing is largely sketched rather than detailed.

As to the texts, the quality of the inscriptions on the case is very poor and they seem to have been inserted without other criteria than the aesthetic one, just to “fill” the space between the scenes. Some of the inscriptions were roughly copied and literally put together without any intention to provide meaning. Although presenting 26 columns of inscriptions, the repertoire of texts inscribed on the case is very limited: only four different sentences can be identified, which could fit within just five columns of text (see inscriptions 3, 4, 5, and 6).

Curiously enough, the several and corrupted versions of the inscription 4 seem to have been copied from the inscription 1 of the left column of the lid, which is seemingly a far better work. Therefore it seems likely that not only several “hands” worked on the inscriptions of this coffin, but also that the workers who wrote the inscriptions on the case were copying sections of texts that of course they were not able to understand. Furthermore, these copies seem more and more distant from the original model of the lid. Inscription 4, for example, was reproduced on the right side of the case with its two columns of text, but on the left side of the case only the first column is considered. Curiously enough, against the rule detected on the right side of the case, where the different texts seem to be perfectly distinguished from each other, on the left side of the case their arrangement seems to be made quite randomly. For example, inscription 3 is repeated several times in two juxtaposed columns on the left side of the case, while the inscription positioned at the feet presents three columns of text that groups different texts without any intention to provide meaning: the first column is inscribed with inscription 5, then follows inscription 3, and the “text” ends with inscription 4.

These elements suggest that at a certain moment of the decoration of the case, the workers who were writing the inscriptions on the left side of the case were no longer copying the original text of the lid (inscription 1), but the versions of the inscription 4, already written over the right side of the case. At this point the first column of the inscription 4 was reproduced on the left side of the case, probably without the awareness that it was part of the text written on the second column.

This might suggest either that there was a certain pressure to finish the job, which in fact may have been the situation since this coffin was among the last to be placed in the tomb, or just a careless attitude toward the quality of the work. Besides the poor literacy and craftsmanship of the inscriptions of the case, the limited scope of the repertoire of texts chosen to be written on the case also suggests surprisingly poor literary resources available in this particular workshop.

In contrast, these limitations are not so strongly detected among the iconographic repertoire of the coffin, which although not rich, presents far better quality than the texts. Nevertheless, the iconographic material is not exempt from some evidence that suggests a decline of the 21st Dynasty’s rich pictorial tradition, especially in the decoration of the case. The sacred tree is depicted in a very unnaturalistic way with symbolic elements such as lettuces, vultures, and the *shetjit* shrines very roughly drawn, the falcon god is depicted without the black contour around the eye. This careless attitude notwithstanding, it is surprising to find some rather inventive iconographic “innovations” such as the use of a feathered headdress of Amun by the *ba*-bird (fig. 8 and fig. 15). Another singularity of the iconographic program of the coffin is the depiction of the mummiform deceased with upraised arms in adoration (fig. 2), a gesture otherwise typical to the depiction of the *ba*-bird. Given the general context of this work, these particular innovations are probably not due to new iconographical trends, but to the lack of a careful supervision of the work being done in this particular workshop, thus giving rise to a personal arrangement of symbols well known by the craftsmen, as the headdress of Amun and the adoration gesture of the *ba* transposed with some kind of *naïveté* to the mummiform deceased.

However careless this craftsmanship may be in its details, the general impression of the coffin is unexpectedly good. It seems to be deliberate, since many of its particular features were chosen to imitate the features that could be found on a luxurious coffin. It presents the mummy-braces, which are

indeed a high prized innovation of the later coffins, the golden hieroglyphs written over black bands, the golden tresses depicted on the wig, which were introduced quite unexpectedly during the process of its construction, and the large heart-amulet, also an old-fashioned feature usually depicted on the most splendid coffins discovered in Bab el-Gasus.<sup>11</sup>

Curiously enough, these features, which are all located on the lid, can hardly be found altogether on other coffins found in Bab el-Gasus. This concentration of “rich” features seems to have been searched deliberately in order to vividly impress a potential customer. Given the contrast between the general low quality of the decoration and the concentration of such powerful features, it is very probable that this particular coffin was intended to be traded in an open-market context where the need to impress the customer was the main concern of the craftsman. In this situation, it is possible that the client, although sensitive to some of the key-features particularly appreciated in these coffins, surely invested with special status significance, was also as illiterate on iconography and hieroglyphic texts as the craftsmen who have made it. Therefore, more than the content of the scenes or the texts, the most important quality was the general impression that it could give to the customer. Other evidence that suggests deliberate production for the open-market is the use of the inscription of the left column of the lid as a model for most of the inscriptions of the case since, when working under commission, the usual practice was to write this vertical inscription at the last moment.<sup>12</sup>

The position of the coffin, which also favors the idea of a hasty inclusion within the tomb, the later date provided by the mummy-braces depicted on the lid, and the stylistic details concerning its decoration, all suggest a strong decline in the coffin craftsmanship tradition by the late 21st Dynasty. This could be due either to the proliferation of independent workshops among the Theban necropolis that worked without close formal supervision, or to the general decline of the once flourishing workshops of the Theban area.

Comparing it to the craftsmanship from later periods, especially from the period immediately after the beginning of the 22nd Dynasty, is therefore instructive. Although the rapid change in the iconographic program and formal features of these later Theban coffins may be due to an influence from elsewhere, the fact is that they remain unrivaled when it comes to the quality of the craftsmanship.<sup>13</sup> Imported technical resources from a northern tradition (as seems to be the case for the iconographic changes registered in this period) do not seem plausible since the technical execution and subsequent quality of the northern coffins seems to be inferior to those from the south, as suggested by the quality of the coffins from the Memphite tomb of Iurudef, which have been dated to the same period.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the Theban coffins from the 22nd Dynasty show that these workshops were still working with high standards of quality. Also, other later coffins from Bab el-Gasus, such as the coffin A.55 showcases that it was still possible to find articles of exceptional quality.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore the idea of a general decline of the craftsmanship of the coffin workshops during the late 21st Dynasty is refuted. This leaves us with the evidence that in that period there may have been

<sup>11</sup> See mummy-cover of A.55, also depicting a heart-amulet between the mummy-braces. Regarding the religious and social meaning of the heart amulet see Rogério Sousa, “The Meaning of the Heart Amulet in Egyptian Art,” *JARCE* 43 (2007), 59–70. See also idem, “Symbolism and Meaning of Pendulum Heart Amulets,” *GM* 221 (2009), 69–79, and idem, *Heart of Wisdom: Studies on the heart amulet in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2011), figs. 65, 66, 67, and 77.

<sup>12</sup> Kara Cooney, *The Cost of Death: The social and economic value of ancient Egyptian funerary art in the Ramesside Period* (Leiden, 2007), 174.

<sup>13</sup> See John Taylor, “Coffin as evidence for a North-South divide,” in Broekman, Demarée, Kaper (eds), *The Libyan Period in Egypt: Historical and Cultural Studies into the 21st–24th Dynasties. Proceedings of a Conference at Leiden University, 25–27 October 2007* (Leiden, 2009), 378–79. See also John Taylor, “Theban coffins from the Twenty-second to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty: dating and synthesis development,” in N. Strudwick and J. Taylor, *The Theban Necropolis: Past, present and future* (London, 2003), 95–121.

<sup>14</sup> Maarten Raven, *The Tomb of Iurudef: A Memphite Official in the Reign of Ramesses II* (Leiden, 1991), 8–31. See also Taylor, “Coffins as evidence for a ‘North-South divide,’” in Broekman, Demarée, and Kaper, *The Libyan Period in Egypt*, 375–416.

<sup>15</sup> See also the coffin of Djedmontuufankh in Van Walsem, *The coffin of Djedmontuufankh in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden* (Leiden, 1997).

independent workshops working in the Theban region. This is by no means a late phenomenon and can be already detected in the Ramesside Period with evidence of private workshops producing coffins to be sold in an open market, that is to say, coffins “made without a previous commission for an unknown buyer in an entrepreneurial fashion.”<sup>16</sup> Further evidence shows that these informal workshops could even work for Pharaoh, producing items for the Valley of the Kings,<sup>17</sup> which means that their activity was under very close supervision. What seems to be new is that coffins such as A.4, for some reason, openly escaped formal supervision, thus leaving space for a “commercial” phenomenon typical of an open-market context, giving rise to a strong valorization of the features that could showcase high social status, which could be more appreciated by the customers to the neglect of other features that simply could not be understood by the largely illiterate public for which they were available in the open-market contexts.<sup>18</sup> This particular coffin may well be a good example of a non-commissioned object produced by an informal workshop to be purchased by an unknown customer in an open, private sector market.<sup>19</sup> After all, it attempts to imitate a luxurious object yet its formal quality is poor, not to mention that it remained anonymous.

Another important piece of information is related to the archaeological origin of the coffin. The fact that it was included among the burials of the priests of Amun shows at least that the deceased woman was seen as important enough to be buried there, notwithstanding the possibility that her coffin may have been acquired through an “independent” workshop, which leads us to raise other questions related to the circumstances that surrounded the burial of this particular songstress of Amun. Since her coffin was one of the last to be buried in Bab el-Gasus, it is possible that she died quite unexpectedly and that the coffin was rapidly acquired from an independent workshop on the urgency of being included in the collective burial as her name is not even written on it. This could explain the acquisition of such a care-less object for a songstress of Amun. Another possibility is that the client bought this coffin just because she or her family could not afford a better one, but nonetheless intended to give the impression of a good coffin. This seems to be a good possibility. In that case coffin A.4 can reflect the impoverishment of some of the priests of Amun by the end of 21st Dynasty and also the relevant social meaning given by coffins, particularly in the context of such an important collective burial, as in this case.

As the result of one situation or the other, this particular coffin raises relevant sociological issues concerning the adaptation of the coffin workshops to the political situation of the theocratic state of Amun in the late 21st Dynasty. Somehow the independent workshops seemed to be left on their own, which might have resulted in the need to invest in the features of the coffins that could vividly impress private customers and to neglect formal details with symbolic or religious meaning. Obviously all these preliminary questions raised through the study of this anonymous coffin can only be fully answered by comparison with other coffins, especially from the tomb of Bab el-Gasus.

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<sup>16</sup> Kara Cooney, *The Cost of Death: The social and economic value of ancient Egyptian funerary art in the Ramesside Period* (Leiden, 2007), 173.

<sup>17</sup> See Kara Cooney, *The Cost of Death*, 162.

<sup>18</sup> The previously quoted lid of the coffin of the chantress of Amun Tay-hery, in Copenhagen National Museum (A.19 from Daressy's list), may also be seen as similar evidence of the activity of independent workshops. The lid seems to have been reused from a Ramessid coffin since originally the lid seems to have had visible feet, a early feature of anthropoid coffins. Probably as a result of tomb robbery, the coffin re-entered a workshop of the necropolis and the lid was “reworked” in a very crude manner in order to be adapted to the local style. Therefore, by the late 21st dynasty the circulation of funerary goods seems to have flourished. Notwithstanding the poor quality of the craftsmanship of this coffin, the workshop clearly tried to improve the visual impact of the object through the painting. Curiously enough, the mummy-cover also presents lateral tresses, like the coffin A.4, which again contrasts with the crude work of the rest of the funerary equipment.

<sup>19</sup> Kara Cooney, *The Cost of Death*, 150.