

## Late Period coffins from the Fayum region

### A common tradition?

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Late Period coffins originating from the Fayum region are difficult to analyse due to their lack of adequate documentation and study thus far. Insufficiently documented early excavations, their distribution to collections worldwide and their oft perceived minor aesthetic quality have caused scholars to shy away from studying them. However, they may provide a valuable source of information concerning not only the prevalent coffin decoration patterns in this region, but also the organisation of coffin production at that time.

The aim of the poster presentation is to show the distinctive features of the coffins from the different Fayum necropolises through a careful analysis of the coffins' iconographic repertoire. In order to trace the development of coffins in this region, the Fayum area is defined in a much broader geographical sense, extending from Karanis, in the north, to Sedment, in the south, and including the Nile valley cemeteries like Abusir el-Meleq or Kafr Ammar. The overall shape of the coffins, their decoration layout, colour schemes and choice of motifs and texts, as well as details in decorative parts, such as the wig and collar of anthropoid coffins, will be taken into account.

One example are the so-called white coffins,<sup>1</sup> which

appeared in the Twenty-fifth Dynasty as wooden bi-valve coffins.<sup>2</sup> Mostly rather plain, with only the facial features, the wig and the painted collar in bright colours, they may also include figurative scenes on their external surface. This type is well attested for many find-spots in the broader Fayum region, but may rarely be found elsewhere in Egypt at that time. As a result, patterns of a common tradition in the Fayum emerge, suggesting a close cooperation between the coffin producers at that time or even a common workshop tradition. Some motifs or coffin types are even unique, which may hint at the Fayum region's innovative craftsmanship.

The implications of this approach for the present study of coffins will be highlighted. Several find-spots in the Fayum have been subject to looting since antiquity, with a surge in modern times. For instance, Abusir el-Meleq has been plundered extensively in the past few years, resulting in severe disturbance to the site. Coffins from illicit excavations often appear on the art market, stripped of their archaeological context and in many cases cut into 'transportable' pieces. However, through identification of these specific patterns, it may be possible to attribute some of these coffins to the broader Fayum region.

<sup>1</sup> For example, the anthropoid coffin from Abusir el-Meleq, University of Rostock, Heinrich Schliemann-Institut für Altertumswissenschaften, inventory number 148.I.2 (see also Meffre, this volume).

<sup>2</sup> These coffins clearly refer back to the first anthropoid coffins of the Middle Kingdom. These were an innovation of the Middle Egyptian region. See for instance the coffin of Userhet in the the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, E.88.1903.