

From Beds and Coffins to Beds as Coffins?

Beds in the Funerary Context of Ancient Egypt from Predynastic Times to the Roman Period: An Overview

Manon Y. Schutz

manon.schutz@mansfield.ox.ac.uk



Project Outline

In my doctoral thesis '**Sleep, Beds, and Death in Ancient Egypt**' I am analysing the occurrences of beds and, to a lesser extent, other sleep-related objects in the funerary context of Ancient Egypt, **from Predynastic times to the Roman Period**. Not only in Greek mythology were **Hypnos** and **Thanatos** seen as brothers, sometimes even twins, but it seems that the Egyptians regarded death as a form of sleep as well. The reasons for this frequent association are, of course, **the similar features that unite both phenomena**: Neither the sleeper nor the deceased are able to speak, hear, see, eat, drink, or move. Furthermore, both states are inalienable from the human nature and, hence, life itself. Through association with sleep, **death becomes a transitional rather than irrevocable state** as, after sleeping, the person is expected to wake up again – whether it is in this world or the next.

One of the major research questions which I intend to answer during my DPhil is how beds and coffins interact during the different periods of Egypt. Are there differences to be seen according to the time horizon or is a straight development line traceable? The aim of this poster is to briefly present to its reader the preliminary results of my work.



Fig. 1: Bovine-legged type of bed, the most common form at this period

Pre- and Early Dynastic Period

There might be evidence for the assimilation of death and sleep as early as **Badarian times**. First, the flexed form of the body, often referred to as foetal position, might represent a sleeper. This so-called **foetal sleeping position** – comparable to the coiling up of certain animals – is even today the most common posture for resting humans; this contraction symbolises an innate need for protection against outer influences and perceived dangers during this most vulnerable stage. Secondly, next to this primary feature, there are other factors beside the position that remind one of a sleeping individual: Sometimes, a **pillow** filled with straw or vegetable material, a folded animal skin, or other objects like a stone or potsherd were laid under the head of the deceased. Also, the fact that some bodies were placed on or under mats or animal skins might be seen in this context; in some cases, the fabrics were replaced by so-called **wooden trays**. **At the end of Naqada II or the beginning of Naqada III, the first bovine-legged beds appear in tombs**. The appearance of the bovine legs might originally stem from a rather profane situation, namely the use of **oxen as carrying animals** which, with time, endowed them with a symbolic meaning as powerful and protective animals.

Although beds are found inside graves **all over Egypt**, for example in Minshat Abu Omar, Saqqara, Abydos, Naqada, Armant, Gebelein, and Hierakonpolis, **Tarkhan** has yielded the most specimens. In this rather wealthy city, which might have been the capital of an early local kingdom or even Narmer's residential seat before it was moved to Memphis, **over 50 examples**, belonging to five different bed types, were discovered. In most cases, **the deceased was buried lying on top of his bed**. In at least three instances, however, when the dead individual was equipped with both a coffin and a bed, **the body was placed inside its wooden container with the bed being placed over it**. It seems, thus, obvious that the coffin and the bed functioned as two different entities. The all around protection a coffin offered the corpse replaced the shielding function the bed might originally have performed as well, thus reducing this piece of furniture to a mere **luxury good**, a status symbol.

Old Kingdom

The only actual preserved, although highly restored, bed of the Old Kingdom belonged to **Queen Hetepheres I** (Cairo JE 53261). As this piece of furniture was found in a grave which was probably a reburial site, its intended position and use within the tomb, especially in relation to the sarcophagus cannot be assessed. It is noteworthy that, contrary to the beds of the Pre- and Early Dynastic Period, which have either plain or bovine-shaped legs, this specimen is **lion-legged, the lion being a typical guardian figure**. Although this shape does not replace the bovine form at this time, lions play an essential role in the funerary equipment of later periods, being used for lion biers, funerary couches, and mummy beds. The bed of Hetepheres might stand at the beginning of this development. That this specific piece of furniture was not unique, even though it is the only bed of this bed that has been discovered, is proven by the so-called **bed-making scenes**, which are most frequent in the Old Kingdom, but are sporadically found in the Middle and New Kingdom as well. These scenes and their context bring another factor into the meaning of beds which was, until now, not really tangible, namely **the semantic class of conception, fertility, birth, and, as such, rebirth**.

Another point that is worth mentioning in this context is the position of at least some of the mummies inside their coffins; unfortunately, bodies from this time period are rather rare. A well preserved example is the **mummy of a young man from Abydos**, now housed at the **Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University (1921.1)**. His position, lying on his right side with his knees bent upwards, is reminiscent of the earlier periods and **evokes a sleeper**; furthermore, his head is resting on a **headrest**. In the case of **Niankhpepi from Assiut, Dynasty 6**, for instance, a bed in form of a slatted frame was found on the coffin floor underneath the mummy. That death and sleep are paralleled in the funerary beliefs is not only apparent through the archaeological setting, but is also explicitly mentioned in the **Pyramid Texts** (e. g. PT 670, §1975b).

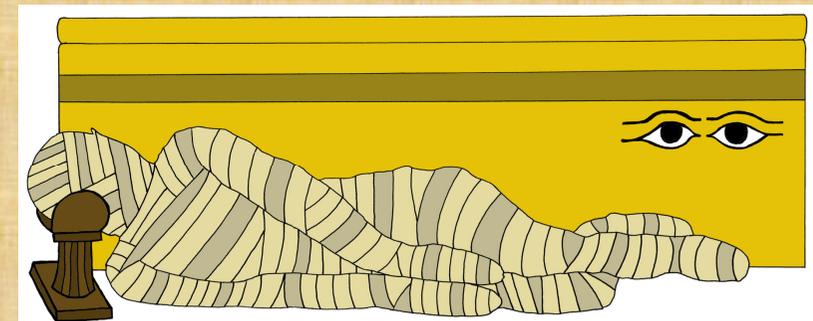


Fig 2: 'Sleeping' mummy in front of a 6th dynasty coffin

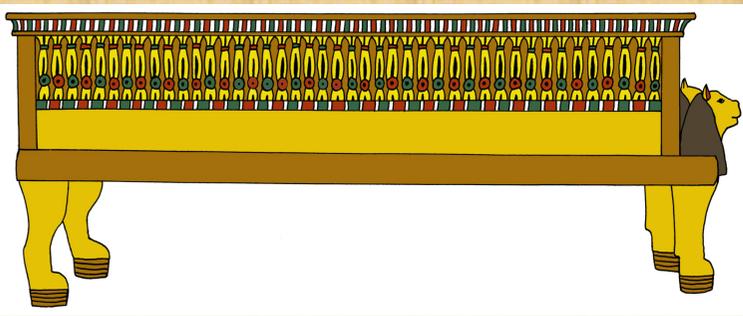


Fig. 3: Mummy bed from the Middle Kingdom

Middle Kingdom

As in the Old Kingdom, mummies were still regularly placed on their left sides inside their rectangular coffins. Unlike the aforementioned mummy in the Carlos Museum, however, bodies of this period were **usually buried in an extended position**. Also the **headrest**, found underneath the head of certain deceased individuals, especially when they were lying on their side, plays an essential role; furthermore, in the **object frieze** inside coffins of the northern type – discovered, for instance, at Beni Hasan, Deir el-Bersha, and Meir – one or more headrests are represented at the head end, thus reflecting their meaning for this life and the next. Besides this rather subtle reference to sleep, beds appear as part of the object frieze on and as actual piece of furniture inside the coffins of this period. One of the best preserved examples of such a bed placed inside a coffin is the specimen of **Djehutihotep from Deir el-Bersha (Louvre AF 9170), Dynasty 12**, whose surface is inscribed with spells from the **Pyramid and Coffin Texts** in order to protect the deceased, receive him into the realm of the gods, and assure his provision. Moreover, this might be one of the earliest instances where a bed was provided not only with lion legs, but also with two heads of this feline.

The close link between coffin and bed is, since the Middle Kingdom, also expressed in a reversed manner, i. e. with **the coffin being on top of the bed**, or rather lion bier. Besides depictions, **two actual so-called mummy beds from this period are preserved** (Cairo 19/11/27/4 and unknown inv.-no.). As these two objects are unfortunately not extensively published, it is impossible to give any more details about them, for example, their construction method, colour scheme, and measurements. It is, however, noteworthy, that the basic features of these mummy beds can be traced into Roman times. A third specimen belonging to a child (Berlin 12708) probably even dates to that late period, although it is often attributed to the Middle Kingdom; it might even be a modern assemblage of ancient material.

New Kingdom

By the New Kingdom, beds played an important role in the funerary context of the royal and non-royal deceased. When **Tutankhamun** died, he **was buried with 10 beds** – five everyday pieces of furniture, one folding bed, three funerary couches, and one lion bier. **The lion bier was found standing in the sarcophagus carrying the three anthropomorphic coffins**, thus following a development line which already began in the Old Kingdom. Furthermore, beds – although not as elaborate as the royal specimens – were found in the tombs of non-royal deceased like **Sennedjem (TT 1), Sennefer (TT 99), and Kha and Merit (TT 8)**. Most of them, however, seem to be reused everyday furniture.

In the case of Sennefer, his coffin was placed on top of his plain, undecorated bed inside the burial chamber. This might, on the one hand, be due to space restrictions or have, on the other hand, a ritual purpose. Very interesting in this context are renderings of the **burial procession**, heading from the East to the West, depicted in several tombs like the tomb of **Paheri in Elkab (Dynasty 18)** and **Rekhmire in Thebes (TT 100, Dynasty 18)**. In these scenes, **the combination of bed and coffin appears in two different forms**: The bed or, more specifically, the lion bier, is either represented as standing on top of the coffin or as carrying it. They function, thus, as two separate elements and, at the same time, as a unit. In the tomb of **Amenemope (TT 41, Dynasty 18)**, it is Anubis himself who tends to the coffin standing atop a bed; in this case, the bier does not have the typical lion component. Due to the formal similarities of this scene with those showing the coffin and bed being shipped to the West and those depicting Anubis tending to the mummy lying on a bier, the coffin-bed composition acquires a symbolic meaning: **the process of the mummification or, rather, rejuvenation is eternalised**. This links the mummy beds of the New Kingdom to the idea of birth and rebirth as already expressed in the Old Kingdom. Moreover, the protective property of the lions still plays an important role as well; especially **the elevated position of the animals' tails**, indicating raised alertness, aggressiveness, and thus better protection for the deceased. For this reason, the positioning of the bed in Sennefers burial chamber was, probably, not a coincidence. The bed acquires, hence, a range of connotations which the coffin alone cannot embody.

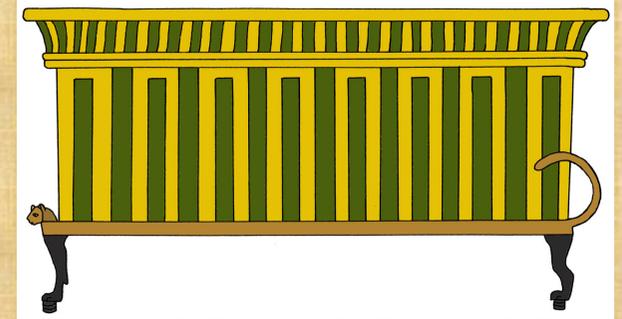


Fig. 4: Depiction of a mummy bed as found depicted in New Kingdom tombs

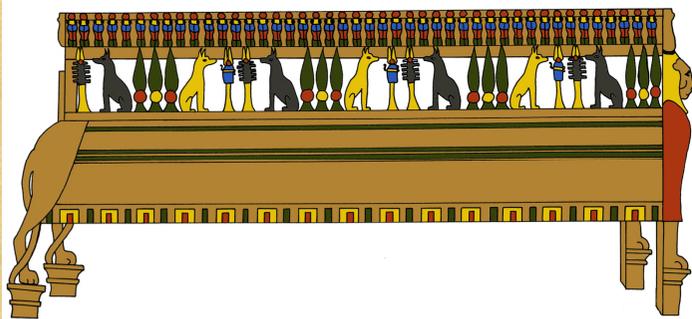


Fig. 5: Mummy beds seem to have been rather popular in the Roman Period

Graeco-Roman Period

In the Graeco-Roman Period, **there are two different kinds of bed that can be found inside tombs**. First, especially in Dush, a city in the oasis of Kharga, **the deceased were buried without coffins on top of beds**. This might be seen as a distant reminiscence of the Pre- and Early Dynastic Period, but it might also have been introduced to the oases from Nubia, where this practice of placing the bodies on beds was also commonly practised during a long time. Secondly, actual **mummy beds** that are similar to the ones surviving from the Middle Kingdom reappear in the Greek Period, for example, the specimen of **Nedjemib, called Tutu, from Akhmim (Cairo 21/11/16/12)**. It is, however, especially in the Roman Period that mummy beds became popular and can be found, for instance, in **Tuna el-Gebel, Thebes, Dush, and Akhmim**. Although it was believed that this coffin type is a phenomenon of this late period, the Middle Kingdom examples have clearly shown that this is not the case; the combination of coffin and bed was already well established at that time.

A characteristic feature of these late mummy beds are the **temple elements that are frequently used in their decoration**; these components are not part of the Middle Kingdom specimens, as **the use of this type of motif in the funerary context can only be observed since the Late Period**. It is thus not unusual that the front side of the object is carved in imitation of a **temple portal** with uraeus-frieze and winged sun disc, guarded by two lions. Also in other instances, **allusions to temple ornamentation are made**. These include small inscription panels that accompany the acting figures, *Randzeilen*, and offering bearers. In the case of the mummy bed of the two half-brothers Apolloni and Titoi (Berlin 12441), even the text probably stems from the temple context, since the closest parallel to the inscription is found on the north side window 9 in the west colonnade of the temple of Philae. On the other hand, traditional tomb and coffin scenes were still used in the decoration scheme as well. Usually, the mummy beds are adorned all over with hardly a spot left blank. This phenomenon is due to the increase of family and multiple burials, often in a reused tomb; the efforts of ornamentation are, thus, shifted onto the mummy and its direct protection. **The mummy beds are, hence, at the same time lion biers, coffins, and temples.**

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Figures:

All figures have been drawn by the author of this poster. They are loosely based on the examples cited in the main text without being exact copies. Their function is not to depict a specific object, but rather to elucidate the basic form of the beds at a certain time and, thus, their development from one period to another.