



Back into Nut's Womb: Burial Containers of the Old Kingdom, Before and After

19th–20th May 2025

Czech Institute of Egyptology
Faculty of Arts
Charles University



The project is supported by the Czech Science Foundation grant no. 23-04989S: Ancient Egyptian Burial Containers of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. Evolution, Contextualisation and Significance.



Czech Institute of Egyptology



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University



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Venue:

Faculty of Arts, Charles University
Main Building
nm. Jana Palacha 1/2
116 38 Praha 1

Lecture Hall No. 104 (first floor)

Preliminary program

Day 1: 19th May 2025

9:00–9:30 – Registration

9:30–9:45 – Welcoming speech and introduction

Session I: Early Dynastic Period

9:45–10:10 – Vera Müller: *The Diversity of Body Containers in the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic Cemetery at Turah*

10:10–10:35 – Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin: *Early Egyptian Coffins – The Case of Tell el-Farkha*

10:35–11:00 – Joris van Wetering: *Early “Coffins” from Naqada I to the Third Dynasty. Wooden, Ceramic, Mud and Stone Constructions*

11:00–11:30 – Coffee break

Session II: Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period I

11:30–12:05 – Věra Nováková and Adéla Pokorná: *Coffins of Plant Fibres from Abusir. Their Terminology, Species Determination, and Dating*

12:05–12:30 – Dominika Uhrová: *Pottery and Clay Coffins of the Old Kingdom*

12:30–14:00 – Lunch break

Session III: Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period II

14:00–14:25 – Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod: *Anonymous Coffin Turin S.14452 and the Study of Undecorated and Decontextualized coffins*

14:25–14:50 – Marie Peterková Hlouchová: *Wooden Coffins from Abusir in a Broader Context*

14:50–15:15 – Věra Nováková: *Typological Development of Stone Sarcophagi from Early Old Kingdom to Early Middle Kingdom*

15:15–15:45 – Coffee break

15:45–16:45 – KEYNOTE LECTURE

Andrzej Ćwiek: *Bones of Geb for the Womb of Nut. Stones of Sarcophagi*

Preliminary program

Day 2: 20th May 2025

9:00–10:00 – KEYNOTE LECTURE

Gersande Eschenbrenner Diemer: *“Reading” the Wooden Objects: Unveiling ancient Egyptian Woodworking Practices Through Funerary Furniture Analysis, Some Case Studies*

Session IV: Wooden coffins I

10:00–10:25 – Marie Peterková Hlouchová and Gersande Eschenbrenner Diemer: *“Undecorated” Wooden Coffins of the Early Old Kingdom Egypt*

10:25–10:50 – Elisabeth Kruck: *“Then I Made 180 Coffins in This City” – Who Were the Coffin Makers and Their Clients?*

10:50–11:20 – Coffee break

Session V: Wooden coffins II

11:20–11:45 – Lubica Hudáková: *Creating a Coffin Decoration – Some Thoughts on Painting Procedures Observable on Middle Kingdom Coffins from Beni Hassan*

11:45–12:10 – Uta Siffert: *Customisation or Mass Production? You name it! – Some Observations on Middle Kingdom Coffins from Beni Hassan*

12:10–12:35 – Lisa Sartini: *The Production of Wooden Coffins during the 18th Dynasty: Continuity and Innovation at the Beginning of the New Kingdom*

12:35–13:00 – Final remarks and discussion

ABSTRACTS

The Diversity of Body Containers in the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic Cemetery at Turah

Vera Müller

In the late Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods, a variety of body containers were used at Turah, consisting of mud, ceramic and wood. In addition, baskets and mats have been confirmed to protect the body for eternity. Hence, for about 20 % of the burials body containers are attested. Interestingly, we were not able yet to establish clear criteria, in which cases a body was deposited in a container or not. There seems to be no obvious relationship between the number of burial goods and the existence or lack of a body container. Also, the type of tomb seems not be correlated with the presence or absence of a device for the body. Thus, there are simple pit tombs reported as intact which contained a coffin but no further grave goods. And we have got burial chambers built of mudbrick with a variety of burial goods but without a coffin. And we have all kinds of combinations between these extremes. In this paper I would like to present the diversity of evidences and discuss possible interpretations.

Notes:

Early Egyptian Coffins – The Case of Tell el-Farkha

Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin

Tell el-Farkha is a site located in the eastern Nile delta with a long history of occupation, beginning in the times of the Lower Egyptian Culture and lasting until the early Old Kingdom (ca. 3800–2600 BC). The work at the site resulted in the discovery of a very interesting sequence of settlement layers divided into seven occupational phases. The rare feature of the site is, however, the fact that, in addition to settlement, a series of cemeteries were also discovered, which correspond to the last four phases of the site. Together, 143 graves were discovered and excavated in Tell el-Farkha, some of them containing burials in coffins.

Graves with coffins are not a common element of local burial customs, as only 12 such examples were recorded. However, they seem to be their accepted element. There are two main types of coffins from the site: pottery and baskets. Although the applied materials seem to suggest a differentiation in the value of the final product, in fact, they were found in both elaborated and well-equipped structures as well as in very simple burials. All examples are dated to the Proto- and Early Dynastic period, that is, Naqada IIIB to Naqada IIIC2 in the relative early Egyptian chronology.

In the presentation, particular examples of burials in coffins known from Tell el-Farkha will be discussed. Special attention will also be paid to details of grave construction, offerings found with the deceased, and the position of the bodies deposited in coffins. Where possible, structural details of the coffins themselves will also be presented, which is unfortunately very difficult, as in most cases they are only preserved as white mineralised fibres.

The data of the graves will be supplemented by general information collected from the settlement, which will provide a background of the phenomenon of the early coffins registered in Tell el-Farkha.

Notes:

**Early “Coffins” from Naqada I to the Third Dynasty.
Wooden, Ceramic, Mud and Stone Constructions**
Joris van Wetering

The Old Kingdom coffin, elongated with the body laying flat, has a long development with wooden “coffins” appearing at the end of the Naqada I period (4.000/3.800–3.600 BC), ceramic and mud ones at the end of the Naqada II period (3.600–3.300 BC), and stone ones during the Second / Third Dynasty (c. 2850–2600 BC). This precursor / early development is discussed here with a focus on the appearance of new materials (wood, ceramic, mud and stone) and types, providing an overview from the Naqada I period to the end of the Third Dynasty. There is significant typological variation within this development, be it that the “coffin” is portable or constructed within the grave, with a lid or without one, with a bottom / base or without, with or without holes (in the side, bottom or lid) besides the different shapes (rectangular, oval, etc.) and the presence of decorations.

An overview will discuss the initial appearances of ‘coffins’ of a specific materials, specific types in relation to regional variations within materials, and significant changes that occur. Towards the end of the period under discussion, the change from a crouched position within a small rectangular coffin to a large elongated coffin where the body lays flat occurs and this seems to have significant ritualist / believe implications. Also, the implication of certain materials (primarily wood) in relation to status differentiation is discussed with focus on local material (tamarisk / sycomore wood) versus non-local / foreign material (cedar), with wooden coffins made of local tamarisk being present throughout the period under discussion. The standardisation of coffins (through the disappearance of certain types) from the First Dynasty onwards, comparable to other developments (e.g. hair styles) is also discussed. Due to this diversity, terminology can sometimes be confusing. Here, “coffin” is used as a very generic term that covers a wide range of shapes and types to delineate this long precursor / early development. This presentation is concluded with a discussion of the issues of terminology in relation to the (wide) variety of types, to better grasp the complexity of this development.

Notes:

Coffins of Plant Fibres from Abusir. Their Terminology, Species Determination, and Dating

Věra Nováková and Adéla Pokorná

Coffins made of plant fibres are usually referred to in Egyptological literature as reed, rush, papyrus, twig, or basket coffins, often without a detailed examination of the material from which they were made. Identification of the material, as well as these coffins in general, has so far eluded the attention of scientific research, probably also due to their poor preservation. From the few studies conducted so far (e.g. Myśliwiec 2011; Hlouchová, Nováková and Uhrová 2024), it is clear that the use of reed coffins was not constant in terms of spatial and temporal distribution during the Old Kingdom. Evidence for the early Old Kingdom is relatively rare (e.g. Tarkhan, Abydos, or Naga ed-Deir); much more numerous finds come from the late Old Kingdom. The largest corpus of reed coffins for Memphite necropoleis was found in West Saqqara during excavations of the Polish expedition. In Abusir, on the concession of the Czech Institute of Egyptology, only several reed coffins were found in recent decades, however, they also deserve detailed research.

This article will be devoted in part to the material analyses of the coffins that took place in the last fall season, including explanation of the method used for species determination, in part to the study of the so-called “reed” coffins in general, generally used terminology and problematic dating.

References:

Myśliwiec, K.: 2011 “Old Kingdom coffins made of *Cyperus papyrus*”, in: Callender, V.G. *et al.* (eds.). *Times, signs and pyramids: studies in honour of Miroslav Verner on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*, Prague: 297–306.

Peterková Hlouchová, M., Nováková, V., and Uhrová, D.: 2024 “Burial containers of the late Early Dynastic Period and early Old Kingdom: adherence to traditions or evolution?”, poster presented at the conference *Egypt at its Origins 8* in Krakow.

Notes:

Pottery and Clay Coffins of the Old Kingdom

Dominika Uhrová

Pottery and clay coffins, rectangular or oval in shape, first appeared during the Naqada II period. They are attested at many localities in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods, however often only in a few graves within the given cemetery. Hence, these coffins never became a dominant feature of burial practices. Their use decreased in the Old Kingdom, but still more than 400 pottery and clay coffins are documented, dated mostly to the Third Dynasty. After a hiatus during the Middle Kingdom, pottery burial containers became common again starting in the New Kingdom and continued to be in use to the Greco-Roman Period.

These burial containers have often been overlooked by scholars, only briefly mentioned or superficially described, without specifying their archeological context, thus not published in a manner suitable for further research. This paper aims to gather and summarize the existing knowledge about pottery and clay coffins of the Old Kingdom, their use, distribution, decoration, as well as typology and measurements.

Notes:

Anonymous Coffin Turin S.14452 and the Study of Undecorated and Decontextualized Coffins

Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod

From 1911 to 1913, Ernesto Schiaparelli excavated numerous tombs in Asyut. His excavations added considerably to the collection of the Museo Egizio in Turin. Unfortunately, a lack of attention to the context of many of these finds has limited our ability to accurately place these objects in their historical and more specific geographical context. The uninscribed artefacts, in particular, have therefore received little subsequent attention. While the lack of records does indeed represent what has been referred to as “a deplorable and irreversible loss of information”, these objects still have much to contribute to our understanding of ancient Egyptian society. The anonymous box coffin from Turin, S.14452, probably from the Old Kingdom, has been selected as a case study to demonstrate the types of insights these objects can provide. A thorough analysis of the materiality and construction of the artefact can help to illustrate patterns in the choices of craftsmen from the end of the Old Kingdom. The selected timber, joining techniques, tool marks, decoration, and overall style, help to place this piece within the complicated history of the development of woodworking and coffins in ancient Egypt. The study reveals information regarding not only the technical skills of craftspeople from this early period, but may also contribute to our understanding of their religious knowledge. These details help these objects to tell the story of their creation and use, demonstrating the types of potential narratives that can be reconstructed even when texts are not available. These uninscribed and decontextualized artefacts are excellent candidates for more scientific analyses, and can contribute considerably to the material history of Egypt.

Notes:

Wooden Coffins from Abusir in a Broader Context

Marie Peterková Hlouchová

While decorated wooden coffins from later periods have been extensively studied, those from the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period—both decorated and mostly undecorated—have received far less attention in broader Egyptological research. In particular, a comprehensive typological and technological analysis is still lacking in the literature.

Yet, wooden burial containers from these periods are found across a wide range of necropoleis throughout Egypt, including sites such as the Memphite necropolis, Tell el-Basta, Assiut, Naga ed-Deir, Gebelein, and many others. In this broader framework, the necropolis at Abusir also provides valuable insights into the development and use of wooden coffins during this time.

As part of the Memphite necropolis, Abusir has been systematically excavated for over 60 years by the Czech Institute of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. These excavations have yielded a corpus of around 40 wooden coffins, offering a unique opportunity to examine various aspects such as coffin typology, construction techniques, and the socio-economic status of the individuals buried in them.

This talk aims to present the finds from Abusir and place them in a wider context—not only within the Memphite necropolis but also in relation to other burial sites across Egypt—to better understand the broader patterns and regional variations in coffin use during the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period.

Notes:

Typological Development of Stone Sarcophagi from the Early Old Kingdom to the Early Middle Kingdom

Věra Nováková

The first stone sarcophagi developed in the Third Dynasty and belonged to the king and members of his family. Gradually, the use of this type of burial containers pervaded the non-royal sphere during the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties. From a typological point of view, stone sarcophagi were made of a monolithic piece of stone, usually rectangular in shape, only distinguishable by a different type of lid. Its two basic forms were adopted from Early Dynastic coffins, but a new type specific for stone has also been developed. In addition, various techniques for closing the lid were created to protect the burial from burglary.

This contribution aims to compare existing typologies (Reisner 1942; Donadoni Roveri 1969; van Walsen 2014), highlight their characteristic features and offer the updated typology of the author. The inspiration of wooden coffins and structures made of plant materials for the manufacture of stone sarcophagus will also be discussed.

References:

Donadoni Roveri, A.M.: 1969 *I sarcofagi egizi dalle origine alla fine dell'Antico Regno*, Roma.

Reisner, G.A.: 1942 *A History of the Giza Necropolis II*, Unpublished Manuscript.

van Walsem, R.: 2014 "From skin wrappings to architecture: the evolution of prehistoric, anthropoid wrappings to historic architectonic coffins/sarcophagi; separate contrasts optimally fused in single Theban 'stola' coffins (\pm 975-920 BC)", in: Sousa, R. (ed.), *Body, cosmos and eternity: new research trends in the iconography and symbolism of ancient Egyptian coffins*, Oxford: 1-27.

Notes:

KEYNOTE LECTURE

Bones of Geb for the Womb of Nut. Stones of Sarcophagi

Andrzej Ćwiek

The sarcophagi for the royals and the elite, a very special case of burial containers, were made of various and different types of stone. The use of rock materials in Egypt accelerated during the Third Dynasty, and the stone coffins made of limestone, travertine and granite became widespread. In the later Old Kingdom also basalt and greywacke occur. After the Old Kingdom one may notice an increasing role of quartzite, with huge sarcophagi of the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period, and rectangular, “cartouche-shaped” examples of the Eighteenth Dynasty. A very specific material is gneiss from Gebel el-Asr, rarely used in the Old and Middle Kingdoms for statues and vessels, but in the burial arrangements as well.

During the lecture basic info on every discussed kind of stone will be provided: the Egyptian and contemporary names, quarries, physical properties, contexts of use, symbolic meaning. The introduction will be illustrated by a hands-on presentation of samples from the Institute of Egyptology collection, and followed by the discussion of the use in sarcophagi.

Some particular issues will be briefly treated (in terms of materials): the relation royal – nonroyal; composite sarcophagi, where the chest and the lid are of different rocks (Tutankhamun’s case); a sarcophagus chamber and chamber-sarcophagus; the relation of a sarcophagus with its complementary canopic chest.

Finally, some remarks will be offered, enabling identification of problematic stone material of an object in a museum or in the field.

Notes:

KEYNOTE LECTURE

“Reading” the Wooden Objects: Unveiling Ancient Egyptian Woodworking Practices Through Funerary Furniture Analysis, Some Case Studies

Gersande Eschenbrenner Diemer

While wooden funerary furniture constitutes a significant corpus of ancient Egyptian artisanal production, the near-total absence of archaeological remains of woodworking workshops poses a critical challenge to understanding their localization, organization, and identification. Nevertheless, the diverse and often high-quality output reveals the utilization of both local and imported materials, alongside specific styles and techniques. These elements serve as crucial markers of workshop practices and associated trade networks, governing both material procurement and the distribution of finished goods.

This presentation will introduce the comprehensive analytical protocol implemented by the *Medjehu Project*. Through several case studies, we will demonstrate how the integration of wood anatomical analysis, dendrochronological investigation, manufacturing technique analysis, and stylistic evaluation enables the identification of distinct workshop practices. Our findings aim to shed light on the local and large-scale economic networks intricately linked to these craft production centers.

Notes:

“Undecorated” Wooden Coffins of the Early Old Kingdom Egypt

Marie Peterková Hlouchová and Gersande Eschenbrenner Diemer

Wooden coffins of the Old Kingdom came to the interest of scholars only when they were decorated with the so-called standard decoration (i.e. offering formulae, a pair of the *udjat* eyes, false door, offering list, seven sacred oils, etc.). These motifs were carved and/or painted and the coffins are attested from the end of the Fifth Dynasty. It is also true that at least in the Early Dynastic Period, the so-called palace-façade wooden coffins (or more precisely coffins with a house motif) were in use. This was a kind of decoration, which, however, has not yet been properly explored. As the coffins with the standard type of decoration come from the late Old Kingdom, the research tend to claim that the earlier ones were undecorated, hence no proper interest in them. However, as demonstrated by several examples from the Museo Egizio Torino and also from the necropolis of Abusir, the wooden coffins could have had a painted decoration even in earlier times; only the motifs were different. In addition, the presence of a red pigment at the junctions between the boards that make up these coffins or at the level of repairs made at the time of their construction highlights the long-standing use of this apotropaic process, well known in the Middle Kingdom and up to the end of the New Kingdom.

This paper focuses on the earlier coffins that bear remains of painted decoration and red pigment uses and aims to compare the motifs with the later scheme of the standard decoration and apotropaic processes. Such an evaluation will contribute to the question of development of decorative elements in the funerary sphere.

Notes:

“Then I Made 180 Coffins in This City” – Who Were the Coffin Makers and Their Clients?

Elisabeth Kruck

This quote is part of the hieroglyphic inscription of a limestone stela in Rome (MVOEM n. E 709) that can be attributed to the coffin maker Nakhty. It is one of the rare documents in which the people who made the coffins can actually be identified and named. A few inscriptions on the coffins themselves give us small clues about the people who were responsible for the selection or donation of the coffin, or at least to whom the selection was attributed. Another source that gives us an indication of the people ‘behind the object’ and who were responsible for creating it, are the objects themselves, which bear traces of their makers, their “handwriting”. A detailed examination of these “handwritings” could make it possible to get closer to these people, the coffin makers, who placed the inscriptions on the coffin.

In this context, it is important to find out whether it is possible to distinguish different handwritings on the different coffin sides within one coffin or to identify different handwritings of different working steps of one coffin. Apart from palaeography, whether as an individual style or deriving from a workshop tradition, this also touches upon questions of orthography, toposyntax, layout, and image-text relations within the decoration. In addition to examining individual pieces and their processing, it is also exciting to look at different coffins from one necropolis that have so far been dated to the same period on the basis of their find context and their stylistic classification. This counts for the coffin of Ipi-Ha-Ishutef from the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago (OIM E 12072) and the inner coffin from the intact burial of Gemniemhat from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek Copenhagen (Inv. No.: AEIN 1615), both found in the Teti Necropolis in Saqqara. The handwriting of these two coffins will be scrutinised more closely as part of the investigation in order to trace the individual decisions and individual steps of the manufacturing process of the coffin production. The presentation introduces these and other sources that provide us with possible information about the funerary industry, and discusses their significance for answering the question “Who were the coffin makers and their clients?”.

Notes:

**Creating a Coffin Decoration – Some Thoughts
on Painting Procedures Observable on Middle Kingdom
Coffins from Beni Hassan**

Lubica Hudáková

More than 220 decorated wooden box coffins datable to the Middle Kingdom were excavated by John Garstang in the Lower Necropolis of Beni Hassan during two archaeological seasons in 1902/3 and 1903/4. In the course of the project Painted for Eternity. Decoration of Middle Kingdom Coffins from Beni Hassan – An Art Historical Case Study, conducted at the Vienna University (FWF no. P31390-G25), 80 coffins or fragments thereof were located in museums all over the world and some 30 further coffins were identified on excavations photographs kept in the Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool (see also paper presented by Uta Siffert). In the course of an in-depth art historical analysis of the painted decoration of the Beni Hassan coffins, valuable insights into the process of the local coffin decoration were obtained. On one hand, a wide range of methods and techniques related to the setting out the layout and drafting the individual decorative elements as well as the use of reference lines could be observed. On the other hand, the study revealed that templates for both ornamental and non-ornamental texts as well as for the figurative decoration were apparently used. Even though it cannot be determined whether these templates were proper models, pattern sheets or mental/memory images in the mind of the painters, how the templates were produced and transmitted, and whether they go back to particular workshops or painters, the painted decoration clearly conformed to certain rules that deserve attention. The paper shall present the findings and offer some thoughts on (re)productive painting procedures to be discussed.

Notes:

Customisation or Mass production? You name it! – Some Observations on Middle Kingdom Coffins from Beni Hassan

Uta Siffert

The decorated wooden box coffins from the Lower Necropolis of Beni Hassan formed the material basis for the project Painted for Eternity. Decoration of Middle Kingdom Coffins from Beni Hassan – An Art Historical Case Study, conducted at the Vienna University (FWF no. P31390-G25). More than 220 decorated coffins datable to the Middle Kingdom were excavated by John Garstang during two archaeological seasons in 1902/3 and 1903/4. Thereof more than 100 coffins or coffin fragments could be identified in museums all over the world or on excavations photographs and were subjected to an art-historical analysis during the project. The study revealed the existence of a local tradition of coffin decoration and involved an analysis of how the coffin decoration was produced (see the paper presented by Lubica Hudáková). Furthermore, phenomena became visible which were not actually intended to be perceived by the recipients (coffin owner and those involved in the funerary processes) and are thus not part of the decoration concept itself. It concerns, for example, the application of the name of the deceased. In the lecture, this phenomenon will be discussed in relation to prefabrication, reuse and customisation as well as within the cultural-historical context of the superordinate conception of the coffins.

Notes:

The Production of Wooden Coffins during the 18th Dynasty: Continuity and Innovation at the Beginning of the New Kingdom

Lisa Sartini

During the 18th dynasty, different types of coffins were used, mainly of the anthropoid type, generally distinguished by their shape, material, and decoration, according to their different symbolic values. Each new type was developed based on the previous one, and old types were used alongside the new ones, at least for a time. In order to understand the reasons for this variety, it is necessary to take into account the production of coffins in previous periods and, in particular, the symbolic evolution of the anthropoid type since its appearance in the 12th dynasty.

Although the rectangular coffin, which symbolically represented the eternal dwelling of the deceased and was intended to recreate a microcosm around him, was still the most common type in the Middle Kingdom, the anthropoid wt coffin, in the form of a mummified body, also began to be used. Its main purpose was to reproduce the Sah, the eternal and perfect image of the deceased. Therefore, as a substitute for his body, this coffin had to be placed inside a container/microcosm, namely the rectangular coffin. The two objects that made up the coffin ensemble thus had two different symbolic values.

However, starting from the 17th dynasty, the anthropoid coffin began to be used on its own, and, to compensate for the lack of the rectangular outer container, it had to take on also its symbolic function and, consequently, some of its iconographic motifs. The rishi coffins, typical of the Second Intermediate Period, are the first to show this symbolic and iconographic fusion. Nevertheless, it became more evident and well-structured only from the reign of Thutmosis I, with the production of the so-called anthropoid white-coffins.

This paper will discuss the material, tangible consequences of this religious fusion in the production of anthropoid coffins during the early 18th dynasty. Following a brief overview of the different types of coffins involved, the paper will highlight which symbolic, iconographic and textual elements, sometimes with some modification, derived from the production of rectangular and anthropoid coffins of the previous periods, and which are the innovative elements that were further developed during the New Kingdom.

Notes:

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN BURIAL CONTAINERS



OF THE OLD KINGDOM AND FIRST INTERMEDIATE
PERIOD