Anthropoid Clay Coffins of the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age in Egypt and the Near East: A Re-Evaluation of the Evidence from Tell El-Yahudiya

Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner
University of Toronto

It is a great pleasure to dedicate this study to my colleague Jack Holladay. Since I first encountered him while a graduate student in Eliezar Oren’s seminar on the Hyksos at the University of Pennsylvania, Jack’s passion, analytical skill, and grasp of the archaeological evidence have distinguished him in my estimation. Arriving as a new assistant professor at the University of Toronto a short time later, I had the good fortune to land in a neighboring office on the fourth floor of Bancroft Hall. Jack has always been a most generous mentor and colleague, sharing insights about the Egyptian-Near Eastern connections that fuel his academic research, serving as sounding-board for my own research projects, and offering strategies for carrying out fieldwork and navigating the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. We have served on many doctoral dissertation and examination committees together, settings in which his intelligence and methodological rigor shine alongside his fundamental kindness and concern for students. Beyond being a formidable academic, Jack is also an exemplary human being. I hope that this study, which grapples with one intriguing aspect of material culture that has direct bearing on cultural interconnections and continues a conversation first begun many years ago, will serve to honor his multifaceted contributions to the field.

Interpreting Anthropoid Clay Coffins: A Contextual Approach

Anthropoid coffins made of fired clay have been recovered from mortuary contexts dating to the period between the 15th–12th centuries BC in Syro-Palestine, Egypt, and Nubia.1 A number of conflicting interpretations of the

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1 The most comprehensive Egyptological studies of anthropoid clay coffins to date are those of Sabbahy Kuchman (Kuchman 1977–78; Sabbahy Kuchman 2009) and Cotelle-Michel (2004), which provide useful compendia of known examples.
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ethnic and social identities of the individuals with whom the coffins were associated have been proposed. Yassine suggests that some of the clay coffin burials in Syro-Palestinian sites were those of local elites in regular contact with Egyptians (Yassine 1988: 38–40; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 77). Oren has argued that the ‘grotesque’ coffins, a subset of the corpus which features highly stylized facial characteristics, represent a component of the Sea Peoples who figured so prominently in the history of the Near East in this period (Oren 1973: 135–38; T. Dothan and M. Dothan 1992: 59; Morris 2005: 761). A significant number of scholars have suggested that the more ‘naturalistic’ anthropoid clay coffins reflect traditional Egyptian burial customs and were associated with the interment of Egyptians (Oren 1973: 142–46; Kuchman 1977–78: 12, 20; Mazar 1990: 285; Gonen 1992: 28–29; James, McGovern and Bonn 1993: 239; Bloch-Smith 2002: 125; Galal and Aston 2003; Killebrew 2005: 65, 67; von Lieven 2006: 103; Sabbahy Kuchman 2009: 9). Based upon the latter perspective, the individuals buried in anthropoid clay coffins in Syro-Palestinian and Nubian sites are understood to have been Egyptian administrative and military personnel and their family members. The presence of such Egyptians, drawn from the ranks of the elite as well as from non-elite sectors of the expeditionary forces, was uncontestably integral to New Kingdom Egyptian imperial activity in Nubia and in Syro-Palestine during the Late Bronze II to Early Iron Age. Whether the anthropoid clay coffins were associated with burials of such individuals, however, is a complex question.

Examination of the full range of archaeological data and material culture associated with the contexts in which anthropoid coffins occur raises a number of problems with the view of these interments as being consistent with standard New Kingdom Egyptian burial practices. The present study undertakes a contextual analysis of the adult burials featuring anthropoid clay coffins at Tell el-Yahudiya datable to the period between the 15th–12th centuries BC. Burials of infants and children that utilized ceramic containers, which occur in many periods and have a wide distribution in Egypt and the Near East, are not considered explicitly herein. This analysis reveals consistent differences between adult burials in anthropoid coffins made of fired clay and contemporary adult burials found in Egypt that featured anthropoid coffins made of other materials. Comparison of the archaeological evidence from Tell el-Yahudiya with contemporary evidence from the Syro-Palestinian sites

2 Oren (1973: 133–35) and Dothan (2008: 95) discuss the division of anthropoid clay coffins into ‘naturalistic’ and ‘grotesque’ types. The typology is problematic because it is based on subjective criteria, and also because a simple dichotomy does not adequately represent the spectrum of morphological variation present in the corpus.