ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

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by Margaret Patterson

The Coffins of Nespawershefyt and Pakepu at the Fitzwilliam Museum: Helen Strudwick

At the beginning of December Helen Strudwick came to talk to us about two sets of coffins that are part of the collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, where she is curator. She chose these coffins as the subject of her talk because she has recently been working on them a lot and they make for an interestingly contrasting pair. During her talk she showed us many pictures of the coffins she was discussing and pointed out interesting features of the decoration.

The first set of coffins she talked about belonged to a man called Nespawershefyt, who lived during the 21st Dynasty (c. 1000 BCE). The coffins are of a type called "yellow coffins" because they are predominantly yellow in colour. The set consists of five pieces: an outer box with a lid, an inner box with a lid and a mummy board.

The Inner Coffin of Nespawershefyt, photo by John Patterson

The mummy board is highly decorated in a style that is well executed and detailed, and it is also highly varnished so the whole thing gleams. The complete coffin set is very impressively decorated; Strudwick said that John Taylor (the world expert on coffins) says that this is the best example of a 21st Dynasty coffin set in the world. One interesting feature on the mummy board is that one eye is shaped differently to the other - this is a common feature, but she has no idea why this was the case.

The inner coffin is where the mummy would have lain, with the mummy board directly on top of the mummy and then the lid on top of that. The underside of the mummy board is decorated with a representation of the night sky, so you can think of it as if the deceased is lying on his back looking up at the sky. The inside of the inner coffin is also highly decorated. The orientation of the decoration and text doesn't seem to make sense at first glance if you are thinking of the coffin as resting horizontally. But if the coffin is set vertically the text is then oriented so it can be read in vertical columns. Strudwick reminded us of Meghan Strong's work on artificial light and ritual around the coffin (Strong spoke to us last December, my write up of that talk is here: https://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2018/01/28/illuminating-path-darkness-artificial-light-ancient-egyptian-ritual-meghan-strong). **There were rituals during the funeral where the coffin was set up in front of the tomb entrance illuminated by torchlight. They think that the lids were taken off the coffins and the mummy board acts to cover the mummy (and present an idealised vision of the deceased) and to hold it in place.**

The coffins were given to the Fitzwilliam Museum by two Cambridge students who were inspired by the rediscovery of Egyptian antiquities in the late 18th/early 19th Centuries including Napoleon's Description de L'Égypte. They took a trip through Egypt and back again, and picked up souvenirs of all sorts along the way. They gave the coffins to the Museum in 1822, although at that point the Museum didn't have a physical building so they had to be kept in storage until they were able to be displayed.

Despite being in the Museum for nearly 200 years the coffins haven't been thoroughly studied and the decoration is largely unpublished. There is an awful lot of decoration on the coffins! Strudwick rather amusingly said the craftsmen exhibited a "fear of open space" - every possible piece of every possible surface has something on it. She talked a little bit about two scenes on the inner coffin in particular. One of these is a rather fine Weighing of the Heart scene, which has, in fact, been published. The deceased is shown several times in the scene - being lead to the scales by Thoth, celebrating his success at passing the test, presenting his heart and eyes to be weighed against Ma'at. Strudwick talked a little about Ma'at, telling us that it's a concept that is difficult to define. She understands it as "everything being the way it should be" according to the cultural context of the time. One of the details in the scene that she pointed out was that the chain supporting the weighing pans is made up of djed and tyet signs - the symbols of Osiris and Isis respectively.

Another scene the she talked about is of Hathor as a cow coming out of the Western Mountain (see John's photo overleaf). The Western Mountain is the Theban Hills at Deir el Bahri where Hatshepsut built her mortuary temple (and Montuhotep II did so too, centuries before her). The depiction of the mountain has a tomb door on it with a pyramid above it. Strudwick told us that Andrzej Newiński thinks that this is not just a visual metaphor but a real shrine that once existed in the hills above Deir el Bahri. The outer coffin of Nespawershefyt is also covered with high quality decoration, including more scenes from the Book of the Dead. It's less shiny than the inner coffin and mummy

board as it is only varnished on the yellow bits. The interior of this coffin is more simply decorated than the interior of the inner coffin - it has a large Osiris figure as a djed pillar on the bottom.

The lid of the outer coffin is pretty damaged, and so the decoration is hard to see. They have used a technique called Visible-Light Induced Luminescence to see it more clearly. This technique uses a quirk of one of the pigments used in Egyptian art. When Egyptian Blue is illuminated with light in the visible spectrum it emits luminescence in the infrared spectrum. So the technique involves taking two photos under visible light - one is what one sees with the naked eye, and the other is taken with a filter that only lets through the infrared spectrum. This latter photo gives a sharp image of where there are traces of blue in the decoration, and so you can see the motifs more clearly without the visual confusion caused by the damaged areas. The luminescence is a feature of only two pigments, Egyptian Blue and Han Blue - only the ancient Egyptians and ancient Chinese made a blue pigment in exactly this fashion. Strudwick told us that they have done experiments to try to make Egyptian Blue, with some success. The ingredients are similar to those of faience: silica, lime, natron and something copper based to make the blue colour. These are then heated to 900°C and kept at that temperature for 3 days for the pigment to form! This is an amazing technological achievement for the ancient Egyptians - within their known capabilities, but difficult for them to do. Of course, it's also possible that the experimental archaeologists have missed some "trick" that would make the process less extreme, but it doesn't seem so.

The damage to the lid is itself quite interesting in thinking about the "afterlife" of these coffins. There's a lot of scuffing near the feet, and the feet themselves are pretty greasy. Strudwick thinks the most plausible explanation is that before the students acquired them the coffins had spent some time in someone's house and been used as a bench! The scuffed area is where people had slid themselves back on the "seat" to sit down. And the grease on the feet is the sort of grease that you get off someone's hand. My mental image is of this beautiful and stunningly decorated coffin in the corner of a room with someone fidgeting about sitting on it, and leaning their grubby hands on the up-turned feet!

So who was Nespawershefyt? Strudwick explained that she likes to try as much as possible to get a feel for who the owner of a set of coffins was - after all they are not just artefacts, they are the final resting place of a person who was missed by his community. The name Nespawershefyt means "the one who is the Great One of Shefyt". Shefyt is an epithet of the god Amun, and it means "ram's head" or "terror". In some places on the coffins Nespawershefyt is called NesAmun as a short version of his name. He's clearly an important person with several high status titles, which were God's Father of Amun(-Re King of the Gods), wab priest, supervisor of the workshops in Karnak and supervisor of the temple scribes in the House of Amun(-Re King of the Gods). The bits I've put in brackets occur in some places that the titles are listed on the coffins but not always.

While the coffins were being conserved relatively recently the conservator, Lucy Skinner, noticed something interesting about the titles. Each time that they occur the varnish is of a darker colour than the surrounding areas of text and decorations. Strudwick said that at first she thought maybe the coffins had been reused - that the names had all been repainted and revarnished. But on closer inspection it was clearly only the titles that were redone, so it seems that Nespawershefyt got a promotion after the initial decoration was finished. It was very important to the Egyptians to take their

status with them into the afterlife, so that they would have access to all the resources and privileges that they had in life for eternity. And so once he was promoted the texts on the coffins were altered, and re-varnished.

Of course the next question is "what was underneath?"! In some places there are traces that are still visible - she showed us an example where there are clearly 5 horizontal lines beneath the hieroglyphs for the new titles. They've managed to piece together the phrase from the bits that are visible, and determined that his previous title was the Great One of the Water of the House of Amun. This is the only place that this title is known from so it's hard to be sure what it meant. But Strudwick speculates that plausible candidate for the "Water of the House of Amun" is the Sacred Lake at Karnak, which is near the craftsmen's workshops (so linking to one of his new title set). Strudwick also speculates that the craftsmen in the temple who he was supervisor of are the men who made his coffin.

Before our coffee break she talked briefly about their experiments in reproducing the coffins (only in brief as she was to return to the subject of the coffins' structure later in the talk). Geoffrey Killen is one of the people involved in this (he spoke to the group about Egyptian woodworking in October 2017, which is a talk I sadly missed - it's written up in the EEG December 2017 newsletter by Alison Woollard:
https://www.essexegyptology.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/December-17-Newsletter.pdf).
One detail of the coffins that particularly struck me is the reason that some of the decoration is in relief – I had always assumed it was carved into the wood, but instead it's because the pigment has been carefully applied layer upon layer until it forms a raised surface.

After the break for coffee and cake Strudwick moved on to talking about the coffins of an individual called Pakepu. This set is also a nested set with two boxes (plus lids), but there is no mummy board. Slightly confusingly the outer of the two coffins that they have is called the intermediate coffin as there once would have been a third, box shaped coffin which the intermediate one was inside. The coffins come from a later time period than Nespawershefyt's coffins - Pakepu died during the 25th Dynasty, c. 640 BCE. Pakepu's title was Water Pourer of the West of Thebes. This was an important role in the funerary industry of the time but not one of the top tier jobs. Essentially if you were wealthy enough you didn't make the trip to your relative's tomb every day (or however often was necessary) to make offerings (including the pouring of water libations) - instead you paid someone like Pakepu to do those rituals for you. So he wasn't poor, but he wasn't as wealthy as Nespawershefyt.

The Inner Coffin of Pakepu, photo by John Patterson

The coffins show that they're a bit cheaper - the decoration is not as high quality as that on Nespawershefyt's coffins. The vignettes and texts look more scribbled and the paint is more poorly applied, the overall effect is a bit sloppy. There are also signs that the draftsman didn't entirely understand the decorative scheme. For instance there are places where a figure is supposed to be labelled with a text, and despite not putting in any of the texts he's put the little bits of coloured background for the text extending down from the top line of the scene. Strudwick said that it's as if he knows those bits of colour are supposed to be there but doesn't know that their function is to be background for a text. If he did then he'd skip them if he wasn't planning to put a text there.

Pretty much all the differences are down to the skill of the artist as the pigments used for the two coffin sets are almost identical. The only difference in the pigments is in how much of the expensive yellow pigment called orpiment there is. All the visible yellow on Pakepu's coffins is yellow ochre, but most of the yellow on Naspawershefyt's coffins is orpiment. Where orpiment has been used on Pakepu's coffins it once again shows the lower skill of the artists - orpiment deteriorates rapidly (within hours, not days) if not varnished, so all the orpiment has changed to a sludgy brown colour and must have done so soon after the coffins were finished.

You can see some interesting things about how the coffin was painted from the sloppiness of Pakepu's decoration. For instance you can see how the artist stood on one side to paint each line across the lid in a single stroke as far as he could reach. Then after he'd done the whole of that side he went round the other side and started again on each line with no attempt to blend the new start into the existing paint. You can also see that he was running short of red pigment - the second side has clearly been done with more dilute paint as it runs and drips more and the coverage looks thinner. One

example of this that she showed us a little later in the talk was of a goddess whose red paint had run so much it looked like she was having a nosebleed.

The decoration at the head of the inner coffin goes across the join between the lid and the box. The edges of the box and lid are also not smooth and look like they've been ripped open since the decoration was done. These two factors suggest that the mummy was sealed into the coffin at the point that the decoration was done. This wasn't the case for Nespawershefyt's coffin, which is corroborated by it being amended after he'd been promoted - the decoration must have been finished before his promotion thus before his death. So the craftsman painting Pakepu's coffins needed to work more quickly, to get the decoration done after Pakepu's mummification was finished and before his burial.

Strudwick also pointed out ways that the content of the decoration is sloppy in addition to the execution of the decoration. One thing she'd already mentioned is that the gods aren't labelled where you would expect them to be. There are also details like the way Anubis is drawn. You can see on the chest of the inner coffin in the photo overleaf the common scene of Anubis standing beside the mummified deceased who is on a bed. And if you look carefully you see that Anubis has a somewhat ludicrously long skinny arm reaching out over the drawing of the mummy. She said it looks a bit like one of those party toys that you blow into and the streamer unrolls! That scene is on both of Pakepu's coffins, and in both cases Anubis has an arm like this, so it's pretty likely to have been the same artist who painted both coffins.

The hieroglyphs are all a bit of a mess and she showed us a few examples of badly written bits of text on the coffins. But she also showed us a cautionary example - not everything that isn't what one might expect is wrong. This example was of a standard offering formula text, where the signs were all written back to front. Normally when reading a piece of Egyptian text you read along in the direction that looks into the faces of the hieroglyphs, but in this text you had to read into the backs of their heads. Which at first glance seems to fit into the "sloppy artist doesn't know what he's doing" narrative that applies to so much of the decoration on this coffin. However this writing of an offering formula in a "retrograde" style is seen in other places not just on this coffin, and it appears to be something that was sometimes done.

So the picture seems pretty clear when looking at the two coffins: Nespawershefyt was of higher status than Pakepu and had a much better quality coffin. But Strudwick now went on to talk about the work they have been doing on the physical structure of these coffins, and the story is not quite as clear cut as it seems from the decoration. CT scans of Pakepu's inner coffin show that it is very well made. The wood is primarily new wood which hasn't been used before and displays beautiful carpentry. The lid is exquisitely carved and shaped from expensive wood, and all the joins are tight. The intermediate coffin is too large to CT scan so they have X-rayed it instead. The resulting images are harder to interpret than a CT scan but they have still managed to map the wood pieces and see how it was made. It was very different to the inner one - it's made of many more pieces of wood, 97 in all, which are held together with lots of dowels and there are also a lot of paste patches. Given the difference in decoration quality between Nespawershefyt's coffins and Pakepu's coffins one might expect the construction quality of Nespawershefyt's to also be better. But that's not at all the case - the inner coffin of Nespawershefyt is more like the intermediate coffin of Pakepu, made up of lots of pieces of reused wood.

There is more to the structure of Pakepu's inner coffin than just the wood and carpentry, high quality as it is. There are many layers of textile and paste(s) on top of the wood. Strudwick had a slide that listed all the layers both inside and out of the coffin but I didn't quite manage to write them all down. The inside had essentially three layers - first paste*, then the whole thing was covered in linen and then more layers of paste put on top of that. The outer surface of the coffin is more complex and this is the bit I didn't get all the detail for. It has several layers, including linen, paste and some sort of fibrous glue that they call "wiggly worms glue" because that's what it looks like under magnification. The linen has been applied by wrapping it round and round, with a long strip up the back of the coffin. These layers seem to be almost a part of the mummification process - an extension of wrapping the body into wrapping the coffin the body is in (and the decorating after all of that).

***In the Q&A session at the end she was asked what the paste was - in essence it's something we might think of in layperson's terms as "plaster". It's a mix of calcite and gum arabic which is smeared onto the surface and then sets solid. It's not called plaster because for those who work on such substances plaster has a very specific meaning, which doesn't include this sort of mixture. So it's called paste instead.**

The linen and paste layers are reminiscent of cartonage and Strudwick said that they have micro-CT scanned some other fragments of cartonage-like material and found the same layers as around Pakepu's coffin. She thinks that the wrapping of the inner coffin in this cartonage-like material is to create a link between the inner coffin and an egg. In fact the words for inner coffin and for egg are written the same in Egyptian, except for the determinative (an optional hieroglyph at the end of a word that does not represent any of the sounds of the word but is used to indicate the class of word this is - there are determinatives for things like names of gods, or for names of cities, or for names of objects made of wood). So the cartonage is equivalent to egg-shell, and the deceased is therefore like a chick in an egg waiting to be (re)born.

Strudwick finished up her talk by drawing out another interesting point about what the structure of Nespawershefyt's coffins implies. Many fewer New Kingdom coffins have been found than 21st Dynasty coffins, and most 21st Dynasty coffins are like Nespawersehfyt's in using recycled wood. So it seems clear that we "know" where all the New Kingdom coffins went! And tomb robbery, including state sanctioned tomb robbery by this period, is how the Egyptians got their coffin wood. (This actually ties into a talk her husband, Nigel Strudwick, gave us a couple of years ago on tomb robbery - my write up of that talk is here:
https://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2016/04/22/mechanisms-and-practice-egyptian-tomb-robbery-view-ancient-thebes-nigel-strudwick).

This was a fascinating talk, it's incredible how much there is to investigate and to think about from just two sets of coffins. And I'm sure Helen Strudwick only barely scratched the surface in this talk, there must be so much more that can be gleaned from the objects.