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# Tabasety, the Temple Singer in Aarhus

Rogério SOUSA, Vinnie NØRSKOV

An Egyptian burial assemblage in the collection of the Museum of Ancient Art and Archaeology of the University of Aarhus, Denmark, comprises an anthropoid coffin, a mummy-cover and a mummy. Several analyses have been carried out on the human remains since their arrival to the Museum in 1950 but these results have never been published nor critically assessed from an Egyptological perspective. Notwithstanding the unique opportunity provided by this burial assemblage to carry out the integrated study of the funerary equipment and the human remains, only recently has the coffin set been thoroughly analysed, described and published. This paper presents the results obtained from former anthropological studies with an Egyptological assessment of the data, comparing them with the information provided by the burial equipment. The critical integration of this data reveals important clues regarding the special social status held by an elderly woman suffering from a severe and chronic disability within the priesthood of Amun during the Twenty-first Dynasty.

*Tabasety, la cantora del templo en Aarhus*

El ajuar funerario egipcio conservado en el Museo de Arte Antiguo y Arqueología de la Universidad de Aarhus, Dinamarca, se compone de un ataúd, una cobertura de momia y una momia. Los restos humanos han sido objeto de varios análisis desde su llegada al museo en 1950, pero los resultados no han sido publicados ni presentados críticamente desde una perspectiva egiptológica. A pesar de la oportunidad única proporcionada por este conjunto de enterramiento para llevar a cabo un estudio que integre el ajuar funerario y los restos humanos, solo recientemente el grupo de ataúdes ha sido analizado en profundidad, descrito y publicado. En este artículo se presentan los resultados obtenidos en estudios antropológicos antiguos procurando integrarlos desde una perspectiva egiptológica y comparándolos con la información obtenida del ajuar funerario. La comparación crítica de estas informaciones revela claves importantes relacionadas con el status social mantenido por esta mujer anciana que padecía severas dolencias crónicas en el seno del sacerdocio de Amón durante la Dinastía XXI.

**Keywords:** 'Yellow' coffins, Theban necropolis, Twenty-first Dynasty, chantresses of Amun.

**Palabras clave:** Ataúdes "amarillos", nécropolis tebana, Dinastía XXI, cantoras de Amón.

The modern history of the coffin and the mummy begins in the first half of the 1940s, when the archaeologist and ethnographer Werner Jacobsen was invited to a reception at the home of Ivan Lystager, an industrialist living in Lyngby, North of Copenhagen. On his way to Lyngby, Werner saw an Egyptian mummy in the window of an antiquities dealer. The mummy was part of a burial assemblage including a coffin and a mummy-cover. The coffin had been previously restored and the mummy had been disturbed

with visible traces of plundering. Despite that, the burial assemblage was still impressive and Jacobsen suggested to Lystager that he acquire these antiquities.<sup>1</sup> The objects and the human remains were then moved to his residence and literally became part of the family, so much so that when Lystager got divorced, it is said that this coffin set was placed in the bedroom of his former wife.

In November 1950 P.J. Riis, Professor of Classical Archaeology at Aarhus University, was contacted by the National Museum

<sup>1</sup> Letter from P.J. Riis to P. Guldager Bilde 1997. Werner Jacobsen was attached to the National Museum in Copenhagen (1940–1945) and the visit most probably took place during this period.

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Rogério Sousa — solar.benu@gmail.com

Department of History / Faculty of Arts and Humanities / University of Lisbon / Portugal

Vinnie Nørskov — klavn@cas.au.dk

Museum of Ancient Art & Archaeology / Aarhus University / Denmark

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in Copenhagen announcing that Lystager wished to donate the coffin to the University. Six days later the coffin arrived in Aarhus, where it entered the study collection of Near Eastern and Classical Antiquities with the Inventory Number O 303. It is important to note that Riis had founded the study collection just one year before this donation and that he had previously been curator at the National Museum in Copenhagen. In fact, just three months after his appointment in Aarhus he arranged for a long-term loan of 300 objects from the National Museum thus establishing the university collection. Perhaps not coincidentally, the person in charge of the Egyptian collection at the National Museum was Marie-Louise Buhl, who would marry Riis in 1955.<sup>2</sup> Riis's close connections with the National Museum may explain why the donation of Lystager ended up in the collections of Aarhus University.

When the mummy arrived to the museum, it was still wrapped in linen bandages. It measured 153 cm in length. Some of the bandages had, however, already been removed, particularly in the area of the abdomen, revealing that it had been previously desecrated. The bandages that covered the face had also been removed, fully exposing the frontal part of the skull.

In 1953 the coffin was restored by H. Helbæk, a conservator at the National Museum in Copenhagen. A few cracks affecting the central area of the lid were consolidated and some of the hieroglyphs in this area outlined. The mummy received at the same time considerable attention. Its examination was carried out by Carl Krebs at Aarhus Kommunehospital, using X-rays. This non-invasive methodology

allowed Krebs to see the interior of the mummy.<sup>3</sup> This examination showed that the bones had been heavily disturbed, probably by tomb robbers while searching for funerary artefacts within the mummy. The X-rays also revealed that the deceased was a woman and that no objects remained in the mummy.<sup>4</sup>

In 1983 a new exhibition of the Aarhus Egyptian collection was designed by Hans Erik Mathiesen. The coffin set and the mummy were the highlights of the exhibition, placed at the centre of the room together with texts, casts of a number of Egyptian sculptures, as well as a small collection of antiquities surrounding the central pieces. It was perhaps during the preparation of this exhibition that Mathiesen was inspired to have the mummy analysed again.

### 1 | Medical research

In 1988, the coffin set and the mummy were taken to the Forensic Department at Aarhus Kommunehospital. As the X-rays photographic plates from 1953 could not be found at that time, new X-rays were taken by Bent Madsen of both coffin and mummy. This examination showed a chaotic picture with the bones from the upper part of the vertebral column lying diagonally across the chest. The thoracic vertebrae were placed on the right side close to the humerus. Several vertebrae were spread confusingly through the area from the throat down to the pelvis.

In the same year, the decision was made to unwrap the human remains and the linen wrappings were further cut allowing all the bones and organic remains, with the exception

to the skull and the feet, to be removed and investigated in detail.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the linen bandages and the human remains have been stored inside the coffin trough (fig. 1).

Photographs were taken of the autopsy, which was carried out by Markil Gregersen. Later on, in 1992, radiocarbon analyses were undertaken by Jan Heinemeyer of both the coffin and the mummy. The coffin was dated to 1301-1035 BC, while the mummy was dated to 1320-910 BC. In 1993, metal analyses were carried out on four pieces from the ribs. The analysis of the bone tissue was made with PIXE method (Particle Induced X-ray Emission). Calcium, iron, zinc and strontium were traced but none of them revealed abnormal results. Lead and cadmium were also found in the tests but in very small quantities.<sup>6</sup>

The multidisciplinary approach of these scientific examinations, gathering scientists from several fields related to medical sciences, shows how quickly medical sciences became aware of the potential input for research provided by Egyptian mummies. However, contrasting with the technical apparatus of these examinations, no Egyptological input was made to this research.

From 1993 until 2011 the bones removed from the mummy wrappings were exhibited in a showcase of its own at Steno Museet, today part of the Sciences Museums at Aarhus University, in the collection of the history of medicine. In 2011 this section of the exhibition was renewed and the showcase with the human remains returned to the Museum of Ancient Art and Archaeology, where they are exhibited today.



Figure 1. Mummy. Photograph: Rogério Sousa.

<sup>2</sup> Riis 1952: fig. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> See Adams 2016: 371-386. See also Curry 2016: 263-275.

<sup>4</sup> Holm-Rasmussen 1983: 99-102.

<sup>5</sup> The forensic examination was performed under the supervision of Markil Gregersen. The team included Markil Gregersen (Forensic Medicine), Hans Erik Mathiesen (Classical Archaeology), Jens Hansen (Environmental and Occupational Medicine), Bent Madsen (Radiology), Erling Thorling (Danish Cancer Society), the photographer Mikkel Randlev Møller and students from Classical Archaeology.

<sup>6</sup> Thorling, Gregersen, Hansen, Madsen 1994: 12-16. Lauridsen 1998: 90-91 (figs. 91-92).



## 2 | The results of the forensic examination

### The analysis of the skull

The skull was carefully wrapped in thin linen bandages over which a thick layer of mud was applied. This treatment was probably applied all over the head. No traces of hair or skin were found. The skull is delicate and narrow. The orbital shape is normal and the bones are relatively well preserved. The nose cavity (*conchae*) was found intact, suggesting that the brain was not removed during the mummification process.

Inside the skull, dusty deposits of organic material were found at the back, probably resulting from the decomposition of the dehydrated brain.

There are no teeth on the maxilla, nor sockets for them, clearly indicating that this woman had become toothless many years before she died. The jaw has no sockets for the teeth either, with the exception of two small holes observed on the left side preserving remains of dental bone.<sup>7</sup>

The sutures were examined by endoscopy, suggesting an age at death between 40-60 years old.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2. Human remains. Photograph: Rogério Sousa.

- 7 At the right knee the forensic team found a small structure that looked like a little tooth (14 mm long).
- 8 There are no fractures in the skull, which is smooth and thin. There are visible sutures between the forehead, the nose bone and the upper jaw. On the contrary, there are no visible sutures on the forehead. The sutura between the *squama temporalis* and the *os parietale* is slightly visible. It seems to be open. The *sutura coreonalis* was not visible. A lamp was used to see the *suturas sphenofrontoparietalis* (it closes around 50-60 years). The left side of the lower part of the *sutura coreonalis* was completely closed (this one closes at the age of 40-50). *Sutura frontalis* was completely closed (it closes at the age of 20-30). On the right side the *sutura coreonalis* was closed. *Sutura squamosa* was open on the left side.

### The analysis of the limbs

The arms were found placed in front of the pelvis and the hands crossed over, resting between the legs. The bones of the upper arms are thin, revealing remains of dried soft tissue, especially on the back side and around the joints.<sup>9</sup> The right hand clearly displayed the tendons from the forearms attached to the metacarpal bones. No visible remains of finger nails have been found.<sup>10</sup>

Both the femur and tibia bones are average sized.<sup>11</sup> The joints are regular with remains of cartilage. No visible signs of arthrosis on the knees or the hips were found. The right femur preserved vestiges of tendons.<sup>12</sup>

Between the legs a large piece of mud covered by linen wrappings was found. A deep impression, seemingly caused by the coccyx bone, revealed that it was originally placed in the pelvis. On the left thigh another large piece of mud was found.

### The analysis of the bones from the body cavity

Inside the body cavity, the ribs were placed all over within the thoracic and abdominal cavities, lying in different directions. The scapula were placed in situ and the clavicles were intact without any sign of fracture. The ster-

num had collapsed and was found among the other bones.<sup>13</sup> The bones were light, brownish yellow and many of them still retained remains of flat dried tissue, possibly tendons.

At the centre of the thoracic cavity, three flakes of dried tissue were found. On the outer face these pieces were smooth, but inside they were irregular and revealed cavities. Our team interpreted these flakes as the remnants of the dried lungs, which had not been removed from the corpse during mummification. The two largest pieces measured 5-10 cm, while the smallest is 2-4 cm long. The perfect preservation of the lungs is remarkable.

In the lower part of the stomach area, a small rounded stone was found with an irregular surface,<sup>14</sup> possibly a urinary stone. This piece of evidence suggests that the urinary organs were also not removed during mummification and that they simply decayed inside the mummy, revealing the calcified sediments within.

The bottom of the body cavity revealed a thick layer of brownish debris, possibly resulting from rotted organic residue that had turned into dust when the mummy was severely disturbed by tomb robbers. Moreover, the body cavity contained a great deal of dried mud-like material, especially in the area of the pelvis and the thighs. Among this material long structures, some of them rather thick and bifurcated, predominantly black, were found.<sup>15</sup>

- 9 They are both 32,5 cm long. There are no signs of fracture. The bone of the right forearm is only 0,27 cm.
- 10 Evidence of an early trauma was found in the joint between the little finger and the metacarpal bone. These changes could also be the result of an illness.
- 11 Both femurs measures 45,9 cm. The right tibia is 38,6 cm long.
- 12 Some of these vestiges are irregular, dark and bifurcated. A long tube (1,5 cm), seeming like a calcified vein, was also found.
- 13 The sternum is broken between the upper part and the middle part. On the upper part of the sternum, dried tissue was found on the left side.
- 14 This consisted in a small rounded bone-like structure with small irregular holes measuring 5-5-7 mm (flebolit?).
- 15 In the breast area, a small tube was found, seemingly a calcified vein a couple of millimeters long and a tube attached to a flat-shaped black piece of tissue (2,5 cm long, diam 3 mm).

These structures were interpreted by the forensic team as the casts of veins on mummification materials, such as wax. Long flattened structures, possibly the remains of tendons, have also been identified, together with pieces of skin. No clear evidence of wrapped organs was found, suggesting that these had been left within the body cavity and desiccated in situ during the mummification process.

### The analysis of the vertebrae and pelvis

As stated, the vertebrae were found loose within the body cavity. Most of them displayed severe deformities (fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> The lower seven vertebrae from the thoracic spine were found intact and showed a strong and abnormal bend backwards. The disks were missing, with only a few remains of ligaments on the vertebrae left in situ. Vertebrae n. 4-5 had fused together. The borders of the thoracic vertebrae were protruding and irregular, the lower vertebra (n.2) very strongly squeezed and wedge-shaped.<sup>17</sup> Most of the vertebrae of the lumbar spine also presented severe abnormalities (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> lumbar vertebrae), advanced signs of vertebral compression, deformations and osteophytes.<sup>18</sup>

These deformations point towards early fractures as well as a moderate buckled back (kyphoscoliosis) with spondyloarthritis causing changes to the vertebrae.

However, the most severe deformations were to be found in the pelvic area (fig. 2). The sacrum, in particular, reveals a strong abnormal bending at the 3<sup>rd</sup> vertebra. Here a deep horizontal fracture was found, without evidence that new bone tissue had ever formed. From here the coccyx bone protrudes directly forward, adopting an unusually sharp angle.<sup>19</sup> This heavy deformity of the sacrum points out to an early fracture. According to the forensic examination, this fracture was old and it possibly occurred during the later years of childhood.

Other consequences of a severe fracture of the pelvis have been detected. The pubic symphysis is broken and as result, the left superior pubic ramus became positioned in front of the right one. A new joint surface was formed between these bones, but this fracture had been continuously loose during the lifetime of this individual.

As was first been detected on the X-rays, the pelvic bones were found in an abnormal position. The right half of the pelvis was found tilted 90°, probably as a result of the dissolution of the joint between the sacrum and the right half of the pelvis. The pelvic bones seem rather thin and fragile. Along the iliac crest remains of skin (dried black soft tissue) had been preserved. The left inferior pubic ramus is fractured, possibly as a result of a post mortem trauma.

<sup>16</sup> The cervical vertebrae are small, tiny and there were remains of tissue found with *processus spinosus* on vertebra n° 7. On n° 6 the borders are protruding.

<sup>17</sup> In front 0.9 mm, behind 2.3 mm.

<sup>18</sup> The first vertebra is clearly wedge-shaped: on the right side it is 1,6 cm and on the left side it is 2,4 cm. Vertebra n° 2 has very strong protruding borders (*osteofytter*) both on the upper and lower border of the right side. Nearly the same thickness is seen on both sides (2,6 cm). Vertebra n° 3 also shows signs of vertebral compression (to the right measuring 2,0 cm and to the left 2,8 cm). The borders are strongly protruding and on the right side there is nearly a tooth-shape protruding (*osteophyte*). Vertebra n° 4 has a regular thickness but relatively protruding borders upwards. Vertebra n° 5 has also the same thickness on both sides but a very protruding border downwards to the left.

<sup>19</sup> The coccyx was found separated from the sacrum.

### 3 | The burial equipment

The linen wrappings are very well preserved and their quality is good. Large pieces of mud that once covered the corpse are preserved among the wrappings, particularly in the area of the hips and abdomen, but they remain undocumented.

The coffin set is inscribed with the name and titles of the owner, the Chantress of Amun-Re and lady of the house, Tabasety (*Bb3sty*).<sup>20</sup> It reveals excellent levels of craftsmanship both in terms of the carpentry work and of the pictorial decoration. The objects belong to the 'yellow' type in use in the Theban necropolis from the late Ramesside Period to the end of the Twenty-first Dynasty.

#### Coffin

On the exterior walls of the coffin, the polychrome paintwork was applied on a thin layer of linen and plaster. Varnish has been applied all over, while the interior walls are uniformly painted in dark red. The coffin measures 184 cm in length and 53 cm in width. The lid depicts a woman with the face beautifully carved featuring a hooked nose, typical of the Rameside style. The usual attributes of female burials are to be seen: earrings, binding bands on the lappets of the wig, breasts and open hands (fig. 3). A large floral collar covers the shoulders and most of the upper torso, showing a winged scarab on the chest. The general layout of the lid clearly points to an early dating.<sup>21</sup> The upper section includes the depiction of the forearms.<sup>22</sup> The central section of the lid is decorated with a panel displaying

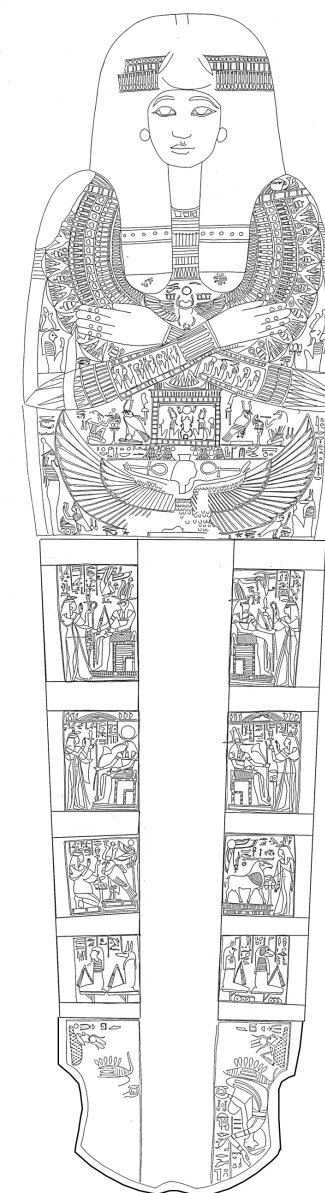


Figure 3. Lid: Iconographic programme. Drawing: Rogério Sousa.

<sup>20</sup> Onstine 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Of a slighter later date, see coffin Stockholm NME 890 (A.121 from Bab el-Gasus). See Dodson 2015: 13–15.

<sup>22</sup> This feature would correspond to Niwiński' Type II. See Niwiński 1988: 69.



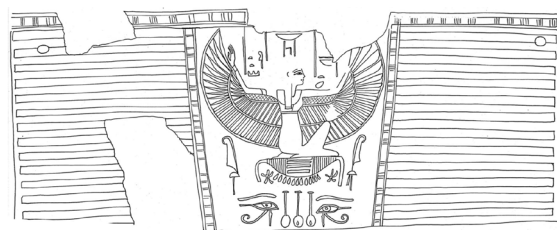


Figure 4. Case: Head-board and foot-board. Drawing: Rogério Sousa.

two superposed registers.<sup>23</sup> The lower section is arranged in two vertical partitions divided into four registers, forming an elaborate diptych depicting the deceased engaged in a variety of ritual ceremonies. The foot-board is decorated with a longitudinal band of inscriptions flanked by reversed vignettes depicting mourning goddesses. The underside of the foot-board is decorated with an image of the goddess Isis, raising her arms in joy.

The iconographic repertoire of the case also includes ritual scenes with the deceased playing the sistrum before Re-Horakhty (Vignette 2) and Osiris (Vignette 7). Most of the remaining vignettes display a rather conservative lay-

out, depicting a single deity (on the left side - Hapy, Qebehenuief and Thoth; on the right side - Geb, Bennu, Anubis, Thoth and the *djed*-pillar).

### Mummy-cover

The mummy-cover measures 182 cm in length and 39 cm in width. Unlike the lid, where varnish was uniformly applied all over the object, the varnish on the mummy-cover has been selectively applied over the inscriptions and images. From this procedure a clear contrast between the varnished areas, which are yellow, and the unvarnished background, which remained white are evident. The reverse side of the mummy-cover is painted in dark red.

The head-board of the mummy-cover has been broken away (fig. 7), with only the left lappet remaining *in situ*. A large floral collar covers the shoulders and remains of a large winged scarab are present on the chest. The hands (yellow) are finely carved, with the fingers outlined in red, including the contour of the nails. With exception to the thumbs, each finger is adorned with two rings (black). The elbows show polychrome lotus flowers.

The layout of the object follows the same scheme displayed on the lid. The forearms are crossed over the chest and the central section displays a composition featuring two superimposed registers. The lower section is divided into two vertical partitions by a double column of hieroglyphs (Inscriptions 1-2). Both partitions display five registers depicting the deceased performing rituals before deities. The quality of the craftsmanship displayed in this object is excellent, showing a refined and minacious treatment of the details.

<sup>23</sup> This layout corresponds to the basic scheme of the central section. See Sousa, 2014: 92–93. See also Sousa 2018: 99–132.

### Dating and style

The decoration of the coffin set reveals a number of key-features dating from the late Ramesside Period and early Twenty-first Dynasty.<sup>24</sup> Particularly telling of this early dating is the single block-frieze adorning the upper edges of the case (figs. 5-6), as well as the direction of writing adopted on the transversal bands of the lid and mummy-cover, which are aligned with the case.<sup>25</sup> No use is made of liminal elements (or ‘space fillers’), which typically appear on objects from the late Twenty-first Dynasty.

The quality of the set is consistently good in terms of craftsmanship and pictorial decoration. The style of the composition is naturalistic, reminiscent of the graceful Ramesside style. The depictions of the deceased include sophisticated features such as long branches of ivy pending from her waist. The deceased wears beautiful white garments, at times adorned with a red folded scarf on her shoulders. Her beauty is highlighted with transparent garments, reminding the voluptuous forms typical from the Amarna Period. The depictions of the deities are extremely well designed, particularly on the mummy-cover, where the divine garments are carefully designed.

### Iconographic programme

The iconographic programme of the coffin set presents an interesting combination of innovative subjects inserted within a rather con-

servative scheme. The depiction of Isis and Nephthys protecting the head and feet of the deceased is clearly borrowed from the Rameside scheme of coffin decoration (fig. 4), as well as the depiction of Thoth (Vignettes 6, 11) and the Sons of Horus (Vignettes 4, 5).<sup>26</sup> However, the repertoire of deities also includes Geb (Vignette 8), Bennu (Vignette 9) and Anubis (Vignette 10). The deceased is depicted playing the sistrum before Re-Horakhty (Vignette 2) and Osiris (Vignette 7). The later tableau features Osiris enthroned over the double-stepped mound, an iconographic innovation of the Twenty-first Dynasty.

The consistency between the iconographic programmes of the lid, the case and the mummy-cover is worthy to note. The same deities are depicted on the lid and on the mummy-cover. Thoth and Bennu figure on the case and on the lid (lower section: second register). The same occurs with the Sons of Horus, who are also depicted on the lid (lower section: fourth register) and on the mummy-cover (lower section: third register). This consistency clearly reveals that these objects were crafted together to be part of the same coffin set.

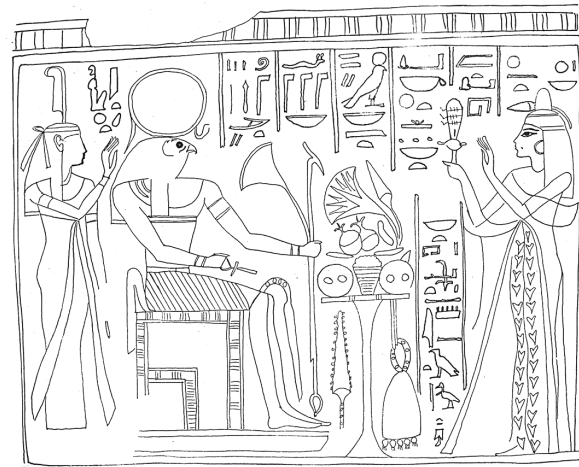
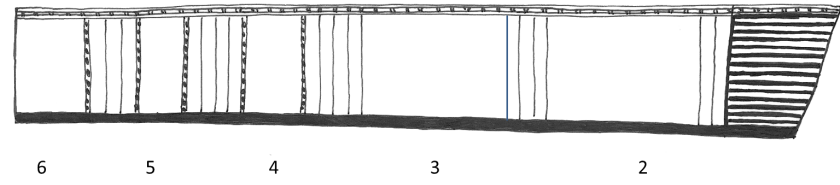
The decoration of the coffin includes motifs from Chapter 151 of the Book of the Dead (the mourning goddesses, the Sons of Horus and Anubis), aiming at the identification of the coffin with the Osirian burial chamber.<sup>27</sup> However, it also includes gods related to heaven and earth (Thoth, Bennu and Geb), probably aimed at protecting the going forth by day of the deceased.

<sup>24</sup> Outer coffin of Henut-taui (Metropolitan Museum of Art), in O’Neill 1987: 74–76. Coffin set (Staatliche Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich, ÄS 12a–c). See also the coffin of Nesymun (Leeds City Museum, D. 426–426a.1960) in Cooney 2007: fig. 187.

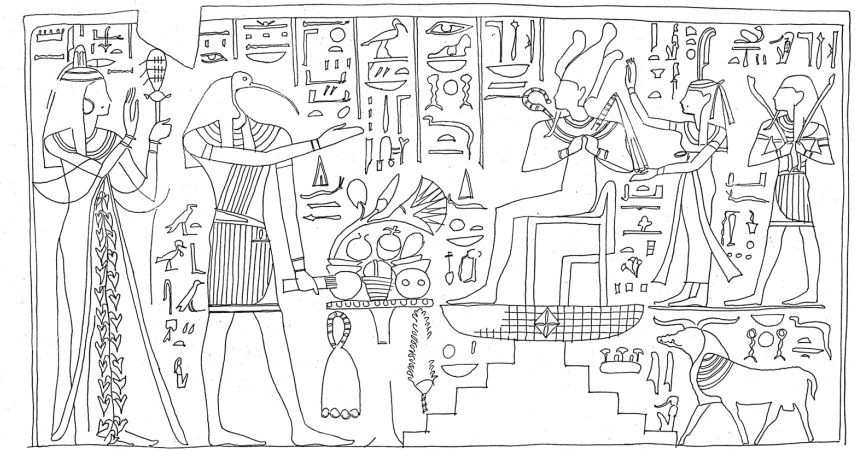
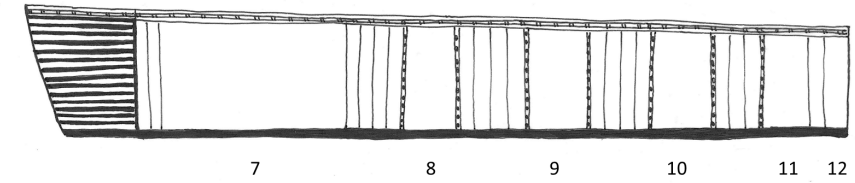
<sup>25</sup> For the general layout of the decoration of the ‘yellow’ coffins, see Van Walsem, 2014: 18–19.

<sup>26</sup> Here the Sons of Horus are only represented by Hapy and Qebehenuief on the left wall. See, for instance, the outer coffin of the lady Henutmehyt (British Museum, EA 48001) in Taylor, 2010: 117.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor 2010: 114–115. The use of these motifs is standard in the scheme of decoration of the ‘black’ coffins and in the Rameside ‘yellow’ coffins. See Taylor 1989: 9–10.



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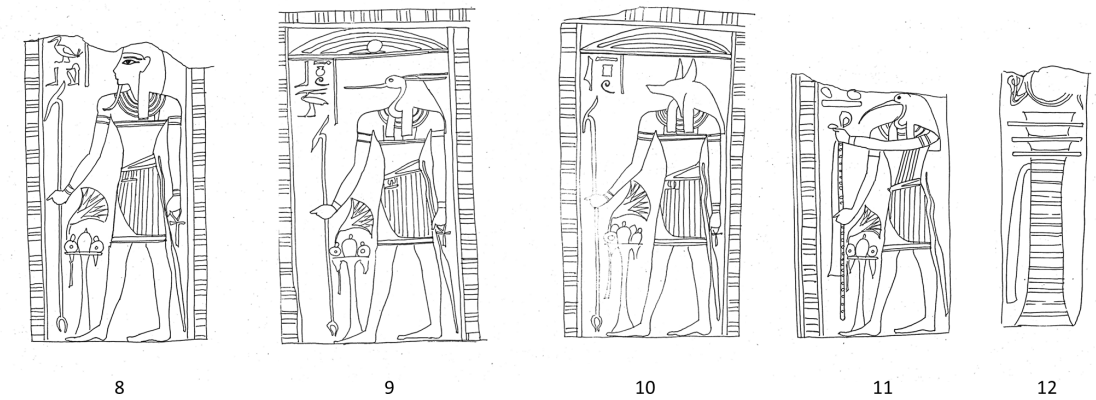
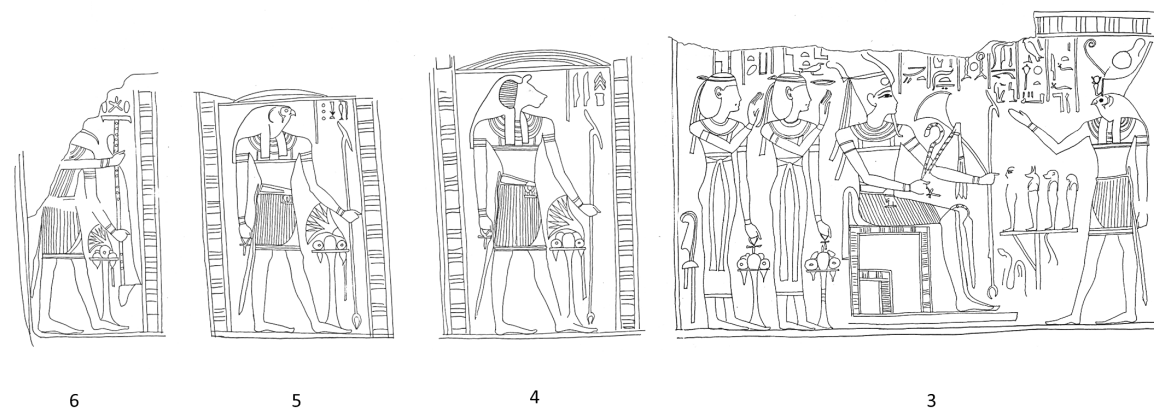


Figure 5. Case: Left side (vignettes 2-6). Drawing: Rogério Sousa.

Figure 6. Case: Right side (Vignettes 7-12). Drawing: Rogério Sousa.



### Overall remarks

Despite the conservative features of its programme, the coffin set includes the state of the art of the iconographic novelties available at the time of craftsmanship. Visibly, the object was crafted in a skilled workshop under learned supervision. The name of the deceased is mentioned in the main inscriptions of the lid, case and mummy-cover.<sup>28</sup> She is depicted six times on the lid as a justified goddess (lower section), twice on the case (Vignettes 2 and 7) and twice again on the mummy-cover (first register). In these depictions, her name is always added, clearly showing that the coffin was crafter under commission .

### 4 | Who was Tabasety?

The poor state of preservation of the human remains – mainly reduced to the skeleton – is misleading in terms of the original configuration of the mummy. The careless handling by tomb robbers, antiquity dealers and previous forensic examinations caused severe damage and most of the dried organic remains had been simply reduced to dust. Despite this, the mummy preserves important vestiges that help us to understand the life of this particular woman, as well as the mummification procedures that were carried out on her corpse.

The collected evidence shows a careless work in terms of mummification. The bones of the skull did not preserve the skin. In fact, with the exception of the forearms and hands, most of the skeleton did not preserve any tissue at all. Given this evidence, one could

suggest that the corpse was already as skeleton when wrapped. However, the body cavities (including the skull) revealed abundant evidence of organic material. The lungs, in particular, have desiccated completely and were found complete inside the body cavity. The other organs, such as the brain, seem to have simply turned to dust. Since no trace of wrapped organs was found, it seems that the corpse was dehydrated, but that evisceration was not carried out at all. The total loss of soft tissues on the skull and limbs suggest that the corpse may have been overexposed to natron during mummification, which was probably intended to prevent the decay of the unrecovered viscera.

Given this careless treatment, it is surprising to witness unusual attempts to restore the body shape. After the drying off of the corpse, the limbs were covered with a layer of mud. Vestiges of this ‘cosmetic’ procedure have also been found on the hips and the skull. This procedure seems to have played an aesthetic if not ritual purpose, contributing to the restoration of the lost tissues of the body and probably aimed at the regeneration of the body, particularly given the symbolic association between the mud (Nile flood) and regeneration.

This exceptional procedure might have been related to the actual physical condition of the lady. The forensic examination of the mummy revealed that she would have been significantly disabled for most of her life. The small lithic structures found in the body cavity have been identified as urinary tract stones, probably resulting from the deformation detected on the pelvis. The forensic and X-ray examination showed that the severe fractures

detected on the pelvic area probably occurred very early in her life and some of them, such as the fracture detected in the sacrum, never actually healed.

Given the lack of other major injuries in the remaining bones, it seems that the severe fractures on her pelvis and sacrum bones resulted as a consequence of a single traumatic event. As a result, a complete dissolution between the two pubic bones occurred, causing the development of arthrosis in the joint between the sacrum and the right part of the pelvis and in the left hip. There could have been rupture of the joints between the sacrum and the hip bone too.

These problems would have undoubtedly disabled this woman severely and made her suffer from chronic pain. Indeed, she must have experienced unbearable levels of pain even when performing the simplest acts of life. Walking must have been particularly painful. The two urinary stones may have been caused by the lesions that made urinating difficult, which also caused cystitis. Additionally, the deep deformation of the sacrum would have made her unable to bear children. The fact that she had a long life suggests that she was never pregnant otherwise she would surely have died in childbirth.

Signs of osteoarthritis were found in the backbone. These lesions must have appeared several years before her death. Based on measuring the long bones in the leg and arm it was calculated that this woman was 160-165 cm tall. However, because of the damage in her backbone, she was stooped during the later years of her life, reducing her effective stature to between 150 and 155 cm.

Nevertheless, despite the severe levels of disability, this woman had a relatively long life and it is clear that this was only possible due to the social support that she enjoyed. The fact that she was toothless many years before her death clearly reveals that someone was

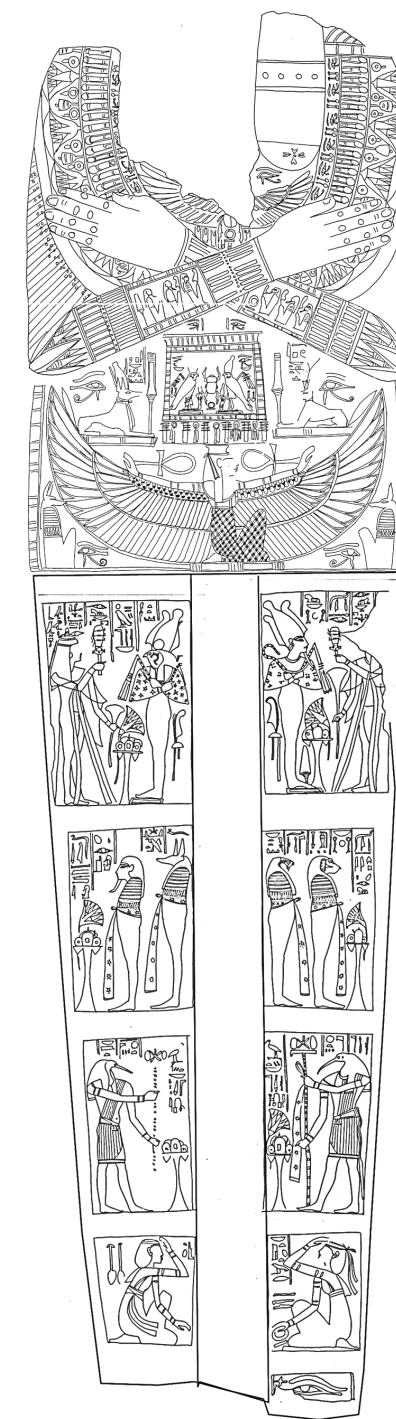


Figure 7. Mummy-cover: Iconographic programme. Drawing: Rogério Sousa.

<sup>28</sup> In such situations, the name would be found only in the final portion of the hieroglyphic bands of the lid, while in this burial assemblage the name is included not only in the beginning of these texts, as in several other inscriptions and vignettes



taking care of her, providing food that she was able to eat.

Her mummification and her burial assemblage are also telling of the special social status of this lady. Despite the poor levels of mummification itself, the way the corpse was wrapped in mud is reminiscent of the role of the Nile in rebirth and deification. The addition of ‘new flesh’ thus seems consistent with the purpose of healing this woman from the painful life that she had. The mummy of the chantress was thus literally regenerated with new flesh, looking for healing and cosmic rebirth.<sup>29</sup>

The stylistic criteria detected in the coffin decoration points towards the end of the Ramesside Period and the first decades of the Twenty-first Dynasty as the most suitable dating of the coffin set. These dates are consistent with the results of the C-14 analysis of the wood, which dates the coffin to 1301-1035 BC. The dating obtained in the examination of the mummy is too wide to be conclusive (1320-910 BC).

Although we cannot be sure whether the deceased found in the coffin is the Tabasety named on it, we did not find in the burial assemblage any particular reason to question this identity. No evidence of re-use was found in the burial assemblage and the dating of the human remains is consistent with the coffin set. Thus, it seems likely that the burial of Tabasety remained undisturbed during Antiquity.<sup>30</sup> The mummy itself does not follow the usual layout known from later burials, involving exterior decorated shrouds with images of Osiris.<sup>31</sup>

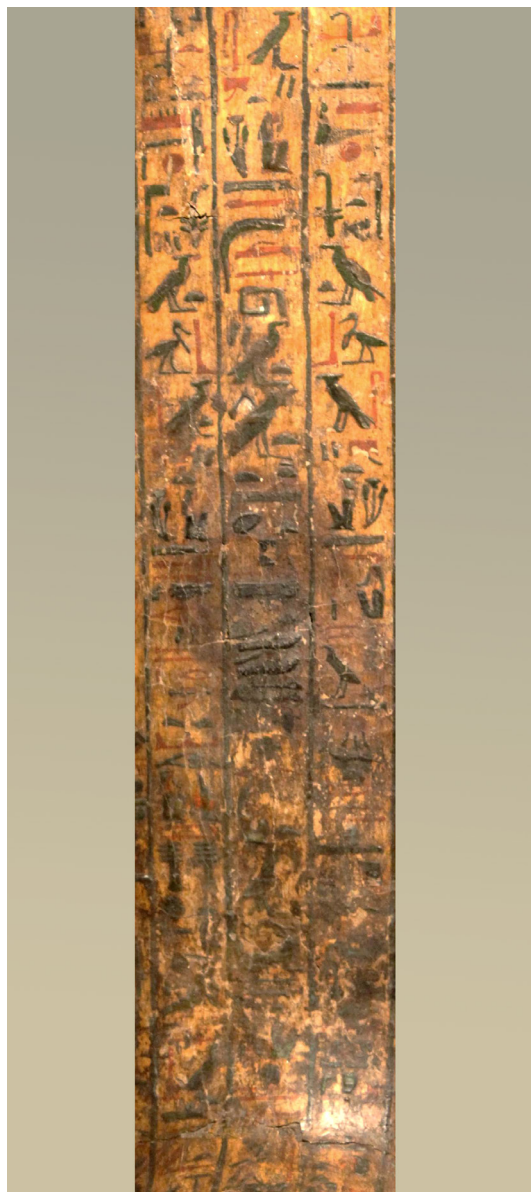


Figure 8. Lid: Longitudinal inscription. Photograph: Rogério Sousa.

<sup>29</sup> Later on, towards the end of the Twenty-first Dynasty, evidence is found of the use of mud in the decoration of coffins. See the inner coffin at the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa (SGL-AC-520), A.136 from Bab el-Gasus, in Sousa 2017: 126–129.

<sup>30</sup> Later on, earlier coffin sets were removed from the original burial grounds and became available for re-use. See Cooney 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Aston 2009.

However, the quality of the linen wrappings is very good and they are still very well preserved.

Without further documentation regarding the life of Tabasety, one can only speculate about the traumatic event that occurred during the later years of her childhood. However, it was this event that changed her life dramatically. Given her condition it is very unlikely that she ever got married, although the title Lady of the House is often accepted as labelling a married woman.<sup>32</sup> If she did, it would have been extremely unlikely that she would survive a pregnancy and reach old age. Without a family of her own, it is thus surprising to find in her burial equipment the title ‘Lady of the House’.

On the other hand, her position as ‘Chantress of Amun’ helps us to understand her status as a member of the Theban priesthood of Amun. Given her severe levels of disability, it is clear that Tabasety only managed to live a long life with the support provided by the temple of Amun itself.

The fine quality of her burial equipment and the fact that it was crafted under commission provide important evidence regarding the social status of this lady in the priestly community of Thebes.<sup>33</sup> Another interesting clue strengthens this idea. The longitudinal inscriptions of the lid are eroded in the area next to the foot-board (fig. 8). In this area – and only here – the hieroglyphs have faded away as if someone repeatedly passed his



Figure 9. Mummy-cover: Central section. Photograph: Rogério Sousa.

(right) hand over and over again. This erosion might have occurred during the mourning rituals, with the attendants passing their hands over the lower section of the standing lid, as can be seen in the Ramesside funerary scenes.<sup>34</sup> It is noteworthy that such critical levels of erosion are not usually seen in other coffins.

Other pieces of evidence suggest that mourning rituals were performed with care. These clues can be found on the mummy-cover, where the varnish was selectively applied over the hieroglyphic bands and deities (including the deceased).<sup>35</sup> This procedure is interesting in many ways. Firstly, it reveals that the use of varnish is related to the purpose of providing gleaming light to the selected motifs.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the varnish seems to have

<sup>32</sup> Personal communication by Andrzej Niwiński.

<sup>33</sup> On the relationship of the burial equipment with the social status of the deceased, see Cooney 2014: 48.

<sup>34</sup> Foucart 1935, Pl. IX.

<sup>35</sup> Evidence of the ritual significance of varnish when applied selectively on particular motifs has been recently pointed out. See Guichard, Pagès-Camagna and Timbart 2017: 177.

<sup>36</sup> This procedure also reveals that the yellowish colour of these objects is the direct result of the use of varnish. In fact, the background of the mummy-cover is white. Moreover, the use of varnish had practical reasons, stabilizing the colours and prevented them from fading. This contrast is clearly visible in the mummy-cover: the colours have been preserved in the varnished areas, while the motifs that were not varnished have faded away. See also Loring 2012: 208–213.

been applied with the object in a standing position. The varnish was so abundantly applied over the winged goddess of the central section that it poured down the cover in thick drops (fig. 9). It seems likely that this procedure took place during the mourning rituals themselves and not at the workshop: the crude way the varnish was applied on the mummy-cover contrasts vividly with the consistent high levels of craftsmanship detected in this equipment, suggesting that this gesture was performed by a different actor, obviously not concerned with the technical aspects of the operation. Moreover, the object remained in standing position long enough for the varnish to dry, thus preventing the change of course of the varnish drops.

It is clear that this strongly disabled elderly woman held an important status in the priestly community of Thebes. Her name, Tabasety, is attested elsewhere only once.<sup>37</sup> In this case, it could have been used as an honorific title, perhaps alluding to Northern origins, since it means ‘She who belongs to the goddess Bastet’ or, more likely, ‘She who belongs to the city of Bastet’. This would suggest that the traumatic event that occurred during her childhood might have actually happened in Bubastis, in the North. The fact that she was able to spend most of her life in Thebes is consistent with the close connection that existed between the Thanite kings in the Delta and the Theocratic state of Amun.

Nothing is known about the actual burial place of the lady.

## 5 | Reconstructing the modern history of the burial assemblage

After 200 years of ‘archaeological’ activity in Egypt, it is not surprising to find heavy layers of modern finger prints in antiquities. Understanding how ancient objects were shaped and transformed in modern times is often an important step to access their original state.

It is likely that the coffin set of Tabasety was found in modern times, by tomb robbers, who crudely disturbed the mummy wrappings looking for precious items inside the corpse. Not long after this event, the burial assemblage of Tabasety found its way to the antiquities market. Here, one of the dealers ‘carefully’ cut off the head-board of the mummy-cover, suggesting that its face was an attractive work of art that could be easily sold separately. It is therefore possible that, with luck, one day we might actually find it in a private or museum collection.

The coffin set presumably preserved the mummy. With the head-board of the mummy-cover ripped off, the upper part of the mummy was now fully visible, revealing some parts of the skull behind the disturbed wrappings of the mummy. At his point, someone had the idea to cut off these wrappings in order to fully show the skull.<sup>38</sup> With this operation the skull became fully visible to the viewer once the coffin was open, thus enhancing the visual impact of the assemblage on a potential buyer.

Likewise, the coffin underwent a ‘restoration’ process. Careless handling and exposure

<sup>37</sup> Allen 2009, 37. The name Tabasety is not listed in Ranke 1935.

<sup>38</sup> In this area, however, the wrappings reveal different types of disturbance. On the upper part of the face, the linen bandages have been loosely ripped off, while around the jaw they were carefully cut with a sharp object, such as a knife. These differences suggest that the removal of the linen bands of the face took place in two different moments. First, they have been disturbed by plunderers, either in Antiquity or in modern times, who ripped off the bandages next to the forehead looking for a headband. However, the thorough cutting around the jaw points to a different actor, who clearly intervened aiming to enhance the aesthetic impact of the mummy. This intervention was surely carried out by an antiquities dealer who, by fully exposing the skull, expected to impress potential customers.

to the air resulted in the loss of material, particularly on the edges and borders of the objects. The restorer added plaster where the original decoration had collapsed and did not hesitate to add fake inscriptions and iconographic details. To complete their work, the restorer outlined the beautiful scenes of the coffin to enhance the visual impact of the deities. The traces of this intervention are abundantly documented on the eyes, the contour of the fingers (usually over numbered) and limbs. Additionally, the lid was covered with wax to ‘stabilize’ the pictorial decoration.

The ‘restoration’ of the inscriptions was particularly careless and simply consisted in the addition of fake hieroglyphs. Clearly the restorer was aiming at impressing an acritical audience who was only able to relate with these antiquities from an aesthetical point of view. No Egyptological knowledge was thus expected to mediate the interaction with these objects. Such expectations point to an early date for this operation. It is likely that the burial assemblage as a whole might have reached Europe during the early or mid-nineteenth century, where it was eventually bought by a private collector.

The fact that it was only in the 1940s that this burial assemblage was officially found is most likely related to the turmoil triggered by the Second World War. The coffin set was either confiscated or sold during this period and it eventually found its way to the antiquities shop where Werner Jacobsen fortunately saw it.

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Papers on Ancient Egypt

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C/ Blanco 1, 2º  
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Tenerife-Islas Canarias  
España

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Diseño de arte y maquetación  
Amparo Errandonea  
aeamparo@gmail.com

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