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Reading a burial chamber: anatomy of a first intermediate period coffin in context

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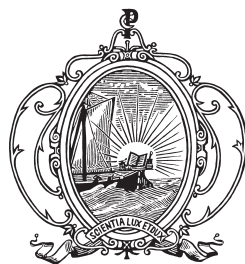
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ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COFFINS

Craft traditions and functionality

edited by

John H. TAYLOR and Marie VANDENBEUSCH



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

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READING A BURIAL CHAMBER: ANATOMY OF A FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD COFFIN IN CONTEXT¹

Marleen DE MEYER

Abstract

The coffin of Henu from Dayr al-Barsha is a rare example of a First Intermediate Period coffin that was found in its original intact context. Considering this coffin as a material object, and as part of a purposely conceived set of burial equipment, permits the reconstruction of certain aspects of the course of the funeral. The choice of offering formulae inscribed on the coffin, moreover seems to complement the selection of tomb models in the chamber, showing that one can only ‘read’ such a burial by considering all elements together, and not by looking at the objects individually.

* * *

Historically coffins have mainly attracted the attention of Egyptologists because of the decoration that they may carry. Undecorated coffins are hardly ever discussed in the literature, and the materiality and constructional techniques of ancient Egyptian coffins play a secondary role at best in their study. This tide has been turning to some extent in recent years, with new techniques being used to investigate the material aspects of coffins. An exemplary project in this regard is the Vatican Coffin Project, an international collaboration focusing on the coffins of the Bab el-Gasus cachette (see Amenta, this volume). Additionally, since most coffins have come down to us without a recorded archaeological context, their exact provenance as well as the setting in which they were originally placed are often unknown. This leads to coffins often being studied as individual objects, leaving out of consideration the broader set of funerary equipment of which they form an integral part. The intact burial chamber of Henu (**Fig. 1**), which was excavated at Dayr al-Barsha in 2007 and which dates to the First Intermediate

Period, makes it possible to bypass both of these issues. In this article, the coffin is considered both as a material object, with close observation of its constructional techniques, and also within the broader context in which this container functioned. The combination of these approaches permits deductions to be made concerning certain elements of the funeral and the theological ideas behind it.

The site of Dayr al-Barsha functioned as the most important necropolis for nearby al-Ashmunayn, the capital of the 15th Upper Egyptian nome, during the Middle Kingdom, when the local governors were buried in rock-cut tombs high on the north hill of the site (Willems 2014, 59–123). However, already during the Old Kingdom a substantial necropolis developed here, although the status of the tomb-owners was much lower than those at nearby al-Shaykh Said, where the Old Kingdom governors of the Hare Nome were buried (Davies 1901; De Meyer 2011a; 2011b). During the First Intermediate Period, the elite cemetery of the Hare Nome seems to have been located at Dayr al-Barsha (Willems 2014, 73–6), while at the same time a programme of restoration of Old Kingdom tombs was undertaken by the provincial governors Iha and Djehutinakht, son of Teti (De Meyer 2005).

One of the Dynasty 6 tombs that Djehutinakht, son of Teti, restored, was the tomb of Uky, located high up on the south hill of Dayr al-Barsha. His restoration text is placed on the northern jamb of the entrance door to the tomb (De Meyer 2005, 129–30; updated drawing in Willems, Delvaux and De Meyer 2015, 211, fig. 133). Uky’s tomb originally consisted of one rock-cut chapel with two shafts inside, intended for the burial of Uky and most likely his wife. At a later date, a second room was added, in which the undisturbed burial of Henu was found. Since the doorway to this second chamber partially cuts through a rock-cut statue

¹ This research was undertaken within the framework of the Dayr al-Barsha Project of the KU Leuven, which is generously financed

by the Special Research Fund (BOF) of KU Leuven and by the Research Foundation-Flanders (FWO).



Fig. 1: The intact burial chamber of Henu at Dayr al-Barsha
(Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

of the wife of Uky, it is unlikely that this addition was made during the Old Kingdom, but rather it should relate to the placement of the restoration inscription on the entrance door by Djehutinakht.

Context

The rock-cut burial chamber of Henu (16H50/1C) is located at the bottom of a 4m-deep square shaft (Figs 1 and 2). The blocking of the chamber, which consisted of loosely piled rough limestone blocks, was intact, with some of the blocks resting on the coffin lid. The contents of the burial chamber consisted of a wooden box coffin together with a number of wooden tomb models (for colour photos of these models, see De Meyer 2007; Willems, Delvaux and De Meyer 2015, 199–212, figs 124–8). To the east of the coffin, wedged in the narrow space between the wall of the

burial chamber and the east panel of the coffin, a large ka-statue of the deceased was standing facing south. In front of this statue, two tomb models of naked women involved in the process of making beer were located. Behind the ka-statue, in the northeastern corner of the burial chamber, stood a large model rowing boat. On top of the coffin, a model showing three women grinding grain and another showing four men making mud bricks were located. It may not be a coincidence that both models seem to be oriented towards the ka-statue of the deceased that was placed to the east of the coffin. Besides these two objects, a pair of white imitation sandals was placed near the foot end of the coffin. While these sandals are life-size, they have wooden soles and could not, therefore, have served a practical purpose. As with the other objects in the tomb, their presence rather ensures a magical provision for the afterlife to the deceased. The selection of tomb

models points to provisions in three essential domains: food (production of bread and beer), shelter (production of mud bricks), and transportation (boat).

Inside the coffin, a wooden headrest was the only object present with the well-preserved mummy of Henu, which was found in the classical position of the time: on the left side, head to the north, facing east (**Fig. 3**). The mummy underwent a CT scan in 2013, the results of which are under study and will be published shortly. It can already be stated that there was no removal of the internal organs, nor of the brain, which is to be expected at such an early time in Egyptian history.² Preservation of the body merely consisted of desiccation with natron and wrapping in linen. The coffin itself forms an integral part of the complete set of funerary equipment that was purposely conceived and designed for Henu's burial, and this is the element on which the rest of this article focuses.

Construction

With dimensions of 204cm long, 57cm wide and 53cm high, the box coffin is the correct size to hold an individual buried in the extended position. The height of 53cm is that of the box itself, without the addition of the crossbars below the coffin, which have a height of 2.5–2.8cm. This measurement (the box height) is remarkably close to the traditional value of the cubit (52.5cm) and it seems likely that a height of one cubit was intended for the coffin. A similar observation has been made in the case of the coffin of Heqata (Willems 1996, 30–1).

The coffin is made of irregularly shaped wooden planks of *Ficus sycomorus* (identification by E. Marinova), a native tree in Egypt that was widely used for coffin construction (**Fig. 4**). The planks have a thickness of 4–5cm and are held together by flat loose tenons, which are made from a different kind of wood, most likely *Balanites aegyptiaca* (see below; a positive identification was not possible in this case since all the tenons are inside the coffin boards). The position of these tenons can be observed in the cracks between the coffin boards (see **Fig. 4**). These cracks were caulked



Fig. 3: The mummy of Henu as it was found inside the coffin, lying on its left side, head to the north, facing east, leaning against the western side of the coffin. Underneath the head was a wooden headrest (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

with white lime plaster, which has to a large extent fallen out due to wood movement over time. On the exterior this plaster is very fine and only covers dowel holes, narrow cracks in the wood, and an occasional irregularity in a wooden board. For the rest, the exterior of the coffin was not covered with plaster, but painted brown with fairly rough brush strokes. The hieroglyphs were mostly painted on the bare wood. On the inside

² I warmly thank Andrew Wade, Lana Williams, and Tosha Dupras for the interpretation of the CT scan.

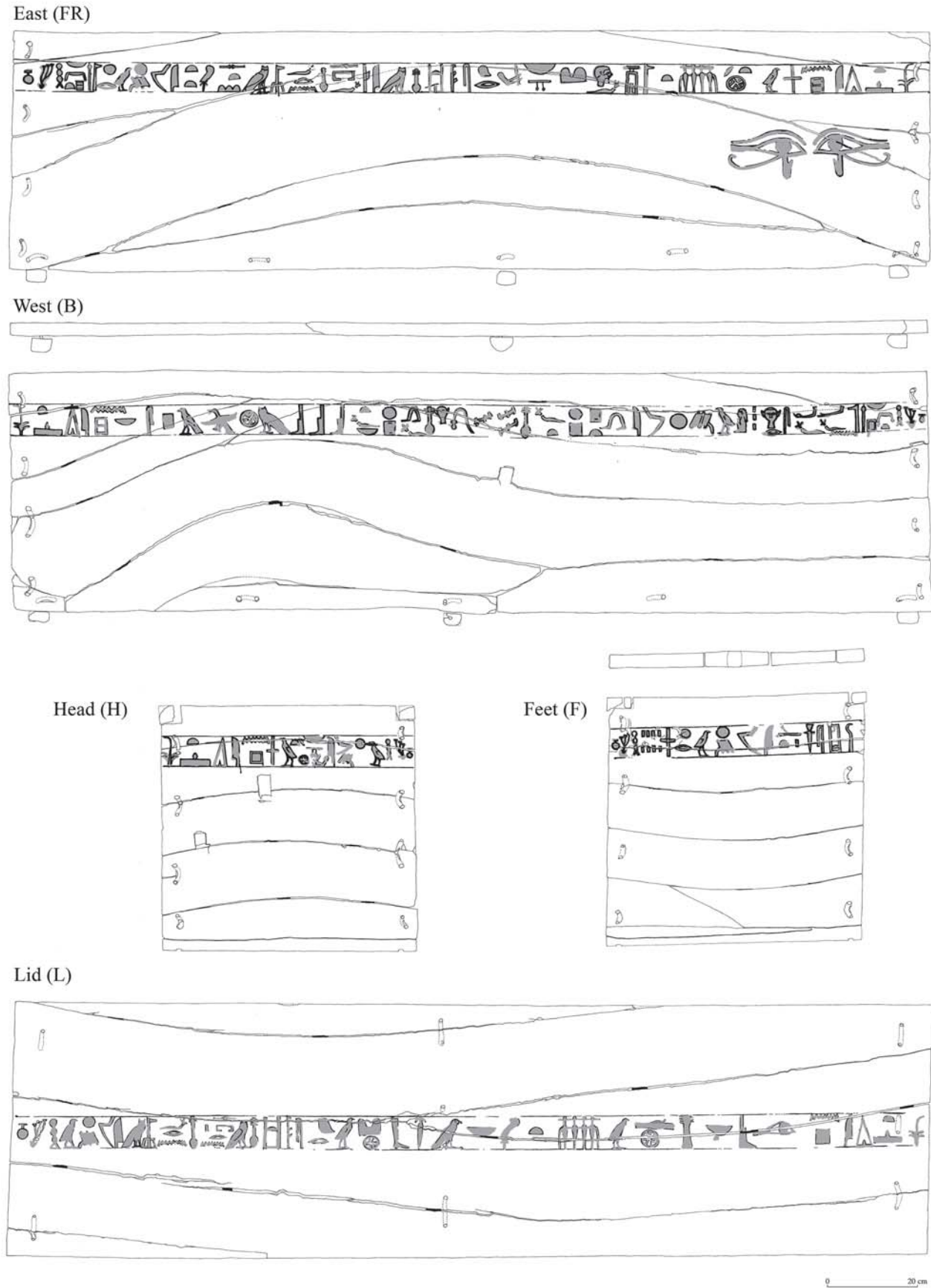


Fig. 4: Drawing of the exterior of the four sides and the lid of Henu's coffin
 (Drawing: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

almost the entire wooden surface was caulked with a thick layer of white lime plaster that is considerably coarser than that of the exterior, concealing large irregularities in the wood. No interior decoration was ever applied (see Fig. 3).

The corners of the coffin are joined by mitre joints, each of which is strengthened by four sets of two wooden dowels (Fig. 5).³ The dowels are long and round in profile, and are made from a harder type of wood than *Ficus sycomorus*, namely *Balanites aegyptiaca* (identification by E. Marinova).⁴ Before these dowels were inserted, tendons were tied through the holes. The choice of tendons for such a purpose was a good one, since they are easy to tie when they are moist, and they tighten up when they dry out, thus pulling the boards of the coffin together.⁵ Parts of dry tendons that had fallen out of their plug holes were found underneath the coffin. The method of using tendons to pull coffin boards together was also observed in fragmentary coffin boards from tomb 16H40/2, which is located only a few metres to the south of the tomb of Uky, and it thus seems to have been a fairly common technique at the site.

The planks of which the coffin is built are irregular in shape and required some creative constructing to turn them into rectangular boards (see Fig. 4). The head board is built up of five planks that are each connected to one another with three flat rectangular dowels. The foot board is constructed similarly, but on the bottom some smaller pieces of wood were necessary to complete this side. The east side of the coffin is built up of four large boards that span the entire length of the coffin, with four triangular pieces of wood to fill in the gaps at the extremities. The west side of the coffin is built up more irregularly, with only one long plank that spans the entire length of the coffin. All the other pieces of wood are shorter. It thus seems that the best pieces of wood were reserved for the head and front



Fig. 5: Mitre joint between F and FR, showing the sets of dowels strengthening the joint (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

panels of the coffin, and that the foot and back panels were constructed with smaller leftover pieces of planks.

The base board has a thickness of 3cm and was made to fit the internal dimensions of the coffin

³ For a constructional drawing of such a joint, see Donadoni Roveri 1969, fig. 9d.

⁴ The observation that dowels and tenons are made from a harder type of wood than the coffin boards has also been made by other authors, such as for instance for the coffin of Imeni from Dra' Abu el-Naga (Neef and Podsiadlowski 2007, 108–9). In the latter case the dowels and tenons are made from *Tamarix sp.* and in one case also from *Acacia albida*, both of which are harder than *Ficus sycomorus*.

⁵ Other materials that were used to tie coffin boards together were rope and flat copper ties. The latter were mainly used for high-status burials, such as for coffins of provincial governors, often in cedar wood. At Dayr al-Barsha this has, for instance, been observed for the coffins of the governors Ahanakht I (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology E 16218A–P), Djehutinakht IV or V (Boston MFA 20.1822–7), and Amenemhat (Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 28091–2).

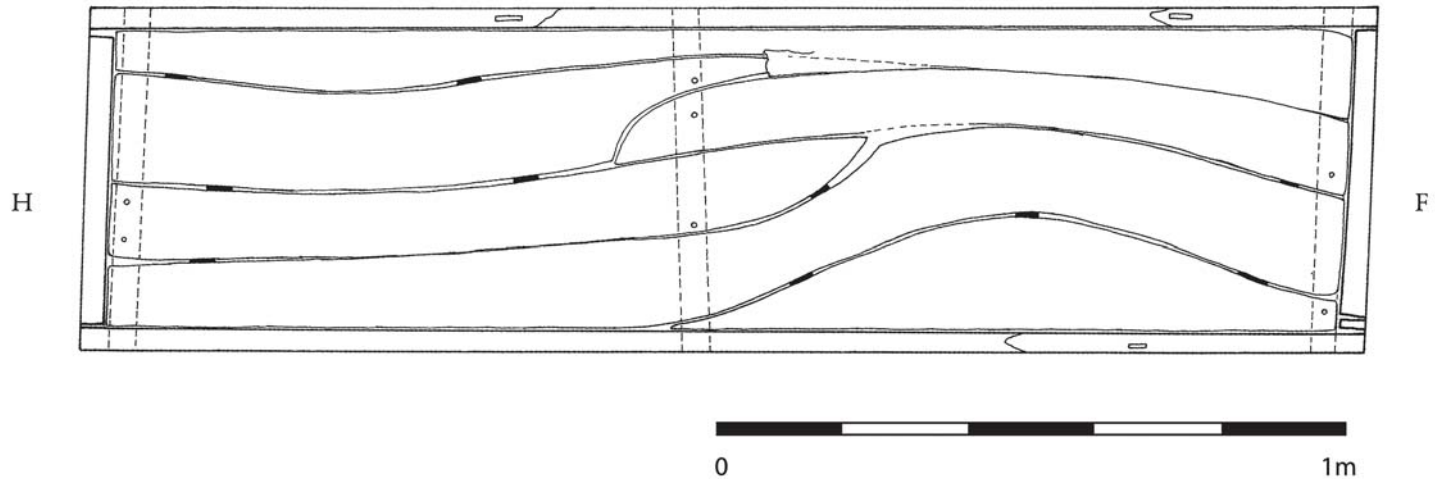


Fig. 6: Base board of the coffin of Henu
(Drawing: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

(**Fig. 6**). It was attached only to the long sides by means of five dowel joints on each side. Remarkably, the bottom was not attached to the short sides of the coffin in any way. Underneath the coffin three wooden crossbars were attached to the baseboard and the long sides of the coffin by means of wooden dowels. On the bottom of each of these crossbars two grooves measuring 1cm wide were cut into the wood (**Figs 7 and 8**). These grooves are cut at both extremities of the bars and run perpendicular to the grain of the wood. The grooves of all three crossbars align with one another, which suggests that they served to guide ropes. Since the shaft leading to Henu's burial chamber is square, the coffin would have needed to be lowered vertically into the shaft, and it seems plausible that ropes tied around the coffin would have helped with that.

The lid is likewise reinforced with three wooden crossbars that fit the interior of the coffin (**Fig. 9**). The middle crossbar has a convex profile, while the crossbars at the extremities have one straight edge and one rounded one, making the lid fit tightly on the coffin (see **Fig. 4**). On these crossbars a few carpenter's marks could be observed, although it is not clear exactly what they mean. The best-preserved one was found on the

front of the bar near the headboard and has the shape of a cross.⁶ Similar crosses were found on the second and third bars. They are, however, not as clearly visible since they are partly covered by plaster.

On the foot end of the lid are visible traces of a protruding square wooden tenon that was sawn off (**Fig. 10**; and see **Fig. 4**). Similar traces are not found on the head end of the lid. Such a protruding tenon was useful for lifting the lid of the coffin, but after the funeral it no longer served any purpose. That they were sometimes sawn off in the burial chamber itself is demonstrated by the tomb of Wah at Thebes, where a sawn-off tenon was found next to the coffin on the floor of the burial chamber (Roehrig 2002, 15–6, 22, **fig. 27**). No such tenon was found in Henu's burial chamber, but it seems likely that it was also sawn off during the funeral. The thin plaster layer covering the plank runs up to the edges of the position from which the tenon would have protruded, but does not continue over the location where the tenon was sawn off. This suggests that the tenon was still present for a period of time after the decoration of the coffin was complete, and was only removed later, most probably during the funeral.

⁶ A cross was also used as a carpenter's mark in the coffin of Meryt from Thebes (Curto and Mancini 1968, 78).



Fig. 7: Grooves on the edges of the crossbar below the F panel
(Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).



Fig. 8: Indication of the location of the three consecutive grooves on the crossbars
(Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

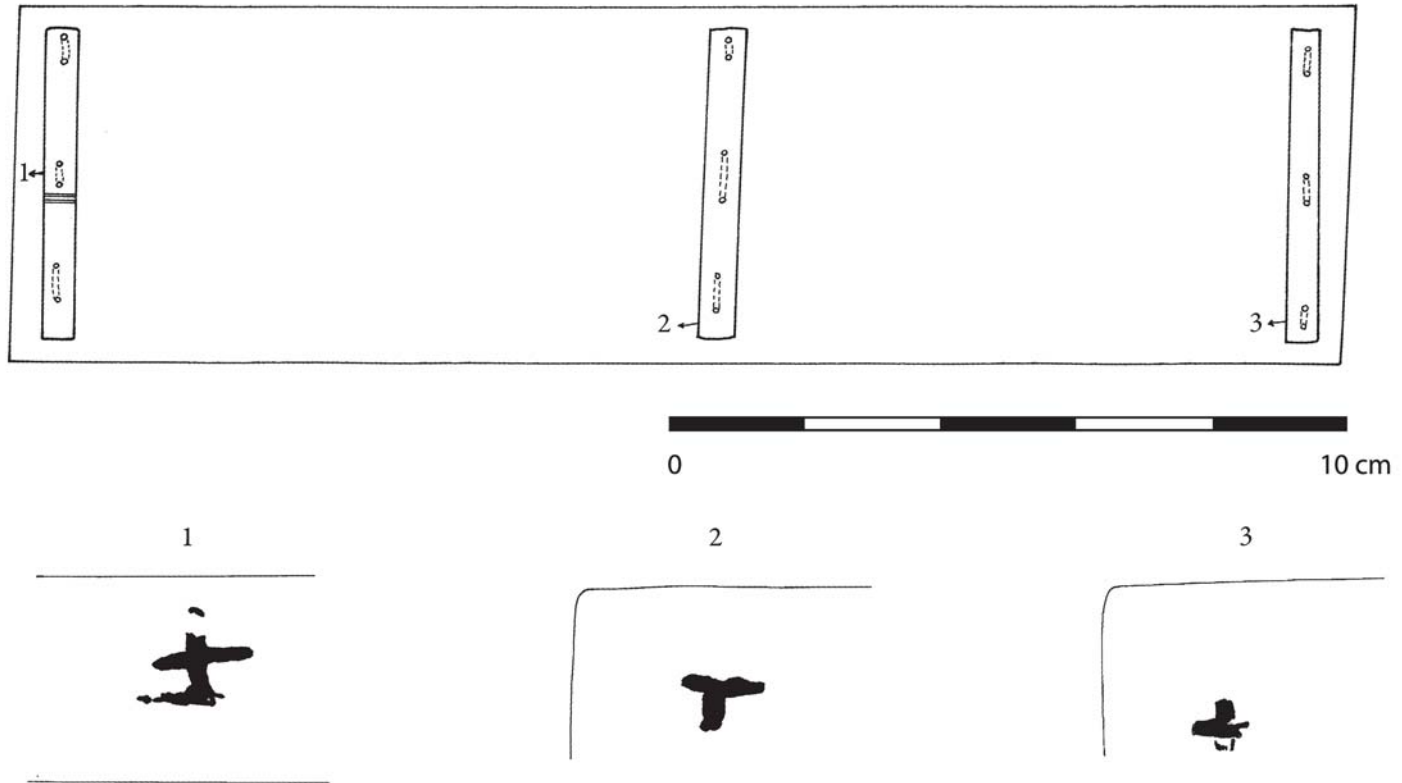


Fig. 9: Lid of the coffin of Henu, showing the three crossbars and the location of carpenter's marks (Drawing: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).



Fig. 10: Traces remaining where the tenon was sawn off on the F end of the lid (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

The lid of the coffin lay loose on the box and was not firmly attached, which raises an interesting question regarding the course of the actual burial. Since the coffin needed to be lowered into the shaft in a vertical position, it seems impossible that this could have been accomplished with a loose lid on and a mummy inside, without resulting in the catastrophic event of the mummy tumbling out of its coffin halfway through the process. Rather, the fact that the lid of the coffin was not secured to the box seems to indicate that it was brought down separately. This would also mean that the mummy was placed separately into the coffin during the funeral.⁷ This method not only has the advantage of reducing the weight of the coffin, but also allows the position and the orientation of the mummy

⁷ There is evidence that mummies and objects were sometimes only placed inside the coffin in the burial chamber during the funeral, for instance since objects inside the coffin would all

have shifted to one side if the coffin was lowered vertically with all its contents (Podvin 2000, 283).



Fig. 11: The east side of the coffin of Henu (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

on its left side facing east to be ascertained. Such an orientation could easily have been compromised if the mummy had been placed inside the box coffin before being lowered into the shaft. Moreover, this would prevent the awkward situation of the mummy resting with its full weight on its head while going down into the shaft head-first. Podvin has argued that, to avoid this, burial chambers were predominantly located to the south of shafts during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (Podvin 2000, 281). This way the mummy went down feet first, and the head of the deceased was located at the north, near the entrance of the chamber. However, in the case of Henu the burial chamber is located to the north of the shaft, meaning that if his head were to be placed in the prescribed northern direction, he would have to go down head first.

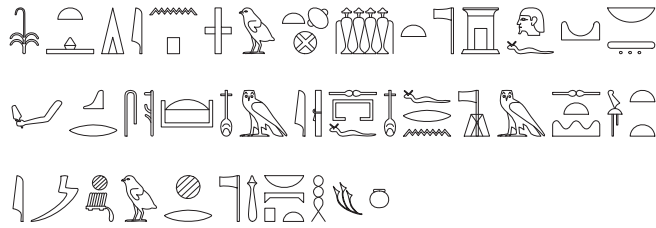
Decoration

The coffin of Henu is decorated with a single line of ornamental hieroglyphs that runs horizontally along the

top of the coffin panels on all four sides (Fig. 11; and see Fig. 4). Another line of text was painted on the lid of the coffin. On the east side a pair of *wedjat*-eyes forms the only other decorative element. Such a Type 1 coffin (Willems 1988, 122–7) was already in use at the end of the Old Kingdom, then flourished during the First Intermediate Period, and still occurred frequently in the early Middle Kingdom.

The outlines of the hieroglyphs were painted with black ink, as were the stance lines demarcating the text. The hieroglyphs were then filled in with Egyptian blue (copper calcium silicate) paint, a colour scheme that is typical for box coffins dating to the late First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (Willems 1988, 119). The blue paint was applied rather sloppily with a fairly large brush, often resulting in colouring outside the lines and the obliteration of interior details in the signs that were present in the black outline. On the long sides of the coffin the texts run from north to south, while on the foot and head end the texts run from east to west, the standard orientations of texts on such coffins (Willems 1988, 119, n. 11).

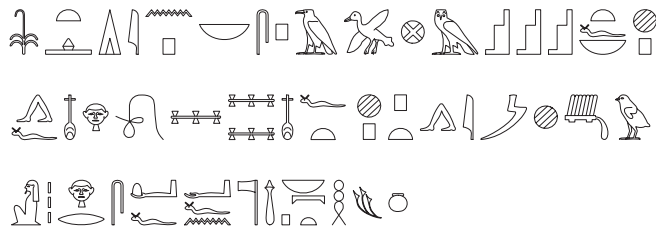
East side (FR)



*h̄tp dī nsw.t inpw im.y wt hnt.y sh-ntr tp.y dw=f⁸ nb t3
dsr qrs<.w> nfr m is=f nfr n hr.t-ntr m smy.t imnt.t
im3h.w hr ntr 3 nb p.t hnw*

An offering which the king gives, and Anubis,⁹ who is in *wt*, foremost of the god's booth, who is on his mountain, lord of the holy land: that he may be buried well in his beautiful tomb in the necropolis in the western desert,¹⁰ the revered one with the great god, the lord of heaven, Henu.

West side (B)



*h̄tp dī nsw.t inpw nb sp3 m s.wt=f nb<.wt> hpi=f nfr
hr w3.wt nfr<.w> t hpp.<w> t im3hw.w hr=s¹¹ dī=f '=f
n ntr 3 nb p.t hnw*

An offering which the king gives, and Anubis, Lord of Sepa¹² in all his places: may he walk well on the

beautiful roads on which the revered ones tread,¹³ may he give his arm to the great god,¹⁴ the lord of heaven, Henu.

Head end (H)



h̄tp dī nsw.t inpw im.y w.t nb t3 dsr im3h.w hnw

An offering which the king gives, and Anubis, who is in *wt*, lord of the holy land, (to) the revered one, Henu.

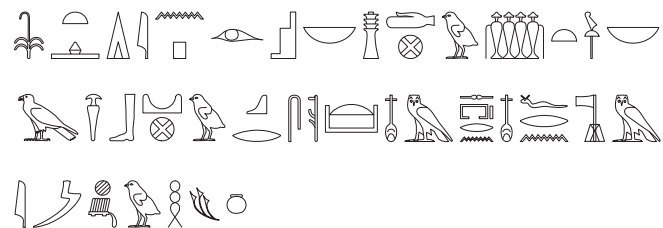
Foot end (F)



h̄k3 hw.t smr w'.ty¹⁵ im3h.w hr im.y hmnw hnw

Ruler of the estate, sole companion, the revered one with he who is in Khemenu, Henu.

Lid (L)



*h̄tp dī nsw.t inpw wsir nb ddw hnt.y imn.tyw¹⁶ nb 3bdw¹⁷
qrs<.w> nfr m is [p]n¹⁸ nfr n hr.t-ntr m im3h.w hnw*

⁸ The correct order of the signs would have been

⁹ The traditional FR text invokes Osiris and not Anubis, and the text which is here placed on FR normally occurs on B (Willems 1988, 124).

¹⁰ This traditional wording has not been adapted for a necropolis on the eastern side of the Nile, where Dayr al-Barsha is located.

¹¹ The suffix pronoun should in fact have been the plural =*sn* since it refers back to *w3.wt* (see Lapp 1986, 51–2). This formula usually occurs on coffin lids, and most often on those originating from the north of Egypt (Saqqara: Teti pyramid cemetery, and Abusir; Willems 1988, 173, n. 183–4; Lapp 1993, 217; Willems 1996, 47). Coffins from Dayr al-Barsha generally use the verb *sd3* instead of *hpi*: *sd3=f nfr hr w3.wt nfr wt n.t hr.t-ntr* 'may he proceed well on the good roads of the necropolis' (Willems 1988, 173, n. 182). For this offering formula in general, see Lapp 1986, 51–8.

¹² The invocation of 'Anubis, Lord of Sepa' generally occurs on coffin lids (Willems 1988, 172).

¹³ As has been noted by Willems 1988, 173–4, this refers not only to the funeral procession towards the tomb, but also to the journey through the netherworld. For the interpretation of this passage, see also Lapp 1986, 56–8.

¹⁴ This is not a standard expression and it seems to allude to CT Spell 399A, which occurs on the coffin of Heqata from Aswan (A1C) and on two coffins from Gebelein (G1T and G2T) (see CT V, 166c). This text reads 'may arms be stretched out to him in the *neshmet*-bark among the venerated ones' and follows immediately after 'may he walk well on the beautiful roads on which the revered ones tread' (CT V, 166b). On this passage, see Lapp 1986, 73–4 (*die Bittenfolge* 8); Willems 1996, 140, 198–9.

¹⁵ The group is reversed.

¹⁶ The *nb*-sign is wrongly placed before the *tyw*-bird

¹⁷ The *tpy*-sign is used instead of the *3b*-sign

¹⁸ The writing is erroneous for

An offering which the king gives, and Anubis and Osiris, lord of Djedu, foremost of the Westerners, lord of Abydos: that he may be buried well in this beautiful tomb in the necropolis, as a revered one, Henu.¹⁹

By the Middle Kingdom, the distribution of offering formulae on the east and west sides of coffins is fixed, with very few exceptions. The standard pattern then consists of the request for an invocation offering (*pr̄.t-ḥrw*) for the deceased on the east (FR), and the wish for ‘a good burial in his tomb in the necropolis in the western desert’ on the west (B) (Willems 1988, 124; Lapp 1993, 195). The coffin of Henu does not follow this pattern. In fact, no invocation offering at all is mentioned on his coffin, not even on the short H and F sides, although it frequently occurs there (Willems 1988, 124–5). However, the absence of a request for invocation offerings is common during the First Intermediate Period (Spanel 1985, 246 and n. 43). Instead the B text was moved to FR, and on B a second plea to Anubis was entered wishing the deceased a good journey on the roads of the underworld. This text, which invokes Anubis, Lord of Sepa, is normally found on the lids of coffins (Willems 1988, 172). Why its position was switched with that on L — a text wishing for a good burial invoking both Anubis and Osiris — is not clear.

A few palaeographic elements support a date in the First Intermediate Period. The horned viper is consistently depicted with a severed head on Henu’s coffin (Fig. 12). This deliberate mutilation of harmful animals in the hieroglyphic script is especially found in inscriptions that are near to the body, such as those on coffins (Fischer 1956, 102, n. 15; Brovarski 1985, 57–8). The mutilation of the poisonous horned viper (*Cerastes cerastes*) already occurs during Dynasty 6,²⁰ but is especially popular during the First Intermediate Period.²¹ At Gebelein and Thebes this feature falls into



Fig. 12: Decapitated horned viper
(Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

disuse after the unification of Egypt during the reign of Mentuhotep II.

The *t3*-sign is written with two pellets below the land sign, to which they are connected by vertical lines (Fig. 13). The occurrence of two pellets instead of three is common during the First Intermediate Period, although examples from the Old Kingdom are known as well (Fischer 1996, 26).

While Dayr al-Barsha is one of the richest sites where Middle Kingdom coffins are concerned (Willems 1988, 68–81), the evidence for the earlier periods is scarce. In fact, no intact Old Kingdom coffins have survived from the site,²² and apart from Henu’s coffin there is only one other First Intermediate Period coffin known from Dayr al-Barsha, that of Shemsi (Kamal 1901, 33; Lacau 1906, 73–4 [CG 28098]; Willems 1988, 35 [B8]; Lapp 1993, 71 [B20]; Willems 2014 [B26C]). The coffin of Shemsi was found in shaft C of the tomb of Middle Kingdom governor Nehri I, on top of the Middle Kingdom burial of a woman named Sathedjhetep and clearly in a secondary position. It carries horizontal bands of hieroglyphs on all four sides,

¹⁹ This text is normally located on B (Willems 1988, 124).

²⁰ See for instance the tomb of Weni the Elder at Abydos (Richards 2004, 98) or the tombs from the Pepi II cemetery at Saqqara (Jéquier 1929, 36–7 and pl. 16).

²¹ For a survey of the occurrence of this feature during the First Intermediate Period, see Brovarski 1985, 58. Several of the Asyut coffins display decapitated vipers (Hannig 2006, 157 [coffin of *ḥnw*, S2Br], 160 [S1Bre], 164 [coffin of *msḥty*, S1C], 178 [coffin of *ḥwī*, S4C], 181 [coffin of *t3w3w*, S5C], 186 [coffin of

ḥwī.n-Nmty/ḥty, S6C], 190 [coffin of *d3g*, S7C], 194 [coffin of *msḥty*, S8C], 264 [coffin of *ḥnnw*, S5L], 267 [coffin of *ḥny*, S6L], a.o).

²² Daressy 1900, 23 does mention that he found Old Kingdom coffins during his excavations on the north hill of Dayr al-Barsha in 1897, but none of these entered the collection of the Egyptian Museum, which was at that time located in Giza (Anonymous 1898). Therefore the whereabouts of these coffins are presently unknown.



Fig. 13: *t3*-sign with two pellets connected to the land sign (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven).

but none on the lid (Lacau 1906, 73–4).²³ The offering formulae on the coffin of Shemsi closely resemble those on a group of early First Intermediate Period coffins from Asyut (Willems 2014, 78, n. 62; Long, De Meyer and Willems 2015, 232, 234, 236), and the mutilated viper hieroglyph occurs on his coffin as well (Lacau 1906, 73–4; however, Kamal 1901, 33 does not indicate that the heads of the vipers are missing or mutilated, but the inaccuracy of his copy in general has already been demonstrated in n. 23). Since almost all coffins that are known from Dayr al-Barsha originate from the nomarchal tombs on the north hill (Lapp 1993, 93), the coffin of Henu constitutes a good example of the type of coffin that was available for lower-ranking officials at the site.

The inscriptions on the coffin of Henu form the only source of information regarding his social status. His titles are *hk3 hw.t* ‘ruler of the estate’ and *smr w.ty* ‘sole companion’. This makes Henu an official in the provincial administration, most likely serving under Djehutinakht, son of Teti, whose restoration inscription is found in the same tomb. The restoration of which Djehutinakht speaks is not an architectural restoration, but rather a reinstatement of the funerary cult in this older tomb by allowing one of his subordinates to create his own tomb in it (De Meyer 2007).

Conclusion

Considering the coffin of Henu as a material object within its original context has led to several observations regarding the course of the funeral and the functionality of the objects that were chosen to accompany Henu to the afterlife. Lowering a box coffin into a vertical shaft must certainly have been one of the more awkward moments during a funeral, but the grooves that line up on all three crossbars underneath the coffin suggest that ropes were wrapped around it to aid in this manoeuvre. The mummy and the lid must subsequently have entered separately into the shaft, making it possible to ensure the correct position of the mummy within its coffin. The tenon at the rear of the coffin lid was most likely sawn off after the mummy and lid were in place, as a final act when there was no further need to manipulate the lid. Afterwards, the tomb models would have been placed on top of and next to the coffin.

A relationship seems to exist between the decoration of the coffin and the choice of tomb models. The offering formulae that were selected for this coffin all focus on the burial and the afterlife. The absence of a *pri.t-hrw* formula, and in fact of any request for offerings at all, may perhaps be explained by the fact that the offerings were being provided by the group of tomb models clustered on top of and to the east of the coffin. The east side is traditionally the place where the *pri.t-hrw* formula would occur on the coffin, and where the deceased would be able to access the offerings through the *wedjat*-eyes or false door. It is thus certainly no coincidence that the tomb models are placed next to the coffin on the east, and that those that did not fit in this narrow space (the brick makers and the three women grinding grain), were placed on the coffin lid’s eastern side, turned towards the ka-statue. One can therefore only ‘read’ this burial by considering all elements together, and not by looking at each object individually. Henu’s burial chamber, small as it may have been, contained all the necessary ingredients to guarantee a successful afterlife.

²³ Note that Kamal 1901, 33 mentions that only three sides carry a horizontal band of hieroglyphs, which is undoubtedly a mistake on his part.

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