



REVIEW

BURIAL ASSEMBLAGES FROM BAB EL-GASUS
IN THE GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF LISBON

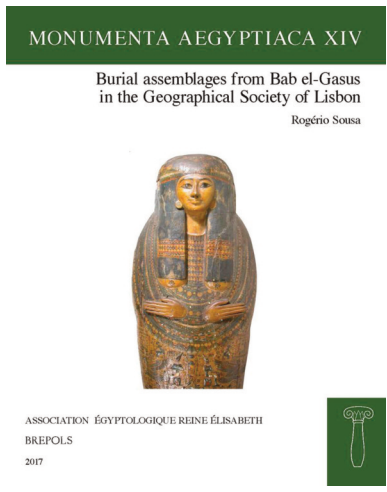
by Rogério Sousa
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This book is a detailed and extensive catalogue of the four Twenty-first Dynasty Theban coffin assemblages preserved at the Geographical Society of Lisbon. The four coffin sets originate from the collective tomb of the so-called Second Cache of Deir el-Bahari (“Bab el-Gasus”) in Western Thebes, located next to the first courtyard of the temple of Hatshepsut, excavated by Georges Daressy and Eugène Grébaut in 1891. As the largest undisturbed tomb ever found in Egypt, it contained 153 burial assemblages

of the members (priests and chantresses) of the Theban Amun clergy. The assemblages contained the burial equipment characteristic of 21st Dynasty elite burials of the Theban necropoleis: e.g., (often more than one nested) anthropoid coffins, canopic jars, funerary papyri, *ushebtis* and *ushebti*-boxes, Osiris figures, and funerary stelae, among others.

After its discovery in 1891, the enormous quantity of coffins and other funerary goods found at the site was divided into two groups by the Antiquities Service: the first group remained in the Giza Museum, while from the second group 17 lots of objects were created, each of them donated as a diplomatic gift to major contemporaneous Egyptian



collections. The four coffin assemblages published in this book came to Lisbon as belonging to the “Eighth Lot” in 1893.

The author of the book is the initiator and coordinator of the Gate of the Priest Project, an international research project based in the Universidade de Coimbra (Center of Classical and Humanistic Studies), involving an international network of institutions (Universiteit Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, Musei Vaticani and University of California, Los

Angeles). The project aims at reconstructing the original integrity of the Egyptian burials dated to the Third Intermediate Period, e.g., the collective tomb of Bab el-Gasus, among others. Since the various parts of the funerary equipments of this collective tomb are dispersed among various collections worldwide, and the present whereabouts of some of the finds are now unknown or uncertain, one of the main tasks is to reconstruct the original archaeological context and the modern history of the individual objects, e.g., their routes from the archaeological site to the collections where they are currently kept. Evidently, a project like this requires the most intensive cooperation among collections

sharing objects from the so-called Second Cache/Bab el-Gasus. This spirit of cooperation received a further great impetus at the international colloquium Bab el-Gasus in Context, organized by Rogério Sousa in Lisbon in 2016.

In order to facilitate scholarly research, another important duty is to make the objects available by publication of monograph studies and catalogues. The last decades witnessed a significant progress in the research of the collective burials of the Bab el-Gasus, as well as the coffin typology and iconography of the Third Intermediate Period in general, owing primarily to the publications of Andrzej Niwiński, John H. Taylor, René van Walsem, and David A. Aston. Additionally, as an exemplary scholarly achievement, it is worth mentioning the series of catalogues of the Third Intermediate Period coffins preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.¹ Now, Rogério Sousa's book is another important step of the research process.

As R. van Walsem pointed out in 1993, "the systematic and methodological study of the anthropoid polychrome coffins of the 21st dynasty from Thebes is a highly complicated matter."² The complex decoration programs displayed on the outer and inner surfaces of the coffins belonging to this corpus suggest an exceptionally rich repertoire of available patterns and motifs associated with an apparent creative freedom in their selection. Therefore, the description and interpretation of a coffin of this type must reflect its iconographic program as a complex system of symbols, in which at the same time every scene panel (or vignette), motif, or iconographic detail can be considered as an integral part of the whole system.

In the Introduction the author identifies the precisely elaborated methodology and terminology used in the descriptions of the coffins in discussion. Following the concept of "architectonisation" introduced by R. van Walsem for "stola-type" coffins of the later phase of the Twenty-first Dynasty, he views the discussed coffins as "buildings" displaying symbolic topography composed of spatial units (headboard; upper section; central pattern; lower section; footboard) with individual principles of composition.

In Part I of the book, the description of the four coffin sets is presented (pp. 7–107). Each of them originates from a different location within the collective burial. According to the iconography of the objects and the (still-legible) texts inscribed on them, all four sets were used by women. After the detailed

systematical description of each object, the translations of the hieroglyphic inscriptions are added, while the exact copies of the inscriptions are presented in plates of Part II of the book. In the Commentary (pp. 109–130) additional and overall remarks are made on the dating, the craftsmanship, the style, the inscriptions and the iconography of each discussed set. Analogies to the iconography displayed and texts inscribed on the discussed pieces are also provided in the Commentary.

The coffin set A.4 (Inv. no. SGL-AL-514) consists of a single wooden anthropoid coffin (lid and box), displaying multicolored painted decoration and inscriptions of inferior quality, manufactured for an anonymous female owner during the late Twenty-first Dynasty. Based on the sharp contrast between the overall rough quality of the piece and its decoration program that obviously borrows the typical repertoire of contemporaneous elite coffins, the author draws important conclusions regarding the socio-economical background of the production of the coffins of the Bab el-Gasus.

The coffin set A.27 (Inv. no. SGL-AL-515 and 516) consists of a decorated wooden anthropoid coffin (lid and box) and a mummy-cover, which were manufactured for an anonymous female owner. The decoration of the exterior walls of the box suggests that the set can be dated back to the end of the Twenty-first Dynasty, while the mummy-cover may have been manufactured earlier and reused from a previous burial. The author rightly assumes that "both objects seem to have been randomly assembled to be used by an anonymous woman" (p. 117).

The coffin set A.110 (Inv. no. SGL-AL-517 and 518) consists of a decorated wooden anthropoid coffin (lid and box) and a mummy-cover. The whole set can be dated back to the middle Twenty-first Dynasty. An *ushebti*-box originally belonging to the same set is now kept in Stockholm (NME 806). The inscriptions of A.110 bear two female names that are unambiguous evidence of the reuse of the ensemble. Its decoration program displays an interesting "intertextuality" between iconography and texts (p. 119), while the iconography of the coffin box is clearly inspired by the wall decoration of temple structures (p. 120). The whole decoration program and the textual corpus focuses on the cults of funerary deities performed by the deceased.

The coffin set A.136 (Inv. no. SGL-AL-519, 520 and 521) consists of a wooden outer and inner coffin and a mummy-cover. The name of the owner of A.136 (Henut-tai) was identified by G. Daressy in the

beginning of the 20th century; however, it cannot be found in any of the legible inscriptions of the set anymore. The pieces belonging to the set seem to have been manufactured during the first half of the Twenty-first Dynasty, but some iconographic elements and differences in style suggest a later reuse of the outer coffin and the mummy-cover, when their decoration may have been updated (pp. 123, 126, and 128). The fact that the outer coffin displays both male and female features also strongly suggests a usurpation and change of ownership (pp. 128–129).

Part I of the book is followed by a bibliography (pp. 131–138) and with several useful indexes (of Bab el-Gasus burial assemblages; coffins from TT320; yellow coffins mentioned in the book; names of deities; divine epithets; sacred topography; animal and composite deities).

The textual description of Part I is supplemented by an extensive visual documentation in Part II of the catalogue. As R. van Walsem pointed out in his foreword, “an adequate and integral publication” of Twenty-first Dynasty decorated anthropoid coffins demands for a “complete visual coverage of the decoration (ideally in photographs and/or drawings).” The documentation of Part II fully meets these academic standards.

Inspired by the architectonic nature of the described objects, the visual documentation partly adopted methods used by archaeological epigraphic surveys. The drawings (made by the author), the black and white photos (plates 1–121), and color illustrations (plates I–XVI), perfectly complemented by each other, are able to provide a complete picture about the individual objects as a whole, highlighting at the same time the characteristics of their various “views.” It is especially useful when individual drawings represent the general scheme of decoration of the coffin lids, their iconographic program, and the corpus of texts inscribed on them, thus facilitating the study of the different—in reality inseparable—components of their decoration programs.

As a complex study on the craftsmanship, decoration, iconography, symbolism, and texts of these coffin sets, supplemented with a well-developed system of visual documentation, this catalogue provides a holistic view of each discussed

object. While placing the coffin sets in their ancient and modern historical contexts, the author is able to give important clues to a better understanding of the socio-economic background of the coffin production of Twenty-first Dynasty Thebes and the distribution of work or possible cooperation among contemporaneous workshops of different standards. He offers valuable ideas and suggestions concerning demand and supply in the coffin production of the discussed period, in particular in the practice of reuse/usurpation.

In summary, this catalogue well illustrates that, using a systematic, specially developed method and a multi-perspective approach, a complex stylistic and typological study of the decoration programs of Twenty-first Dynasty coffins may reveal lost or hidden information about the ritual and social significance of coffin decoration of the period. Furthermore, it can offer help to reconstruct some social practices and economical aspects of the production of coffin ensembles, along with shedding light on some less-known features of the extensive practice of reusing pieces of earlier sets. Hopefully, this excellent catalogue will soon be followed by further and similarly high-level comparative studies of other “lots” of the tomb of Bab el-Gasus.

REFERENCES

- Egner, Roswitha and Elfriede Haslauer. 1994. *Särge. Der Dritten Zwischenzeit I*. CAA Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Ägyptisch-orientalische Sammlung, Lieferung 10 (Mainz am Rhein: Zabern Verlag).
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- van Walsem, René. 1993. “A Study of 21st Dynasty Coffins from Thebes.” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 50.1–2: 9–91.

NOTES

- ¹ Egner and Haslauer 1994; Egner and Haslauer 2009.
- ² van Walsem 1993, 10.