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A Rishi Coffin from Giza and the Development of This Type of Mummy Case

Peter Lacovara

Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University

While the work of the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Expedition at Giza yielded some of the most important monuments we have from the Old Kingdom, the excavations also uncovered significant material from later periods in Egyptian history, much of which has gone unnoticed and unpublished.

One interesting example are the fragments of a “rishi” type coffin now preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 1).1 These fragments were part of a burial at the edge of the great Western Cemetery at Giza. This area was actually excavated by Clarence S. Fisher for the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.2 Fisher worked in conjunction with Reisner and left the cartonnage fragments at Harvard Camp as part of the study collection kept there at the site (cf. Dunham 1972: 38–39).3

The fragments were part of a badly decomposed coffin found in a burial between Fisher’s mastabas 3040 and 3030. Fisher records his excavation of the area in his notes as:

Saturday, January 30, 1915.
...Work was carried on again this morning clearing out hard-packed debris which was under (in street south of 3030) the sand. In debris a number of small pottery ceremonial jars and saucers. Finished clearing out sand and a little hard debris from between 3030 and 3040. In small space under mastaba 3040 was found a number of small pottery ceremonial jars and saucers, a rough flint spear head, a small piece of worked flint, and a fragment of a large pottery jar of thick, rough ware.”

Sunday, January 31, 1915
...Work on pits A, B, C, D of 3041, a stone mastaba. Clearing out limestone debris from A and sand from B, C, and D. In B a burial was uncovered about ___ cm. below top....” (Fisher’s field notes for Sunday, January 31, 1915)
Fisher's brief entries are accompanied by two rough sketch plans, which suggested that the burial was intrusive into the plundered fill of one of the mastaba tomb shafts. This is not unlike a burial of approximately the same period as discovered by Emery in the Archaic necropolis at Saqqara (cf. Bourriaud 1991: 129-144, esp. 136-140).4

The coffin fragments are the only objects preserved from the burial noted as 3040 x on the boxes which held them. Today, they number 8 adjoining pieces measuring approximately 74.0 cm long by 30.0 cm wide. The fragments are badly decayed, with only the outer cartonnage layer remaining, but they indicated that the original coffin was a particularly fine example of the type. A column of text in green hieroglyphs runs down the center between green lines and with a polychrome diamond panels in red, yellow, black, and green over white on either side.

The scale pattern on the outside of the borders is carefully done in yellow, red and pale green with black outlines and feather tick marks. The foot end is decorated with bands of white, red, green and yellow and outlined, scored and checked in black in imitation of beaded anklets (Fig. 2).

The surviving text reads, “I have gone down to my nome, I have done that which men love and the gods promise in order that I may arrive in the land of Ma'at and that I may come forth from the doors of eternity” (cf. British Museum Texts II 1912: pl. 24).5

The hastily executed signs of the inscription contrast with the carefully delineated painted patterns on the fragments. This type of fine painted decoration is characteristic of the last stage in the development of the private “rishi” coffin, dating to the early Eighteenth Dynasty. A close parallel to this coffin had originally been made for the lady Rai and re-used for the burial of
Ahmose-Inhapi, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Fig. 3) (Cairo CG 61004: cf. PARTRIDGE 1994: 39–40). An abstracted anklet similar to the Boston fragments is visible at the foot end of this coffin as well, and the quality of the painting is of a similar high standard.

While most “rishi” coffins are known from the Theban area, masks with rishi type decoration have been found in Nubia (VERCOULTER 1976: 151–261) Naga ed-Deir and Beni Hasan (GARSTANG 1907: 177). There is also an unprovenienced example from the art market (Christie's London Antiquities sale catalog April 30–May 1, 1974: pl. 26, no. 367).

The coffins have that been excavated at Thebes can be dated to the latter part of the Second Intermediate Period and early Eighteenth Dynasty and are clearly the work of provincial craftsmen. They were probably “mass produced,” dug out of a single log of sycamore wood.

Few examples of these rishi coffins derive from well-dated contexts, making it difficult to determine a chronological development. Also, since the preponderance of the surviving examples come from Thebes, it is difficult to distinguish regional as opposed to developmental differences.

One main distinction observable in these coffins is the type of headdress. The most common
type is the “nemes” headcloth as described above, while the other is a version of the female “Hathorian” headdress. This was clearly intended to be gender-specific, as can be seen by comparing the coffins of Sekhenere Tao and Queen Ahhotep in Cairo.

The “Hathorian” type clearly evolves from Middle Kingdom antecedents such as the coffin of Senebtisi at Lisht (WINLOCK 1916: 23–56). Such coffins are rare, as women’s coffins, as opposed to men’s are in general. One example, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, may be one of the earliest in the series. It is rather narrow with a gilded face and inlaid eyes and particularly good workmanship. It also uses a color scheme not unlike the box coffins of the Thirteenth Dynasty (MMA 12.181.330).

A model coffin, in Cairo, inscribed for Titi-nefer, is far cruder in execution and uses a more colorful palette (NEWBERRY 1957: 415, pl. 45 no. 48405). As with the standard rishi type, the “female” coffins also tend to become broader through time (WINLOCK 1924: 274–276) although, they again narrow dramatically within the first reigns of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

A small child’s coffin now in the Metropolitan also has a “Hathorian wig,” and a broad lid with finely carved features and a carefully painted feather pattern (MMA 23.3. 461). It also has three-dimensional crossed arms as typically seen on coffins of the early Eighteenth Dynasty, as for example on Ahmose-Nofretari or Meryetamun (Cf. PARTRIDGE 1994: 57, 93).

As mentioned above, the standard “male” type of rishi coffin also develops in shape from narrow, as can be seen in the anthropoid coffins of the Thirteenth Dynasty (cf. BOURRIAU 1988: 91–92), to broad, as in the coffin of Sekenenre Tao. The coffins of the Intefs in the British Museum and the Louvre are only slightly less wide, with a tall arched foot, and have high, peaked “nemes.”

A return to a more narrow type of rishi coffin found at the end of the Second Intermediate Period and beginning of the New Kingdom is exemplified by an example excavated at Qurna (PETRIE 1909: 6–11). Among the burial equipment was a group of Classic Kerma beakers which confirms a
late 17th Dynasty date for this type of coffin. Like a number of Theban coffins, the Qurna "rishi" is very narrow with a long face and high nemes with long lappets and a low, thin foot.

While a number of explanations have been advanced as to the mythical significance of the feather pattern on the "rishi" coffins, (cf. STRUDWICK and TAYLOR 2005: 50) a more mundane explanation might be the most logical. As has already been noted, the coffins portray a number of borrowings from royal regalia. Already in the Middle Kingdom the process began, for example with the coffins of Khnumnakht and Khnumhotep from Rifeh, which have nemes headdresses (MURRAY 1910). The coffin of General Sepa from Bersha not only has a nemes-like headdress that seems to have had a uraeus, but also sports a version of the beaded royal kilt around the lower part of the lid and bottom of the coffin (CG 28084). The feather pattern of the rishi coffins may simply be derived from yet another element of royal costume, the coronation robe (PATCH 1991/2).

These coffins were the work of provincial craftsmen who probably had little in the way of complex theology in mind in making such caskets. The colorful coronation robe with its combination of scale and feather patterns would seem the most obvious inspiration for the decoration as it appears on these coffins. As with the other royal borrowings, by the early New Kingdom, the rishi pattern is again reserved for royal usage only and at that point may be imbued with more symbolism.

Notes:

1 I would like to thank Dr. Rita E. Freed, Curator of the Department of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern Art of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for permission to publish these fragments. I am grateful to Andrew Boyce for drafting the illustrations used in this article.

2 I am also particularly indebted to Dr. Diana Craig Patch for checking Clarence Fisher's field notes in the archives of the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania and to Dr. David O'Connor for permission to publish them.

3 Some of this material, including the coffin fragments, was sent back to Boston after Harvard Camp was closed following Reisner's death.

4 It should be noted that this fits within the context of the re-use of earlier important burial sites at Abydos and in Western Thebes.

5 I would very much like to thank Joyce Haynes for her reading of this text and the identification of a parallel text on the Middle Kingdom stela of Intef son of Senet in the British Museum.

6 Coffin Fragments from Naga ed-Deir, see BMFA archive photos C 8174 and C8940.

7 It should be noted that the reconstruction published by Winlock conflates what must have been the mummy mask decoration with that of the coffin, resulting in the odd pattern with four roundels. These most probably would have been pairs terminating the wig on the coffin and on the mask inside.

8 I would like to thank Dr. Diana Craig Patch for calling this to my attention.

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