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GRECO-ROMAN COFFINS FROM DEIR EL-BANAT (FAYOUM)

Since 2003 the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (CES RAS) has been carrying out archaeological excavations at Deir el-Banat (Fayoum). The subject of this paper is Greco-Roman coffins discovered in the course of the work. Most of these coffins are of anthropomorphic shape. Such caskets have two parts — a flat bottom and a relatively high cover. Normally they are made of roughly fitted wooden planks and covered with a substance consisting of sand and a bounding agent. The coffins have no additional elements attached, except of masks that were made separately and added to the head part of their covers. Approximately a half of these coffins are undecorated, while the other half are painted from outside.

Coffins of rectangular shape were less popular. These ones were made of wood and, more frequently, of reed. Besides, there are instances of burials in pottery coffins.

Keywords: Fayoum, Deir el-Banat, coffin, sarcophagus, Greco-Roman period, burial customs.

In 2003 the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (CES RAS) started archaeological research at the site of Deir el-Banat¹, which is located on the south-eastern edge of the Fayoum oasis, in proximity to the monastery of Archangel Gabriel at Naqlun. Deir el-Banat is more than 60 ha and includes three areas — remains of a ‘nunnery’², which functioned until 11th century CE, and two necropoleis.

In 2006–2017 the main work of the CES RAS mission was focused on the Southern necropolis where the area of c. 1200 m² was excavated and 371 graves were studied. The necropolis was in use for a thousand years: the earliest graves date back to the Ptolemaic period (3rd–2nd centuries BCE), while the latest ones — to the 9th century CE.

¹ For general information on the site and the project see: ² Grossmann 1991: 788. Krol 2005; Белова 2017; Tolmacheva 2017, etc.

Approximately 30% of excavated graves date back to the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods³. These graves usually consist of a rectangular west — east oriented entrance pit and one or several side niches made along walls of the pit. Side niches were used for placing coffins with mummified bodies⁴. Most of the mummies were furnished with cartonnage elements — helmet-masks⁵, collars, pectorals, foot-cases, etc. Due to multiple reuse and heavy plundering (both ancient and modern), the Greco-Roman graves are usually badly damaged. Collation of materials from the fill of neighboring graves, found *in situ* and in rare untouched burials provides a possibility to study burial customs and funerary equipment of the Greco-Roman period.

This paper aims to present a brief overview of Greco-Roman coffins coming from the Deir el-Banat Southern necropolis and to give preliminary remarks on their production, typology and use. This work is based on analysis of 93 caskets from the CES RAS excavations. Some coffins found at the site by Egyptian archaeologists in 1980–1990-s can be added to this collection, but due to unavailability of full archaeological records these items are mainly used as a comparative and complimentary source.

Out of 93 coffins 79 are made of wood, 11 are produced of reed, and 3 are receptacles of burnt clay. This paper provides a general overview of the caskets made of organic materials, a more detailed study will follow in further publications.

I. WOODEN COFFINS

1. Anthropoid coffins

The majority of wooden coffins (77 of 79) are of anthropoid shape (fig. 1). They consist of a base, on which a mummified body was laid, and a high cover that formed the main volume of the coffin. The base is a flat board that has elongated hexahedral shape with low (2–3 cm) borders. The cover has the same shape and dimensions *in planum* and roughly represents general proportions of a human body: it is low at the head part, becomes higher at the breast, goes down to ankles, and at feet rises again. Masks were carved separately and attached with wooden pegs to the head part of the coffin. In most cases ears were cut separately and fixed to the cover at sides of the face. The masks are modelled in a lapidary style and represent basic facial features. Below the mask a craftsman usually placed a low relief (0,1–0,3 cm) marking side strands of a *nemes*-headcloth (tripartite wig) that go down to the breast part of the coffin. Apart from the mask and the wig, the caskets have no carved decoration.

This type of coffins can be defined as ‘rhomboid’⁶. Similar examples are known from Gamhoud⁷, Antioe⁸ and other sites. In Thebes⁹ and El-Deir¹⁰ rhomboid coffins have a more

³ Белова 2017: 5. Though this figure refers to graves excavated in 2017, it represents a general percentage of Greco-Roman burials in the Southern necropolis.

⁴ For patterns of mummification see: Белова 2012.

⁵ Фридманн 2015.

⁶ This type is also known as ‘Dreiecksärge’ (Niwínski 1984: 456, Abb. 19); the author prefers to call it ‘rhomboid’ as was suggested by H. Györy (Györy 2007: 914).

⁷ Kamal 1908; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest: 51.2112 (Kóthay 2017: pl. 57, fig. 1), 51.2018/2 (Kóthay

2012: pl. 51, fig. 3); Archaeological Museum, Cracow: AS/2441 (Kóthay 2012: pl. 51, fig. 4).

⁸ Musée des Beaux-Arts et d’Histoire naturelle, Châteaudun: 83-SDA-429 (Lintz, Coudert 2013: 148–149); Musée d’Art et d’Archéologie, Guéret: 900 (Lintz, Coudert 2013: 150); Musée de l’Hôtel Bertrand, Châteauroux: 3444 (Lintz, Coudert 2013: 151).

⁹ Riggs 2005: 290–291 (No. 107–108), 190 (fig. 91).

¹⁰ Dunand 2010: 150–158; Dunand 2015: 301–305, etc.



Fig. 1. Anthropoid coffin without decoration (No. 06/0011)

expressed shoulder part, Theban caskets also have larger wigs and disproportionately small masks.

It is worth mentioning that during a relatively long period — in respect of the necropolis of Deir el-Banat — construction of coffins, method of their production and patterns of decoration remained unchanged. Throughout a few centuries the caskets even had the same dimensions: they were c. 180 cm long, 45–50 cm wide and 30 cm deep. There were coffins of smaller and larger size (their length was 165 and 190 cm respectively), but these were used in exceptional cases.

All coffins are produced of timber¹¹ of rather low quality. It is characterized by numerous knots and uneven structure. Most of coffins are made of roughly smoothed boards. The majority of the boards are relatively short and narrow pieces of wood of irregular shape, some are made of small trunks and have natural rounded surface on one side. Despite obvious lack of proper timber, there are just a few cases of secondary use of materials.

Boards were put together with simple joints¹² — a doweled butt-joint for right-angle connections and a doweled edge-joint for flat details. To fix joints carpenters used multiple dowels (2–6 cm long, c. 0,5 cm in diameter). In many cases the number of dowels was undue, but it did not help strengthening the structure and led to additional destruction of the poor-quality wood. The carpenters also used a simplified tongue-and-groove joint with a wedge on one part and a corresponding curvature on another. It is remarkable that they only used it to extend the length of the boards (i. e. on rather narrow surfaces) and never to make the boards wider that would require more carpentry.

The base and the cover of a coffin were joined with 6–8 wooden tenons, which were inserted in corresponding slots on the edges of both parts (marked on the outer surface with black ink). Normally the tenons were either inserted into the slots or fixed to one of the parts (most frequently to the cover) with wooden dowels. In some cases coffins were locked by pegging tenons to both cover and base; these dowels were too long and occasionally damaged a mummy inside.

To sum up, the coffins were made of uneven boards that were roughly fitted to each other. Numerous holes and chinks were filled with mud plaster. After burial the plaster got dehydrated and crumbled away. This along with natural decay process and robbers' activity explains why most of the coffins were found in rather bad state of preservation.

1a. Undecorated anthropoid coffins

Almost half of anthropoid coffins (38 of 77) were left undecorated. Some of them have large white spots that can be mistakenly taken for remains of paint; in fact these are accumulations of salt. As far as the coffins were not painted, all technical details (joints, plastering of holes, a carpenter's marks, etc.) are clearly visible.

As most of mummies with gilded cartonnage masks found in undisturbed burials were interred in such coffins, the absence of decoration cannot be considered a sign of social status of the deceased. It is highly probable that simple coffins were used for 'rich' burials for a purpose, for example to avoid plundering.

¹¹ The type of timber is still to be identified. According to preliminary observations, all coffins are made of *Ficus sycomorus* L., this corresponds to identification made by D. Březinová and B. Hurda, particularly for

pieces from Gamhoud (Březinová, Hurda 1976: 141–142; Onderka 2010).

¹² For a detailed description of joints and other techniques see: Gale at al. 2000: 358–367.

However the value of a coffin (and accordingly social status of a deceased) can be estimated by quality of material and level of craftsmanship. Some caskets are made of relatively good wooden boards (long and wide pieces of more or less regular shape — in comparison to cheaper coffins). Masks of such coffins are carved out of a solid piece of wood or of three relatively thick pieces that were joint together. The carpenters made an effort to carve faces with recognizable features.

Cheaper coffins were made of low-grade wood — mainly out of short and thin fragments. Masks of such caskets are carved out of several pieces, usually rather thin and of irregular shape. Facial features are just marked, sometimes simply by scratching; in many cases noses of these masks were carved separately (they have the shape of half-cones) and attached to them with dowels.

1b. Painted anthropoid coffins

Out of 77 anthropoid coffins 39 were adorned with a polychrome painting (fig. 2). The artists normally used coffins of average quality as their work hid imperfections of wood and faults of a carpenter. In most cases the painting was done with tempera over a thin (1–3 mm) layer of mud plaster identical to the filling of chinks in wood by its composition. In course of time the timber had dried and cracked, and the plaster with paint layer flaked off.

It is obvious that artists did not do their best or just did not have enough skills. There were coffins of somewhat higher quality: they were made of better timber (larger planks, well-dried and not rotten wood), and paintings on them are done over a dense base layer in a ‘careful’, detailed manner. There were also painted coffins of quality below average — these were made of low-grade, almost junk wood. The style of paintings on these coffins is quite original in all respects. It can easily be described as a child’s drawing with awkward figures and facial features, with multiple (and exposed) corrections and no single accurate outline.

Though this difference in quality looks similar to the one mentioned in respect of undecorated coffins, it is hard to say whether it marks social status of a deceased or it simply reflects changes that local workshops underwent in the course of time having periods of flourishing and decline. At least all painted coffins demonstrate continuity of more or less the same artistic tradition, which was expressed at various levels of artistic skills.

The coffins were painted only from outside; therefore the artists had to decorate the top, lateral faces of the cover and the bottom side of the base. With a few exceptions, the subject repertoire of decoration was rather limited.

The mask of a coffin was usually painted with a single color (white, yellow or pink), outlines of eyes, eyebrows and pupils were drawn in black. In some instances artists were seeking realism and used red or brown color to mark blood vessels in corners of eyes, to draw nostrils, nasolabial groove and folds, to mark chin and cheeks with circles or spirals. Faces were framed with traditional tripartite wigs, which were painted solid black or, rarely, with white and blue strands.

The chest part of coffins was decorated with a traditional representation of a broad collar consisting of floral elements plaited in several rows. Below the collar an artist placed two registers, one with a winged scarab, another with a winged goddess. The goddess is crowned with a sun-disc and holds *maat*-feathers in her hands. The registers with winged deities are followed with a scene of trial that shows the main elements of the subject — a deceased brought in front of Osiris, Toth weighing the heart of the deceased, and the monstrous Ammut waiting for the judgment. There is a register with a scene of mummification below: Anubis embalms a body



Fig. 2. Anthropoid coffin with polychrome decoration (No. 06/0026)

that lays on a lion-bed, under which four canopic jars are placed. The lowest scene represents deities sitting in a bark.

The foot part of a cover was usually decorated with two vertically oriented representations of cobras wearing double crowns. The figures of snakes frame a space that was intended for an inscription; in most cases it was left blank. The lowest register is occupied with two jackals recumbent on naoi and facing each other.

This is the most typical and complete list of scenes, however the number of registers and their sequence could vary, some episodes could be omitted while the others doubled. The reasoning is obscure: most likely it depended on good eye of an artist, on his ability to build a proper composition in a limited space.

The sides of a cover were usually decorated with representations of standing *genii* (the ‘sons of Horus’). They are supposed to have human, hawk, baboon and jackal heads, but in our case they also have heads of a ram or rather mixed features. Their number is also varying: each side of the cover can have from two to six representations of these deities.

The bottom part of coffins was usually decorated with a representation of a goddess standing on a standard. Her arms are either stretched down or raised. In the last case she holds round or trapezoid vessels, one in each hand. The goddess is represented in a net-dress with long shoulder straps, her breast is frequently open. The deity is wearing some jewelry — a simple collar, armlets, bracelets and anklets. The wig of the goddess is often adorned with a ribbon tied around her head; longer ribbons are hanging down from folds of her arms.

The identity of deities represented on coffins is not always clear. Some gods are recognizable by their typical features: Osiris and Anubis can be known by iconography, Isis, Nephtys and Nut — by symbols placed on their heads. But in most cases — due to absence of characteristic attributes or corresponding inscriptions — the deities cannot be identified definitely. Thus the goddess represented on bottoms of coffins could be Nut or any other mother-goddess, and the gods depicted in multi-figured scenes could be any deities of Egyptian pantheon. It appears that artists who decorated the coffins, followed traditional patterns and did not fully realize the meaning of these images.

The same refers to hieroglyphic inscriptions: formally, it is a classical offering formula, but it is obvious that scribes did not understand the language and simply copied the texts. They also tried to give some sense to obscure signs by reshaping and making them more decorative. This fact, as well as jumble and muddle of deities in figural scenes, may point to a certain degree of obscurity of Ancient Egyptian culture.

2. Rectangular coffins

Two burials in graves 182 and 248 were made in rectangular caskets (fig. 3). These might have been considered belonging to a different funerary culture, but archeological context indicates the opposite. The coffins were found in side niches of deep rectangular graves, they were placed upon a layer of pure sand, the casket in the grave 182 contained a properly mummified body decorated with a gilded mask¹³.

The caskets were of trapezoid shape *in planum*, the foot part was narrower than the head one. Unlike anthropoid coffins, these have a deep bottom part and a flat cover. The bottom of

¹³ Grave 248 had been looted, and the body of the deceased was not found.



Fig. 3. Rectangular coffin (No. 08/0106/001)

the caskets was enforced with thick cross-boards attached to the outer side. The coffin from the grave 182 has a cover consisting of short transverse boards at both ends and in the middle and longer longitudinal pieces of wood in between. Due to bad preservation of wood, fragments of the cover of the casket from the grave 248 were not identified among numerous wooden pieces found in the fill of the grave. The caskets have following dimensions: length is 172/168 cm¹⁴, width is 48/40 (head part) and 33/29 (feet part), height is 50/c. 22 cm. Both coffins have a small round through-hole (diam. c. 2 cm) in the head side; the holes could be used to fix ropes in order to put the coffin into the grave during interment.

The casket from the grave 182 was made of boards of regular shape and relatively good and hard timber. Carpenters used simple doweled butt- and edge-joints; tongue-and-groove joints were not used. Some boards have holes, tongues and grooves that do not correspond to the structure of the casket; one of the boards was used as a writing board¹⁵.

The casket from the grave 248 was made of low-grad timber, its boards are mainly of irregular shape. Shape of some boards, existence of slots for locking tenons that do not have any sense in their current location and other features convey an impression that carpenters remodeled an anthropoid coffin. Structure of the casket in the grave 248 was not solid, its side walls were kept together by means of a rope, which was threaded through holes and chinks between the boards. It is likely that the coffin had fallen apart during transportation to the place of burial and was fixed in haste.

Defects of wood and a carpenter's work were smoothed with mud plaster similar to the one that was used for anthropoid coffins. The caskets were even decorated with brownish stripes along perimeter of each face.

Reuse of wood, the weak structure of caskets and other features do not necessarily mean the lack of money: large deep graves, where the coffins were found, and the well-mummified body decorated with a gilded mask hardly correlate with a burial of an indigent person. Most likely a non-typical shape of the coffin was used due to personal preferences of a deceased or his/her family. The size of the caskets, which is smaller than dimensions of an average anthropoid coffin, gives a possibility to suggest that these caskets were made for an adolescent or a person of small height.

II. REED COFFINS

The second group of coffins — reed¹⁶ caskets (fig. 4) — can also be associated with burials of adolescents. They are c. 170 cm long, c. 30 cm wide and c. 25 cm deep. The caskets also have a trapezoid shape *in planum*, their head part is 10–15 cm wider than the foot one. Such coffins have a deep bottom part, which housed a body, and a flat cover.

Out of 93 coffins found during our excavations at Deir el-Banat, 11 were made of reed. They were put in large graves with side niches. In most cases the reed coffins were used for secondary interments — either in a side niche or above a wooden anthropoid coffin. Bodies inside the caskets were mummified, well wrapped and decorated with cartonnage elements

¹⁴ The measurements of the caskets found in the graves 182 and 248 respectively.

¹⁵ Panov, in print.

¹⁶ 'Reed' is a general definition for a vegetable material, plants used for production of these caskets are to be specified (cf. Wendrich 2000: 254–255).



Fig. 4. Reed coffin (No. 315/01/001)

(masks, foot cases, etc.). Again, the use of this type of caskets was probably a choice of a deceased person's family.

The bottom of such a casket is made of midribs of date-palm leaves (*gerīd*). The sides consist of a *gerīd* frame, which was strengthened with numerous transverse pieces fixed between long sticks of the frame. The frame of the bottom is enforced with 3–4 longitudinal ribs of *gerīd* and numerous transverse elements. For the cover the artisans placed one or two stems diagonally instead of longitude pieces. This was suitable for the burial, but after that the cover (and the mummy inside the casket) was crushed under weight of earth.

Each side of the caskets was faced with reed, which was finely stitched to the carcass with thin strings. Then the sides were tied together, the cover was attached from only one side so it could get opened and shut. After putting a mummy in, the box could be locked with thin ropes that were attached to the cover and the side part in three or four places and tied in a bow.

Due to fragility of reed most of the caskets are in a very bad state of preservation and can be hardly taken out of the graves without being disintegrated. However the lack of reed facing provides a possibility to observe certain technical details that otherwise would have been hidden.

Such coffins are also known from other archaeological sites (for example El-Deir)¹⁷, but due to their bad state of preservation they remain poorly published.

To sum up, wooden anthropoid coffins of average quality constitute the majority of Greco-Roman burials at the Southern necropolis of Deir el-Banat. Shape and dimensions of the caskets remained unified throughout the long period of existence of the cemetery. Half of the coffins were decorated with polychrome paintings, however it does not seem to be a mark of social status. More likely the status is reflected in quality of materials and craftsmanship, which is much higher in wealthy burials. A relatively small number of burials were made in rectangular wood or reed coffins. It is possible that these caskets were produced for adolescent persons, and their use was a result of preferences of a deceased's family.

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¹⁷ Dunand 2015: 299 (No. E2.1.01).

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САРКОФАГИ ГРЕКО-РИМСКОГО ВРЕМЕНИ ИЗ РАСКОПОК ЦЕИ РАН В ДЕЙР-ЭЛЬ-БАНАТЕ (ФАЮМ)

Начиная с 2003 г. Центр египтологических исследований РАН проводит археологические исследования в Дейр-эль-Банате (Фаюм). Памятник, общая площадь которого превышает 60 га, состоит из трех основных частей — остатков «монастыря», функционировавшего до XI в., и двух обширных некрополей.

Основной раскоп ЦЕИ РАН расположен на территории южного некрополя, где на площади около 1200 м² в 2006–2017 гг. была изучена 371 могила. Наиболее ранние из исследованных могил относятся к концу птолемеевского — римскому периоду. Для них характерна прямоугольная в плане ориентированная по оси запад — восток входная яма, вдоль стен которой устроены от одного до трех подбоев. В подбоях были помещены саркофаги с мумифицированными телами умерших. Большинство мумий украшено масками (нередко позолоченными), накладками и футлярами для ног, выполненными в технике картонажа.

В статье рассмотрены саркофаги, найденные в могилах греко-римского времени. Большая часть саркофагов антропоморфна. Саркофаги этого типа состоят из плоского основания (дна) и высокой крышки. Как правило, саркофаги собраны из плохо подогнанных деревянных досок, пространство между которыми заполнено грунтом, состоящим из песка и связующего вещества. За исключением масок, которые изготавливали отдельно и прикрепляли к головной части крышки, саркофаги не имели накладных элементов.

Около половины таких саркофагов оставляли нерасписанными, другая часть с внешней стороны покрыта росписями.

Помимо антропоморфных саркофагов, умерших хоронили в прямоугольных гробах, сделанных из дерева или тростника.

Ключевые слова: греко-римский период, Фаюм, Дейр-эль-Банат, саркофаг, древне-египетский погребальный обряд.