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BEYOND ICONOGRAPHY:
THE AMARNA COFFINS IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

Anna Stevens

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of twenty decorated wooden coffins excavated from the South Tombs Cemetery at Amarna from 2005 to 2013. It considers how the coffins fit temporally and socially within the cemetery, and the social dynamics through which they came to be used as burial containers for a small portion of the Amarna population. It suggests that some of the coffins might have been used by family members of the officials who owned the South Tombs, but argues against straightforward associations between coffin use and socio-economic strata.

Introduction

From 2005 to 2013, the Amarna Project undertook fieldwork at the South Tombs Cemetery, the largest of the burial grounds of ancient Akhetaten (Fig. 1). Over the course of the excavations some 378 graves were recorded and a minimum number of 432 individuals recovered. Twenty of the burials showed evidence of having contained painted wooden coffins. Almost all had been subject to heavy looting in antiquity and in many cases all that survived were small pieces of wood and painted plaster. In eight cases, however, more substantial portions of the coffins survived to be excavated, conserved and studied.

As the only decorated coffins preserved from Amarna, these objects offer an unprecedented opportunity to explore religious beliefs concerning death and the afterlife during the Amarna Period. A study of their iconography is ongoing, undertaken in conjunction with a broader project to conserve and investigate the technology of the coffins. The South Tombs Cemetery, as a single-phase, well-excavated and broadly sampled burial ground, also brings the opportunity to explore and contextualise burial materials in ways that are not possible at many Egyptian cemeteries, especially those excavated before the advent of ‘new archaeology’ and the careful excavation, sampling and study of mortuary assemblages and human remains. With this in mind, the focus of this paper is the archaeological and social context of the coffins; the paper asks how the coffins fit into both the burial landscape of the South Tombs Cemetery and, more broadly, the social environment of ancient Akhetaten. It is also a response to calls for greater consideration of non-elite burial practice in ancient Egypt (Baines and Lacovara 2002, 12–14; Richards 2005, 49–54; Cooney 2007, 275–9).

The South Tombs Cemetery

The South Tombs Cemetery occupies a long wadi in the cliffs adjacent to the South Tombs, which represent the elite component of the cemetery. The wadi is about 400m long, and seems to have been almost completely filled with graves, implying that several thousand people were buried here.

The approach to fieldwork was to open three main excavation windows (Figs 2 and 3), termed the Upper Site, Lower Site and Wadi Mouth Site, with smaller exposures at the Middle and Wadi End Sites and some

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1 With post-exavagation analysis continuing, this figure is somewhat preliminary, but unlikely to change very much.
2 The coffins from the South Tombs Cemetery are probably not, however, the first Amarna Period coffins that the site has yielded. The Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, while clearing the sand and rubble from the courtyard of house P47.6 in the Main City in 1912, uncovered a coffin sitting adjacent to the boundary wall of the courtyard (Borchardt and Ricke 1980, 106, plan 29). The coffin is only mentioned briefly in the excavation report, where it is dated to the later New Kingdom, but information in diary entries and archive photos (VII.6.13.065–6) suggests an Amarna Period date is possible (Bettum 2015, 32; a fuller discussion of the coffin is pending).
3 This work is being undertaken by Anders Bettum (Oslo Museum) and a team of conservators and materials scientists headed by Julie Dawson (Fitzwilliam Museum) and Lucy Skinner. For preliminary reports, see Dawson and Skinner (2013; 2014), Skinner (2015) and Bettum (2015).
Fig. 1: Map of Amarna by Barry Kemp, based partly on survey data from Helen Fenwick.
Fig. 2: Plan of the South Tombs Cemetery showing the areas excavated between 2006 and 2013 by Barry Kemp and Anna Stevens, based partly on survey data from Helen Fenwick.
investigation of isolated squares on the edges of the cemetery.⁴ As the fieldwork progressed, it became clear that the burials had been affected not only by looting, but by one or more flash floods that formed or enlarged a channel down the axis of the wadi, and washed away looted materials from the burials. Despite these events, much evidence remained from which to reconstruct a picture of burial practice. Careful excavation has provided some understanding of what is likely to be missing from robbed and flood-damaged graves – at least in general terms, if not on a burial-by-burial basis.

The social patterning that underlies the organisation of the graves is difficult to reconstruct, but when the interments are plotted according to age and sex, they reveal a mixed distribution, with the burials of adults, children and infants, and males and females, intermingled. Presumably these are, at least in part, family groups. While most graves contained only a single individual, there were examples of multiple burials, in which the deceased persons seem to have been interred at the same time, although it is never possible to be certain of this.

Overall, a sense of simplicity and uniformity prevails across the graves; some of this is a side effect of looting, but certainly not all. In terms of superstructure, most burials were probably marked with a rough stone

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⁴ A summary of the work up to 2012 is provided by Kemp et al. (2013). Preliminary excavation reports appear in the Journal of Egyptian Archaeology from 2005 to 2013, and the final excavation monograph is in preparation.
cairn, a small number of which survived the looting. Sometimes a stela seems to have been placed at the graveside, usually made of limestone and with a distinctive pointed shape, finishing at the top in a single, double or triple triangle (Fig. 4). The decoration rarely survives, but traces of carving on some suggest that the main scene was an image of the deceased sitting in front of a table of offerings. This scene is usually placed within a recess, giving the impression of a stela set within a frame. Two small limestone pyramidia were also recovered from the site, one measuring 44cm in height and the other, not quite intact, surviving to 36cm. The latter has a small round-topped niche on one face that presumably was once carved or painted with an image of the deceased (Kemp 2010, 16–17, fig. 6; Kemp et al. 2013, 69, fig. 4). A preliminary interpretation of these stelae and pyramidia is that they combine a model of a rock-cut tomb (the pointed element) with
a memorial representation of the deceased (on a stela), the pointed iconography presumably implying a solar association.

None of the stelae were found in situ, although one example – unique in being round-topped and made of a granular off-white plaster – was found with pieces of impressed mortar that suggest it was attached to a stone grave cairn (obj. 39448; Stevens and Shepperdson 2009, 19–20, fig. 9). One of the pyramidia has a shallow rectangular recess in its base and might thus have been raised up on a foundation, while small fragments of mud brick, found very occasionally in disturbed grave fills and bulk sand deposits, are possibly the remains of small mud-brick superstructures. One of the excavated graves had a mud-brick burial chamber and it seems a good candidate for a superstructure of some kind (Fig. 5). If so, nothing survived the looting and weathering in situ, although fragments of a window grille found in a disturbed grave nearby perhaps originated from such a structure. Undoubtedly, though, simple constructions such as low stone cairns were the norm.

As regards the artefact record, potsherds were by far the most common item recovered during the excavation (Rose 2007; 2008; 2014; Rose and Gasperini 2015), potentially originating both from offerings left grave-side and within the burial pit itself. The disturbance of the site largely removed sherds from their original context, although there were examples of vessels found in situ within graves, a few containing food offerings (Clapham 2007; 2015). There were also examples of jars with probable ‘killing holes’. Otherwise, grave goods were fairly rare, but did include items of personal adornment or significance such as cosmetic implements, and amuletic or ritual objects, such as scarabs, used presumably to aid the transition to the afterlife and ensure well-being thereafter.

The deceased individuals were usually wrapped first in textile and then placed in a burial container, of which five different kinds were encountered. By far the most
Fig. 6: Distribution map of wooden coffins at the Wadi Mouth Site.
A brief description of the decorated coffins and their archaeological context follows.\textsuperscript{5} It should be noted that during the earlier fieldwork seasons the coffins were photographed extensively \textit{in situ} and lifted out of the ground without treatment. From 2011, a new approach to excavating the coffins was instigated, with the use of cyclododecane (CDD), a wax that is applied in liquid form to the surface of an object and forms a rigid shell that helps the object to be lifted. The CDD is later allowed to sublime into the air in a controlled environment. This allowed an improved recovery rate, but the need for rapid application of the CDD limited the time available to photograph and study the coffin walls as they were exposed, the controlled sublimation of the CDD being an ongoing process. There is, therefore, only a partial record at present of most of the coffins excavated post-2011, while the study of the very fragmentary examples also largely awaits completion.

The decorated coffins

\textit{The Wadi Mouth Site}

Three decorated coffins were found at the Wadi Mouth Site (Fig. 6). One of these, in square AM111, survived only as fragments of wood and painted plaster. To judge from the scale of the grave, the coffin was adult-sized, but no human remains survived, nor were there any objects, other than a few potsherds, in the grave fill.

\footnote{The numbering of the eight better-preserved coffins follows that of Bettum (2015); all have in addition object and/or excavation numbers. The determination of the age and sex of the individuals interred in the coffins is the work of the bioarchaeological team headed by Jerry Rose (University of Arkansas) and Gretchen Dabbs (Southern Illinois University).}
Fig. 8: Distribution map of wooden (and mud) coffins at the Lower Site.
The other two coffins, both excavated in 2012, were better preserved. One was a full-size anthropoid coffin, Coffin 7 (obj. 40105). The wood was badly rotted and somewhat crushed and the decorated plaster layer was in particularly bad condition. It was covered in CDD to enable lifting, but from what was visible during excavation it seems to be of the traditional type. The name Tiy can possibly be read (Bettum 2015). Inside the coffin there remained the lower body of a female aged between 40 and 45 years (Ind. 300).

The second, Coffin 8, was a small rectangular coffin decorated with yellow text bands with black frame lines, the bands and image panels left blank (obj. 40106; Stevens, Shepperson and King Wetzel 2013, 4; Bettum 2015; Fig. 7). The coffin was consolidated in the ground and lifted intact, before undergoing conservation treatment (Peters 2015). The skeleton was not removed, but seems to be that of a child aged around 3 or 4 years (Ind. 332).

Fig. 9: Preliminary reconstruction of Coffin 3 (unit 13281) based on field photographs (Drawing: B. Kemp).
The Lower Site

Excavations at the Lower Site revealed the remains of eleven decorated coffins (Fig. 8). Most survived only as small fragments of wood and painted plaster, although four were more substantially preserved. Of the former, the majority were so badly robbed-out that no skeletal elements remained, with two exceptions: a grave with coffin fragments in square V104 contained skeletal elements from an adult male aged 35–50 years (Ind. 117), while the skeleton of a man aged 35–45 years (Ind. 71) was found adjacent to, and may have originated from, an unoccupied grave with coffin fragments in U102.

Fig. 10: Preliminary reconstruction of Coffin 4 (unit 13262) based on field photographs (Drawing: B. Kemp).
The 2010, 2011 and 2012 seasons produced better-preserved coffins. In 2010, work in square Y105 yielded, within the space of a single week, two full-sized coffins that remained largely intact apart from their lids, which had been smashed through by robbers in order to remove the contents. Unfortunately, the initial impression of good preservation was misleading; the wood survived largely as a grainy powder held together by the layers of paint and gypsum plaster on its surfaces. The coffins were lifted out of the ground in fragments after a photographic record was made, from which reconstruction drawings have been produced (Kemp 2010, 18–21, figs 7–8).

Both coffins are of the ‘new type’ with human offering bearers and columns of text on their walls. Coffin 3 (unit 13281; Fig. 9) has four male offering figures separated by columns of hieroglyphs, with a fifth female figure at the shoulder. The name bands alternate the personal names Hesy(t)en-Ra and Hesy(t)en-Aten. Coffin 4 (unit 13262; Figs 10 and 11) was slightly larger, at 2m long, and shows on each wall four men carrying offerings or standing before a table of offerings, each figure separated by columns of largely unintelligible hieroglyphs. A larger table of offerings is placed at the shoulder. In neither case were any skeletal remains or burial goods preserved within the grave.

The 2011 coffin, Coffin 5 (unit 13438), was situated in square AA105 and was again almost intact apart from the lid (Stevens 2012a, 4–5, fig. 4). While one of the coffin panels is still covered in CDD, on the other traces of four standing figures can be discerned. The decoration is very poorly preserved, and requires closer study, but one of the figures is clearly jackal-headed (Fig. 12). The coffin was densely filled with jumbled bone representing the remains of four individuals. The most complete, and most likely to have been the original occupant, was a female aged 15–18 years (Ind. 199A). Bones from a foetus (Ind. 199D) suggest she may have been pregnant at the time of death. There were no remaining grave goods.

A further coffin with what seems to be traditional imagery, Coffin 6 (obj. 40107), was found in 2012 in square AL105. It had been smashed into pieces by robbers, but some of the wood was in good condition, retaining a black-painted ground with cream-coloured decoration, a jackal-headed figure again visible (Bettum 2015). The grave contained skeletal elements from a child aged 8–12 years (Ind. 315).
The Middle Site

No decorated coffins were found at the Middle Site, where only a small area was excavated, although two plain wooden coffins were present; Fig. 13 shows their locations.

The Upper Site

Remains of five probable decorated coffins were found at the Upper Site (Fig. 14). The disturbed fill of the mud-brick tomb chamber in square G51, excavated in 2006, contained fragments of plastered and painted coffin wood, and also loose pieces of gold leaf. The same fill contained about half of the skeleton of a probable male aged 20–35 years (Ind. 21). A grave pit crossing squares I52 and J52 also contained small fragments of painted plaster that are perhaps from a coffin once interred here. A small portion of a juvenile skeleton, aged around 6.5 years (Ind. 62) was found within the grave, but was possibly intrusive. Another entirely robbed-out grave crossing squares H51 and I51 also contained painted plaster fragments, some perhaps from a coffin lid; in this case, no skeletal remains survived. In the latter two examples, both excavated in 2007, only small amounts of painted plaster were found, but the very regular shape of the grave pit and the heavy disturbance are noteworthy – both are typical of graves with painted coffins.

The 2007 excavations yielded a third example, Coffin 1, in square H52 (objs 37841–52, 37854, 37987; Kemp 2007, 21–2, fig. 8). The grave had been heavily looted and the coffin survived mostly as fragments of

Fig. 12: A jackal-headed figure on the side of Coffin 5 (unit 13438), after conservation treatment (Photograph: L. Skinner).

Fig. 13: Distribution map of wooden coffins at the Middle Site.
Fig. 14: Distribution map of wooden coffins at the Upper Site.
The Wadi End Site

The 2012 excavations at the Wadi End Site produced small fragments of plaster and wood from a decorated coffin, the same grave containing parts of an adult skeleton (Ind. 292), of indeterminate age and sex (Fig. 16).

Who was buried at the South Tombs Cemetery?

The South Tombs Cemetery is not the only non-elite cemetery for Akhetaten, and it is not entirely straightforward to ascertain who was buried here. There were at least three burial grounds located at the North Tombs, and each of the workers’ villages, the Workmen’s Village and Stone Village, had its own small cemetery (see Fig. 1). It has been proposed – on the basis of levels of degenerative joint disease, trauma and musculo-skeletal stress at the South Tombs Cemetery – that many of the people buried here had undertaken hard labour that might have included quarry work (Kemp et al. 2013, 71–4). The intention was not to imply, however, that these people necessarily belonged to a separate workers’ community as such.

The most straightforward explanation of the fact that there are two main cemetery groups at Amarna, one at the north and one at the south, is that this reflects the division of the residential suburbs of the city into two zones, the North Suburb and North City to the north of the Central City, and the Main City to its south (see Fig. 1). Undoubtedly, some caution needs to be exercised here. The high priest Panehesy, who evidently lived in the Main City (Griffith 1924, 302, pl. XXXIII), also having a formal residence beside the Great Aten Temple (Pendlebury 1951, 26–7, fig. 6, pls XI, XXXI, XXXII), was not buried at the South Tombs, but was the owner of North Tomb 6. Below his tomb, there is a small cemetery of pit graves, not yet excavated, but with Amarna Period pottery on its surface, which was perhaps used by Panehesy’s dependents, people who might have lived in small houses adjacent to his Main City estate. Furthermore, recent excavations at the largest of the northern cemeteries, located in a wadi between North Tombs 2 and 3, suggest this burial ground might have been for a labour force, whose place of residence is not yet clear (Stevens et al. 2015; 2017; Stevens and Dabbs forthcoming). A strict correlation between the north and south residential zones and cemeteries cannot be maintained, but we can probably assume nonetheless that a large number of the people buried at the South Tombs Cemetery were from the Main City.

plaster and degraded wood. Recognisable amongst the former are facial elements including two modelled ears, painted red, and it is likely that many of the fragments are from the coffin lid. It remains to be ascertained whether parts of the coffin case were also present, or whether the lid might have been thrown in from elsewhere. Human remains belonging to a female aged 30–39 years (Ind. 29) were found in association with the fragments, but nothing remained of any grave goods.

In 2008, a further decorated coffin, Coffin 2, appeared in square I51 (obj. 38819; Kemp 2008, 35–41, fig. 10; Fig. 15). Small parts of the coffin case survived, but the most notable element was the face from the lid. The coffin is for a female, named in inscriptions as Maya. Its decoration is of the ‘new type’, showing ritual scenes (Bettum 2015). Disarticulated bone was again found, being that of a female aged 40–49 years (Ind. 69A). An intact bowl containing botanical remains was found in situ on the grave floor at the head end of the coffin.
The Main City, to judge from the excavation and study of its houses (Tietze 1985; Crocker 1985; Shaw 2004, 16–18), was home to a population that varied considerably in socio-economic status and occupation. The study of the human remains from the South Tombs Cemetery in turn reveals individuals who died at various ages, from infants to older adults, while morphological analysis of cranio-facial features shows high levels of diversity, suggesting a population that originated from across Egypt and – at an indeterminate level of generational remove – beyond its borders (Gretchen Dabbs, pers. comm.). So at the South Tombs Cemetery (including the rock-cut tombs) we probably have a mixed and broadly representative sample of the Amarna population other than, obviously, the royal family, and perhaps also very poor or outcast members of society who may not have attained a proper burial. It offers a fruitful basis from which to pursue social analysis (see also Stevens 2017).

**Coffin use at Amarna**

Evidence from the South Tombs Cemetery indicates that wooden coffins were either rarely sought after or – more likely – rarely attainable at Amarna. They represent only around 10% of the burial containers excavated at the South Tombs Cemetery, and decorated examples around just 5%.\(^6\) This is an important dataset that confirms that coffins were rare commodities in

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\(^6\) These figures are obtained by dividing the number of coffins by the number of graves. They may be refined slightly as post-excavation analysis continues.
New Kingdom Egypt, assuming they were no more or less attainable at Amarna than at contemporaneous sites.7 The wooden coffins are not confined to any one part of the South Tombs Cemetery but spread across it, with a concentration of both decorated and plain examples across the south-western excavation squares of the Lower Site and probably the southern squares of the Upper Site, although here their identification is based on more fragmentary evidence (see Figs 8 and 14). Graves with coffins fit smoothly into their setting, mostly conforming to the same orientation as surrounding burials, and surely belonging to the same general process of infilling that populated the cemetery as a whole. It is difficult to know how exactly this progressed, although it was presumably a fairly organic process, to judge from the mixed nature of the interments and the lack of a gridded or similarly structured layout to the graves. Local topography may have been one of the influences on how graves were oriented. Those on flat ground often follow the line of the wadi itself – the dominant directional prompt in the landscape – but those on the sloping sides of the wadi tend to run across the gradient, often with the head of the deceased on the higher ground, mimicking perhaps the way a person would lie on uneven land. It seems likely that the colonisation of the ground was driven especially by family-level agency; it was potentially rife with social tension, including that connected to securing family plots. If there were mechanisms in place to regulate the use of space, they can only be guessed at.

It is tempting to see the cemetery beginning at the mouth of the wadi and the graves spreading down its length over time, although there is little scope to test this idea. If it is correct, however, the fragmentary coffin at the Wadi End Site (see Fig. 16) would lie exactly at the far limit of the burial ground and may thus have been interred close in time to the abandonment of Amarna, providing one temporal marker – unfortunately, almost entirely destroyed. It may be noteworthy, too, that the two coffins that have so far been identified with images of traditional divinities (Coffins 5 and 6) occur at the Lower Site (see Fig. 8), reasonably close to the beginning of the wadi, although with so many coffins surviving only as small fragments, we cannot be sure that similarly decorated examples were not once located further down the wadi. More significant, perhaps, is the close proximity of one of the ‘jackal coffins’ (Coffin 5) at the Lower Site to those of examples with ‘godless’ decoration, suggesting that these were potentially interred not far apart in time, and perhaps even used by people who were in some way associates.

Despite the robbery of the site, there is still information to be gleaned on the identity of those interred in the coffins through a combination of skeletal analysis, the inscriptions on the coffins, or simply the size of the grave in which coffin fragments were found. This is presented in Table 1, where a couple of patterns are clear: namely, the association of decorated coffins with adults, both female and male (although age is often deduced solely on the basis of grave size); and the large number of infants buried in plain wooden coffins. In the latter we might see a heightened desire to protect the young and vulnerable, if not through ritually charged iconography, then at least through a more substantial container than a burial mat. It is not clear, due to poor preservation, whether all of these infant coffins were purpose-made or might have been reused boxes. Coffin 8, the partially decorated child coffin at the Wadi Mouth Site (see Figs 6 and 7), offers an interesting case, the child being too big for the coffin and a hole having been cut through the foot-board to accommodate the feet. It presumably represents the expedient procurement of a burial container, perhaps from a coffin-maker’s non-commissioned stock. No attempt was made to finish the decoration of the coffin, or even it seems to inscribe a name; its incomplete decoration may have had little ritual value.

One of the underlying research questions for the cemetery is whether it can contribute to our understanding of the socio-economic make-up of the Amarna population, as a complement to previous work on the topic based on house sizes and fittings (Tietze 1985; 2010, 98–117; Crocker 1985; Kemp 1989, 298, 300). The cemetery data is not immediately promising because of the effects of robbery, but also because of the sense of uniformity across the graves. The site

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7 The situation is even more extreme at the cemetery between North Tombs 2 and 3, where no evidence of wooden coffins at all was encountered amongst the eighty-five graves excavated in 2015 (Stevens et al. 2015).
A. STEVENS

The identification of wood and pigment types is the work of Rainer Gerisch (Free University, Berlin) and Corina Rogge (Houston Museum of Art) respectively.

Has this perception necessarily uniform across the life–death–afterlife transition?

The Setne text is a reminder of the central role of the funeral in marking this transition, and of the socially charged occasion this constituted. Status, closeness to court culture and religious affiliation – of the deceased and/or those who took on responsibility for the funeral – would have been amongst the aspects on display. The ritual power that decorated coffins embodied, relative to simple matting coffins, must have imbued the decorated forms automatically with value – and public responses to the parading of ‘traditional’ or ‘new’ coffin types are fascinating to consider in this respect.

The quality of workmanship and materials must likewise have been open to some degree of scrutiny. In these respects, the Amarna coffins appear to be broadly comparable to non-elite coffins from other New Kingdom sites (Bettum 2015). Local woods are predominant, especially sycamore fig, and a typical New Kingdom palette of pigments is attested: red and yellow ochre, carbon black, Egyptian blue, calcite (white) and orpiment.8 Flakes of gold leaf found loose near coffin fragments in the mud-brick chamber at the Upper Site (see Fig. 5) could suggest the use of more precious decorative elements in at least this one case. Based on the artistic style and legibility of the text, the preliminary study of Coffins 3 and 4 from the Lower Site suggested that they were the products of ‘village’ craftsmen, who worked to a standard coffin template but were not trained as artists (Kemp 2010, 21). Greater artistic skill might be seen, perhaps, in the execution of the jackal figure on Coffin 5 (see Fig. 12) and the carving of the mask of Coffin 2 (see Fig. 15; Bettum 2015).

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8 The identification of wood and pigment types is the work of Rainer Gerisch (Free University, Berlin) and Corina Rogge (Houston Museum of Art) respectively.

Table 1: Breakdown of coffin ownership according to age and sex. Note that one of the undecorated coffins seems to have contained two infants (Inds 140 and 165).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coffin type</th>
<th>Infant (0–2.9)</th>
<th>Early child (3–6.9)</th>
<th>Late child (7–14.9)</th>
<th>Young adult female (15–24.9)</th>
<th>Young adult male (15–24.9)</th>
<th>Young adult (indet. sex) (15–24.9)</th>
<th>Adult female (25–50+)</th>
<th>Adult male (25–50+)</th>
<th>Probable adult (on the basis of grave size)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decorated wooden coffin</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 + 2?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecorated wooden coffin</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 + 1?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In any case, there is perhaps enough variation in the quality of decoration to suggest that this was executed in somewhat varied environments, although repositioning the coffins into their manufacturing contexts is not an easy task. We are looking for industries that are particularly ephemeral in the archaeological record — woodworking and painting — and beyond identifying suitable tools or pigments, we are unlikely to get far in finding direct evidence of spaces in which coffins were made at Amarna. It seems worth noting, nonetheless, that one concentration of artistic skill occurred at the Workmen’s Village, most evident in the vibrant paintings that decorated the chapels adjacent to the walled settlement (Weatherhead and Kemp 2007). Might it be that, like their Ramesside counterparts at Deir el-Medina (Cooney 2007), the artisans of the Amarna Workmen’s Village were sometimes engaged to take on private commissions of coffins? There is no record of decorated coffins being found amongst the graves of the workmen themselves, which might have provided support for this idea, but very few graves have been cleared here (Peet and Woolley 1923, 94; Stevens 2012b, 442; Stevens and Rose forthcoming).

Once interred at the South Tombs Cemetery, the coffins were rendered invisible, and any role as visual status markers was nullified. There are hints, however, that a sense of otherness was maintained at some of these burials through the use of superstructures somewhat more elaborate than average. The mud-brick chamber at the Upper Site — with its possible gold-leaf coffin — is the most likely example (see Fig. 5). Might we imagine a small pyramid and attached offering place, the latter in the grave-free area of ground to the north-east of the chamber (see Fig. 14)? In this one burial it is almost possible to see signs of the adjacent graves lining up orthogonally around it as though it was a monument, or represented a person, of some presence — although because it lies on the edge of an excavation area, the full picture of its setting is lacking.

At the Lower Site, loose fragments of mud brick found along the junction of squares U102 and U103 perhaps originated from a mud-brick superstructure at one or both of the graves with decorated coffins here. It might be no coincidence, too, that the Lower Site, with the largest number of wooden coffins proportionate to graves excavated, also has the most stelae (eight of fifteen definite examples), and one of the two small pyramidia. Although all were from disturbed contexts, three of the stelae were excavated near graves containing decorated coffins.

The stelae from the cemetery are of very variable quality. The simplest is little more than a roughly smoothed piece of limestone with a triangular design that is now weathered, but seems never to have been carefully incised (obj. 39425 from the Lower Site; see Fig. 4a). But even such simple monuments may have stood out at the site, assuming their rarity is not a result of post-depositional processes. The best-preserved of the stelae is a remarkable example in which a seated man and woman are shown in an intimate style reminiscent of imagery of the king and queen (obj. 39938 from the Lower Site; Kemp 2010, 16–17; see Fig. 4b), and it is difficult not to suppose that status — real or sought after — was inherent in the mimicking of court style.

But to what extent were statements of ‘otherness’ as inscribed in the burial landscape, or conveyed through the parading of a decorated coffin during a funeral, reflections of position during life? Emotions connected with bereavement may have prompted family members to acquire items beyond their normal means, while for some individuals attaining a coffin may have been a product of personal investment over the course of a lifetime — a pinnacle of achievement. Some people buried in coffins might indeed have had elevated status, but in a restricted social context — as the head of a household for example — rather than in a broader community setting. Individuals buried in coffins may have attained in life such benefits as a larger or better fitted-out house, but need not always have done so. It is worth asking whether some of the patterning seen at the South Tombs Cemetery could reflect such mechanisms of attaining coffins: the association of decorated coffins with a mud-brick superstructure at one or both of the graves with decorated coffins here.

In any case, there is perhaps enough variation in the quality of decoration to suggest that this was executed in somewhat varied environments, although repositioning the coffins into their manufacturing contexts is not an easy task. We are looking for industries that are particularly ephemeral in the archaeological record — woodworking and painting — and beyond identifying suitable tools or pigments, we are unlikely to get far in finding direct evidence of spaces in which coffins were made at Amarna. It seems worth noting, nonetheless, that one concentration of artistic skill occurred at the Workmen’s Village, most evident in the vibrant paintings that decorated the chapels adjacent to the walled settlement (Weatherhead and Kemp 2007). Might it be that, like their Ramesside counterparts at Deir el-Medina (Cooney 2007), the artisans of the Amarna Workmen’s Village were sometimes engaged to take on private commissions of coffins? There is no record of decorated coffins being found amongst the graves of the workmen themselves, which might have provided support for this idea, but very few graves have been cleared here (Peet and Woolley 1923, 94; Stevens 2012b, 442; Stevens and Rose forthcoming).

One grave did contain a plain wooden coffin at least. It occurred as part of a tomb assemblage that included a wooden object identified as a chair leg, a set of eight vessels, some apparently containing food offerings, and a hieratic ostracon. This would be considered a rich assemblage if found at the South Tombs Cemetery, the ‘chair leg’ unparalleled here. Burial architecture at the Workmen’s Village, and to some extent the Stone Village, is also more elaborate, both sites lying on a plateau of desert marl and soft rock that allowed the cutting of shaft-and-chamber tombs (Stevens 2012b, 442).
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Large quantities of pottery and burial materials, including interments wrapped in matting and in coffins, were removed from the South Tombs in the late 19th century, but not published (Davies 1906, 10–11; 1908, 13–14, n. 5). These are assumed to have been secondary, and indeed the pottery at least dates to Dynasties 25 and 30 (French 1986). The possibility that New Kingdom burial materials were amongst these, however, cannot be entirely ruled out. Amongst items found by Flinders Petrie at one coffin with traditional imagery (Coffin 5) to others in the new ‘godless’ style (Coffins 3 and 4) at the Lower Site might suggest that both decorative types were in circulation close in time, and perhaps used by people who were associated.

The general lack of evidence for subsidiary burials at the rock-cut South Tombs raises the possibility that some of the burials containing decorated coffins within the wadi itself are those of family members of the owners of these tombs. At the same time, consideration of the social dynamics of coffin ownership cautions against assumptions that there were always straightforward associations between coffin use and social-economic status.

Conclusions

Amarna provides a rare opportunity to situate cemeteries and burial assemblages within their broader urban context, while the cemeteries of Amarna in turn provide the chance to approach this extensively studied settlement not from the perspective of houses and households, but that of individual lives. In a burial landscape characterised by uniformity and the widespread use of burial mats to wrap the deceased, the decorated wooden coffins stand out. Their widespread distribution across the cemetery suggests that graves here were not strongly segregated according to socio-economic status, although clusters of somewhat better-off burials, perhaps grouped according to kinship ties, can also be found. The reasonably close proximity of

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**Bibliography**


