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THE FRAGMENT OF AN EGYPTIAN ANTHROPOID COFFIN FROM A PORTUGUESE PRIVATE COLLECTION (COLLECTION RUI MOREIRA)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the examination of the fragment of an Egyptian sculpture kept in the Collection Rui Moreira. Using a comparative approach with objects featuring a similar design, we propose a reconstruction of the object regarding its original archaeological context and dating. This approach allows us to identify this object as an important piece of evidence of the cultural renewal carried out in Thebes under the rule of the Kushite kings.

Keywords: Egyptian coffins; Theban necropolis; Third Intermediate Period.

Resumo

Este artigo centra-se no estudo de um fragmento de uma escultura egípcia conservado na Coleção Rui Moreira. Recorrendo a uma abordagem comparativa envolvendo objectos apresentando características similares, propomos a reconstrução do contexto arqueológico original do objecto e sua datação. Esta abordagem permite-nos identificar no objecto em estudo evidências da renovação cultural empreendida em Tebas durante a ocupação dos faraós Kuchitas.

Palavras-chave: Ataúdes egípcios; Necrópole tebana; Terceiro Período Intermediário.

Fragmenting objects was a common practice among art dealers during the 19th century and the early 20th century. Sometimes, this operation aimed at a greater profit by creating multiple objects that could be sold separately.

However, at times the art dealer aimed at enhancing the esthetical impact of the object, by simply removing “unnecessary” parts, probably too damaged to be considered “beautiful”. This seems to be the case of one interesting fragment belonging to an Egyptian anthropoid coffin kept in a Portuguese private collection: collection Rui Moreira in Porto.

According to the owner of the object, it was bought to an art dealer from Lisbon in 2008 during an Antiquities Fair held in the Palácio da Bolsa, in Porto. Any information was provided by the dealer regarding the provenance of the object or the former owners of the object.

The fragment consists of a finely modelled male face, carved in wood and covered with painted plaster (H: 29 cm; W: 24 cm; D: 11 cm). The face is angular and the bone structure clearly rules the composition.

The eyes and eyebrows have inlays of stone and copper. The irises are painted black against the white background of the stone. The nose is long with the nostrils poorly defined. The lips are large and well modeled but they are smoothed by using a thick layer of plaster, creating a *sfumatto* effect. The strong muscles of the face observe the male anatomical structure. The plaster was painted with red pigment.

The fine treatment of the anatomical details of the face contrasts with the crudely carved line of the wig, clearly indicating that it was concealed, perhaps under a thick layer of plaster. The size and shape of this fragment suggests that it once belonged to an object reaching nearly 2,0 m in height, probably an anthropoid coffin.

It was probably adorned with a divine beard. However, no hole has been found on the chin for that purpose, suggesting that the craftsman suspended the divine beard with a metallic device that run along the jaws. Moreover, a strong incision found on the left side suggests that such device was inlaid directly on the cheek.

The few vestiges detected in this fragment give us clues not only to date the object but also to sketch the original features of the coffin. The reddish face is a typical male feature in Egyptian sculpture, but it is rare in coffins. It was briefly used in the coffins depicting the deceased as a living, during the early 19th Dynasty (1295-1186 B.C.). During the late Ramesside Period (1295-1069 B.C.) and the 21st Dynasty (1069-945 B.C.), faces were commonly painted yellow regardless the gender of the deceased¹. With the 22nd Dynasty (945-715 B.C.), the faces of anthropoid coffins were painted green, red or black.

¹ Van Walsem 2014: 18-19. See also Taylor 1989: 39-46.

The use of inlaid copper or bronze eyebrows, as it is the case in this object, is worthy to note since it has been seldom detected in Egyptian sculpture, with the few known parallels found in anthropoid coffins dating from the 22nd Dynasty (945-715 BC) and the 23rd Dynasty (818-715 BC). One of such examples is found in the burial assemblage of Paisetenef, kept in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin (Inv. N. 51-52). The coffin set, dating from the 23rd Dynasty was found in Thebes². It involved three coffins: the outermost was rectangular in shape, while the others were anthropoid. The middle anthropoid coffin measures 1,91 m in height. Its case is very simply decorated with a single line of inscriptions running along the sides. The decoration of the lid is austere featuring a large foot-board and several columns of inscriptions. The hands are not depicted and the head-board is decorated with a large floral collar. The head of the deceased features an imposing divine wig and long curled beard. The face is reddish and the eyes and eyebrows have inlays of bronze and stone. The face is adorned with a short beard, also modelled with inlaid material.

The coffin of Nesibanebdjed (British Museum: EA 6657-lid, EA 6886-face), presents interesting parallels with our object³. The object is decorated observing the same scheme described above. The lid features a single band of hieroglyphic inscriptions running down the centre. The head-board includes a once imposing collar and a massive divine wig. The eyes and eyebrows have inlays of bronze. Inlaid stone had been used in the decoration of the eyes but it was removed. Moreover, the face is adorned with a squared beard, also crafted in bronze, held in situ by long stripes running along the jaws to suggest a short beard.

These two objects offer interesting parallels with the face kept in the Collection Rui Moreira, giving important clues regarding the dating and provenance of the object. The use of metallic inlays and the reddish paint suggest that it was crafted during the late 22nd and the 23rd Dynasty in Thebes. The style, however, reminds the lively and youthful portraits of officers dating from the Old Kingdom, announcing the archaization that would be known from the 25th Dynasty (747-656 B.C.) onwards.

It is interesting to point out that a similar pattern of decoration is observed in objects dating from the 25th Dynasty. The burial ensemble of

² Arnst et al 1991: 211.

³ Taylor 2010: 172-173.

Padiamunet, from Thebes, is a later example of this trend⁴. This scheme of decoration was used in objects with disparate levels of quality. Those using metallic inlays stand amongst the finest, but others simply used paint to reproduce the key-features of this model. Such is the case of the coffin of Harwa, dating from the 24th-25th Dynasty⁵.

It is thus likely that the fragment kept in Porto belonged to a Theban burial set dating from the 24th-25th Dynasty. This fragment would fit in the planks of the head-board and ears would be attached to it. A heavy wig and a large floral collar would complete the decoration of the head-board. Giving the size of the fragment it is likely that it belonged to a middle coffin. The complete funerary set would thus have included an inner anthropoid coffin and an outer rectangular *keresw* coffin.

Despite the fragmented state of this object, it is one of the few known artefacts where it is possible to detect the input of the Memphite conventions in the craftsmanship of Theban anthropoid coffins, during the Kushite rule.

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⁴ Sheikhosleslami 2014: 111-124.

⁵ See Bonacini 2015: 176.

FIGURES



Fig. 1 - Frontal view



Fig. 2 – Left side