

## WOODEN COFFINS INSIDE STONE SARCOPHAGI: A COMMON PRACTICE OR AN EXCEPTION IN THE OLD KINGDOM?

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Burial containers (including wooden coffins and stone sarcophagi) were one of the most important aspects of burials in ancient Egypt, but especially in the case of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2592 – 2120 BCE) they have not been properly researched. In particular, what remains unclear is the number of burial containers used in one burial. There are three possibilities regarding this particular issue. The first suggests that there was a wooden coffin inside each sarcophagus, the second claims that when there was a stone sarcophagus, no wooden coffin was needed, and the third envisages a variety of options. Archaeological evidence attests stone sarcophagi without wooden coffins as well as wooden coffins inside stone sarcophagi in addition to other possibilities. This brief case study draws on material from the residential, Memphite necropolis (mainly Abusir, but also from Saqqara and Giza) and demonstrates that there was considerable variation and that we do not properly understand the reasons behind the different choices in the terms of funerals and burials.

**Keywords:** Old Kingdom, wooden coffin, stone sarcophagus, burial practices, society, economy, religion

The ancient Egyptians are reputed to have been greatly concerned with death and burial and as such to have invested much effort and many resources into mortuary-related issues. Although this statement is somewhat exaggerated, the truth is that they created an elaborate system of afterlife beliefs that were (besides being status symbols) projected in the burial structures and items that

accompanied the deceased.<sup>1</sup> The ancient Egyptians sought, at least according to the sources at our disposal, to live eternally after death. Death was only a kind of transitional stage between the earthly life and their eternal existence in the hereafter, and a number of rituals were connected to it and to the funeral itself.<sup>2</sup> However, the funeral, at least in some social groups, must also have been a significant public event, demonstrating thus the wealth and importance of the deceased (and their families). Even if scenes of funerary processions are present in tomb decorations (see below), the practical part of the funerals remains less or more unexplored. Admittedly individual stages of the funeral have been identified by Andrey O. Bolshakov, but he did not go into detail regarding the practicalities.<sup>3</sup> One of the related topics is the issue of how many burial containers were used for the dead of those who could be considered of higher social status. Undoubtedly, there were burials in a simple pit without a burial container, but what the case was for elite interments remains unknown, which only goes to confirm the fact that the subject of burial containers for the Old Kingdom period (ca. 2592 – 2120 BCE) remains largely unexplored.<sup>4</sup>

As far as members of the Old Kingdom elite are concerned, wooden coffins and stone sarcophagi constitute an important part of burials.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, the burial containers had two basic functions: practical (physical safeguarding of the body) and symbolic (magical protection of the deceased).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, one can add a third significant function, namely that of status symbol, especially in the case of stone sarcophagi and coffins made of cedar or imported wood in general. However, the burial containers of the Old Kingdom period, especially wooden coffins, remain largely unexplored and so there is no certainty regarding their number in one burial.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary on the topics related to death, funerary and mortuary customs in ancient Egypt, see, e.g., IKRAM, S. *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, with further references.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the ancient Egyptian view of death, see ASSMANN, J. *Der Tod als Thema der Kulturtheorie. Todesbilder und Totenriten im Alten Ägypten*.

<sup>3</sup> BOLSHAKOV, A. O. The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession. In *Göttinger Miszellen*, 1991, Vol. 121, pp. 38–40.

<sup>4</sup> The project “Ancient Egyptian Burial Containers of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. Evolution, Contextualisation and Significance” supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic began in 2023 and it explores the burial containers of the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period in a broader context.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, the terms “coffin” and “sarcophagus” are used interchangeably, but this article clearly distinguishes between the sarcophagus, made of stone, and the coffin, from wood or other materials (reed, pottery).

<sup>6</sup> TAYLOR, J. H. *Egyptian Coffins* (Shire Egyptology Series 4), p. 7.

The stone sarcophagi are the ones that are usually better preserved than wooden coffins.<sup>7</sup> In the majority of cases, they have survived (almost) complete, sometimes also in fragments and exceptionally in outlines on the walls of the burial chambers (as, for instance, in the mastaba of Khuwy at South Saqqara).<sup>8</sup> The sarcophagi were manufactured from several types of stone, be it limestone, granite, greywacke, travertine,<sup>9</sup> etc. Being from durable materials, they were prestigious items and also a gift from the king. The king or local rulers oversaw the quarrying activities and sent expeditions of an almost military character to obtain various types of stone.<sup>10</sup>

Many tombs contained wooden coffins as well. At first sight, it might seem that wooden coffins were not as prestigious as stone sarcophagi, but this view might be distorted by the fact that the Old Kingdom wooden coffins have been neglected in the research (see below). There are examples of coffins made of cedar which was imported from the Levant, and as such under the control of the king and the royal administration. The role of the king in the long-distance trade in timber has sometimes been suggested, based on two entries on the Palermo Stone from the time of King Snefru, but as Toby A. H. Wilkinson pointed out,<sup>11</sup> it was the construction of the boats rather than the transport of timber itself that was actually mentioned in the annals. In general, the Old Kingdom corpus of wooden coffins is extensive (more than 300), but these items have been neglected

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<sup>7</sup> Stone sarcophagi with their socio-economic aspects have been studied by Věra Nováková (Štěpánová). Cf. ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ, V. *Kamenné sarkofágy v Egyptě ve 3. tisíciletí před Kristem* [Stone Sarcophagi in Egypt during the 3rd Millennium BC]; NOVÁKOVÁ, V. Old Kingdom Sarcophagi: The Abusir Corpus. In INCORDINO, I., MAINIERI, S., D'ITRIA, E., DILETTA PUBBLICO, M., MICHELE REGA, F., SALSANO, A. (eds.). *Current Research in Egyptology 2017. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Symposium, University of Naples "L'Orientale" 3–6 May 2017*, pp. 139–160; NOVÁKOVÁ, V. Old Kingdom Stone Sarcophagi as Indicators of Social Change. In KURASZKIEWICZ, K. O., KOPP, E., TAKÁCS, D. (eds.). *The Perfection that Endures... 'Studies on the Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology*, pp. 333–346.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MEGAHED, M., VYMAZALOVÁ, H. The Tomb of Khuwy at Djedkare's Royal Cemetery at South Saqqara. Preliminary Report on the 2019 Spring Season. In *Prague Egyptological Studies*, 2019, Vol. XXIII, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> There is no generally accepted opinion on the terminology of this type of stone. Some prefer "Egyptian alabaster" or "calcite". However, the present study will follow Barbara G. Aston, Paul T. Harrell and Ian Shaw, where "travertine" is used. Cf. ASTON, B. G., HARRELL, J. A., SHAW, I. Stone. In NICHOLSON, P. T., SHAW, I. (eds.). *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> WILKINSON, T. A. H. *Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt. The Palermo Stone and its Associated Fragments*, pp. 141, 143.

in both coffin and Old Kingdom research.<sup>12</sup> Wood deteriorates due to humidity in the subterranean chambers, attacks of fungi and insects, but also because of tomb robbers. To obtain an overall view of the distribution of the Old Kingdom wooden coffins is even more difficult because, with a few exceptions, archaeologists and excavators have not been concerned in their observations of find contexts with whether there were any remains of wood, be it unidentified fragments, rotten wood or only brown powder from the wood.

Uncertainty about the number of burial containers in an individual interment in the period of the Old Kingdom has given rise to three opinions on the subject:

1. The suggestion that without any doubt, wooden coffins were inside stone sarcophagi, at least in the case of royal burials, was expressed by John Baines when investigating the earliest mortuary texts.<sup>13</sup>
2. The second assumption is that a stone sarcophagus might have been enough and there was no need to have a wooden coffin, even in royal contexts.<sup>14</sup>
3. Lastly, the third view argues for considerable variation in the use of burial containers, reflecting thus several interesting phenomena.

Clearly, the first and the second points are problematic, as revealed by archaeological evidence (see below).

At this point, it also needs to be said that the present author firstly was in favour of Baines' position, when taken in a broader sense, meaning that each burial in the sarcophagus contained a wooden coffin as well. This assumption was based on the fact that it must have been more practical to bury the deceased in a coffin, as well as on the evidence of funeral scenes in the relief decoration of various Old Kingdom tombs where a coffin often appears in the funerary processions.

Andrey O. Bolshakov counted 16 examples of funerary scenes from the period under survey.<sup>15</sup> The first large composition of this type is the one in the tomb of

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<sup>12</sup> PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Old Kingdom Wooden Coffins: A Neglected Topic. In JIMÉNEZ SERRANO, A. (ed.). *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings from the Conference Held in Jaén.*

<sup>13</sup> "Here, I start with the observation of J. P. Allen, that the focus of the inscription of Pyramid Texts is next to the sarcophagus, which contained the mummy, no doubt within a coffin." BAINES, J. Modelling Sources, Processes, and Locations of Early Mortuary Texts. In BICKEL, S., MATHIEU, B. (eds.). *Textes des pyramides et textes des sarcophages : d'un monde à l'autre : actes de la table ronde internationale, IFAO – 24 – 26 septembre 2001*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>14</sup> Gabrielle Pieke, personal communication.

<sup>15</sup> BOLSHAKOV, A. O. The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession. In *Göttinger Miszellen*, 1991, Vol. 121, pp. 34–35.

Debeheni at Giza (G 8090),<sup>16</sup> dated to the Fourth Dynasty, the reign of King Menkaure (ca. 2447 – 2442<sup>+25</sup> BCE)<sup>17</sup>. The south wall of the so-called second room shows five male figures dragging an object that has, however, been destroyed. Selim Hassan has suggested that the people are pulling a sledge or a boat with a statue or a corpse in a coffin.<sup>18</sup>

More details appeared in the funeral scenes of the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2305 – 2115<sup>+25</sup> BCE).<sup>19</sup> An example comes from the north wall of Court C in the tomb of Qar at Giza (G 7101).<sup>20</sup> This structure is dated to the reign of Pepi I (ca. 2276 – 2228<sup>+25</sup> BCE) or slightly later. As for the scene, there is a series of depictions in which a container with the body of the deceased is apparently transported by boat and several people into the purification tent (*jbw*) and into the embalming workshop (*w3b.t*).<sup>21</sup>

In this regard, one can wonder whether it is a coffin or a sarcophagus that is being depicted. The latter, however, seems unlikely since it would be too heavy to be carried by the people. Moreover, much other evidence allows us to assume that sarcophagi were installed in subterranean chambers before the actual completion of the constructing of the tomb and some of them may have been finished in the burial chamber itself, as is the case of the limestone sarcophagus from Shaft no. 113 that is located to the west of the Step Pyramid complex at

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<sup>16</sup> HASSAN, S. *Excavations at Giza: 1932 – 1933. Excavations of the Faculty of Arts, Fouad I University. Excavations at Giza 4*, pp. 175–179; HARPUR, Y. *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom: Studies in Orientation and Scene Content* (Studies in Egyptology), p. 113; BOLSHAKOV, A. O. The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession. In *Göttinger Miscellen*, 1991, Vol. 121, pp. 33, 34.

<sup>17</sup> The dating used in this article is according to HORNUNG, E., KRAUSS, R., WARBURTON, D. A. *Ancient Egyptian Chronology* (Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section One. The Near and Middle East 83), p. 491.

<sup>18</sup> HASSAN, S. *Excavations at Giza: 1932 – 1933. Excavations of the Faculty of Arts, Fouad I University. Excavations at Giza 4*, p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> There are some funeral depictions of the funeral from the Fifth Dynasty, the reign of King Nyuserre (ca. 2402 – 2374<sup>+25</sup> BCE) for instance in the tomb of Nyankhkhnum and Khnumhotep on the east and west wall of the pillared portico. There is not a depiction of a coffin, but of a naos. Cf. MOUSSA, A. M., ALTENMÜLLER, H. *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep* (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 21), pp. 46–55, Taf. 6–15; BOLSHAKOV, A. O. The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession. In *Göttinger Miscellen*, 1991, Vol. 121, pp. 33, 34. One must, however, bear in mind that many tombs from the early and mid-Fifth Dynasty have not been explored.

<sup>20</sup> SIMPSON, W. K. *The Mastabas of Qar and Idu. G 7101 and 7102* (Giza Mastabas 2), p. 1, fig. 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6, pl. 7, fig. 24.

North Saqqara and that was excavated by the Polish mission.<sup>22</sup> It has to be admitted that there are some depictions of sarcophagi in the tomb relief decoration, but they are mostly scenes of the manufacturing of the sarcophagus. As a result of this, the wooden coffin would be more appropriate for the actual funeral (and the decoration as well). From a practical point of view, it would be easier to let down the body of the deceased in a container into the shaft. However, one should bear in mind that the tomb scenes capture partly idealised depictions of the funeral, regardless of whether it was the image of a real coffin or not. And these depictions tend to avoid picturing the dead body.<sup>23</sup>

A minute inspection of the archaeological material has led the present author to reconsider this assumption and this case study aims to demonstrate that the archaeological situations support neither the first nor the second theory, the author being therefore in favour of the third option. There was considerable variation in the use of the burial containers (only a stone sarcophagus; a stone sarcophagus and wooden coffin, a wooden coffin in a burial pit, only a wooden coffin, but also a burial container from different materials and burials without a coffin). This article also focuses on the discussion of the factors that influenced the choice of the burial container.

## **Archaeological Evidence**

There are a great number of Old Kingdom cemeteries throughout Egypt with tombs of members of the elite, as well as non-elites, but this article investigates the finds from the residential Memphite necropolis and more precisely mainly from Abusir, but also Saqqara and Giza. Thus, the list of the archaeological evidence will not be extensive, but illustrative. Though incomplete, the examples presented here can clearly testify for the premise presented above.

## **Stone Sarcophagi**

Seemingly, the use of only a stone sarcophagus in a burial can be evidenced by a number of examples. However, one has to point out here that this situation may have been caused, as mentioned above, by the fact that many an excavator did not pay enough attention to the presence of wood or the dust in disturbed contexts

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<sup>22</sup> WELC, F. Installing a Stone Sarcophagus in the Burial Chamber of an Old Kingdom Shaft. In *Études et Travaux*, 2010, Vol. XXIII, pp. 179–207.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also BOLSHAKOV, A. O. The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession. In *Göttinger Miszellen*, 1991, Vol. 121, p. 42.

of the burial chambers. There is, indeed, evidence of burial only in a sarcophagus, but the number might be lower than expected and this phenomenon has to be re-examined.

Burial in a limestone sarcophagus without a wooden coffin was used for the burial of a man (Exc. No. 53/AS37/2007)<sup>24</sup> interred in the Burial Chamber West of Shaft 1 in the mastaba belonging to the sun priest Neferinpu (AS 37, dating: late Fifth Dynasty; fig. 1).<sup>25</sup> The deceased remains anonymous since no traces of a name were found. It has to be admitted that the burial was disturbed by robbers, but the body stayed inside the sarcophagus and no remains of a wooden coffin were present. In this context, one must bear in mind that this burial chamber was visited by thieves, but had there been a coffin, at least some remains might have been present in the rubble inside the burial chamber. Admittedly, the remains of wood were collected in the south part of this room, but these pieces belong to a canopic chest,<sup>26</sup> and hence are not the remains of a coffin.

A more illustrative example can be found in the same tomb, in the Burial Chamber East of Shaft 1,<sup>27</sup> where an intact burial of the main owner of the mastaba, Neferinpu, was found. The dating is similar to the previously mentioned example (i.e. late Fifth Dynasty). Neferinpu belonged to lower-ranked officials,<sup>28</sup> and his burial chamber was equipped with a limestone sarcophagus alongside its east wall. The sealed sarcophagus contained the body of Neferinpu (Exc. No. 42/AS37/2007) and some items of burial equipment, including a wooden headrest (Exc. No. 43/AS37/2007), a wooden staff (Exc. No. 44a/AS37/2007) and a wooden sceptre (Exc. No. 44b/AS37/2007). No remains of a wooden coffin were present inside the sarcophagus (fig. 2), which clearly demonstrates that there was no container of this type.

As far as royal burials are concerned, it can be stated that only stone sarcophagi (complete or in fragments) are preserved. However, it does not

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<sup>24</sup> In the archaeological part of the publication, the burial is identified as belonging to a woman of ca. 40 years (BÁRTA, M. *The Architecture and Archaeology of the Tomb*. In BÁRTA, M. et al. *The Tomb of the Sun Priest Neferinpu (AS 37)* (Abusir XXIII), p. 42), but the anthropological evaluation states that it was the burial of a man aged over 50 (HAVELKOVÁ, P. *Anthropology*. In BÁRTA, M. et al. *The Tomb of the Sun Priest Neferinpu (AS 37)* (Abusir XXIII), pp. 167–169).

<sup>25</sup> BÁRTA, M. *The Architecture and Archaeology of the Tomb*. In BÁRTA, M. et al. *The Tomb of the Sun Priest Neferinpu (AS 37)* (Abusir XXIII), pp. 39–42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39 and fig. 3.41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–38.

<sup>28</sup> BÁRTA, M. *Conclusions*. In BÁRTA, M. et al. *The Tomb of the Sun Priest Neferinpu (AS 37)* (Abusir XXIII), pp. 208–210.

necessarily mean that the kings did not have a wooden coffin as well.<sup>29</sup> The internal dimensions of these sarcophagi allow us to envisage that there might have been a wooden coffin.<sup>30</sup> There is, however, also an oval sarcophagus of pink granite from the remains of the northern pyramid (so-called Grand Fossé) located at the locality of Zawiyet el-Aryan. It has been assumed that its owner was the enigmatic King Baka from the Fourth Dynasty; Baka may have been the son of King Khafre.<sup>31</sup> The sarcophagus was also found sealed, but when opened, it was empty.<sup>32</sup> Alexandre Barsanti noticed only a line of black deposit that may have come from an offering. Even though the inner dimensions of the sarcophagus (210 × 106 × 105 cm)<sup>33</sup> are big enough to house a coffin, its shape is really unique and supposedly, no coffin would fit inside. Even if Barsanti found the sarcophagus sealed and empty, we cannot be sure from when the sealing dates. We may suppose that the owner of the northern pyramid at Zawiyet el-Aryan (Baka?) might not have had a wooden coffin, but there is no certainty.

On the basis of these findings, it remains unclear whether even the kings had a stone sarcophagus as well as a wooden coffin. This is perhaps something we will never ascertain.<sup>34</sup>

### **A Wooden Coffin in a Stone Sarcophagus**

On the other hand, there are also examples of stone sarcophagi that must originally have housed a wooden coffin. The number of such burials is not high (so far; future research may modify this statement), but there are at least some clear and undeniable examples.

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<sup>29</sup> PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Old Kingdom Wooden Coffins: a Neglected Topic. In JIMÉNEZ SERRANO, A. (ed.). *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings from the Conference Held in Jaén.*

<sup>30</sup> For the inner dimensions, cf. ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ, V. *Kamenné sarkofágy v Egyptě ve 3. tisíciletí před Kristem* [Stone Sarcophagi in Egypt during the 3rd Millennium BC], entries SA 4, GI 7, SA 21, SA 22, SA 44, GI 48, SA 80, ZA 91, SA 163, GI 182.

<sup>31</sup> VERNER, M. Zawiyet el-Aryan. In BÁRTA, M., BRŮNA, V. (eds.). *The Pyramid Fields of Ancient Egypt: A Satellite Atlas*, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> BARSANTI, A. Rapport. In *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte*, 1906, Vol. VII, pp. 285.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286.

<sup>34</sup> PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Old Kingdom Wooden Coffins: A Neglected Topic. In JIMÉNEZ SERRANO, A. (ed.). *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings from the Conference Held in Jaén.*



The evidence comes from the tomb of judge Inti (AS 22), which is located at Abusir South.<sup>35</sup> Inti's mastaba contained several shafts,<sup>36</sup> and one of them (Shaft A) brought to light a burial of Inti's relative, called Inti Pepiankh, dated to the Sixth Dynasty. In the burial chamber at the bottom of this shaft, there was a limestone sarcophagus. Although the chamber was looted, many items of the original burial equipment were found there.<sup>37</sup> The robbers did not touch the burial equipment, but they broke into the sarcophagus and severely damaged the body that was interred inside it. What is important is the fact that a floor plank from a wooden coffin remained inside the sarcophagus (fig. 3). Pieces of wood were also found on the sarcophagus and this is another piece of evidence that proves the presence of the wooden coffin in this burial.<sup>38</sup> This clearly demonstrates that Inti Pepiankh was buried in a wooden coffin inside the limestone sarcophagus.

There is, however, a much earlier example from the galleries of the Step Pyramid. Shaft V contained two travertine sarcophagi and in one of them the remains of a wooden coffin were found.<sup>39</sup> It has been suggested that members of the royal family were buried there. Taking into account the inner dimensions (153 × 52 × ? cm) of these sarcophagi, it has been assumed that they were prepared for

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<sup>35</sup> BÁRTA, M. The Sixth Dynasty Tombs in Abusir. In BÁRTA, M. (ed.). *The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Prague, May 31 – June 4, 2004*, pp. 45–62; BÁRTA, M., VACHALA, B. et al. *The Tomb of Inti* (Abusir XXI).

<sup>36</sup> BÁRTA, M. The Sixth Dynasty Tombs in Abusir. In BÁRTA, M. (ed.). *The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Prague, May 31 – June 4, 2004*, fig. 2.

<sup>37</sup> ODLER, M. Copper Vessels and their Miniatures from the Burial Chamber of Inti Pepiankh; Copper Altar and Set of Miniaturised and Model Vessels from the Burial Chamber of Inti Pepiankh; Set of Copper Model Tool Blades from the Burial Chamber of Inti Pepiankh. In BÁRTA, M., BAREŠ, L., KREJČÍ, J., MEGAHED, M., VARADZINOVÁ, L. (eds.). *Created for Eternity: the Greatest Discoveries of Czech Egyptology*, pp. 182–183, 186–187, 192–193; BÁRTA, M. Receptacles for Food Offerings from the Tomb of Inti Pepiankh; Scribes' Palette; Set of Stone Receptacles for Cosmetics. In BÁRTA, M., BAREŠ, L., KREJČÍ, J., MEGAHED, M., VARADZINOVÁ, L. (eds.). *Created for Eternity: The Greatest Discoveries of Czech Egyptology*, pp. 184–185, 188–189, 190–191; BÁRTA, M., VACHALA, B. et al. *The Tomb of Inti* (Abusir XXI).

<sup>38</sup> PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Wooden Coffins in the Tomb of the Judge Inti (AS 22) at Abusir South. In BÁRTA, M., VACHALA, B. et al. *The Tomb of Inti* (Abusir XXI).

<sup>39</sup> FIRTH, C. M., QUIBELL, J. E. *The Step Pyramid. Vols. 1–2* (Excavations at Saqqara); PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Old Kingdom Wooden Coffins: a Neglected Topic. In JIMÉNEZ SERRANO, A. (ed.). *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings from the Conference Held in Jaén*.

children.<sup>40</sup> However, one also has to consider the possibility that they are short burial containers intended for burials of bodies in a contracted position.<sup>41</sup>

Besides the cases when wooden coffins were installed inside sarcophagi, there are also attestations for burials in wooden coffins inside a burial pit that was cut into bedrock. The burial pit may have replaced the limestone sarcophagus. This is attested, for instance, in the burial of Lady Setib from Abusir South. She was buried in Shaft 14 of a family tomb belonging to her father Khemetnu (AS 79), and is dated to the Sixth Dynasty. Setib's body was interred in a wooden coffin made of imported cedar wood and in a burial pit.<sup>42</sup>

Other tombs have provided evidence for burials in a wooden coffin, but on the floor of the burial chamber, as demonstrated by the interment of priest Sefekhu from Shaft 14 of the courtyard of the complex of Princess Sheretnebtj (AS 68) at Abusir South.<sup>43</sup> This burial also comes from the Sixth Dynasty.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that two double wooden coffins (outer wooden coffin, inner wooden coffin) were excavated at Giza and are currently in the collections of the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum (ÄS 7512 and ÄS 7803).<sup>44</sup> The first one comes from an anonymous burial in the Giza cemetery G 5000, Shaft 316.<sup>45</sup> It has been suggested that it dates from the end of the Fifth to the

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<sup>40</sup> NOVÁKOVÁ, V. Old Kingdom Sarcophagi: the Abusir Corpus. In INCORDINO, I., MAINIERI, S., D'ITRIA, E., DILETTA PUBBLICO, M., MICHELE REGA, F., SALSANO, A. (eds.). *Current Research in Egyptology 2017. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Symposium, University of Naples "L'Orientale" 3 – 6 May 2017*, p. 338.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. NOVÁKOVÁ, V., PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Burials at Abusir. In BÁRTA, M. (ed.). *Kings of the Sun. Studies*, p. 258.

<sup>42</sup> DULÍKOVÁ, V., PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Decorated Coffin of King's Ornament Setib Buried at Abusir. In GRACIA ZAMACONA, C. (ed.). *Variability in the Early Egyptian Mortuary Texts (c. 2600 – 1600 BCE)*.

<sup>43</sup> VYMAZALOVÁ, H. Exploration of the Burial Apartments in Tomb Complex AS 68. Preliminary Report of the 2013 Fall Season. In *Prague Egyptological Studies*, 2015, Vol. XV, pp. 46–47.

<sup>44</sup> I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Regina Hölzl, the director of the Ägyptisch-Orientalische Sammlung in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, and to M. A. Karoline Halbwachs, the restorer of the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, for allowing me to study the coffins and for providing me with their archival documentation.

<sup>45</sup> JUNKER, H. *Giza VII. Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf Gemeinsame Kosten mit Dr. Wilhelm Pelizaeus Unternommenen Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza. Bd. VII. Der Ostabschnitt des Westfriedhofs. Erster Teil* (Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. Denkschriften 72. Bd. 3. Abhandlung), pp. 50–52, Taf. XI–XII; HASLAUER, E. Die Konstruktion von Kastensärgen aus Holz in der Ägyptischen Sammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien. Teil I. Särge des Alten und des

beginning of the Sixth Dynasty.<sup>46</sup> Both coffins are made of cedar wood<sup>47</sup> and at least the outer one constitutes a massive container. What is also thought-provoking is the fact that the outer and inner lids were tied together.<sup>48</sup>

Another example is represented by the double coffin of the official Meryib who was buried in shaft 693 at Giza.<sup>49</sup> The burial is dated to the end of the Sixth

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Mittleren Reiches. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2009, Vol. 6, passim.

<sup>46</sup> Hermann Junker suggested the dating to the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty or the end of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period (JUNKER, H. *Giza VII. Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf Gemeinsame Kosten mit Dr. Wilhelm Pelizaeus Unternommenen Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza. Bd. VII. Der Ostabschnitt des Westfriedhofs. Erster Teil* (Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. Denkschriften 72. Bd. 3. Abhandlung), p. 50). Elfriede Haslauer dates this coffin to the end of the Sixth Dynasty, whereas the documentation of the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum refers to the Fourth Dynasty. See HASLAUER, E. Die Konstruktion von Kastensärgen aus Holz in der Ägyptischen Sammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien. Teil I. Säрге des Alten und des Mittleren Reiches. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2009, Vol. 6, p. 146, footnote 10. However, according to Regina Hölzl, the turn of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty is the most suitable dating, which is also supported by the archaeological context. See HÖLZL, R. Katalog. In HAAG, S., HÖLZL, R., JÁNOSI, P. (eds.). *Im Schatten der Pyramiden. Die österreichischen Grabungen in Giza (1912 – 1929)*, p. 246; and Regina Hölzl, personal communication.

<sup>47</sup> HASLAUER, E. Die Konstruktion von Kastensärgen aus Holz in der Ägyptischen Sammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien. Teil I. Säрге des Alten und des Mittleren Reiches. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2009, Vol. 6, p. 146.

<sup>48</sup> JUNKER, H. *Giza VII. Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf Gemeinsame Kosten mit Dr. Wilhelm Pelizaeus Unternommenen Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza. Bd. VII. Der Ostabschnitt des Westfriedhofs. Erster Teil* (Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. Denkschriften 72. Bd. 3. Abhandlung), Abb. 18; HASLAUER, E. Die Konstruktion von Kastensärgen aus Holz in der Ägyptischen Sammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien. Teil I. Säрге des Alten und des Mittleren Reiches. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2009, Vol. 6, p. 162.

<sup>49</sup> JUNKER, H. *Giza VIII. Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf gemeinsame Kosten mit Dr. Wilhelm Pelizaeus unternommenen Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza. Bd. VIII. Der Ostabschnitt des Westfriedhofs. Zweiter Teil* (Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Denkschriften 73. Bd. 1. Abhandlung), pp. 140–151; ENGELHARDT, I., HASLAUER, E. Die Restaurierung des Innensarges von der Bestattung des Meri-ib aus Giza. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2005, Vol. 2, pp. 116–131; HASLAUER, E. Die Konstruktion von Kastensärgen aus Holz in der

Dynasty. As for the coffin itself, the outer one was made of sycamore wood and plastered whereas the inner one was of coniferous wood. Both chests bear inscriptions (offering formula, a title, an epithet and the name of the deceased) on the external perimeter of the case, and the inner coffin has a decoration on the inner east wall (a false door and an offering list).

## Discussion

Obviously, the archaeological evidence from the residential cemeteries (Abusir, Saqqara and Giza) demonstrates that neither the first (always stone sarcophagus and wooden coffin) nor the second (only stone sarcophagus) theory about the number of the burial containers in one burial is plausible. There are indeed stone sarcophagi that housed only a dead body, without a coffin (e.g. Burial Chamber West and Burial Chamber East of Shaft 1 in the mastaba of Neferinpu at Abusir South [AS 37]). On the other hand, we have burials that were interred in a stone sarcophagus as well as in a wooden coffin (e.g. Inti Pepiankh from Abusir South [AS 22], Shaft V in the Step Pyramid at Saqqara). Besides that, there are other possibilities, leaving aside for now containers made from other materials (pottery, reed), and those are a wooden coffin in a burial pit (e.g. Setib at Abusir South [AS 79]), a wooden coffin on the floor (e.g. Sefekhu from Abusir South [AS 68]) as well as a set of two wooden coffins (e.g. the anonymous coffins from Shaft 316 at Giza [ÄS 7512] and the coffins of Meryib from Giza [ÄS 7803]).

The use of a wooden coffin means that during the actual funeral, the body of the deceased was carried and let down the shaft in the wooden container. However, it is questionable whether this statement reflects the reality or whether the body inside the coffin might have been damaged during the movement down the shaft. Another option is that the body and the coffin were lowered down separately. In the burials where no coffin was used, the body must have been somehow transported into the burial chamber, with the aid of ropes and/or in a bag. Whether the action of letting down the body (regardless of it being in a coffin or not) was somehow ritualised also remains an open question as well. Hypothetically, the scene of the procession of the offering bearers and the sanctuary depicted on the tomb in the mastaba of Debeheni at Giza (G 8090)<sup>50</sup> might suggest some kind of ritual activities, if we consider that this scene depicts

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Ägyptischen Sammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien. Teil I. Särge des Alten und des Mittleren Reiches. In *Technologische Studien, Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 2009, Vol. 6, passim.

<sup>50</sup> HASSAN, S. *Excavations at Giza: 1932 – 1933. Excavations of the Faculty of Arts, Fouad I University. Excavations at Giza 4*, fig. 122.

the mummified body of Debeheni (in the form of a statue) before its being introduced into the shaft and into the burial chamber. On the other hand, there is the possibility that this is a depiction of the offering ritual in the tomb chapel.

In connection with the practical aspects of the funeral, it also needs to be said that the items of burial equipment, when found inside the coffin, were placed in the container at the moment when the coffin had already been lowered into the burial chamber, the sarcophagus or the burial pit. The coffin was transported through the shaft vertically oriented,<sup>51</sup> and this would have caused the items to move. This observation finds support in the archaeological evidence, mainly from the Middle Kingdom,<sup>52</sup> but also from the Old Kingdom (Abusir, AS 79).<sup>53</sup> However, whether the coffin went down with the body or not remains unclear.

The reasons for the choice of the particular container have not been identified. One possibility is the king's intervention to provide his officials with stone sarcophagi and/or maybe even the imported timber. Other factors may have also been the chronological and geographical development (see below), the economic situation of each individual (and their families), but also personal and/or religious preferences. Regrettably, there is not enough clear evidence in this regard. Only future in-depth analysis of the whole corpus of the Old Kingdom burial containers may shed more light on this particular topic.

As far as the chronological and geographical aspect of the burial practices is concerned, it needs to be stated that the text above has presented the finds of mainly the late Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. It has to be admitted that for the former, we only have (so far) examples of sarcophagi without coffins, whereas the wooden coffin inside the stone sarcophagus is attested in the latter. Nevertheless, the Step Pyramid brought to light the example of the wooden coffin in the travertine sarcophagus from the Third Dynasty, which is indeed a royal context, but at this point in the research it is not clear if the members of the elite copied this practice or not. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that there is also the double wooden coffin from the turn of the Fifth and the Sixth Dynasties. Whether the outer wooden coffin replaced the stone sarcophagus is a matter of debate. The

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<sup>51</sup> PODVIN, J.-L. Position du mobilier funéraire dans les tombes égyptiennes privées du Moyen Empire. In *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo*, 2000, Vol. 56, p. 283.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 277–334; MEYER, M. De. Reading a Burial chamber: Anatomy of a First Intermediate Period Coffin in Context. In TAYLOR, J. H., VANDENBEUSCH, M. (eds.). *Ancient Egyptian Coffins. Craft Traditions and Functionality* (British Museum Publications on Egypt and Sudan 4), p. 225.

<sup>53</sup> DULÍKOVÁ, V., PETERKOVÁ HLOUCHOVÁ, M. Decorated Coffin of King's Ornament Setib Buried at Abusir. In GRACIA ZAMACONA, C. (ed.). *Variability in the Early Egyptian Mortuary Texts (c. 2600 – 1600 BCE)*.

study of this material may lead to the conclusion that the Sixth Dynasty was very creative in terms of burial containers, but this statement might have to be revised by future research.

As for the geographical development, the material from Abusir and Saqqara is more or less similar, but Giza, with its double wooden coffins, is specific to a certain extent and points to another interesting tradition. Whether this was a local custom or whether it occurred also in Abusir and Saqqara is a topic that deserves more research.

### **Summary**

The material from Abusir, Saqqara and Giza brought together in this article provides us with important details on the burial customs of the ancient Egyptians and demonstrates that there was considerable variation and richness in the number of burial containers used for one single burial. Even if this article presents seemingly few examples for a reliable analysis, it clearly demonstrates the major trends. Obviously, it was not a rule to have a coffin inside the stone sarcophagus in the Old Kingdom period. However, on the other hand one cannot claim that there was no wooden coffin when a stone sarcophagus was used. There are attestations for both cases, and even for burials in a wooden coffin in a burial pit or on the floor, in double wooden coffins, as well as without a burial container. There are other examples from Abusir and Saqqara that have been unpublished, but their future publication will corroborate the observations of this article. The reasons behind the choice of wooden coffins, stone sarcophagi, the containers from other materials and no container are still beyond our understanding. What is clear, however, is that one cannot generalise.

### **Acknowledgements**

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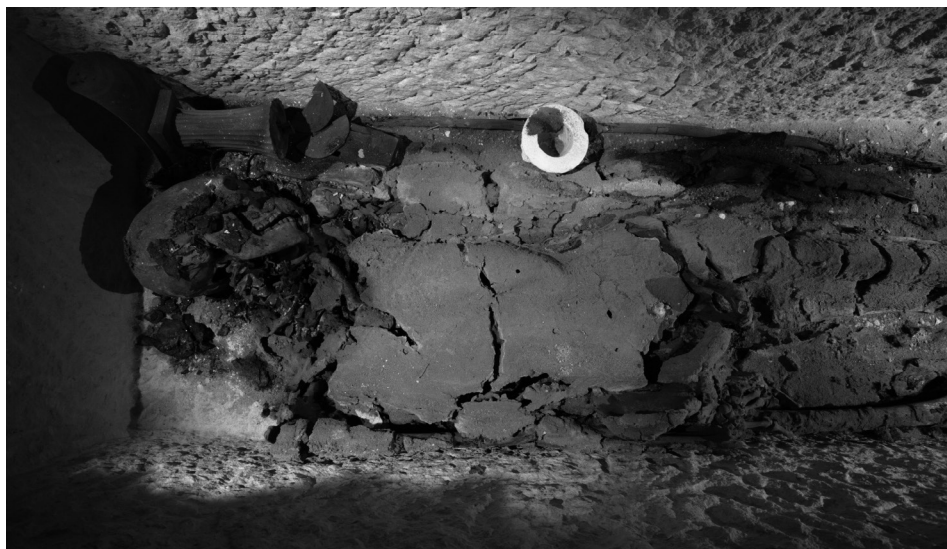
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# PLATES



**Peterková Hloučová, Fig. 1:** Burial Exc. No. 53/AS37/2007 in a limestone sarcophagus in the Burial Chamber West of Shaft 1 in the mastaba of Neferinpu at Abusir South (photo: Martin Frouz, © Czech Institute of Egyptology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University)



**Peterková Hloučová, Fig. 2:** Sarcophagus with the body of the sun priest Neferinpu (Exc. No. 42/AS37/2007) and some items of burial equipment in the Burial Chamber East of Shaft 1 in the mastaba of Neferinpu at Abusir South (photo: Martin Frouz, © Czech Institute of Egyptology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University)



**Peterková Hlouchová, Fig. 3:** Floor plank of a wooden coffin inside the limestone sarcophagus belonging to Inti Pepiankh (Shaft A, mastaba of Inti, Abusir South) (photo: Kamil Voděra, © Czech Institute of Egyptology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University)