



# Palaeographical Comparison and the Origin of the Coffin of Ankhtashepsit

Kea Johnston, University of California, Berkeley  
Contact: [kjohnsto@Berkeley.edu](mailto:kjohnsto@Berkeley.edu)

# Introduction

The coffin and cartonnage of Ankhtashepsit (sometimes called Ankh-tesh) at the Toledo Museum of Art has long been thought to have come from the site of Akhmim. However, this provenience is probably incorrect. Given its paleographical similarity to the coffin of an infant found at Beni Hasan by John Garstang, and the date on which the coffin of Ankhtashepsit was sold, it may well have also come from Beni Hasan. The existence of other pieces from the Third Intermediate Period stemming from the cemeteries at Beni Hasan hint that the site should be reconsidered as an origin for other unprovenienced Third Intermediate Period coffins with blue backgrounds.

Cartonnage of Ankhtashepsit, TMA 1906.1 Photo: Kea Johnston



## The Coffins of Ankhtashepsit, Toledo Museum of Art (1906.1, 1906.2)

A wooden coffin and cartonnage now at the Toledo Museum of Art (Toledo, Ohio) once belonged to a woman whose name was originally translated Ankh-tesh. Her name is inconsistently spelled and is ended in two places by a glyph depicting a standing hippopotamus with a protective loop. Her name is thus likely to have been Ankhtashepsit (*ḥt-šps.t*) or Ankhtent(ta)shepsit (*ḥt-n.t-šps.t*), where “ta-shepsit” is an epithet for the goddess Taweret (LGG VII, 53). Ankhtashepsit has no other titles or filiation in the inscriptions on her cartonnage and outer coffin. The male body associated with the set was not Ankhtashepsit herself; since it came to the museum in the outer coffin, it may have been added to the ensemble by the dealer.

This dealer was Ralph Blanchard, who worked for the American consulate and later owned an antiquities shop in the courtyard of the Shepard’s Hotel in Cairo (Hagen et al. 2016, 205). He sold the coffin and cartonnage of Ankhtashepsit to the Toledo-based glass magnate, Edward Libbey in 1906. Libbey donated it to the museum later in the same year (Anon 1906, 6,7). Based on stylistic parallels, the coffin and cartonnage must date to the Third Intermediate Period (22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty), not the Ptolemaic period as was originally supposed.



## An Akhmim Origin?

The museum's records claim that the coffin of Ankhtashepsit came from Akhmim, and this attribution has been echoed in the literature about the coffin. Hundreds of coffins from Akhmim dating to the first millennium BCE flooded the antiquities market between 1884 and the beginning of the 20th century—a time when tourism was becoming available to a wider swath of the public in Europe and the United States. It was also a time when wealthy industrialists wished to showcase their wealth through philanthropy.

These coffins came from a low hill in the desert now called *Naga el-Diabat*, located in the desert plain between the cliffs northeast of the city of Akhmim. *Naga el-Diabat* was excavated by Reis Halil Sakkar under the auspices of Gaston Maspero, head of the Ministry of Antiquities, between 1884 and 1889. At the same time as the official excavation, the site was also being systematically looted by treasure hunters both with and without official permission (Claude 2019, 43–53; Johnston 2022, 37–44). This looting continued long after Maspero/Sakkar's excavation had ended such that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the site had a reputation among scholars for having been so devastated as to merit little further attention (Petrie 1931, 80).

Despite the profusion of artefacts from Akhmim on the market in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there is reason to doubt the Akhmim provenience of Ankhtashepsit's coffins. Firstly, the source of the provenience seems to have been the dealer, Blanchard, who may not have known where the coffins came from or whose interests may not have been served by revealing it.

# Irreconcilable Stylistic Differences

The second reason to question Blanchard’s provenience is that the coffin of Ankhtashepsit is stylistically completely of the “Northern” type. That is, it has features of construction and decoration like coffins found in the cemeteries of Middle Egypt and Memphis (Taylor, 2009). In contrast, the few coffin/cartonnage sets that can be attributed with certainty to Akhmim exhibit a mixture of Northern and Theban features.

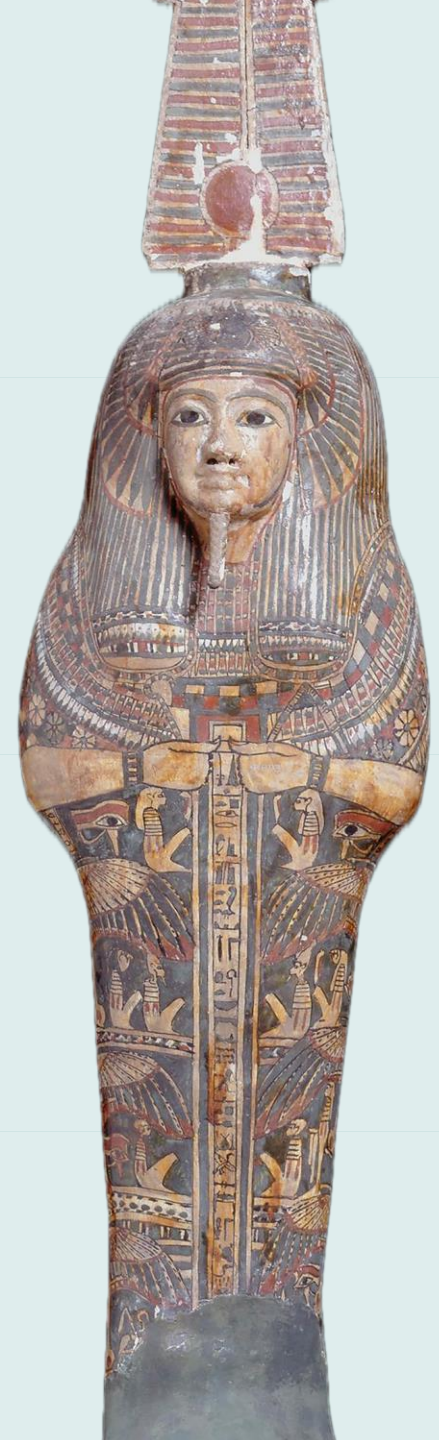
|  | Sculpted Contours and foot on Outer Lid (Theban) | ”Sunrise Motif”/ Winged Deco (Theban) | Wooden Face for Cartonnage (Northern) | Depiction of hands with "Gloves" (Northern) | Recumbent Jackal on Outer Coffin Inscription (Northern) | "Water to your Ba" offering formula (Northern) | Use of chain-pattern in borders. (Northern) | Scarab or Falcon winged headdress (Northern) |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|
| Ankhtashepsit Toldeo, 1906.1, 1906.2 (Unknown)         |  |                                       | X                                     | X   | X   | X  | X   | X  |
| Asetemkheb Krakow, MNK XI-482a,b (Akhmim)              | X  |                                       | X                                     | X   |   |  |   |  |
| Nespaqaishuty Athens, 3412 (Akhmim)                    | N/A  | X                                     | X                                     |   | N/A   |  |   |  |
| Heqaankhu Leiden, AES 12b, 13b (Akhmim)                |  |                                       | X                                     |   | X   | X  |   | ?  |
| Nesykhonsupakhered Berkeley, 6-19929, 6-19931 (Thebes) | X  | X                                     |                                       |   |   |  |   |  |
| Unknown Greenlock, 1987.395 (Sedment)                  |  |                                       | X                                     | X   |   | ?  | X   | X  |
| Anonymous Child EA 41603 (Beni Hasan)                  | N/A  |                                       | X                                     | No gloves but hands are shown.              | N/A   | X  | X   | X  |

# An Uncanny Parallel: The Coffin of an Anonymous Infant (British Museum EA 41603)

A search for stylistically northern coffins with a blue background led to the coffin of an anonymous infant, now in the British Museum (EA 41603). While the coffins have different layouts in terms of number of registers and selection of vignettes a closer look at the inscriptions reveals striking similarities. Both coffins have a central inscription with containing an offering formula to Osiris and wishing for “Water for the Ba”: a formula common on Northern coffins. However, these two coffins share some distinctive orthographical and palaeographical features that do not occur on other stylistically similar cartonnages. Among other similarities:


























- The *imnt.t* sign (R14) has a short pole on and a long plume.
- The long, tapering outer end of the eye glyph (A4), has a pupil not quite in the centre.
- The mummy glyphs, (A54, A55) have a prominent knotted sash at the area of the groin.
- The word *hqꜣ* has a superfluous *.t* ending though it is not feminine.
- The word *hꜣ.t* (corpse) is abbreviated and written with a single sign, *hꜣ*.
- The word *zꜣh* (divinized body) is written with two signs, *z* and A54/55.
- The term *hn.ty imnt.t* (Foremost of the West) has a similar spelling on the Anonymous coffin and on Ankhtashepsit.

The similarities in the orthography and handwriting indicate that the **cartonnage of an anonymous infant and the cartonnage/coffin set of Ankhtashepsit were likely inscribed by the same person.**







|   |     |    |     | <i>h̲z.t</i>  | <i>zḥ</i>  | <i>hn.ty</i><br><i>imnt.t</i>   |
|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| Ankhtashepsit<br>Cartonnage<br>(TMA 1906.1)                     |    |    |    |  |   |    |
| Ankhtashepsit<br>Coffin<br>(TMA 1906.2)                         |    |    |    |  |   |    |
| Anonymous<br>Infant<br>(BM EA 41603)                            |   |    |   |  |  |   |
| Asetemkheb<br>Cartonnage<br>Krakow MNX XI-<br>482-b<br>(Akhmim) |  |  |  | N/A   | N/A  |  |

## Blue Coffins from Beni Hasan?

The paleographical and orthographical similarities between the cartonnage of the anonymous infant and the coffins of Ankhtashepsit are important because the former has a solid provenience. It was excavated by John Garstang in a cemetery near Beni Hasan in the cliffs opposite Speos Artemidos between 1902 and 1904 (Garstang 1907, 204, Pl 219). There is a possibility that the artist who painted the coffins of Ankhtashepsit or the coffins themselves moved from Beni Hasan to Akhmim. It seems more likely, especially given the late purchase date of Ankhtashepsit's coffins in 1906, that the Akhmim provenience is simply wrong.

Though Beni Hasan is better known as a Middle Kingdom cemetery, Garstang found hundreds of post-New Kingdom tombs in the cliffs and valley opposite from the Speos Artemidos. Unfortunately, these were excavated in an experimental fashion and were never fully documented or published (Garstang 1907, 200–201). The short chapter devoted to the few intact late burials gives a sense that the find was smaller than it was.

Garstang's finds were divided among his sponsors and then remitted to various museums in the UK, where they still reside. Among these museums' collections are fragments of late period coffins thought to come from Beni Hasan. Most intriguingly, the Townley Hall Collector's room is in possession of a white-on-blue cartonnage with some similarities to that of Ankhtashepsit. Did looting occur concurrent to the official excavations near Speos Artemidos like it had at Akhmim?

One other unprovenienced blue cartonnage, that of Pabastet in Hamburg, seems to also have been acquired in the first years of the 20th century (Altenmüller 2000). This piece also has parallels in both handwriting and artistic style to the coffin of Ankhtashepsit and probably came from the same workshop. Did it also come from Beni Hasan? Though the origin of both pieces may never be known, the fragmentary Third Intermediate Period finds of Garstang at Beni Hasan deserve further attention. Their study may lead to further clues about the origin of many of the unprovenienced northern-style coffins and the development of regional styles in the funerary art of the Third Intermediate Period.



## Bibliography

- Altenmüller, C. 2000. Außensarg und Mumienhülle des Pabastet im Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg (Inv. -Nr. 4057a und 4057b). *Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg* Neue Folge 30: p.182–229.
- Anon. 1906. *Catalogue of a Collection of Egyptian Antiquities Presented by Edward Drummond Libbey*. Toledo: Toledo Museum of Art.
- Claude, M. 2019. La Redécouverte des Nécropoles d'Akhmîm. *Égypte Afrique & Orient* 96: p.43–53.
- Garstang, J. 1907. *The Burial Customs of Ancient Egypt as Illustrated by Tombs of the Middle Kingdom: Being a Report of Excavations Made in the Necropolis of Beni Hasan During 1902-3-4*. A. Constable & Company, Limited. Available at: <https://books.google.com/books?id=HNFMAAAAYAAJ>.
- Hagen, F., & Ryholt, K. 2016. *The Antiquities Trade in Egypt 1880-1930: The H. O. Lange Papers*. Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.
- Johnston, K.M. 2022. *Unseen Hands: Coffin Production at Akhmim, Dynasties 21-30*. UC Berkeley. Available at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3xp41156> [Accessed November 25, 2022].
- Petrie, F. 1931. *Seventy years in archaeology*. London: Low, Marston & Co.
- Taylor, J.H. 2009. Coffins as Evidence for a “North-South Divide” in the 22nd-25th Dynasties. In G. P. F. Broekman, R. J. Demarée, & O. E. Kaper (eds) *The Libyan Period in Egypt*. Egyptologische Uitgaven, 375–415. Leuven: Peeters