MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION NATIONALE, DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR ET DE LA RECHERCHE

BULLETIN
DE L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne

BIFAO 126 (2026), p. 477-495

Lisa Sartini

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The Rediscovered Coffin of Taat from Deir el-Medina: A Rare Example from the Amarna Period

LISA SARTINI*

ABSTRACT

The coffin of Taat has long been of particular interest, as it is the only complete example decorated in the distinctive Amarna style found outside Amarna. While it belongs to the corpus of black coffins with yellow decoration, it is set apart by its unique iconography and inscriptions, which feature references to the god Aten and the city of Akhetaten, alongside ritual scenes typical of the period.

Originally discovered by Bernard Bruyère in tomb 1352, an 18th Dynasty burial, the coffin was later lost. The opportunity to rediscover this remarkable artifact arose in 2018, when the archaeological mission at Deir el-Medina, led by the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, began reopening funerary structures that had been repurposed in modern times as storerooms for artifacts from previous excavations. While other objects from tomb 1352 were housed within TT 217, Taat's coffin was not among them. However, during the 2023 season, it was finally identified in the Ministry of Antiquities' storerooms (Magasins Carter) on Luxor's West Bank.

The comprehensive study—covering material, technical, and stylistic analysis—carried out on this unique coffin thus provided a rare opportunity to examine the craftsmanship of wood during the Amarna period from a broader perspective, as well as to investigate the dynamics of artifact displacement and the movements of elites during and after the Amarna period.

* Postdoctoral researcher in the project *Textos en 3D: los ataúdes del Reino Medio egipcio como documentos* (SBPLY/23/180225/000093, "Proyectos de investigación científica y transferencia de tecnología" Programme, Castilla-La Mancha Region), Universidad de Alcalá, 2024-2025. This study is part of the work of Deir el-Medina operation IFAO 17148.

BIFAO 126 (2026), p. 477-495
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Keywords: Deir el-Medina, Thebes, Amarna Period, New Kingdom, black coffins with yellow decoration, New Amarna style, ritual scenes, Amarna Period funerary formulae, woodcraft, construction techniques.

RÉSUMÉ

Le cercueil de Taat suscite depuis longtemps un intérêt particulier, qui s'explique par le fait que c'est le seul exemple complet décoré dans le style caractéristique d'Amarna qui ait été découvert ailleurs qu'à Amarna. Bien qu'il appartienne au corpus connu des cercueils noirs à décor jaune, il est unique en son genre : il arbore des inscriptions évoquant le dieu Aton et la cité d'Akhetaton, soit un programme décoratif typique de la période amarnienne. Initialement mis au jour par Bernard Bruyère dans la tombe 1352, qui date de la XVIII^e^ dynastie, ce cercueil avait ensuite disparu. Sa redécouverte fortuite en 2018 est intervenue lorsque la mission archéologique de Deir el-Médina, sous l'égide de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, a entrepris la réouverture de plusieurs tombes reconverties en magasins pour y abriter les artefacts issus de fouilles passées. S'il apparut que des objets de la tombe 1352 avaient été entreposés dans la TT 217, le cercueil de Taat n'en faisait pas partie. C'est finalement au cours de la campagne de 2023 que ce cercueil longtemps perdu a été identifié dans les réserves archéologiques du ministère des Antiquités (Magasins Carter) sur la rive ouest de Louxor.

L'étude globale (matérielle, technique et stylistique) réalisée sur ce coffre unique a ainsi offert une occasion privilégiée d'examiner la production artisanale du bois à l'époque amarnienne dans une perspective élargie, et d'étudier les dynamiques de déplacement des artefacts et des élites pendant et après la période d'Amarna.

Mots-clés : Deir el-Médina, Thèbes, période amarnienne, Nouvel Empire, cercueils noirs à décor jaune, nouveau style amarnien, scènes rituelles, formules funéraires de la période amarnienne, artisanat du bois, techniques de fabrication.

The wooden coffin once belonging to the woman named Taat was discovered by Bruyère in tomb 1352, located in the western cemetery of Deir el-Medina, during the 1933-34 season.[1] Since its discovery, it has attracted great interest among scholars studying coffin production during the 18th Dynasty. Indeed, although it belongs to the well-known class of black coffins with yellow decoration from the New Kingdom, it deviates from the conventional decorative and textual program, which is primarily based on Chapters 151 and 161 of the Book of the Dead.[2] Remarkably, Taat's coffin features characteristic Amarna inscriptions mentioning

1 Bruyère 1937, pp. 95–109.

2 For discussions on black coffins see: Sartini 2015; Sartini 2019; and L. Sartini, *I sarcofagi neri con decorazione gialla del Nuovo Regno*, PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Pisa, 2021 (forthcoming publication).

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the god Aten and the city of Akhetaten, along with an unusual decorative scheme depicting offering rituals and mourning figures—motifs found on some private, non-royal specimens from the South Tombs Cemetery of Amarna.[3]

Other than at the capital city of the so-called heretic pharaoh, this distinctive style has been identified on only four coffins to date, with Taat's being the only one preserved in its entirety.[4] However, despite its historical significance, the coffin went missing after its discovery.

The opportunity to find this remarkable specimen occurred in 2018 when the archaeological mission at Deir el-Medina, led by the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO), began reopening funerary structures that had been repurposed in modern times as storerooms for artifacts found during previous excavations. This initiative led to the discovery of an extensive corpus of mostly unpublished objects, including a diverse array of wooden artifacts spanning various periods. In response, a team of specialists in ancient Egyptian woodworking was established within the mission to document, study, and publish this significant assemblage, including the coffins.[5] These were primarily stored in two tombs, 1022 and TT217. The latter served as the repository for all the remaining grave goods from tomb 1352, which had belonged to a man named Setau, who lived during the Amarna period and was buried alongside a few family members. Within his tomb, Bruyère originally discovered four black coffins with yellow decoration—those of Setau, Taat, a girl named Bakiset, and an unidentified young woman—as well as an undecorated rectangular coffin belonging to a child. However, when TT217 was reopened in 2018, only four of the five coffins remained, with Taat's coffin missing.[6] At some point, it had been relocated to the Ministry of Antiquities storerooms (Magasins Carter) on Luxor's West Bank, likely due to its valuable, partially gilded decoration. It was finally identified there during the 2023 season.

Unfortunately, the coffin (inv. no. DEM_2023_Mcarter_035_0001 a, b) shows numerous alterations and signs of degradation, with a substantial portion of the decoration in poor condition. Nonetheless, an analysis of the remaining texts and figurative scenes has confirmed that Bruyère's published description was largely accurate, with only minor inaccuracies.

3 Bettum 2024; Skinner, Bettum 2015, pp. 27–32; Stevens 2018.

4 The other three known specimens decorated in the Amarna style are: a lid fragment of a black coffin featuring mourning figures, discovered in pit 1022 at Deir el-Medina (inv. no. DEM_19_12_006; see Eschenbrenner et al. 2021, p. 262, fig. 6a); a fragmentary black coffin from Akoris (Paleological Association of Japan 1995, p. 319, fig. 228); and a granite coffin usurped by Djehutymes, which was purchased in Luxor and of which only four fragments have survived (Bettum 2024, pp. 61–62, fig. 10. Three of these fragments were housed in Kaiser-Wilhelms-Universität in Strasbourg—see Spiegelberg 1909, pp. 10–11, pl. 8—while one is in Pisa, at Museo dell'Opera della primaziale—see Gallo 1993, p. 15).

5 The team consists of members and collaborators of the Medjehu project (https://www.medjehuproject.com), led by Gersande Eschenbrenner Diemer. Among its various research activities, the Medjehu team is also involved in the study and publication of the IFAO wood collection as part of the ÉBÉNES program (20211) of the IFAO. The present author is responsible for the documentation and analysis of the coffins, together with Jaume Vilaró Fabregat.

6 Regarding the other three black coffins in TT 217 from tomb 1352, we found only the small coffin ascribed to Bakiset (inv. no. DEM_2019_217_093/093bis) in a complete state, whereas for the coffins of Setau and the anonymous woman only some of the planks of the boxes remained (DEM_19_12_217_1 box of Setau, DEM_19_12_217_2 box of anonymous woman). In fact, their lids were moved to the National Museum in Warsaw around 1937 (Inventory numbers 138983 NMW Setau—and 138985 NMW anonymous woman) as the result of a research cooperation agreement between France (IFAO) and Poland (University of Warsaw) in Egypt (Ambroziak 2016). For further information on the coffins from 1352 and other black coffins of the New Kingdom from Deir el-Medina see Eschenbrenner Diemer et al. 2021.

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The same cannot be said for the mummified body found inside. Although the Egyptologist described it as belonging to a woman—likely influenced by the decoration and inscriptions dedicated to Taat on the coffin— the mummified body actually belongs to a male individual.[7] The fact that the coffin was usurped and reused at an unspecified time is confirmed by the visible structural modifications on the box (see discussion below).

1. TOMB 1352: SETAU, TAAT AND THE USURPATION OF HER COFFIN

Tomb 1352 is attributed to a man named Setau who held the titles of "Servant in the Place of Truth" (*sḏm-ꜥš m s.t mɜꜥ.t*) and "Servant in the Place of Beauty" (*sḏm-ꜥš m st nfr.t n nsw.t*), identifying him as an artisan working in both the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.[8] The objects discovered in his tomb suggest that he lived with his family in Deir el-Medina during the 18th Dynasty, likely spanning from the reign of Thutmose IV or Amenhotep III to the end of the Amarna period or slightly later.[9] In fact, he was found wearing a bronze ring adorned with a cartouche of Thutmosis IV, and the same cartouche appeared on one amulet found on the mummified body of the anonymous woman. Additionally, two of his shabtis,[10] along with Taat's coffin, feature references to the god Aten and the city of Akhetaten.

The quality and type of grave goods suggest that Setau belonged to the "middle class", a group that included lesser bureaucrats, priests, military officers, wealthy farmers, and craftsmen—essentially the equivalent of mid-ranking officials of the time.[11] He and his family appear to have had considerable wealth, as they could all afford well-equipped burials. Taat's coffin, for instance, is partially gilded (possibly indicating that her social background was of a higher rank than that of Setau). Setau features a finely crafted coffin and shabtis inscribed for him. Even though the anonymous woman was buried in a mass-produced coffin, she was interred with at least some quantity of jewelry.[12]

However, the relationship between Setau and the other individuals buried with him remains partially unclear. The extended family of the tomb owner is depicted on a stela now in the Hermitage Museum (Inventory no. 3937). The text indicates that he had a sister called Bakiset but there is no mention of a woman called Taat. Since the same object identifies his mother

7 The identification was carried out by Prof. Anne E. Austin (Assistant Professor of Anthropology & Archaeology at the University of Missouri—St. Louis), who is currently conducting research at Deir el-Medina, investigating how health and disease affected the village community during the New Kingdom. For more information see Austin 2024.

8 (Soliman 2015, pp. 34–36). He also bears the title Servant in the Great Place, *sḏm-ꜥš m st ꜥɜ.t.* (Černý 1973 [ed. 2001], pp. 50-51).

9 Anne Austin, who conducted an osteopathological study of the remains of Setau, affirms that he was at least 50 years old when he died and likely a decade or more older (Austin 2024, pp. 193–194).

10 Brooklyn 48.26.3 and JE 63791 (Bruyère 1937a, pp. 98–99; Černý 1973 [ed. 2001], pp. 50–51).

11 Smith 1992, pp. 218–219.

12 The small anonymous mummified body was found looted by Bruyère, partially undressed. The jewellery that was not stolen consisted of nine faience rings, a few beads from a necklace, two bracelets (one with beads also in gold and lapis lazuli), and the amulet in faiance with the cartouche of Thutmosis IV (Bruyère 1937, pp. 106–107). On the value of the funerary goods from tomb 1352, see Meskell 1999b, pp. 189–193.

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as Takhat, it is possible that she was one of his wives who passed away before him, during the peak of the Amarna period.

In fact, the black coffin of Setau, as well as those of Bakiset and the anonymous woman, can be dated shortly later than Taat's coffin, likely after the Amarna reform had already come to an end. These specimens are decorated with the traditional decorative scheme of black coffins, derived from Chapter 151 and 161 of the Book of the Dead, while also incorporating some stylistic and somatic details inherited from the Amarna period style.[13]

Unfortunately, the construction of the anonymous Ramesside Tomb 1346—whose shaft broke through the ceiling of Setau's burial chamber—not only allowed water to infiltrate the tomb, severely damaging the objects within, but also appears to have led to the disturbance and looting of the funerary assemblage.[14] As a consequence, the five coffins and their associated grave goods were displaced and stacked: the black coffins of Setau, Taat, Bakiset, and the anonymous woman were piled in pairs within a cavity dug into the southern part of the chamber alongside few goods, while the rectangular undecorated coffin of the child and the remaining funerary objects (those that had not been looted) were heaped in the northern section. The backfill from the excavation of the Ramesside shaft subsequently covered the objects, inadvertently protecting them from future lootings but compromising their preservation.[15]

However, as mentioned before, Taat's coffin was usurped, modified, and reused to house a male mummified body at some point. Bruyère was on the belief that the tomb was still unviolated when it was disturbed during the Ramesside period. If so, this would imply that the usurpation may have occurred before the tomb was sealed in the post-Amarna period or when the tomb was disturbed in the Ramesside period. However, since Taat's coffin was found piled up and half-buried with the other 18th Dynasty burial goods from the tomb of Setau, the first hypothesis seems to be the most likely.[16]

Notably, inside the coffin, above the male mummified body—found with a ring bearing a cartouche of Amenhotep III—Bruyère discovered two walking sticks, a well-used scribe's palette covered with hieratic inscriptions on both sides, and a headrest inscribed for the "Excellent scribe and expert in his duties as a draftsman, May" (*sš ỉkr šsꜣ m ỉꜣt-f sš qd May*).[17] While the Egyptologist hypothesized that this pairing was arbitrary, due to the actions of

13 They also show a peculiar feature that appears to follow the Amarna period. This is the depiction of a pyramid found on the footboard of Setau's coffin and on the anonymous woman's coffin box. This motif may reference the pyramid-complex tombs used in Deir el-Medina at the end of the 18th Dynasty (for more on this type of tomb, see Meskell 1999a, pp. 188–190). A close parallel can also be found on a model coffin discovered in the royal magazines in the city of Akhetaten (British Museum EA63635, see Bettum 2024, pp. 53-55, fig. 2; Taylor 2001b, p. 226, fig. 166) and on the black coffin of the craftsman Tjay, originating from Dahshur and dated at the end of the 18th Dynasty (Yoshimura, Baba 2015, p. 550, pl. 7).

14 Bruyère 1937a, pp. 95-96.

15 This storage led to the discoloration of the painted coffin decoration and significant wood deterioration due to rot.

16 Consistent with the possibility that the coffin was usurped in the post-Amarna period, there are strips of red cloth that covered some of the bandages on the male mummified body, already recorded by Bruyère (Bruyère 1937a, p.105). Chiara Spinazzi Lucchesi (University of Copenhagen and part of the Medjehu team), who is studying the mummified body's textiles, notes that although these do not provide chronological clues, and the use of red for the bandages is not consistently documented for the New Kingdom, the presence of a red shroud on Tutankhamun's mummified body provides evidence for the use of this colour at least in the post-Amarna period to the end of 18th Dynasty (personal communication). A detailed study of the textiles from tomb 1352 will be developed and published in the near future.

17 Bruyère said that the sticks were placed one on each side of the mummified body, the palette on the left at arm level, two pieces of the headrest on the legs, and the headrest support under the feet (Bruyère 1937a, p. 105).

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those who violated the tomb in the Ramesside period, Meskell suggested the possibility that these items were intentionally placed with the deceased by May himself, possibly one of Taat's descendants.[18] However, since the mummified body inside the coffin is not Taat's, the palette and headrest could alternatively be interpreted as belonging to the usurper.

2. THE COFFIN

Unfortunately, the yellow-painted decoration on the lid is almost entirely lost, while the polychrome *usekh*-collar and the decoration on the left wall of the box are in particularly poor condition (see Figs. 1–6).[19]

However, slight variations in the decoration can be observed when compared to the drawing published by Bruyère—the only existing visual documentation of the coffin to date.[20] Notably, some human figures appear to have been misinterpreted by the Egyptologist. Conversely, although some inscriptions have been completely lost since Bruyère's discovery, the analysis of the surviving texts has not revealed any discrepancies from his version.

2.1. Decorative scheme

The coffin belongs to the class of black coffins with yellow decoration from the New Kingdom, sharing their color scheme, certain iconographic elements, and the overall layout of the figurative decoration. However, it diverges from their traditional iconographic program, which is primarily based on Chapters 151 and 161 of the Book of the Dead. Typically, this program features standing figures of Anubis and the Sons of Horus (sometimes framed by Thoth) on the box walls, Nephthys and Isis at the head and foot ends, and Nut or Nekhbet on the chest, all of them symbolically surrounding the mummified body of the deceased, who is identified as Osiris, within the coffin.[21]

On Taat's coffin, all these divine figures are replaced by depictions of individuals—specifically her family members—shown mourning, presenting offerings, or performing libations. This decorative scheme is characteristic of the Amarna period, as it has been identified on several private black coffins with yellow decoration found in the South Tomb Cemetery of Amarna,

18 Meskell 1999b, pp. 191–192. According to Davies' prosopographic study of the workmen's community, there is no evidence of scribes named May starting from the reign of Ramses II (Davies 1999, p. 283).

19 The cleaning and consolidation of the object were carried out by Jaume Vilaró Fabregat, conservator and Egyptologist (Post doctoral researcher within the Vatican Coffin Project, Musei Vaticani and part of the Medjehu team). The thick dust layer covering the lid and box was removed with soft brushes, while embedded dirt was cleared through dry mechanical cleaning using Wishab sponges and scalpels. Once the decoration became visible, detachment of the preparatory layer and gold foil was noted, and Kucel G (3%) in alcohol was applied for reattachment and stabilization. Broken and separated wooden elements were rejoined with fish glue (pers. com.). The procedures are currently in the process of publication.

20 Bruyère also published a photo of the lid, but it is in black and white and of poor quality, which does not allow for a detailed analysis of the object (see Bruyère 1937a, pl. 10).

21 It is widely accepted among Egyptologists that this BD 151/161 composition reflects the unfolding of a funerary ritual, facilitating the transformation of the deceased's body from death to new life. For interpretations of this decorative scheme, see Bettum 2024, pp. 50-53; Bettum 2013, pp. 138–158; Lüscher 1988, pp. 59, 73–77.

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as well as on a model coffin and a black coffin from the Main City of Akhetaten.[22] Anders Bettum, who leads the iconographic and typological study of these specimens within the Amarna Coffin Project, has identified two stylistic variants—two sub-groups that possibly follow one another chronologically, although there is not yet enough archaeological evidence to confirm this. In the coffins belonging to Group 1, the figures of mourners and offering-bearers simply replace the traditional divine figures, maintaining a direct relationship with the deceased's mummified body inside the coffin, which is considered part of the composition. However, in Group 2, the deceased is also depicted on the coffin itself, engaging in more dynamic and independent scenes in which he interacts with those honoring him with funerary offerings or mourning his passing—possibly representing funerary rites or ancestor worship.[23]

The coffin of Taat belongs to Bettum's Group 2. Each scene depicted on the box can be interpreted as an independent composition, almost always featuring the deceased and one or two of her relatives engaged in offering scenes.

In contrast, the lid displays a much more traditional decoration. Below a broad *usekh*-collar adorned with polychrome bands and floral motifs, in keeping with the fashion of the period,[24] there is only a single kneeling female figure. However, instead of the traditional winged goddesses Nekhbet or Nut, as typically expected, this figure represents the deceased's granddaughter in mourning. In line with this variation, the same figure also replaces the familiar goddess Isis at the foot end of the coffin.

Notably, all the preserved female figures are depicted wearing Amarna style wigs, with a band that encircles the hair at ear level, tying at the back of the head. [25]

Lid (Figs. 1–3, 8). The tripartite wig is decorated with yellow stripes on a black background[26] and probably had the terminal part of the lappets covered with gold leaf. It frames the gilded face with the ears in relief.

Based on the remains of the *usekh*-collar, its upper section appears to have been composed of blue, green, and (one) red bands separated by gilded lines, featuring a triple (or possibly quadruple) outer edge (Fig. 8). The two innermost bands of the edge consist of a series of gilded drops on a red background, and a row of white petals with a red dot on a blue background, while very little survives of the one or two outermost bands, which were just painted rather than gilded. However, by comparison with similar examples dating from the mid- to late 18th Dynasty, it is plausible that these outer bands featured a row of alternating rectangular red beads on a yellow background, followed by a line of white petals tinged with blue.[27]

22 See footnotes 3 and 15. On the black coffins see also Stevens 2017, pp. 113–116.

23 Bettum suggests that, both on Group 1 and 2 coffins, the scenes feature the deceased's family members, even when the individuals depicted are not identified by name. He also hypothesizes that these scenes may represent part of the Opening of the Mouth ritual (Bettum 2024, pp. 63–64).

24 See Sartini 2015, pp. 50–51.

25 This new hair ornament was introduced in the representation of women during the reign of Akhenaten (Haynes 1977, p. 21).

26 Bruyère mistakenly describes the wig as having yellow and blue stripes.

27 A similar composition appears on the collar of the anonymous woman from tomb 1352 (138985 NMW). Likewise, a fragment of the lid of Hesyenre's coffin from the South Tombs Cemetery in Amarna (coffin STC 3, 13281), which preserves part of the *usekh*-collar, reveals that it was also decorated with a row of white petals on a blue background (Stevens 2018, p. 148).

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The terminals on the shoulder have unfortunately not survived, but traces of the preparatory drawing in black pigment, still partially visible, suggest that they possibly were originally intended to be decorated as upright lotus flowers.[28]

On the chest, a kneeling woman (her granddaughter, daughter of Hetepdemyu, Iyhy) is portrayed. Bruyère described the figure as having both arms raised beside her head. However, based on the negative imprint of the figure that has survived, she actually held both hands in front of her face, in the typical gesture of grief (Fig. 8).

Box (Figs. 5–6, 9). The spaces on both exterior walls are adorned with scenes depicting the deceased alongside her offering-bearing relatives, most of whom are identified by their degree of kinship and forenames.

As previously mentioned, some details in Bruyère's drawing differ from the preserved evidence (Fig. 9). Below is a description of the scenes as they appear on the coffin, though some are in a poor state of preservation and therefore difficult to interpret.

On the right wall of the box, starting from the panel on the upper shoulder, the four spaces depict: a man (his son Meryra) standing before an offering table; a mourning woman (her daughter Sheritra) and a man (her son? Ramesu) performing a libation on an offering table placed in front of the mummy of the deceased; a man (Ramesu) offering a bouquet of lotus flowers to the deceased, who is shown seated before an offering table while wearing a head cone and sniffing a lotus flower; a man holding a stick and a mourning woman facing each other on either side of an offering table.[29] The last space near the foot of the coffin shows no surviving decoration.

On the left wall of the box, starting from the panel on the upper shoulder, the four spaces depict: the mummy of the deceased facing an offering table; one man in adoration and one woman (?) holding a stick (with a pommel in the shape of a papyrus leaf) facing the standing deceased; a man in front of an offering table and the mummy of the deceased; a mourning woman (her daughter Henutdemyu/Hetepdemyu) facing an offering table and the deceased, who is depicted seated while smelling a lotus flower. Bruyère reports a man (her son Meryra) performing a libation on an offering table in the last space near the foot, but unfortunately, it has not been preserved.

Head and foot. There is no figurative decoration at the head end, whereas the foot end shows a woman (her granddaughter, daughter of Hetepdemyu, Iyhy) represented standing in front of an offerings table, with her hands raised and palms facing her face in a gesture of grief (Fig. 4, 9b).

Edge of box/lid and interior of the coffin. The flat edge is painted red while the interior of the coffin seems left undecorated (Fig. 7).[30] Indeed, red had an apotropaic function according to the ancient Egyptian colour symbolism, it was suitable for protection if used with

28 Although the preparatory drawing only outlines a pseudo-triangular shape, lotus-flower-shaped terminals for usekh-collars appear on black coffins at the end of Amenhotep III's reign and remain in use until the 19th Dynasty (Sartini 2015, pp. 50–51).

29 Oddly, it seems that three names are present in this scene: a female Merytra, Iyhy (possibly appearing twice?), and a male Iy.

30 Unfortunately, it was not possible to remove the male mummified body found inside the coffin due to its poor state of preservation. Its bandages and textiles, impregnated with funerary ritual substances such as oils, waxes, and/or resins, have adhered to the surface of the box, making its removal impossible without causing damage.

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care. This is why this colour was usually applied at the junction between the box and the lid of coffins, as this was the most vulnerable part of the object.[31]

2.2. Inscriptions

On coffins decorated in the Amarna style, the overall layout of the inscriptions appears to remain consistent with that of traditional New Kingdom black coffins, usually featuring three columns of inscriptions on the lid and four transverse bands extending onto the box. However, the textual repertoire evolved alongside the decorative scheme, becoming more focused on the deceased as well.

In fact, in the inscriptions, all references to traditional religion are removed to make way for invocations to Aten, captions listing the names of the individuals depicted in the decoration, or prayers typical of this period, in which the deceased directly requests food, wine, and the breath of the north wind.[32]

The same textual variations occur on the coffin of Taat (Fig. 9b).

The caption texts written alongside each of the individuals represented on the coffin, bear the names of the deceased or her worshipping family members. Among them we find Taat's sons Meryra and perhaps Ramesu, and her daughters Henutdemiu and Sheritra on the box, while the female figure on the chest and on the footboard is identified as her granddaughter Iyhy, apparently mentioned also on the box walls.

The inscribed bands replace the traditional invocations to various deities, usually Geb, Nut, Anubis and the Sons of Horus, with references to Aten and the city of Akhetaten, although the transversal ones retain the traditional designation *ỉmɜḫy* ("the revered one") characteristic of New Kingdom black coffins.

Some of the best-preserved inscriptions read:[33]

- Right lateral inscription on the lid:
  […] m ɜḫt-ỉtn šsp ḥtpw n ḥnk nswt […] ỉr (tw?) rwḏ (?) rnn

  […], therefore '[…] in Akhetaten, receiving the peace of the offerings of the king […] give (you?) forever. Rejoice […]'

- First transversal inscription on the right:
  […] -k ḥr st-(k?) ḏd nswt rwḏ (?)

  (May you rest?) at your place, which the king has given you forever.[34]

31 See Bettum 2013, p. 58, Taylor 2001a, p. 176.

32 Kemp 2008, p. 41. For a general discussion about the text from the Amarna period, see Murnane 1995.

33 The transliteration and translation provided are based on the inscriptions recorded by Bruyère in his drawing, which have been at least partially preserved and could be verified, albeit not entirely.

34 Murnane offers the following translation for one of the inscriptions on the coffin but does not specify which one: "[May] you [repose?] upon your seat, which the king gives, enduring in Akhet-Aten and receiving the peace of the king's giving forever" (Murnane 1995, p. 67). It is possible that he combined the translation of the inscription in this transversal band with that transcribed in the right lateral one.

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• Third transversal inscription on the right:
ỉmɜḫy n ɜḫt-ỉtn n Ỉtn šsp-s (?) ṯɜw n ʿnḫ
The revered one of Akhetaten, (she who) belongs to Aten. May she receive the breath of life.

• Second transversal inscription on the left:
[…] m ṯɜw […] m ḥw.t n Ỉtn n ɜḫt-ỉtn nfr(.t?)-rnp.t (?)
[...] with the breath (of life?) in the dwelling of Aten in Akhetaten, a good year (?).[35]

• Third transversal inscription on the left:
Ỉmɜḫy nb(.t) spd (?) ỉɜw.t […] m st-s (-sn?) n […] ḥw.t n Ỉtn
The revered lady of old age (?)[36] [...] at her (their?) place [...] (in the?) dwelling of Aten.

2.3. Manufacturing, decoration and construction technique

The quality of the assembly and the construction techniques used for this coffin are consistent with its decoration, indicating a medium-high level of craftsmanship.

The face and part of the polychrome *usekh*-collar are gilded, with gold leaf applied over a layer of plaster, which is itself adhered to the wooden surface of the coffin by a layer of fabric. The remaining decoration, executed with moderate quality and somewhat disproportionate figures, is painted in yellow on a black background, with additional red and black details. Furthermore, a layer of yellow varnish appears to have been applied over much of the decorated surface.[37]

Wood analysis reveals that the coffin (L. 181 cm; W. 46 cm; H. 67 cm) was constructed using common local wood species: *Ficus sycomorus* L. for the plank of the lid, *Acacia sp.* for the planks of the box, and *Tamarix sp.* for the loose tenons.[38] However, as discussed below, the study of manufacturing techniques indicates that the coffin was primarily made up from good-quality long and thick wooden planks, capable of reaching the required length without the need for additional pieces (Fig. 10).

The lid is primarily constructed from a single long wooden plank, with additional pieces of varying sizes attached to form the shoulders, the foot end, the uppermost curve of the wig, its lowermost section, and the terminal parts of the lappets. Smaller pieces were also added to fill gaps in construction. All these additional components were joined to the main body of

35 Murnane proposes that *nfr rnp.t* could be interpreted as a proper name, Neferrenpet, suggesting that Taat may not have been the coffin's original owner (Murnane 1995, p. 67). However, the analysis of the coffin indicates that all texts were inscribed at the same time, with no evidence of later modifications or additions.

36 Murnane 1995, p. 67.

37 The investigation of the yellow varnish and its application on the coffin was conducted by Margaret Serpico (Honorary Research Fellow, Institute of Archaeology, UCL and part of the Medjehu team). The condition of the varnish on the lid is extremely poor with considerable alteration and damage. It is more evident on the footboard and the box where it seems to have been comprehensively applied although the preservation is variable in places (pers. com). More detailed results will be published in the near future. For more information on this material and its use on coffins and other funerary objects, see: Eschenbrenner Diemer et al. 2021, pp. 279–286; Serpico, Stern 2025; Serpico, White 2001.

38 The identification was made by Gersande Eschenbrenner-Diemer (Researcher Ramón y Cajal, University of Jaén and Director of the Medjehu team).

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the coffin using cylindrical wooden dowels, while the foot end was secured with both dowels and pegged mortise with loose tenon joints.

The bottom half of the box is primarily carved from a single log of wood, with three long boards—two on the left wall and one on the right—along with a panel at the head wall, added and joined using wooden dowels and pegged mortise with loose tenon joints. Additionally, smaller wooden pieces were attached to the exterior surfaces of the side walls to achieve the necessary thickness in some areas, fill construction gaps, and form the uppermost edge of the head and foot walls. Notably, the two additional planks used to construct the upper half of the left wall of the box are joined using a half-lap joint, with the surface of the planks cut into an "L" shape rather than their thickness, similar to the construction technique observed in the coffin of Setau.[39]

Many joints display a coating of plaster mixed with pieces of fabric and, in some cases, mud. This technique was used to reinforce the joints and fill the large gaps created by the irregular shape of the planks.[40] Notably, some of the joined edges were painted red. These procedures, implemented during the coffin-making process, served the same protective purpose as the red coloring applied at the junction between the lid and the box—specifically, to protect the open spaces of the object.[41]

Lastly, as previously mentioned, the coffin box exhibits evident structural modifications: the inner surface at the shoulders and footwall has been cut and reshaped to enlarge the available space, allowing it to accommodate the usurper's mummified body, which apparently was bigger than Taat's one (Fig. 7).[42]

3. CONCLUSIONS

The coffin of Taat stands as a unique specimen, providing valuable insights into coffin production during the Amarna period and the development of its distinctive and chronologically defined decorative style. However, its discovery in a tomb at Deir el-Medina raises several questions, primarily regarding its place of manufacture—whether it was produced in Amarna or in the Theban area. The most widely accepted hypothesis, first suggested by Bruyère, is that Taat's coffin was indeed crafted in Amarna.[43] This would imply that Setau and his family followed Akhenaten to the new capital at some point, only to return to Deir el-Medina after its abandonment. Since Taat had already passed away, Setau would have brought her coffin with him to place it in the family tomb, where he himself was buried shortly thereafter.

But if that were the case, is it possible that she was originally buried in the South Tomb Cemetery, where the coffins are of medium to low quality? Given that she could afford a

39 See Eschenbrenner-Diemer et al. 2021, p. 272, fig. 2 (a2, b).

40 The same technique has also been documented on the other black coffins found originating from tomb 1352. See Eschenbrenner-Diemer et al. 2021, pp. 266, 268-269, figs. 2,3,4.

41 For the use of the colour red as an apotropaic medium, see Arbuckle MacLeod 2023, pp. 71-72, Eschenbrenner Diemer et al. 2021, pp. 287–295, Perrot 2010.

42 For a discussion of coffin reuse practices in Ancient Egypt, see Cooney 2024.

43 Bruyère 1937a, p. 104.

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partially gilded coffin, Taat undoubtedly belonged to the elite of society. As Bettum suggests, it is possible that she was instead buried in one of the cliff tombs of Amarna.[44]

However, the hypothesis that this coffin was produced at Deir el-Medina remains equally plausible. Although little is known about the state of the village during the Amarna period—specifically, to what extent it was abandoned or whether it continued to function without full royal support[45]—the coffin of Taat is not the only object from Deir el-Medina datable to the Amarna period.[46]

Moreover, although not a decisive factor, some construction techniques observed in Taat's coffin—such as the extensive use of plaster mixed with fabric and mud to fill gaps, as well as the half-lap joint used to connect two of the planks in the box—were also employed in the coffins of Setau, the anonymous woman, and Bakiset, all of which were produced at Deir el-Medina.

Another unresolved question regarding Taat's coffin concerns the timing of its usurpation. According to Bruyère, the burial assemblage of Setau and his family was found disturbed, with many objects either stolen or damaged. He suggested that the looting occurred when the grave was disrupted during the construction of tomb 1346, asserting that it had remained intact until then—likely because he found no evidence of earlier intrusions. Thus, the Ramesside-era looters, after ransacking the tomb, discarded and rearranged items they deemed unimportant, which were later buried beneath the debris from the shaft of tomb 1346.[47] Although there is no definitive evidence to confirm or refute this hypothesis, it is likely accurate to assert that the looting of Setau's burial assemblage occurred during the Ramesside period, while the usurpation of Taat's coffin were not merely incidental. The coffin underwent deliberate structural modifications designed to accommodate the usurper's mummified body, indicating that this was not a hasty act carried out during a robbery. Moreover, the male mummified body found inside was discovered wearing a ring bearing the cartouche of Amenhotep III, suggesting that this individual also likely died during the Amarna/post-Amarna period. However, whether he was indeed the scribe May, owner of the two objects found inside the coffin, remains unknown to date.[48]

Setau's tomb and its associated artifacts warrant further investigation, but the rediscovery of Taat's coffin and the revelation of its usurpation and reuse represent a significant advancement in our understanding this complex funerary context and the life of Deir el-Medina during and shortly after the Amarna period.

44 Bettum 2024, p. 55.

45 Müller 2014.

46 In addition to the aforementioned shabtis of Setau and the fragment of a black coffin decorated with mourners in Amarna style (DEM_19_12_006), another noteworthy artifact is the chair inscribed for a man named Nakhy, "Servant in the Place of Truth on the west of Akhetenaton,", which was found in Thebes but is now lost (Černý 1973 [ed. 2001], pp. 51-52). Moreover, Anna Giulia De Marco (part of the Medjehu team) has identified a group of shabtis displaying a distinctive style and inscription, suggesting they were likely produced in the village during the Amarna period or shortly thereafter (De Marco forthcoming. She has also collected various evidence of the Amarna period in Deir el-Medina, see for example Bruyère 1937b, p. 18; Bruyère 1939, p. 278, n. 15, Bruyère 1952 p. 53, fig. 38, n. 18, 19).

47 Bruyère 1937, p. 106.

48 If the two objects instead belonged to a relative of Taat (or the usurper), their owner could potentially have been the scribe May of TT338, whose funerary chapel (S. 7910) is now preserved in the Museo Egizio in Turin. In fact, he is believed to have died during the post-Amarna period (Tosi 1970, p. 17).

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Fig. 1 Left side of coffin lid.



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Fig. 2. Right side of coffin lid.



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Fig. 3. Upper part of coffin lid.



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Fig. 4. Foot end of coffin.

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Fig. 5. Left wall of coffin box.



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Fig. 6. Right wall of coffin box.



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Fig. 7. Front view of coffin box.

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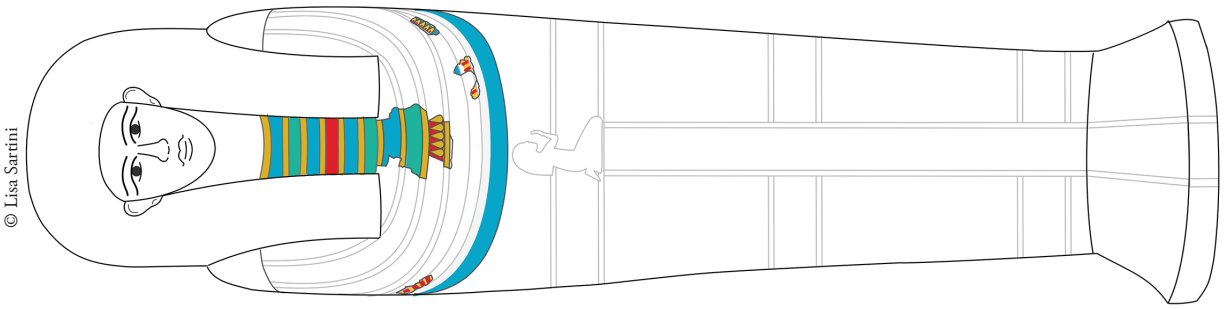


Fig. 8. Drawing of the lid and its decoration.

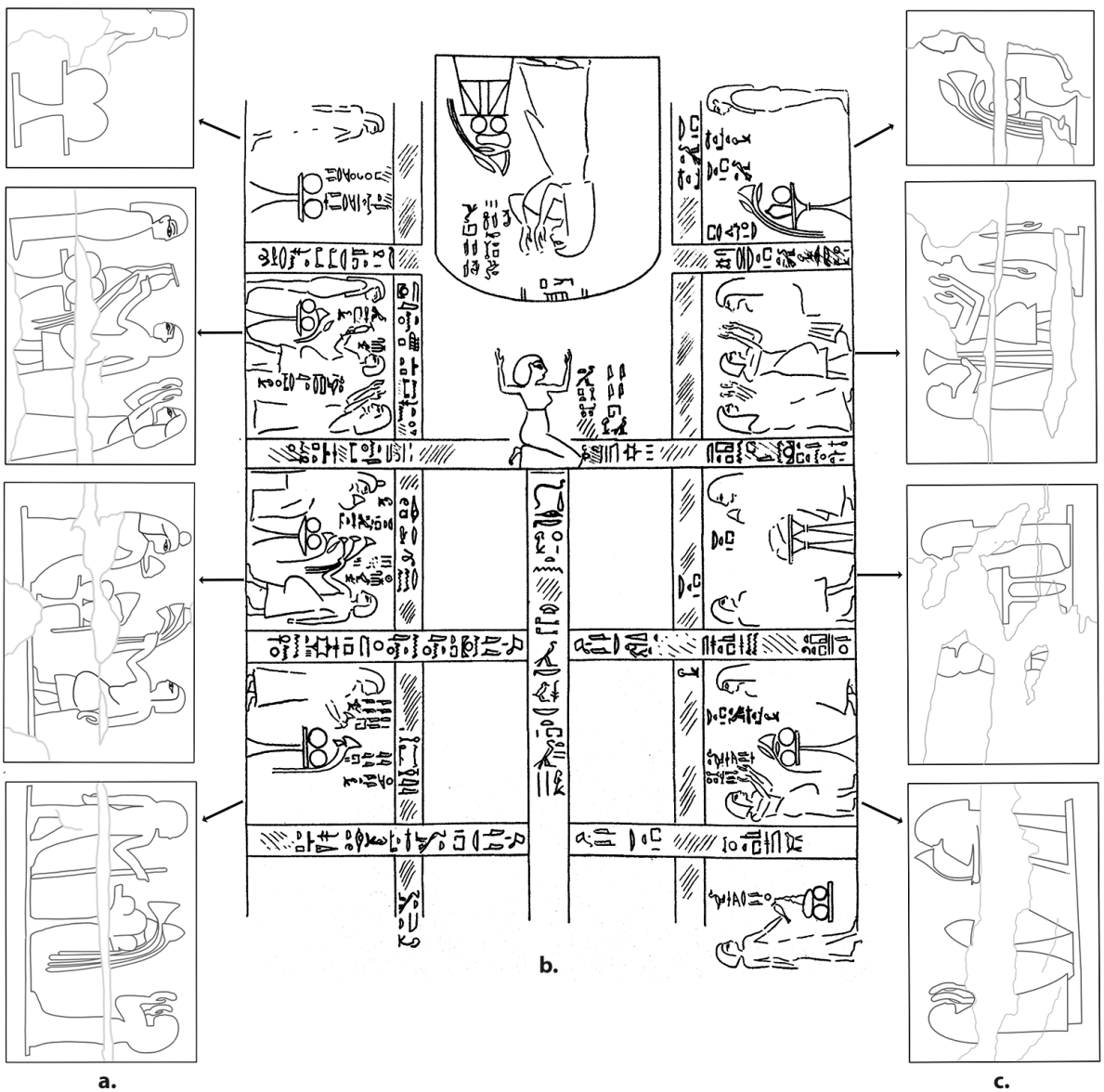
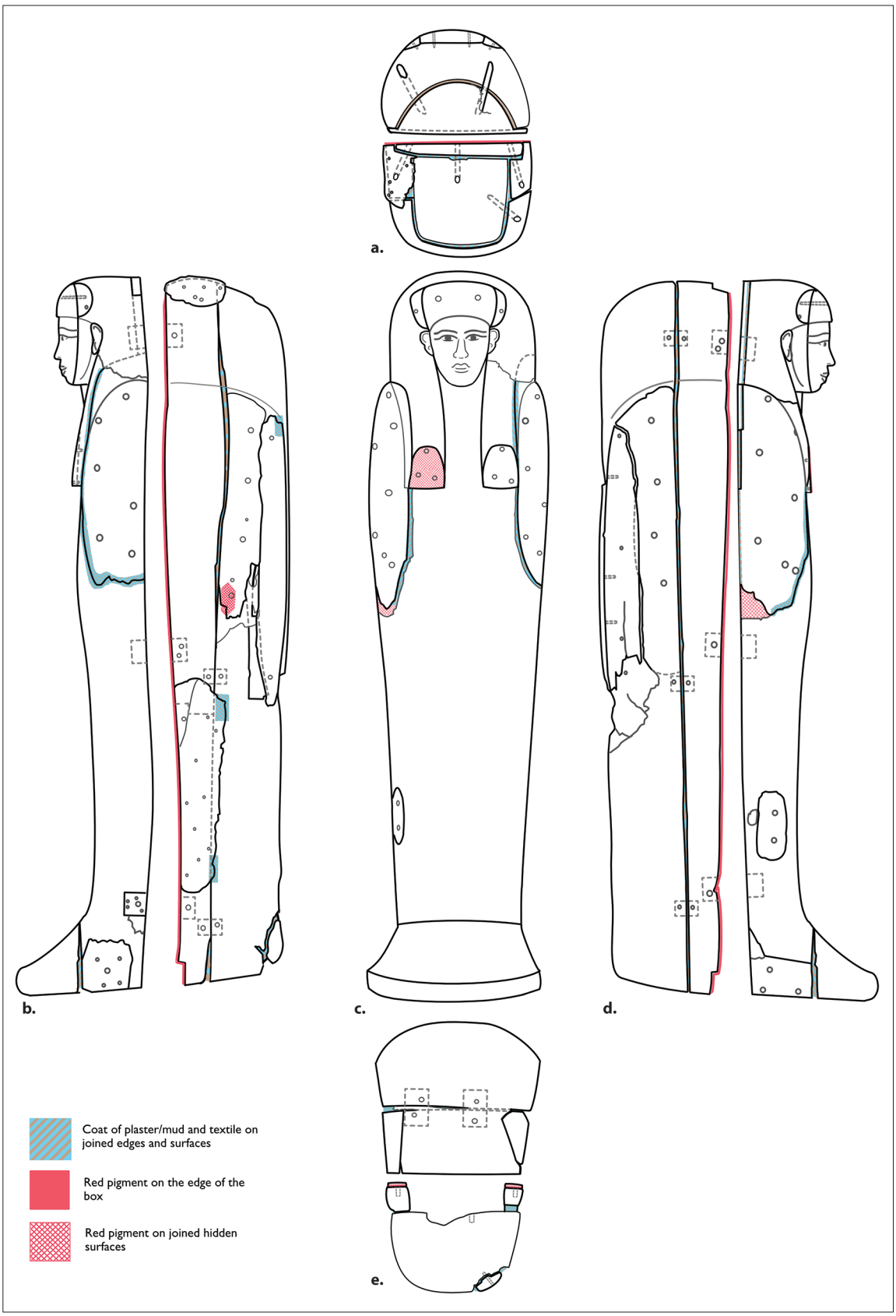


Fig. 9. Comparison of the figurative scenes on the coffin: **a-c.** Surviving scenes on the right wall (**a**) and left wall (**c**) of the box (© Lisa Sartini); **b.** Drawing of the coffin published by Bruyère (Bruyère 1937, pl. 12).

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Fig. 10. Technical drawing of the coffin: **a.** Head end and head wall; **b.** Left wall of coffin; **c.** Lid; **d.** Right wall of coffin; **e.** Foot end and foot wall.

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