

Iconography and Texts of the Headboard and Footboard of the Inner Coffin of Ta-Bes at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo

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DOI: 10.21608/misj.2024.325686.1065

Received: 3-10-2024 Accepted: 17-10-2024

Published: 30-10-2024

https://misj.journals.ekb.eg/article_386919.html

Citation: Gadallah, I., & Abdelaal, A. (2024). Iconography and Texts of the Headboard and Footboard of the Inner Coffin of Ta-Bes at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. *Mişriqiyā*, 4(2), 67-84. doi: 10.21608/misj.2024.325686.1065

Abstract

This study discusses the iconography and texts that are depicted on the headboard and footboard of the anthropoid wooden coffin of Ta-Bes at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, TR. 5/10/16/11, which has never been published before. Neither the provenance nor the date of this coffin was identified before this study. This coffin is distinguished by its yellow inscriptions on a black background. The present study will deal with the description of both goddesses Isis and Nephthys that are depicted on the headboard and footboard, translation of the texts, and then comment on the date, parallels, and provenance. This study concludes that the coffin can be dated to the late Twenty-fifth or early Twenty-sixth Dynasty and designated its provenance to Akhmim. Furthermore, the different representations of the two goddesses on the headboard and footboard of coffins from the same period have been discussed. In addition to, the religious purpose of the scenes. Finally, epigraphical notes will be made at the end of this paper to enhance the date of the coffin.

Keywords: Nephthys, Isis, Coffins, Thebes, Akhmim

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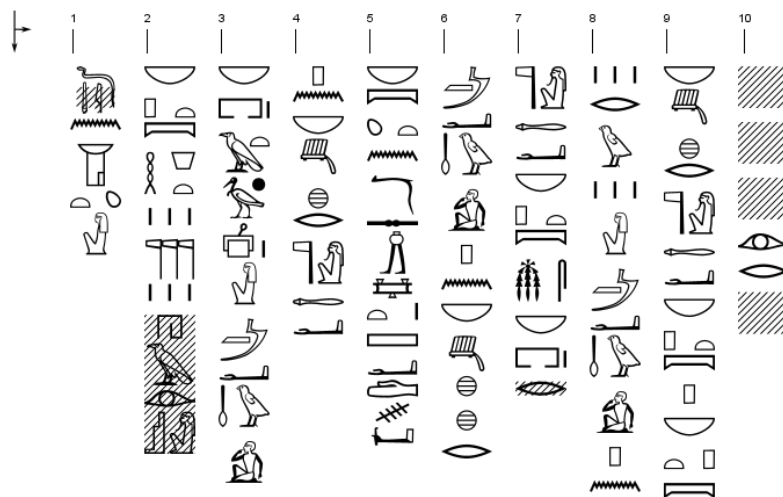
Introduction:

The iconography and texts of the headboard and footboard are important dating criteria of the bivalve anthropoid wooden coffins from the Third Intermediate period and the Late period, so, this study aims to use these criteria for dating the inner coffin of Ta-Bes. This coffin belonged to “Type 3” in Taylor’s typological study of the Theban coffin during the Third Intermediate period (Taylor, 2003, p.114). It belonged to the group (B) in Brech’s Typological study of Akhmim coffins from the Third Intermediate period and Late period (Brech, 2008). It is distinguished with its yellow inscription on the black background which is first attested in the 18th dynasty during the reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmosis III, and the last one dated to the reign of Ramses II (Niwinski, 1988, p.11), (Sartini, 2015, p.49). Then, it had another revival during the Saite period on the coffin of Irethoreru from Akhmim, which is preserved now at Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (Brech, 2008, p.309) and continued in develop to the Ptolemaic period on many coffins such as the coffin Isetweret at The Metropolitan Museum (Brech, 2008, p.132).

1. Description:



1.1. Description of the headboard iconography and text (Fig. 1-2):

The headboard scene is divided into two parts, the upper is belonging to the lid and the lower is belonging to the case of the coffin. The Upper part depicted the standing goddess Nephthys wearing a long-knit dress, while her winged arms are downcast, and holding ostrich feather in each hand, unfortunately, the facial features in poor state. The figure of Nephthys is flanked by cursive hieroglyphs text consisting of ten columns, five columns on each side read as follows:



Transliteration	Translation
¹ <i>dd-mdw in Nbt-ht</i>	Words spoken by Nephthys
² <i>nbt pt hnwt ntrw [h3 Wsir]</i>	Mistress of the sky, mistress of the gods [O! Osiris]
³ <i>nb(t) pr T3-bs m3^c(t)-hrw</i>	Mistress of the house, Ta-Bes, true of voice
⁴ <i>p3 n nb(t) im3h hr ntr 3</i>	possessor of reverence with the great god
⁵ <i>nb(t) pt s3t n Ns-inhrt (nb) š^cd-(ht)</i>	Mistress of the sky, daughter of Nes- inherit (lord) of Woodcutters
⁶ <i>m3^c(t)-hrw p3 n nb(t) im3h hr</i>	true of voice, possessor of reverence with
⁷ <i>ntr 3 nbt pt ms(t) (n) nb(t) pr</i>	The great god, mistress of the sky, born of mistress of the house
⁸ <i>Rwrw m3^c(t)-hrw p3 n</i>	Ruru, true of voice

⁹ <i>nb(t) im3h hr ntr ʕ3 nb(t) pt</i>	possessor of reverence with the great god, mistress of the sky
¹⁰ [...] <i>irr?</i> [...]	[...] (name of someone?) [...]

A largely damaged text is written on the lower part of the headboard consists of four horizontal lines, only the beginning of the first line can be read as:  (*ntr ntrw wnn n.i*) which means (The most divine of gods, open to me), then, the name of the owner is appeared in the fourth line “Ta-Bes”. 

1.2. Description of the footboard iconography and text (Fig. 3-4):

The goddess Isis is depicted standing, wearing a long dress, with her winged arms lowered. She is holding an ostrich feather in each hand. Above the figure of Isis, the hieroglyphic sign of the sky (*pt*) appears, containing several stars. On either side of the figure of Isis, there are eight columns written in cursive hieroglyphs, which can be read as follows:



Transliteration	Translation
¹ [...] <i>h3 Wsir nb(t) pr [t3-bs] m3^c(t)-[hrw] [...]</i>	[...] O! Osiris, mistress of the house [Ta-Bes] True [of voice] [...]
² <i>nb(t) im3h hr ntr 3 nb(t) [pt] [s3]t [n] [ns]-inhr(t) š[^cd-ht]</i>	possessor of reverence with the great god, and mistress of [the sky], [daughter of Nes]-inheret, [(lord) of Woodcutters]
³ Destroyed	[...]

2. Commentary: (Date, parallels, and provenance)

2.1. The Headboard scene of Ta-Bes coffin:

The depiction of Nephthys on the headboard belonged to Type 6 in Taylor's typology of the headboard iconography on the anthropoid wooden coffins from Thebes. This type is first attested at the end of the twenty-fifth dynasty (675-650 B.C.), and probably continued to the first half of the twenty-sixth dynasty (Taylor, 1985, p.312). Nephthys is represented in a standing position with her winged arms downward on paralleled coffins dated to the same period from Thebes such as TR.19/1/27/2, TR.21/11/16/10, CG41046 (Gauthier, 1913, pp.323-355, pl.XXIII), and CG41058 (Gauthier, 1913, pp.83-111, pl.VIII), as well as the coffin of Irethoreru from Akhmim at British museum EA20745 (Brecht, 2008, p.103). Therefore, we can date the coffin of Ta-Bes through the headboard scene to the end of the twenty-fifth dynasty and the first half of the twenty-sixth dynasty.

Various types depicting the goddess Nephthys on the headboard of several contemporary coffins:

1. Nephthys is standing on the upper part of the headboard, while the lower part is depicted with two baboons worshiped to the sun disk from which its rays extend (TR.27/9/16/7).

2. Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph with outspread wings on the upper part, while on the lower part we find text in horizontal lines such as (CG41056), (Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum 0829), (Liverpool Museum M13992), this type fits with type 5 of Taylor's typology of Theban coffin (Taylor, 1985, p.311), In addition to its appearance in Akhmim.
3. Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph on the upper part, while the sun disk which flanked with two uraeus cobras are represented on the lower part of the headboard such as JE25804, and CG41064 (Gauthier, 1913, pp.408-429, pl. XXXIII).
4. Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph raising her arms up (Cairo, TR.12/11/16/2), or in a squatting position (Turin Inv.Nr. Cat. 2231/01).
5. Nephthys is seating on a base like the palace façade *srh* with her wings down (Cairo, TR.6/9/16/5).
6. As last one, but the Kheper beetle appears above the head of Nephthys as a sunshine symbol (Cairo, TR.28/9/16/14).
7. Nephthys is squatting and just one hand is raised to her face, while the wings are absent (Cairo, CG41057) (Gauthier, 1913, pp.297–323, pl. XXI).

2.2. The footboard scene of Ta-Bes coffin:

The depiction of Isis on the footboard belongs to “Type 6” of Taylor's typology of the footboard types. This type came into use around 675 B.C., at the end of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. This date provides a *terminus post quem* for this type, which continued in use into the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (Taylor, 1985, p.330). This depiction of Isis in the standing position with her winged arms down has parallels from Thebes such as Cairo, TR.27/9/16/7, Toledo Inv. Nr.1906.1A (Peck, 2011, pp.82-83) and from Akhmim such as London BM EA20650 and EA20745, which are dating to the same period. So, we can date the coffin through the footboard scene from the end of the twenty-fifth to the first half of the twenty-sixth dynasty.

Various types depicting the goddess Isis on the footboard of several contemporary coffins:

1. Isis is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph with outspread wings on examples from Thebes such as Cairo, CG41056 (Gauthier, 1913, pp.267-297, pl. XIX),

- CG41064 (Gauthier, 1913, pp.408-429, pl. XXXIII) and one example from Edfu at Kelsey Museum Inv.Nr. 1989.3.1 (Wilfong, 2013, p.44).
2. Isis is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph without outspread wings but raise up just one hand to its face (Cairo, SR.7/23536).
 3. Isis raised up both of her arms whether standing such as CG41050 (Gauthier, 1913, 169–193, pl. XII) or kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph (Cairo: TR.12/11/16/2).
 4. Isis is standing and raising up one hand to its face on the upper part of the footboard, while the *zht* hieroglyph is flanked with the East and West signs *iszbt* - *imntt* on the lower part such as (Turin Inv. Nr. S.5238).
 5. Isis is squatting and raising one hand forward such as Cairo, CG41048 (Gauthier, 1913, pp. 138–166, pl. XI).

2.3. Provenance:

The provenance of the Ta-Bes coffin had remained uncertain until this research proposed that its origin is likely from the Akhmim region. This identification was made through an analysis of the artistic features and epigraphy of two coffins from Akhmim dated to the 26th dynasty. The first coffin exhibits the same color scheme of yellow-on-black background (San Francisco-42895), a style that, until now, has only been observed on this coffin from Akhmim. The second one belongs to Djedhor which is preserved at British Museum (EA20650), this coffin closely resembles the Ta-Bes coffin, showing complete similarity in layout, iconography, and epigraphy. Unfortunately, neither the deceased nor her parents held any administrative or religious titles linked to a specific region that could assist in determining the coffin's provenance. Additionally, genealogical research did not provide further insights, as neither the names of the deceased nor her parents are associated with other individuals from the 25th and 26th Dynasties.





The name “Ta-Bes” exhibits variations across different periods, including the New Kingdom, Late Period, and Ptolemaic Period (Ranke, 1935, p. 359). However, the name inscribed on the coffin does not correspond to the one listed in Ranke's Personennamen (PN), indicating that the name inscribed on the coffin is likely distinct from the Ta-Bes recorded by Ranke. Similarly, the name “Nes-inherit” appears on a stela from the reign of King Aspelta during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty

(Schäfer, 1905, p. 108), as well as on a Ptolemaic stela (Ranke, 1935, p. 174), but it is unrelated to the father of the coffin's owner. Additionally, while the name "Ruru" is documented in Ranke, PN, during both the Late and Ptolemaic Periods (Ranke, 1935, p. 221), it is not associated with the name found on the coffin of Tabes.

3. Function:

Nephtys and Isis were played important roles in the ancient Egyptian religion, the most important of which was protecting and supporting the deceased in the afterlife as Osiris (Wilkinson, 2003, pp.147-148). This is evident from the text of Spell 151a in the Book of the Dead (Quirke, 2013, p.369) (Allen, 1974, p.148) (Elias, 1993, p.591, p.598), which confirms the comprehensive protection provided by the two sisters to their brother Osiris. Their depiction on the head and foot of the coffin serves as a three-dimensional representation of the vignette of spell 151a from the Book of the Dead (Johnston, 2022, p.366). Although the text accompanying the two goddesses does not include Spell 151a from the Book of the Dead—possibly because the deceased lady was not an elite individual—the depiction of the goddesses alone still fulfilled the protective function. This is supported by the presence of Spell 151 on many coffins belonging to elite individuals from Thebes such as Cairo CG41056, CG41057 and from Akhmim such as London BM EA20745, BM EA20650.

4. Epigraphic notes:





The writing of the Osiris name is one of the most important independent dating criteria. Leahy mentions that the writing of  does not occur before the reign of Rodamun from the 23rd dynasty (Leahy, 1979, p.142). It then became more extensively used from the early years of the Kushite period onward. While the use of the older form  gradually declined during the 26th Dynasty (Leahy, 1979, p.146) (Taylor, 1985, p.24). This helps to date the coffin as  is not repeated very often in the coffin texts. While  is increased in use in Ta-Bes coffin texts, which suggests that it dates to the 25th Dynasty until the first half of the 26th Dynasty.

The word *šꜥd-ht* is frequently documented in texts from the 19th and 20th Dynasties, particularly in those of the workers from Deir El-Medina, and it translates to “woodcutters”. In certain texts, such as those inscribed on the Ta-Bes coffin, the

word *ht* is omitted without altering the meaning, which still refers to woodcutters responsible for chopping wood into small pieces to provide fuel for cooking and baking fires. (Janssen, et al. 2003, pp.1-2).

Conclusion


This study concludes that:

1. The coffin of Ta-Bes can be dated to the late Twenty-fifth Dynasty and early Twenty-sixth Dynasty, based on a range of artistic and inscriptional evidence that supports this dating. Key elements of this evidence include:
 - **The depiction of Nephthys:** Nephthys is shown in a standing position with her wings pointing downward, a motif also found on coffins from the same period, such as TR.19/1/27/2, TR.21/11/16/10, CG41046, and CG41058 from Thebes, as well as the coffin of Irethoreru from Akhmim (British Museum EA20745). This dating is further supported by the coffin's classification as "Type 6" in Taylor's typology of the headboard iconography on anthropoid wooden coffins from Thebes.
 - **The depiction of Isis:** Isis is similarly depicted standing with her wings pointing downward on coffins from the same period, including TR.27/9/16/7 and Toledo Inv. Nr.1906.1A from Thebes, as well as the coffin of Irethoreru from Akhmim (British Museum EA20745). This dating is also reinforced by the coffin's classification as "Type 6" in Taylor's typology of the footboard iconography on anthropoid wooden coffins from Thebes.
 - **The writing of the Osiris name:** According to Leahy the writing of  became more extensively used from the early years of the Kushite period onward. While the use of the older form  gradually declined during the 26th Dynasty. This helps to date the coffin as  is not repeated very often in the texts of Ta-Bes coffin. While  is increased in use, which suggests that it dates to the 25th Dynasty until the first half of the 26th Dynasty.
2. **The provenance:** the study suggests that the coffin's probable provenance is Akhmim, based on a detailed analysis of artistic and epigraphic features, as well as comparisons with similar coffins from the same period.
3. **Nephthys was depicted in various positions on the headboard such as:**

- Nephthys is standing on the upper part of the headboard, while the lower part is depicted with two baboons worshiped to the sun disk from which its rays extend (TR.27/9/16/7).
 - Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph with outspread wings on the upper part, while on the lower part we find text in horizontal lines such as (CG41056), (Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum 0829), (Liverpool Museum M13992), this type fits with type 5 of Taylor's typology of Theban coffin, In addition to its appearance in Akhmim.
 - Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph on the upper part, while the sun disk which flanked with two uraeus cobras are represented on the lower part of the headboard such as JE25804, and CG41064.
 - Nephthys is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph raising her arms up (Cairo, TR.12/11/16/2), or in a squatting position (Turin Inv.Nr. Cat. 2231/01).
 - Nephthys is seating on a base like the palace façade *srh* with her wings down (Cairo, TR.6/9/16/5).
 - Nephthys is seating on a base like the palace façade *srh* with her wings down, furthermore, the Kheper beetle appears above the head of Nephthys as a sunshine symbol (Cairo, TR.28/9/16/14).
 - Nephthys is squatting and just one hand is raised to her face, while the wings are absent (Cairo, CG41057).
- 4. Isis was depicted in various positions on the footboard such as:**
- Isis is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph with outspread wings on examples from Thebes such as Cairo, CG41056, CG41064 and one example from Edfu (Kelsey Museum Inv.Nr. 1989.3.1.)
 - Isis is kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph without outspread wings but raise up just one hand to its face (Cairo, SR.7/23536).
 - Isis raised up both of her arms whether standing such as CG41050, or kneeling on *nwb* hieroglyph (Cairo, TR.12/11/16/2).
 - Isis is standing and raising up one hand to its face on the upper part of the footboard, while the *ꜥht* hieroglyph is flanked with the East and West signs *ꜥꜣtt* - *ꜥꜣtt* on the lower part such as (Turin Inv. Nr. S.5238).
 - Isis is squatting and raising one hand forward such as (Cairo, CG41048).

- 5. The religious purpose:** The depiction of Nephthys and Isis on the head and foot was intended to provide protection for the deceased in the afterlife, as mentioned in Spell 151a of the Book of the Dead.

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Figure 1

*Photo of the Headboard of the Coffin of Ta-Bes.
Courtesy of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Photograph by Sameh Abdelmohsen.*



Figure 2

Facsimile of the Scene and Text of the Headboard of the Coffin of Ta-Bes. © Author.

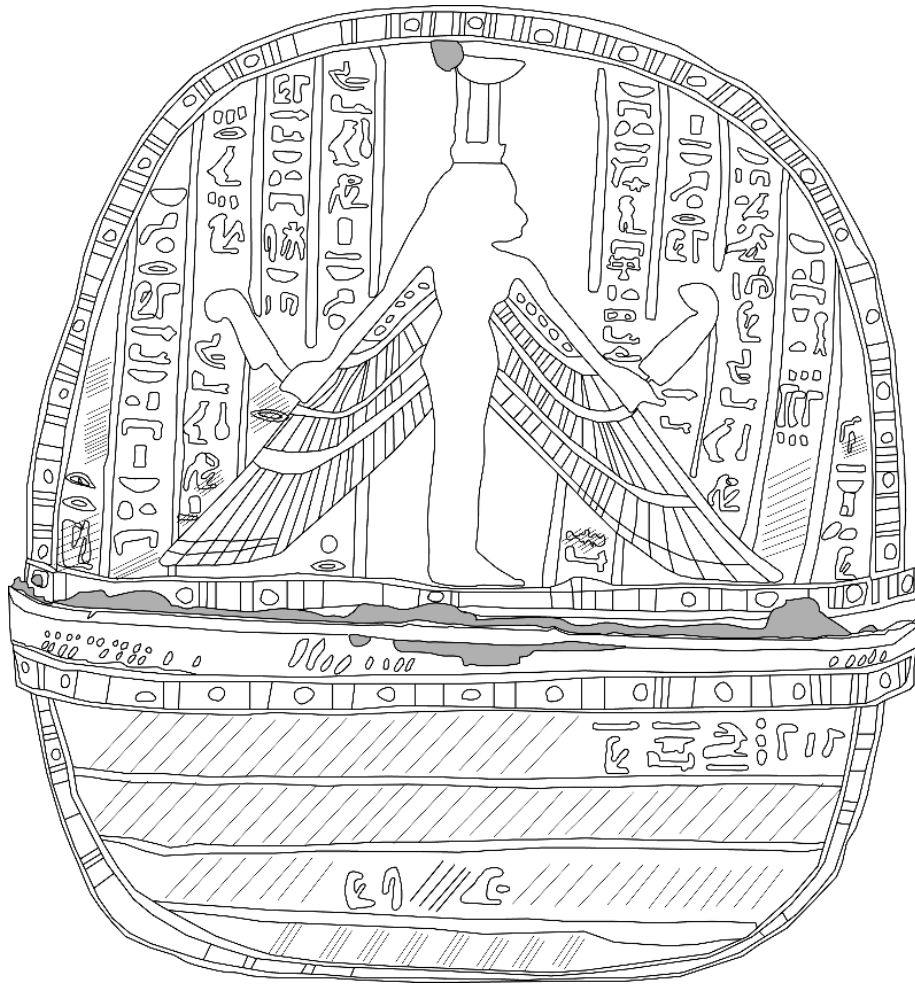


Figure 3

Photo of the Footboard of the Coffin of Ta-Bes.

Courtesy of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Photograph by Sameh Abdelmohsen.



Figure 4

Facsimile of the Scene and Text of the Footboard of the Coffin of Ta-Bes. © Author.

