

# Iwona Zych

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## Wooden Coffins from the Moslem Cemetery at Kom El-Dikka

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# WOODEN COFFINS FROM THE MOSLEM CEMETERY AT KOM EL-DIKKA

Iwona Zych

The unexpectedness of the discovery of wooden coffins at a Moslem burial ground at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria,<sup>1)</sup> hinting of practices not in the mainstream burial tradition, warrants a few words of additional description.

Both coffin burials seem to have been secondary internments and both have suffered from the specific conditions of the site. The wood in the case of the coffin in grave E-3 was in fairly good condition, but many of the elements were missing. In grave E-9A, the box was apparently largely preserved, although crushed by imploding stone walls of the tomb structure, but the condition of the wood was poor. In either case the damages are too considerable for

the reconstruction of the form to be anything but dubious at best.

The wood does not appear to be of the same species in these two coffins. However, until examination by an expert little more can be said on the subject except that it was definitely not palm wood.<sup>2)</sup>

The woodworking technique is skilled, the boards dressed smoothly, and especially in the case of the coffin from grave E 9A cut very thin, 1 cm when the rule is rather 2 cm. Traces of sawing can be seen, and the rough parts on some elements evince the difficulty the carpenter had in dressing some of the pieces (around knots in particular). The technique itself and the tools used remain to be studied.

## COFFIN FROM GRAVE E 3

The surviving elements of this coffin include about half the length of a long board, the head board and a piece of the foot board, and five beam uprights (*Fig. 1*).

The long board was actually very cleverly made of two narrower boards, joined together with a virtually square tenon (5 by 4.5 cm, 0.3-0.5 cm thick) set equidistant into a slot cut into the side edges of two boards (*Fig. 2*). The fit was not

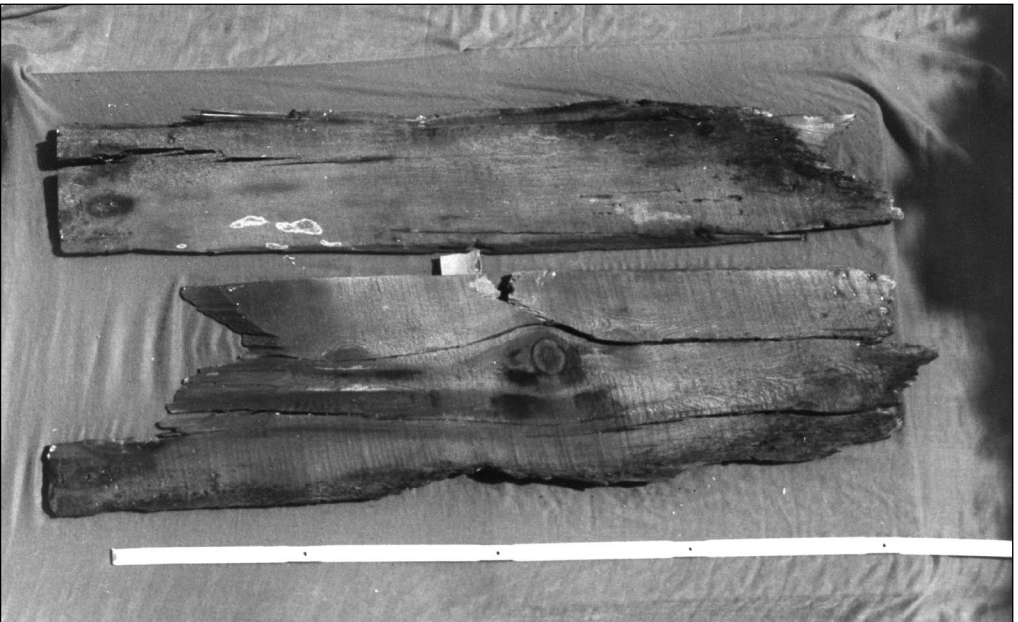
snug, but the hold was firm, since the slots were not exactly opposite one another. The tenon must have been cut to size to match the part of the two slots that meets (4.5 cm long). The tenon-in-slots joining of the two boards occurs in about the middle of the surviving length which is 92-95 cm. The combined width of the two boards was at least 40 cm, the thickness 2 cm at the short edges, thinning to 1.6 cm near the other

1) For the discovery and the work at the site this season, see report by G. Majcherek and W. Kołataj in this volume, especially, pp. 21-22. I am grateful to Dr. G. Majcherek for permission to publish these finds and to the Lanckoroński Foundation from Cracow for a grant to study worked wood in London in 2002.

2) I am indebted to Dr. T. Ważny for identifying the wood of the coffin box from grave E 3 as pine (*Pinus pinaster*).



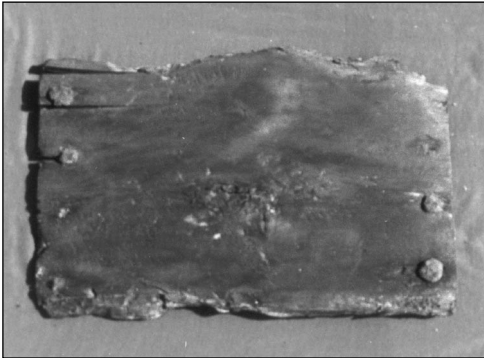
*Fig. 1. Remains of a wooden coffin from grave E 3, photographed in situ  
(Photo I. Zych)*



*Fig. 2. Surviving board from the wooden coffin found in grave E 3  
(Photo I. Zych)*

end. The outside surface was smooth with only occasional saw cuts visible near the knot; the inside, on the other hand, was much rougher, with evident traces of lengthwise sawing in the other direction than on the top. At the end preserving the original edge of the boards, there is evidence of three iron nails (there may have been at least two in the missing section between surviving nails) being driven through the thickness about 4 cm from the edge. These were big nails with shafts that were ca. 0.8 cm in section. Next to the line of nails, on the side away from the short edge of the board, there are two or perhaps even three linear stains, each 1.5 cm wide and russet-colored at the edges (cf. *Fig. 2*). These stains are visible only on the presumed outside of the coffin and should be interpreted *per analogiam* as stained impressions of finger-thick ropes once binding the box together, as an extra measure to make sure that it would not fall apart (if not for ritual or habitual reasons).<sup>3)</sup>

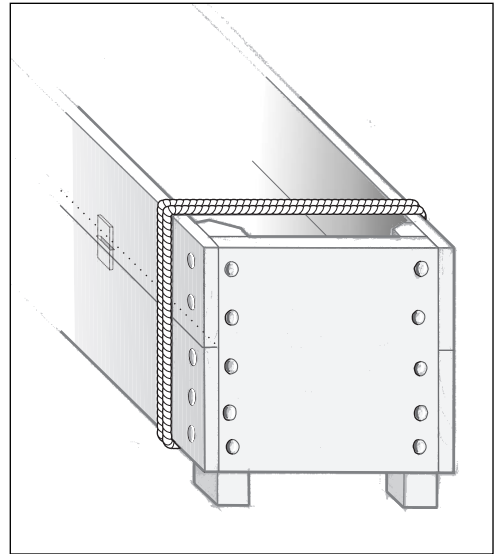
The head and foot boards are 37 and 38 cm wide, respectively, and 2 cm thick,



*Fig. 3. The end board of the coffin from grave E 3 (Photo I. Zych)*

the surviving height being negligent in the case of the foot board, and at least 28 cm for the head board. Both preserve iron nails, some still with the big concave, rounded heads, driven into the wood alongside the side edges. In the head board there are four on either side, spaced not too evenly along a line 2.6 and 2.7 cm away from the edge (*Fig. 3*). The nails have thick shafts (0.5 to 0.8 in size, the heads reaching 2 cm in diameter (the corroded head is naturally somewhat bigger). Interestingly, all the nails, in the boards, as well as in the uprights, if they survive at all, have been broken flush with the surface of the wood.

The upright members are square beams measuring about 5 cm to the side, except for one, which is somewhat slimmer. The length appears to have been close to 50 cm (three of the beams; two are shorter, but



*Fig. 4. Reconstruction drawing of the wooden coffin from grave E 3 (Drawing M. Puskarski after I. Zych)*

3) I am grateful to Prof. W. Godlewski for this suggestion. I have also drawn heavily on the documented evidence, kindly shared with me by Prof. Godlewski, of several well preserved wooden coffins of various types that have been excavated, this season in particular, at the medieval Coptic cemetery of Naqlun in the Fayum.

they have not been preserved in their entirety). In all cases two adjacent sides form a right angle and present evidence of 7-8 nails driven into the surfaces at more or less regular intervals of about 8 cm (but avoiding one another in the adjacent planes), which would fit the approximate spacing of the nails noted in the board edges. Occasionally, the nails had been driven right through the thickness of the beam and in one case a nail had apparently been driven into the top of one end. The average size of the nail shafts is 0.3 x 0.3 cm and 0.5 x 0.5 cm (it should be kept in mind that the nail shafts evident in the beams are at least 2 cm away from the head, because that is the thickness of the board they had been driven through. Since most of them do not come out on the other side, it should be assumed that the nails were no longer than 7 cm. The opposite two surfaces of the beams are plain, in two cases merely rounded off at the corner, in two others the corner edge having evidently been cut away. The wood appears to bear traces of a whitish substance (some kind of carpentry adhesive?) on the flat planes with the nails,

all along their length except for the last 10 cm or so at the end.

Unfortunately, it has proved impossible so far to match any of the nails in the head and foot boards, or the surviving edge of a long board with the uprights. Even so, it may be assumed that the vertical members must have been fitted in the corners of the coffin body, the end boards being nailed on flush with the edge of the beam, the long side boards extending beyond the edge of the corner post to end evenly with the face of the end board (*Fig. 4*). There is no evidence of how the bottom and lid could have been attached. The corner posts evidently extended through the bottom of the coffin body and formed legs upon which the coffin stood. It cannot be excluded that the coffin was not much longer than the surviving long board. Indeed, the breaking in two of one of the presumed corner posts when considered in the light of the position of the surviving long board, which had been doubled under along the tenon-joining planes, might suggest that the board was actually the left side of the coffin body.

## COFFIN FROM GRAVE E 9A

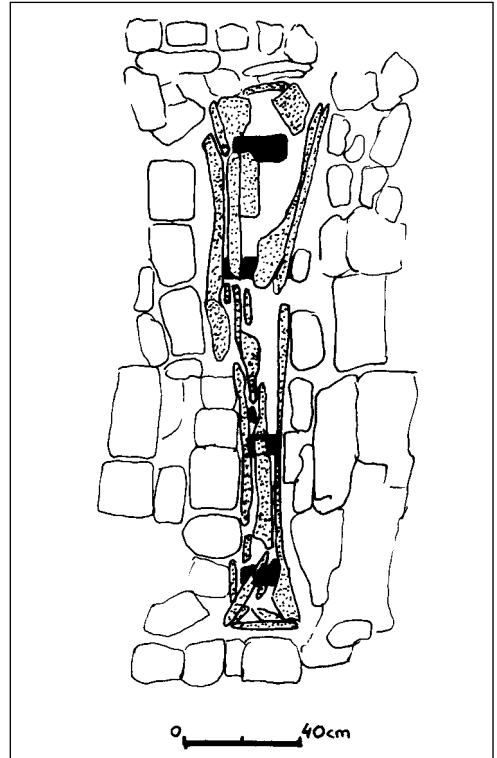
The other coffin came to light in grave E 9A, a few hundred meters to the north of the previously described one. Here, the long boards, very fragmented unfortunately, appeared to be all in position, crushed inward by the collapsing stone-block walls of the tomb. A careful lifting of the pieces and analysis of their relative position in the grave led to the conclusion that this coffin was constructed in a somewhat different manner. The long boards, as far as they could be securely identified, turned out to be at least 160 cm long, from 24 to 30 cm wide, and uniformly 1 cm thick. Apart from some iron nails in the

short ends of the long boards, there was no trace of any other form of joining element (the long sides had a tendency to curl under, as if a bentwood technique had been applied).

Unlike the previously discussed coffin, there were no uprights found in this case. Instead there were at least four narrow strips of wood, 1 cm thick like the rest of the boards, but only about 6-8 cm wide and about 20 cm long. While all the long boards, whether from the sides, lid or bottom of the coffin, were found lying more or less lengthwise in the grave, these narrow strips lay crosswise, at fairly regular

intervals, the ones at either end being approximately 15 to 20 cm away from the endboards (*Fig. 5*). The condition of these strips (split and with holes torn out of their substance) suggests that they were affixed to the long boards in some form of inside reinforcement of the coffin bottom or lid. This hypothesis is substantiated by what was noted on one of the boards believed to be from the lid: on the inside surface, which (as in the case of all of the boards) bears some kind of limewash (?), there is a crosswise strip that failed to be covered with the substance, and it is exactly along this strip that holes (nails?) were ripped in the wood, resulting in the board breaking in two in this place (*Fig. 6*).

The position of the presumed endboards confirms that the coffin had disintegrated without being moved, accidentally or otherwise, later on. The boards were 36 cm wide and at least 26 cm high; their thickness fell in the range of 2.5 and 3 cm and, while none of the nails have survived, the jagged sides can be presumed as evidence of iron nails having been used to fix the endboards to the coffin body.



*Fig. 5. Remains of a wooden coffin found in grave E 9A. The crosswise strips have been marked in black (Drawing E. Szpakowska)*



*Fig. 6. Piece of wooden coffin from grave E 9A. Evidence of inside limewash? (Photo I. Zych)*

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the use of wooden coffins is not unknown in Moslem burial practices,<sup>4)</sup> it is certainly rare. Suffice it to say, that of the few hundred graves explored in the past forty years in the three successive phases of the Moslem burial ground on Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, no traces of wooden coffins of any kind have ever been noted in the archaeological record. Admittedly, the conditions at the site are not the most conducive to the preservation of wooden objects, even so pieces of worked wood from levels corresponding to the Moslem necropolis have been discovered in the past.<sup>5)</sup>

At this point in the research, it seems plausible to think that these two separate instances of burials in wooden coffins were the outcome of pure necessity: as G. Majcherek has suggested in his report, the dead may have been transported to this burial ground from some distance outside the city, in which case the accepted form of a bier would simply not have sufficed.

The two tombs with the secondary burials in wooden coffins, albeit situated in different parts of the cemetery, belong to the same phase of the so-called Upper Necropolis, which is dated by the excavators to the 11th-12th centuries AD.<sup>6)</sup>

4) T. Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, Blackwell Publishers 1999, p. 168.

5) For a presentation of the worked wood finds from Polish excavations in Alexandria, cf. I. Zych, "A note on the collection of wooden objects from the Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria", *Alexandrian Studies in Memoriam Daoud Abdu Daoud*, *BSAA* 45 (1993), 413-427.

6) For the most convincing dating of this phase of the burial ground, cf. W. Kubiak, *Inscriptiones arabes de Kom el-Dick*, II, *BSAA* 43, 1975, 133ff. Recent work at the site has yielded much new evidence substantiating this dating, cf. reports by G. Majcherek in successive volumes of *PAM*.