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# WOODEN COFFINS FROM CEMETERY A IN NAQLUN

Iwona Zych

The 12th-13th century cemetery on Kom A in Naqlun, which has been excavated on and off since the 1998<sup>1</sup> season, has provided rich evidence for a variety of aspects of the life and status of the medieval Christian inhabitants of the oasis (e.g. textiles, glass, personal accessories, anthropological studies). Not the least, thanks to favorable climate conditions, which are conducive to the preservation of wood, it has yielded

information about the kinds of coffins that were used for burying the dead.

Out of the practically 400 graves explored so far in cemetery A, at least half had box coffins of some kind and 40 of these were documented in detail by the present author during the 2004 season. These preliminary remarks are based on observations made on site, coupled with documentation of coffins from earlier years.

## COFFIN TYPES

Only the regular wooden-box coffins will be considered in the present report<sup>2</sup>. The *qafas* crate, which follows all the construction rules typical for this kind of container, con-

stitutes a special type which will not be discussed here [Fig. 1].

A little over 12% of the coffins found in the cemetery at Naqlun in 2004 were of



Fig. 1. *Qafas* coffin T. 343  
(Photo. I. Zych)

1 For excavation reports, see W. Godlewski in this volume (pp. 181-190) and previously: *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 117; *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 126-128; *PAM XII, Reports 2000* (2001), 154-160; *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 168-169; *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 163-171; *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), 144-145.

2 Other forms include biers and regular containers made of *jarid* ribs tied together with rope, with intricate triangular supports, also of spliced jarids, mounted on either side of the head to keep it from lolling.

this type and it remains to be seen whether they were an inspired local invention, making use of an ubiquitous Egyptian container<sup>3</sup> for a less than ordinary contents, or were generally used in this particular capacity. Naturally, the vagaries of preservation in the case of organic materials limit substantially any remarks of a more general nature.

The absolute majority of the coffins represents a wooden-box type, but in a sur-

prising variety of forms. The set can be considered in terms of physical characteristics like size, shape, and material. It can also be looked at from the point of view of wood-cutting and assembly techniques, construction and quality of execution. The end analysis should add to our understanding of the differentiated status of the dead buried in cemetery A at Naqlun, as well as provide information on the carpenter's trade in the oasis.

### SIZE AND SHAPE

The coffins come in three general sizes: small, medium and large. Apart from cases of mothers being buried together with their babies, the boxes were intended as containers for individual dead bodies and hence it is only natural that they were made in more or

less standard sizes reflecting people's bulk at death. Hence, the small boxes, apparently for pre-teen children, were under 100 cm long, those for juveniles between 130 and 140 cm long, and those for adults between 180 and 190 cm long.

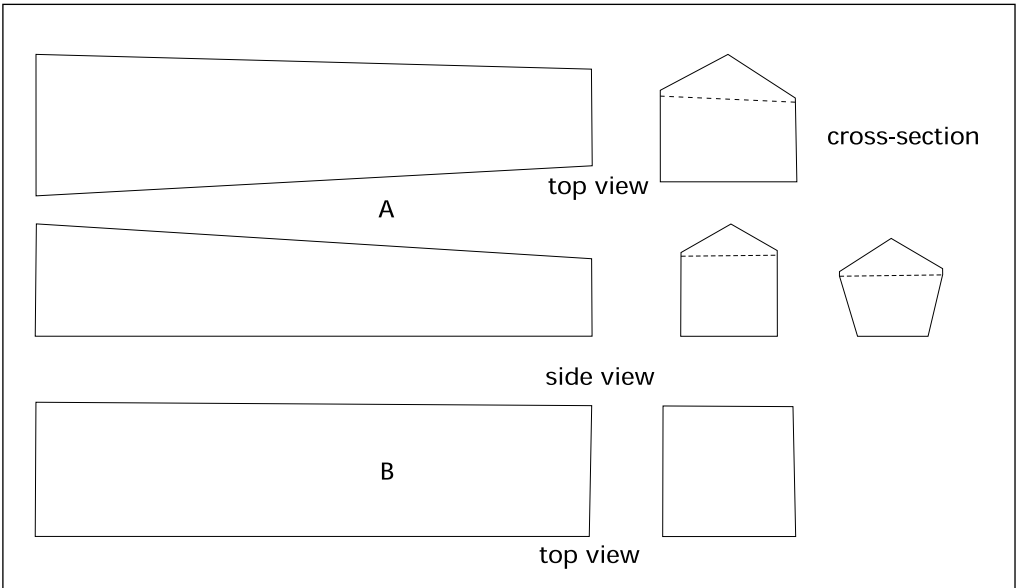


Fig. 2. Schematic coffin shapes: A. trapezoid (top and side sections) with cross sections (1: regular box, box with gable roof, pentagonal box with gable roof); B. rectangular (top and cross-section) (Drawing I. Zych, R. Mahler)

3 Cf. W. Wendrich, *The World According to Basketry* (CNWS: The Netherlands 1999), 163.

The oasis population must have had its share of over-size adults, as indicated by one case of an extra-long coffin (243 cm in length).

Most coffins were a standard c. 40-50 cm wide by c. 30-40 cm high (c. 30 cm by 20-25 cm respectively in the case of children's coffins) and an effort was made to give the box a trapezoid form reflecting body shape,

meaning that the coffin was widest at the shoulders and visibly narrowing in width and height towards the feet. The trapezoid plan in the horizontal plane was not reflected in the vertical crosswise cut, which was more or less rectangular [Fig. 2:A].

A series of coffins presented lids in the form of gable roofs (T. 290, T. 292, T. 298,

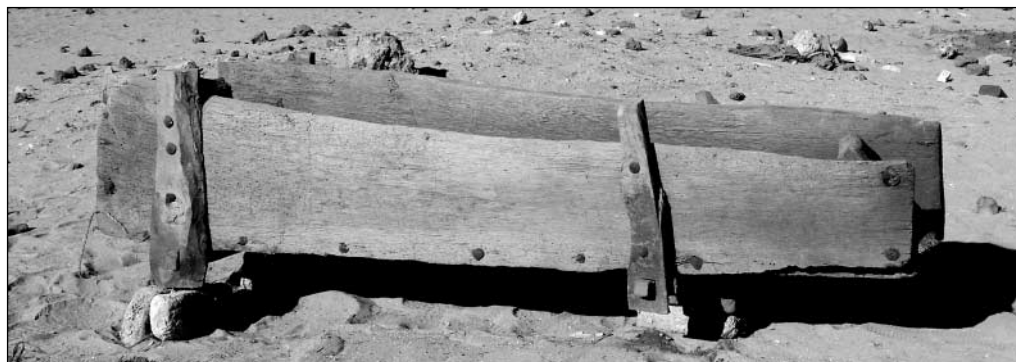


Fig. 3. Example of adult-size box coffins T.341(top) and T.304 (Photo I. Zych)

T. 300, T. 312, T. 323, T. 324, T. 364). Otherwise they followed the principle of trapezoid shape in the horizontal plane, narrowing in height and width toward the feet (average maximum size: 55 cm wide and 45-55 cm high). The sides of these coffins were kept generally vertical with regard to the bottom. In one case (T. 323), the sides were visibly inclined inward, giving an overall pentagonal shape in the vertical plane [cf. *Fig. 2:A*].

In at least two cases, the philosophy of the shape was entirely different. The coffins, which were fitted with leg supports and demonstrated very fine quality joinery, were made as rectangular boxes of a larger size than the rule (T. 311: 30 cm wide by 40 cm high, 170 cm long; T. 322: 47 cm by 47 cm, 198 cm long; cf. *Fig. 2:B*). The association with ancient stone sarcophagi, especially sarcophagi in the form of imitation beds, is not unconvincing.

## CONSTRUCTION

The regular, not to say ideal box coffin consisted of four long boards and two end boards, fitted and nailed together [*Figs. 3, 3a*]. The technique was to nail the bottom to the end boards first, then nail the side boards to the bottom and end boards. Iron

nails were used, at least two per each short edge, spaced c. 10 cm apart, and at least 3-5 per long edge, the spacing being c. 23-40 cm as a rule. Cases of very close spacing were also documented [*Fig. 4*]. Wooden pegs were used in lieu of iron nails in two



*Fig. 3a. Example of small box coffin T. 388  
(Photo I. Zych)*

of the gable-lidded coffins found earlier and in one coffin excavated this year (T. 364); otherwise, pegging was employed mainly as a joinery technique to connect pieces of wood in a single plane [Fig. 5]. Obviously, carpenters found little need or purpose, not to mention functionality in the face of the common availability of iron nails,



Fig. 5. Examples of pegs used to join boards together: coffin bottom (left) and lid (Photo I. Zych)

to employ this far more laborious method of putting a box together. Indeed, pegging appears to be a furniture technique that was applied in coffin-making only in cases where evidently extra care was taken to produce a fine piece of carpentry (presumably for status purposes, e.g. the two sarcophagi-like coffins T. 311 and T. 322, lid of T. 353). The use of pegs did not exclude a few nails added for sounder construction.

The inside corners, but only in the case of very thin boards, were very seldom strengthened with vertical struts (e.g. T. 322, T. 391). The standard, especially on the bottom



Fig. 4. Tightly spaced nails joining the bottom to the headboard of coffin T. 385, *in situ* (Photo I. Zych)



boards and lids, was to nail crosswise slats, either two, three or four, on the outside for the coffin body and often on the inside surface for the lids [Fig. 6]. In the latter case the ends of the slats were cut even with the edge of the lid to make it fit snugly into the box. If the slats were on the outside of the lid, they extended beyond the outside edges of the boards and were fitted in with the side supports of the coffin (see below), again to ensure a snug fit. In the case of T. 322, the lid had slats nailed onto it on the inside and the ends had notching that fitted them into appropriate notches made in the top edge of the long side boards. (This again proves the mastery of the carpenter who made T. 322.) Slats nailed onto the bottom, which were not part of a cradle-like construction (see below), would be positioned right behind or in front of the side supports for a snug fit that acted as a structural reinforcement for the box [Fig. 8].

Apart from providing general reinforcement of box structure, the slats were a practical form of piecing boards together. The piecing was done both lengthwise and widthwise, it being very rare that a board of sufficient width (at least 35 cm) was on hand (and even if such widths were sawed and sold on a regular basis, they would have been used for more demanding purposes).

While statistics will be available only once the final study is completed, it can be safely said that more than half the coffins were fitted with side supports that acted as furniture legs, raising the coffin off the ground by c. 20 cm as a rule. In most cases the tops of these supports were cut even with the top of the lid, serving to keep the fitted lid in place. However, they could also extend 10 cm and more above the lid [Fig. 7]. These supports were made of thicker beams or, often, halved branches of a diameter c. 7-9 cm (hence their roughly

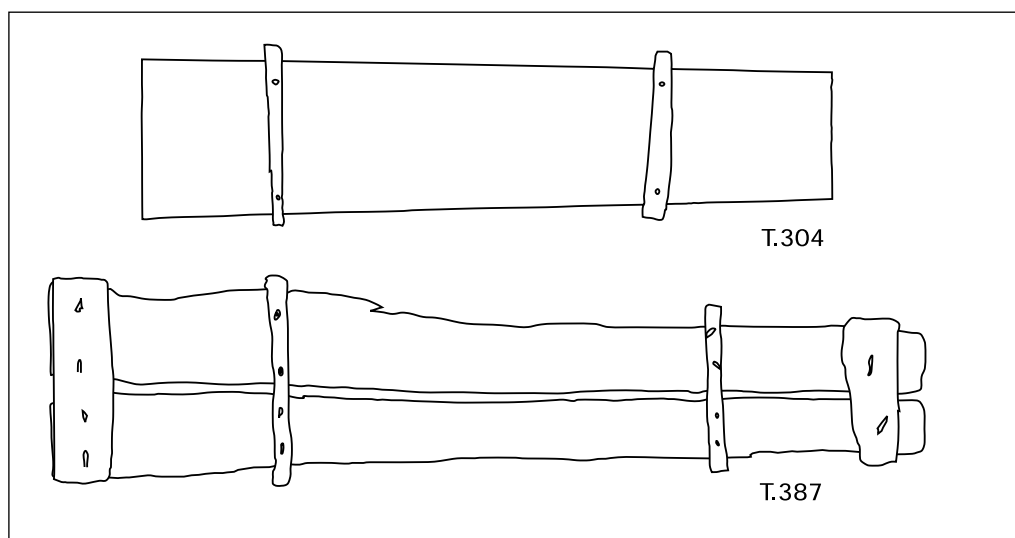


Fig. 6. Two examples of lids with reinforcing slats nailed to top  
(Drawing I. Zych, R. Mahler)

semicircular shape). They were nailed onto the side boards, occasionally also from the inside out, and the ends of longer nails were hammered down.

About half of the documented examples presented a special cradle-like construction consisting of the slat on the bottom board being fitted into the side supports to create a U-halter shape [Fig. 9 b,c]. The bottom slats in these cases had the ends extending beyond the edges of the board, thinned down and fitted into rectangular slots made in the side supports. Wedges were often hammered into the slots, next to the slat ends, to stabilize the structure. In a single case, the construction was reversed with the side supports passing through holes made in the bottom slat, which consequently extended well beyond the edges of the coffin (cf. Fig. 9a).

It is tempting to consider these 'legs' as an indication that the coffins were placed

in mausolea some kind, meant for view during whatever remembrance services that were practiced at the cemetery. And with regard to a number of coffins, which appear to have been placed in enclosed spaces, it could well have been the case. This aspect will have to be studied across



Fig. 7. Coffin T.348 with qafas lid and side supports, in situ (Photo I.Zych)



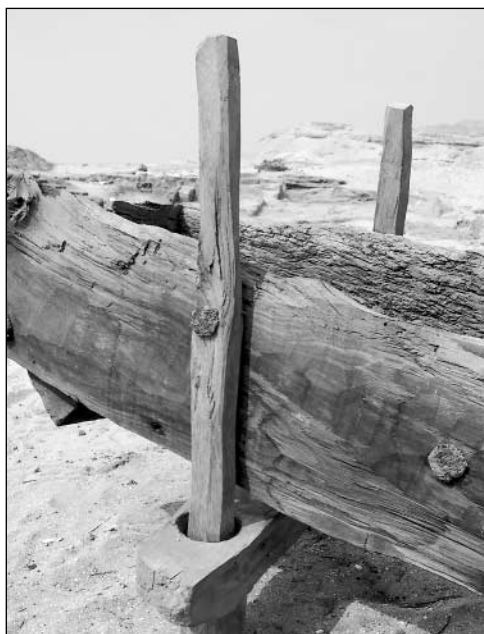
Fig. 8. Bottom of coffin T.305.1 (Photo I. Zych)



the cemetery before final conclusions are drawn, but already it is apparent that of the seven coffins with the cradle-like construction and two others on 'legs' documented this season, the majority had been buried in the ground.

Coffins hollowed out in half of a palm log were noted in earlier seasons of fieldwork (T. 307).

Lids have already been mentioned in the discussion of construction techniques. Suffice it to say that on the whole they were flat (only one case of potential gable-lid discovered this season) and were fitted between the projecting ends of side supports. Apparently they were never nailed down, the boxes rather being wrapped in coffin shrouds and tied with rope in a complicated net-like pattern that kept the lid down during the funeral service. In only one case of a child's coffin, the lid rested on the edges of the end boards, which were lower than



*Fig. 9a. Cradle-like construction of coffin side supports (T. 348) (Photo I. Zych)*



*Fig. 9 b,c. Cradle-like construction of coffin side supports: b) T. 341; c) T. 378 (Photo I. Zych)*

the side boards, and was fixed to the side boards presumably with wooden pegs inserted through matching holes (T. 388). The gable lids (for a photo of coffins found *in situ*, cf. report in *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), *Fig. 2*, on p. 166) were made of long boards nailed or pegged to triangular end pieces that were fixed on pegs to the end boards of the coffin box [*Fig. 10*].

The side edges of the boards were not, as a rule, cut at a slant to accommodate for the angle at the point of fitting of the boards together; in one instance, a thin long slat was inserted lengthwise at the top where the two slanting sides of the lid met.

One case of a *qafas* lid of palm-branch ribs tied onto a wooden box coffin was documented this season (T. 348, cf. *Fig. 7*).

## QUALITY

Two aspects need to be discussed under this heading and both have wider repercussions. The material used in making coffins is an indirect reflection of the wood trade and carpentry in the Fayum Oasis in this period. The workmanship of the coffins reflects not only on woodworking skills (talented carpenters need not have been that rare after all, considering the extensive use of wood in building and furniture in the period), but throws light on this sphere of spiritual beliefs and the related aspects of social status and emotional commemoration.



*Fig. 10. One of the gable-lidded coffins showing pegged construction of endboard (Photo I. Zych)*

As regards the wood used in coffin-making, both palmwood and greenwood is represented. Characteristically, the long boards of coffins can be made of palmwood, but the end boards are always of some greenwood species.<sup>4</sup> Coffins made entirely of greenwood constitute the other type.

Minute analysis of the wood has provided data on various wood-cutting and construction techniques that will not be analyzed in this preliminary report. At present, suffice it to say that the wood used in coffin-making was for the most part leftover wood from other jobs (mainly architectural construction) that a given carpenter was charged with. In the best of cases, the boards are sawed from the outside parts of a tree trunk and are thus narrower. Frequently, they appear to have been discarded because of one flaw or another, not the least because a corner had broken off or there was a hole left by a knot, or the piece had cracked. The material was no longer acceptable for building or decoration purposes, but was obviously good enough for a coffin. As for the end boards, shorter slats and pieces that could be cut to size were used, but often enough branches of a lesser diameter

<sup>4</sup> Four different kinds of wood have been sampled for laboratory identification of the wood species scheduled to be carried out in a future season. Likely candidates are naturally sycamore and acacia, which were commonly available in the region. A dark and hard wood (oak?), found occasionally, was probably salvaged waste wood.

were simply cut in half and not even stripped of bark. The same can be said of the slats, struts and supports, all of which appear to have been made of waste branches cut to shape in the most general fashion (without stripping the bark, disregarding holes and cracks, etc). T. 383 is an excellent example of a coffin put together from whatever the person making it had within reach [Fig. 11]. This brings me to another question: Were all the coffins made by professional carpenters? Coffin T. 383 is the best proof that as in other matters, so in the case of coffin-making there is always a wide range to consider, from the expensive

containers ordered from professional workshops by well-to-do relatives (if not by the person himself in anticipation of future needs) to the poor-man's box nailed together in some backyard from whatever the compassionate craftsman had on hand.

The forty coffins documented this year illustrated the full range, from very fine pieces made of well selected wood and revealing sound joinery, through the average production where quality wood was used, joinery was on an average, generally acceptable level and with evidence of some patching, and finally, the poorest pieces, poorly constructed (but sound), made of waste wood and, characteristically, of re-



*Fig. 11. Poor quality and poor workmanship: example of coffin T. 383  
(Photo I. Zych)*

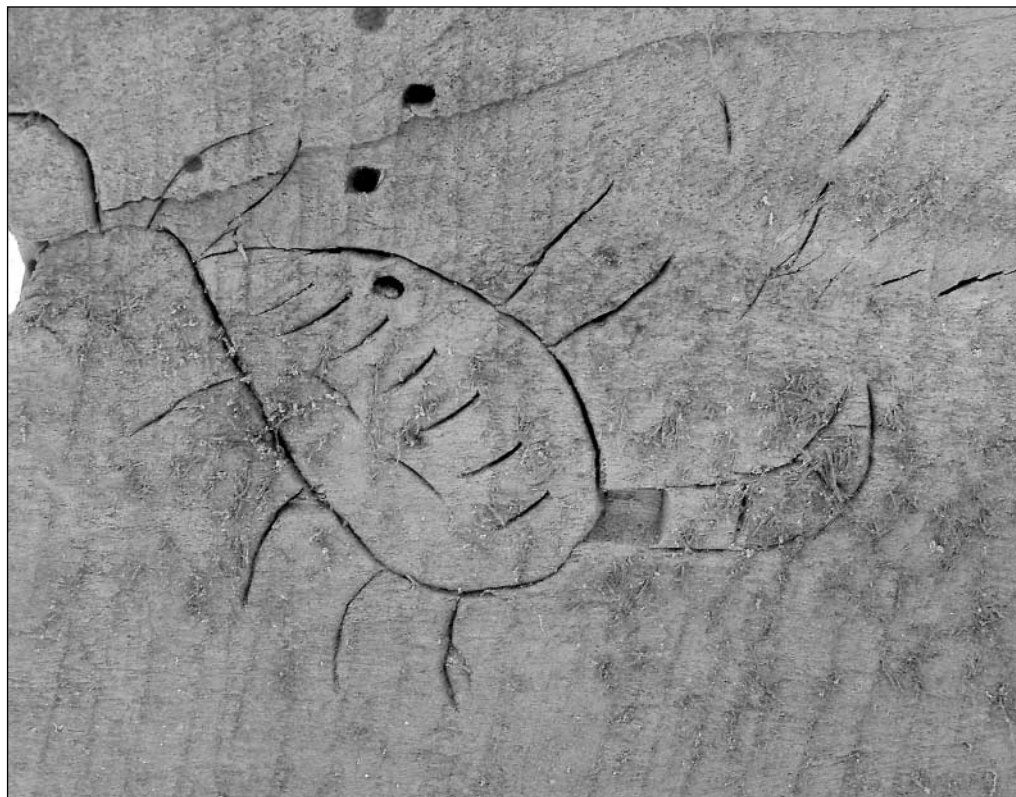
used material. Indeed, it is quite obvious, that various pieces of wood must have been salvaged from the rubble of ruined houses or other constructions (evidence of holes of

no functional significance in a coffin, guidelines in black or red for cutting wood to specific shapes, painted crosses which were concealed from view, etc.).

## DECORATION

In conclusion, it should be added that the coffins, as already mentioned above, were frequently wrapped in shrouds and had typical crosses painted in red on them. In individual cases, a cross was painted directly on the head end of the lid (T. 311 and T. 322). The gable-lidded coffins not only had a criss-crossing pattern (imitation

of wrapping with ropes ?) painted in red on some of the lids, but also various lines painted in red on the head board (T. 323, T. 324). Finally, this year's excavations yielded a find that is entirely unique – a representation of a scorpion incised into the headboard of a child's coffin (T. 305.2) [Fig. 12].



*Fig. 12. Scorpion carving on the head board of coffin T. 305.2  
(Photo I. Zych)*