Peopling the Past Video 4: Egyptian Coffins with Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads “Peopling the Past”

We hear Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod Speak: “Hello and welcome to Peopling the Past. My name is Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod and I'm an archaeologist currently working as a researcher at the University of British Columbia.”

There is a woman sitting in front of the camera. She has shoulder-length blonde hair, dark glasses, and a gray shirt. The wall behind here has a colorfully painted mural of a landscape. The PowerPoint slide shows the Peopling the Past logo.

MacLeod: “So for our first question: "what topic are you talking about today?" Today I'm going to be talking about the people who built objects in ancient Egypt. Right now, my work focuses in particular on those individuals who constructed wooden coffins. To understand some of the complicated roles that these people may have held in their society I want to first explain a little bit about the coffins themselves.”

The slide shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text is read out by MacLeod.

MacLeod: “In ancient Egypt a coffin wasn't just a container that held the body of the deceased they were also magic vessels that protected the deceased's spirit and helped it on the journey to the afterlife. Because of this, coffins were seen as a really important part of the burial and they were used throughout the entirety of Egyptian history and in all areas of Egypt to bury the elite. Over the long history of ancient Egypt, thousands of years the different religious meanings of the coffins changed along with their shape and decoration. As the coffins changed the craftspeople and artists involved in making these objects also had to change their techniques, learn new skills, or work with other specialists. By the end of

the New Kingdom around 1100 BCE a coffin had to be carefully carved into a human or anthropoid shape, it had to be painted with colorful images of the gods and protective symbols, and spells from what is commonly referred to today as the Book of the Dead were also written over it. It might also be inlaid with glass or precious stones, or covered over with gold or silver then rituals were performed on the coffin to activate these spells before it was finally placed in a tomb. So what I'm really interested in is understanding the people involved at each step of construction. I want to know who they were, if and how different specialists worked together and how they had to adjust their approach when coffin styles changed once more. Of course getting to this information means investigating a lot of different evidence."

The slide shows the outer coffin of Henuttawy on the left, crafted out of wood, and painted to represent the coffin's owner. The caption below the image gives the inventory number at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On the right are a series of bulleted points about ancient Egyptian coffins. The points explain that in the New Kingdom, coffins were anthropoid—or in the shape of a human, were carved out of wood, were painted with religious images, could be inlaid with glass or precious stone or covered in gold foil. The list ends with the question of who were the people who made these coffins?

MacLeod: "This brings us then to the next question: "what sources or data do you look at?"

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay table from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads "What sources or data do you look at?"

MacLeod: "There are three main types of evidence that I use to study coffins and their construction: the material evidence, which involves a close investigation of objects; pictorial evidence, which for me largely involves the examination of scenes from tombs; and the textual evidence. So for the material evidence, I start by looking at the coffins themselves and take

note of the different construction choices and decorative patterns used over time."

Slide includes two images. On the left is rectangular wooden coffin from the Old Kingdom (now in Metropolitan Museum of Art). On the right is an image of two coffins from the tomb of Khonsu (also in the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

MacLeod: "I look carefully at details such as the different techniques that carpenters use to join the parts of the coffin together, in addition to the different pigments used for decoration and any added materials."

Slide shows a close-up image of the coffin of Khnumnakht, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The coffin is colourfully painted with images and hieroglyphs. A yellow outline highlights a piece of wood and the join between this and other pieces of the coffin.

MacLeod: "I also analyze the cellular structure of the wood which can help me understand what species of wood is used in the construction. This is important as it can tell me if the wood was local or imported. At different times in Egyptian history Egypt was cut off from imported woods like Lebanese cedar which was the favorite for coffin construction. So at these times, artists again had to change the techniques to work with local timber."

Slide shows a microscopic view of the cellular structure of Sycamore wood (Ficus sycomorus). The slide is titled "Wood Analysis."

MacLeod: "Then to help me better understand the construction and the choices made by craftspeople and artists I study the tools that they used. I can then compare these to marks left on the objects which are called tool marks. Sometimes the different strokes and patterns in the tool marks can help me understand if the artist was an expert or an apprentice and if they had full access to the full suite of tools available to them."

Slide shows a collection of ancient Egyptian woodworking tools from the New Kingdom, now in the British Museum.

MacLeod: "To get a better idea of what was involved in creating these objects I've also worked with carpenters and artists in Cairo and Los

Angeles and have constructed a number of wooden objects myself. This has helped me to better understand the tool marks that I find on ancient objects and has certainly made me appreciate the skill of both ancient and modern woodworkers."

Slide shows MacLeod working in a modern workshop, bent over a table and working on a piece of wood that is standing upright. The slide text indicates that MacLeod is in the process of learning new joining techniques.

MacLeod: "And now on to the pictorial evidence. Luckily for us the ancient Egyptians also loved to depict workshops on their tomb walls. They believed that by illustrating events and objects in their tombs they could ensure that the tomb owner would have access to these elements in the afterlife. There are therefore some very detailed illustrations of ancient workshops that also help to reveal aspects of production."

Slide, titled "Ancient Egyptian Crafstpeople," shows an artistic rendering of a wall painting from the Tomb of Rekhmire in Thebes. In this image, we see a seated craftsman working on a wooden piece of furniture.

MacLeod: "Then there is the written evidence. This can take the form of transaction records and temple donation lists which can tell me what people were working, on how much they charged for different tasks, and the relative values of different materials. But what I really like to study are biographies, and again we as Egyptologists are so lucky that the ancient Egyptian people wanted to record aspects of their lives in their tombs. A number of biographies from tombs and objects like this one called "stelae" have been found that belong to craftspeople and artists. This one is my favorite, the Stele of Irtysen from the Middle Kingdom, around 2000 BCE. Irtysen describes himself as an 'overseer of craftsman, a scribe, and a sculptor', 'who knows the hidden knowledge of hieroglyphs, and the conduct of festive rituals.'"

Slide has an image on the right of the Stele of Irtysen, a standing inscribed stone slab with a rounded top. On the right are a list of types of written evidence available, including transaction records, donation lists, and biographies. There are also two quotes from the Stele of Irtysen, including his titles as the "overseer of craftsmen, a scribe, and a sculptor," and his

description as one who “knows the hidden knowledge of hieroglyphs, and the conduct of the festive rituals.”

MacLeod: “Finally, there are also times when texts, images, and objects all come together. The spells written on coffins either called Coffin Texts or the Book of the Dead spells depending on the period tell us about the changing religious beliefs associated with these objects and sometimes they help us question our assumptions about the different roles that people held in society. Take a look at this side of a coffin of Djehutynakht also from around 2000 BCE. The red box is highlighting an area of the coffin that would not be visible once it was put together with the other coffin sides.”

Slide, titled “Objects and Texts”, shows a side image of the Coffin of Djehutynakht, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. On the left of the image there is a red box added to highlight a section of the joining wood that would not be visible to the viewer once the coffin was fully assembled.

MacLeod: “Let's take a closer look at it. Hopefully you can see here that there are spells scratched into the joint on the left and onto the tenon, a piece of wood used to join the sides together, on the right. These spells had to be added during the construction process. Does this mean that carpenters worked closely with priests and scribes during each stage of construction? Or were these carpenters like Irtysen, multi-talented and trained in a number of different skills?”

Slide shows a close-up image of the wooden joins from the coffin of Djehutynakht. These joining portions are not finished and painted like the surrounding wood, however there are signs and symbols visible on the join that were scratched in by the coffin maker.

MacLeod: “Asking these questions brings us to our final section: How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?”

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted “mummy portrait” of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The

text reads “How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?”

MacLeod: “All of this evidence comes together to provide us with some really amazing insight into the lives of craftspeople and artists. We can track how these individuals had to adapt long-standing traditions and techniques to changes in religious beliefs and to changes in access to materials due to shifts in trade networks or warfare between different regions. Tool marks help us identify the work of experienced versus beginner artists which can help us study the training process and which patrons had access to different workshops. Perhaps most importantly however, all this evidence, the different added materials, and religious knowledge necessary to complete these objects, makes us question our ability to easily label people in the past, to place them into discrete categories or ranks in society. Irtysen for instance describes himself as an overseer of workers, a sculptor, a scribe, and somebody who knows sacred rituals. He is therefore a multi-talented, educated artist who in other contexts might be considered a priest. Secret spells written in coffin joints which would be hidden after construction, again make us question our assumptions. It helps to remind us that people who created objects who are usually labeled as craftspeople might belong to high positions in society. It reminds us that people can film multiple roles in the community and that people in the past just like people today are complicated. But it is these complications that make studying the past interesting and with each discovery we get a little closer to piecing together the lives of individuals who lived so long ago.”

On the left of the slide is the same image of the seated craftsman from the Tomb of Rekhmire shown earlier. The slide is titled “Ancient Egyptian Craftspeople and Artists,” and includes a bulleted list of subjects we can learn about through this research. The content was read out by MacLeod.

MacLeod: “Thank you so much for watching and don't forget to look through some of the other videos and podcasts from Peopling the Past.”

(music playing)
The last slide shows the credits for this episode:

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