

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COFFINS

Craft traditions and functionality

edited by

John H. TAYLOR and Marie VANDENBEUSCH



PEETERS

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ICONOGRAPHY AND FUNCTION OF STELAE AND COFFINS IN DYNASTIES 25–26

Hisham EL-LEITHY

Abstract

In the Third Intermediate and Late Periods wooden stelae were usually placed in the burial chamber with the coffin and the mummy. With the beginning of Dynasty 22, wooden stelae became an essential element of funerary furniture in the tombs of the elite. They were often the only funerary furniture accompanying the deceased in the tomb, as exemplified by an intact burial found in 2012 in the Valley of the Kings (KV 64).

This paper will highlight and connect the scenes on the Theban wooden stelae with those on coffins. The religious iconography of the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period wooden funerary stelae symbolised a microcosm of the universe and integrated the heavenly sphere with the earthly realm. The central scene, in which either solar or Osirian concepts dominate, illustrates a transitional stage in which the mortal encounters the divine and the deceased is shown making an offering before a deity. This central scene may depict the successful conclusion of the judgement scene, based on BD 125, or it may be related to the solar aspect of the afterlife. After this, the deified deceased was identified with the creator god or the Great God, who embodied both solar and Osirian aspects.

In Dynasties 25–26 the lid of the outermost coffin often displays a standard sequence showing the weighing of the deceased's heart (on the viewer's right). This all-important moment of judgement was supposed to determine whether or not the individual was worthy to enter the afterlife. As usual, a successful outcome is shown, and the 'justified deceased' is introduced to a number of deities. In contrast, on the wooden stelae, this judgement scene shows only the introduction of the deceased to either three gods or to a long series of deities, including the Sons of Horus. Among these deities a snake, standing upright (sometimes with human legs and arms) is frequently represented; a study of different examples of this figure leads to the conclusion that the snake is a representation of the god Atum.

Introduction

Following the end of the New Kingdom, the rich tradition of private tomb decoration was replaced by painted coffins, wooden stelae and funerary papyri. In fact, these artefacts represent the best surviving categories of Theban art during the Third Intermediate and Late Periods (Swart 2004, 41; Munro 1973, 5; Aston 2009, 349–55).

With the beginning of Dynasty 22, wooden stelae became an essential element of funerary furniture in the tombs of the elite. The use of a light material, such as wood, was perhaps preferred so that the stelae could easily be placed with the deceased, either near the coffin inside the burial chamber or elsewhere in the tomb (**Fig. 1**; Hassanein 1982, 42, n.2; Hassanein et al. 1986, 7–26; Leblanc and Nelson 1997, 82; Nelson 2003, 90; Aston 1987, 578, A. 110, no. 20; Saleh 2007, 41; Winlock 1942, 53). Such stelae could be the only funerary furniture accompanying the deceased in the tomb, as illustrated by an assemblage which was found in the Valley of the Kings: Susanne Bickel discovered an intact tomb (KV 64) containing a coffin accompanied only by a wooden stela and dated to Dynasty 22 (**Fig. 2**; Adrom et al. 2011, 2, figs 1–2).

Transferring the stela from the chapel to the burial chamber also changed its function. The target audience shifted from the general public, on whom the deceased relied to recite the offering formulae, to the gods themselves. The stela became more of a 'memorandum for the gods' and less for humans (Swart 2004, 41; Munro 1973, 5).

The types of wooden stelae

Three major types of funerary stelae were in use during the period from Dynasty 21 to the end of Dynasty 26. The first type has only a scene showing the deceased adoring the seated god, with a label containing the names of the figures or a short offering formula above their heads (Bierbrier 1987, 10, pls 4–5 [British Museum EA 37899]; Aston 2009, 349–50 [I–III];



Fig. 1: Stelae thrown out at the entrance of tomb 801 south of Deir el-Bahri (M3C 154. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



Fig. 2: The wooden stela facing the coffin in KV 64 (courtesy of University of Basel Kings' Valley Project).

Saleh 2007, 162; el-Leithy 2012, cats 10–12): examples include the stelae British Museum EA 37899 and Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden AH 28 (**Fig. 3**; Saleh 2007, 223; Leemans 1840, 301, W 2; van Wijngaarden 1932, 12–13, pl. IV.16; Schneider 1987, cat. no. 18; Raven 1992, 56–8 [21]). The second type of stela, dating from Dynasty 25, has a scene with a short text of one to three lines on the lower part: examples include the stelae Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9449 (**Fig. 4**; Munro 1973, 187; el-Leithy 2007, 591–2; 2012, cats 326–8) and Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 72.4280 (Munro 1973, 187, 189–90, pl. 2; Leprohon 1991, 36–8). The third type of stela is divided into three sections: the upper part (the lunette); the middle part (the main scene); and the lower part (the text). Examples of this type include the stelae Paris, Musée du Louvre N 3387 (Munro 1973, 193) and Chicago, Oriental Institute Museum OIM 12220 (**Fig. 5**; Allen 1974, 12–14; Munro 1973, 177; el-Leithy 2012, cat. 401).

The function of the stelae

The multiple purposes of the stelae mirror several of the functions of the funerary papyri, in spite of the change in funerary focus and materials, and the impoverishment of iconography from Dynasty 21 to Dynasty 22. However, unlike the papyri, the stelae do not provide the deceased with knowledge of navigational aids, or spells to enable them to deal with various situations in the afterworld. The stelae are more concerned with the practical aspects of passing through death, such as supplying the deceased, providing protection and existing in the presence of the gods.

The offering table painted on the stelae was used as an invitation for the god to be responsible for the prosperity of the deceased in the afterlife. Here, the deceased exchanged the role of a passive recipient for that of an active donor.

The stelae performed an additional function, that of safeguarding the name of the deceased, and of placing them directly under the protection of the gods (Schulz and Seidel 1998, 486–7; Swart 2004, 41). This ideal state was desired by everyone for their *ka*, and the stelae, therefore, helped to preserve it eternally (Swart 2004, 42). Finally, the stelae together with all their constituent elements, such as the gods (Ra and Atum), the *pt*-sign and the winged sun disc at the top, represented the universe, as will be explained below.

Throughout the history of ancient Egypt, the form, function and arrangement of the figures depicted and

the selection of texts on the funerary stelae were subject to change, but one integral element, unaltered since the earliest times, was the presence of the name, and, almost always, a representative portrait of the deceased (Munro 1973, 6; Swart 2004, 42).

During the Third Intermediate Period, all wooden funerary stelae have the same scenes and the same combination of graphic elements and symbols. The ancient Egyptians also copied funerary scenes from the Book of the Dead onto the wooden stelae, because they used them to provide the deceased with a small number of spells and vignettes from this important corpus of funerary texts.

Iconography of the stelae

Specific areas of the stelae were reserved for particular elements of iconography, which were typically adapted to their shape.

Iconography of the main scene (middle register)

It is noticeable that the iconography of the wooden funerary stelae during Dynasties 25 and 26 resembles that found on the coffins, which was itself adapted from the funerary papyri. This paper considers some similarities between the wooden funerary stelae and the contemporary wooden coffins, such as the depiction of the judgement scene from BD 125 (Seeber 1976).

The wooden stelae do not represent the full scene of BD 125 as it is shown in the vignettes of Book of the Dead papyri. Instead, they show some specific elements which refer to the vignettes, or which were used by the artist to visually ensure the rebirth of the deceased. The deceased appears in front of deities such as Ra-Horakhty and Osiris, protected by Isis and Nephthys, and the four Sons of Horus emerging from the lotus flower (as on stela British Museum EA 8476: Bierbrier 1987, 24–5, pls 40–1 [2]; Munro 1973, 218; **Fig. 6**). Nefertum may also be depicted; the deceased is sometimes led by the god Thoth to a group headed by a rearing serpent and followed by Ra-Horakhty, Osiris, Isis, Nephthys and the four Sons of Horus (as on stela Copenhagen, National Museum AAd 4: Schmidt 1879, 20, pl. XIV [1]; Mogensen 1918, 40–1, pl. XXII [37]; Munro 1973, 220; **Fig. 7**).

This scene can also appear in very abbreviated versions, showing, for example, the deceased before Ra-Horakhty and the rearing serpent followed by Osiris (as on stela British Museum EA 8452: Bierbrier 1987,

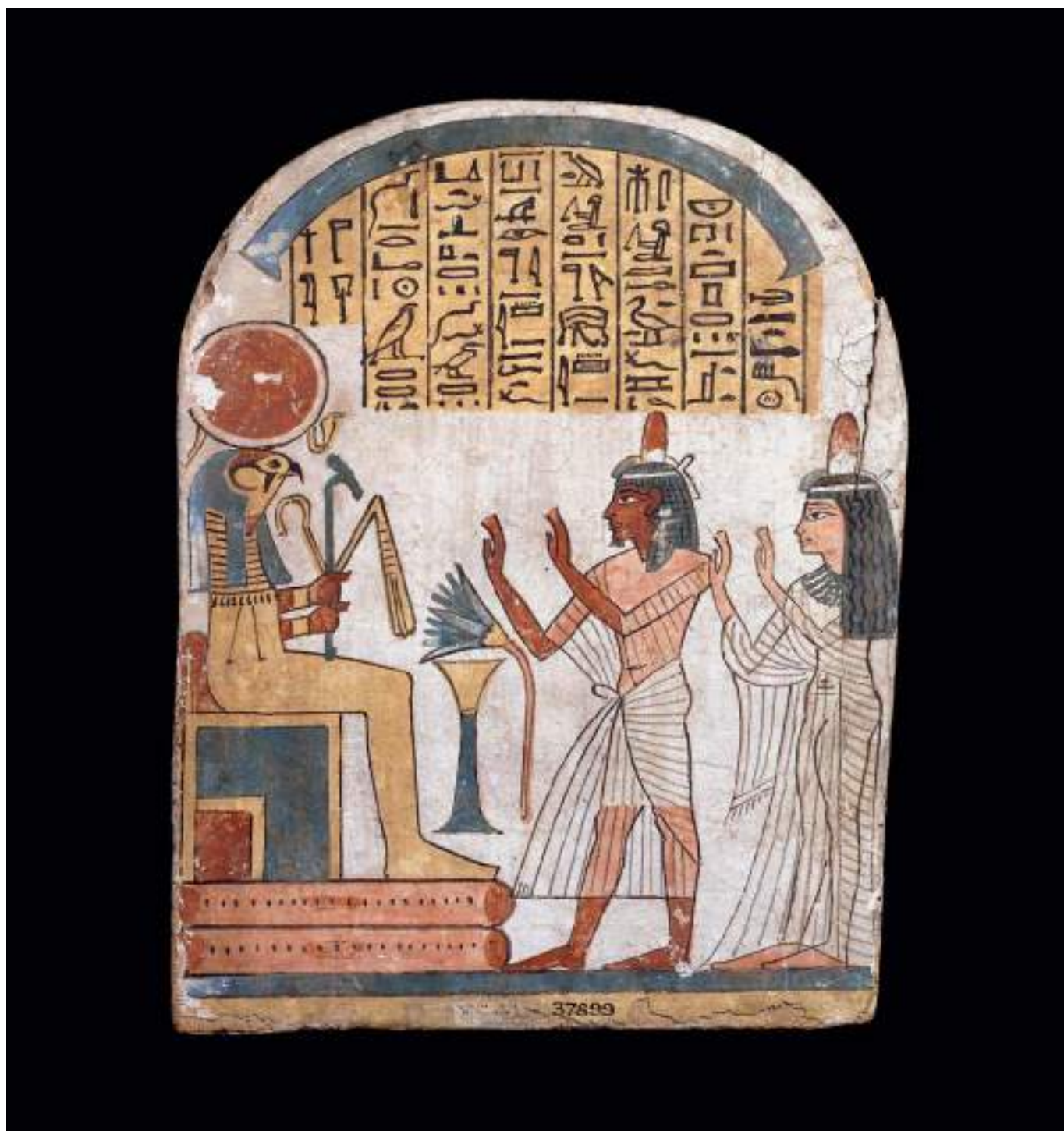


Fig. 3: Stela British Museum EA 37899 (© Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 4: Stela Egyptian Museum SR 9449
(Photograph: Ahmed Amin, © Egyptian Museum Cairo).

17, pls 22–3; Munro 1973, 189; **Fig. 8**) or with the serpent in front of Ra-Horakhty and Osiris (as on stela British Museum EA 8453: Bierbrier 1987, 17, pls 22–3; Munro 1973, 189; el-Leithy 2012, 220–2; **Fig. 9**). The son of Horus, Imsety, may accompany them. Sometimes the serpent is wearing the *atef* crown (see Fig. 9, right), but it may also wear an unguent cone (as on the stela Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9447 [Munro 1973, 189; el-Leithy 2012, 220–2; **Fig. 10**] and Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1895.153 [Vittmann 1978, 55; Munro 1973, 189–90; el-Leithy 2012, 217–19], and on an example included in a Christie’s auction [el-Leithy 2012, cats 226–8]; **Fig. 11**). The snake may also have a divine beard and two legs, as on stela Turin Museum C. 1596 (el-Leithy 2012, cats 235–7; **Fig. 12**). The stela in Copenhagen, National Museum, mentioned above (AAd4: Schmidt 1879, 20, pl. XIV [1]; Mogensen 1918, 40–1, pl. XXII [37]; Munro 1973, 220; el-Leithy 2012, cats 681–3), shows the deceased led by Thoth towards a group of deities headed by a rearing serpent with the *atef* crown, two arms and two legs, and followed by Ra-Horakhty, Osiris, Isis, Nephthys and the four Sons of Horus (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 5: left: Stela Chicago, OIM 12220 (Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago);
right: Stela Louvre Museum N 3387 (© Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Georges Poncet).



Fig. 6: Stela British Museum EA 8476
(© Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 7: Stela Copenhagen, National Museum AAd 4
(published in Schmidt 1879, 20 pl. XIV [I]).

The same scene is found on the lids of the outer coffins in the same period. The coffin of Peti-Imen-menu in Hamm Museum 5500 (von Falck and Fluck 2004, 70–5; **Fig. 13**) shows the god Thoth leading the deceased to the group of deities headed by the snake and followed by Ra-Horakhty, Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Neith and the four Sons of Horus (Heerma van Voss 1980, 52–3), who are identified only by their iconography. But on the coffins of Padiese, Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden AMM 19 (M. 24), Paenpy, Leicester 303.1882 (**Fig. 14**) and Tadijtaina, Tübingen 150a, all the deities except the serpent are identified by their names.

The snake deity on wooden stelae and coffins

The snake is depicted in several variant forms on stelae and coffins of Dynasties 25 and 26. Three different forms of the snake appear on the stelae (**Fig. 15**):

- Rearing snake with beard (1–3)
- Rearing snake with beard and unguent cone, and sometimes legs (4–8)
- Rearing snake with beard and *atef* crown (9–10)

Four different forms of the snake appear on the coffins (**Fig. 16**):

- Rearing snake (1–2)
- Rearing snake with beard (3–5)
- Rearing snake with beard and unguent cone (6)
- Rearing snake with hands and legs, and solar disc on head (7)

In spite of the minor variations in the iconography of the snake, all its forms are actually quite similar and it is evident that it represents one particular deity in the context of BD 125.

As far as the writer is aware, there is no study which discusses this body of evidence, with the exception of a brief reference by Christine Seeber (Seeber 1976,

131–2). This article aims to consider different representations of this snake in the vignette of BD 125 on the coffins and stelae in an attempt to clarify what it represents in the judgement scene.

A simple comparison between the arrangement of scenes of groups of gods on two stelae (Bologna KS 1951 and Leiden AH 25: van Wijngaarden 1932, 6, pl. II, 7) and on the coffin of Taditjaina, Tübingen 150a-b (Brunner-Traut and Brunner 1981, II, pl. 115) indicates that in the lowermost scene the snake represents the god Atum, who appears in human form in the upper two scenes where the snake is absent (Fig. 17).

The arrangement of the scene on both stelae and coffins is very similar, the minor variations reflecting the differences in the available space which the artist had at his disposal. It is probably for this reason that some gods are omitted on the stelae, but the basic concept and the main gods who are depicted remain the same: Ra-Horakhty, Atum, sometimes Osiris, and the four Sons of Horus.



Fig. 8: Stela British Museum EA 8452
(© Trustees of the British Museum).

The coffin Berlin 17490 (Dynasty 22)

In all the depictions of the snake on both stelae and coffins considered above, the figure is neither named nor referred to in the text. To the author's knowledge, only the coffin Berlin 17490 names the snake as Atum in association with Osiris or Ra-Horakhty (Fig. 18). In the judgement scene on this coffin, the snake with the double crown represents the god Osiris-Atum in the vignette of BD 125, where he appears beside the balance (Seeber 1976, 131, fig. 576 and 134, fig. 586). The creator god Atum appears in the judgement as a member of the Ennead and was related to Ra-Horakhty-Atum. The text in front of him on the Berlin coffin reads: *ḏd mdw in wsir tm nb t3wy* 'Words spoken by Osiris-Atum, Lord of the two lands'. Behind him sits Ra-Horakhty-Atum, with the inscription: *ḏd mdw in R' hr 3hty tm nb t3wy Iwnw* 'Words spoken by Ra-Horakhty-Atum, Lord of the two lands and of Heliopolis', as also found on the lids of inner coffins and a stela of Dynasties 25–26 (coffins British Museum EA 22814, EA 25256, EA 15654; cf. also British Museum EA 24906, late Dynasty 22 or beginning of Dynasty 25).

In Dynasty 26, the main scene of the stela was centrally divided into left and right parts, with another scene above and a text taken from BD 15 (Fig. 19). The deceased is always represented standing in adoration before the god Atum, who is depicted in his usual form as a man wearing the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt.¹ The remainder of the text is a short hymn to Atum 'who sets in life and is received into the underworld', referring to this deity as the eldest of the three phases of the sun. According to Egyptian belief, when the sun was born (rose) it was Khepri or Ra-Horakhty, in its maturity (midday) it was Ra, and it was Atum when it died (set) in the evening (Strudwick and Taylor 2005, 150).

All these elements demonstrate that the stelae show a representation of the universe or the solar cycle: the winged sun disc at the top represents the sky; the god Ra-Horakhty on the right refers to the east and life; the god Atum on the left refers to sunset and death, and the base of the stela refers to the ground.

¹ See stelae Chicago OIM 12220 (above, p. 65) and Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9905.

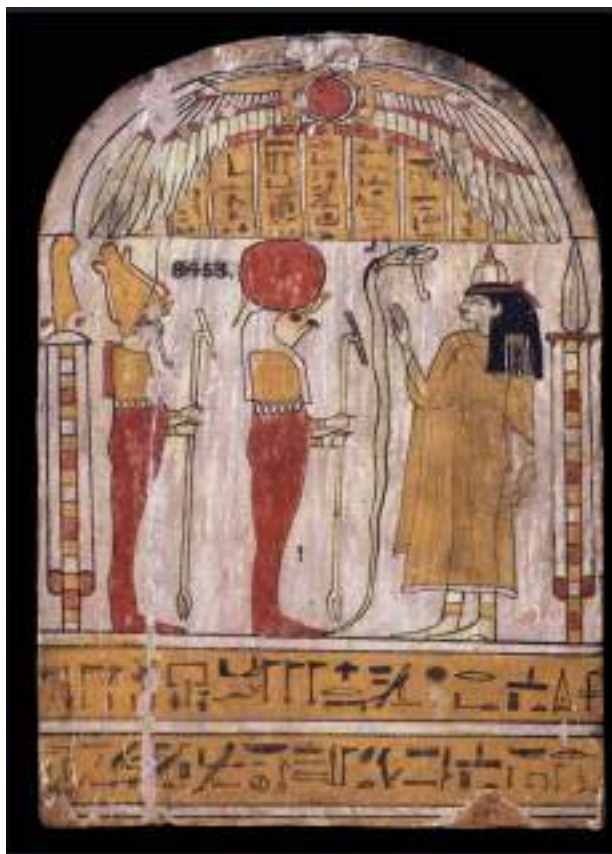


Fig. 9: left: Stela British Museum EA 8453 (© Trustees of the British Museum); right: Stela Ashmolean Museum 1895.153.



Fig. 10: Stela Egyptian Museum SR 9447
(Photograph: Ahmed Amin, © Egyptian Museum Cairo).



Fig. 11: Stela of Neskhonsu
(Auction, Christie's London, 8 December 1993, lot 189.
© 1993 Christie's Images Limited).



Fig. 12: Stela Turin Museum C. 1596
(© Museo Egizio, Turin).

The snake in the Book of the Dead and the Shipwrecked Sailor

In the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor (Lichtheim 1973, 211–15), the snake which the narrator meets is described as having the divine beard, an attribute of many gods such as Ptah, Osiris and Amun. In this story, the snake is interpreted as Atum, the god of the sunset and also the creator god in the cosmology of Heliopolis, in which he appeared on the primeval hill. The snake, encountered on an island, tells the shipwrecked sailor at the end of the text that he will not see this island again because it will be transformed into water.² This interpretation refers to the end of the universe, when everything will be terminated except the creator god, who is in the shape of a snake (Atum), and his daughter the goddess Maat. This interpretation corresponds to a passage in BD 175: here it is stated that after the destruction of the universe the only

remaining god will be Atum in his first image as a snake.³

It should be noted that in the night journey of the sun god, as related in the Amduat, Ra enters the netherworld as Atum and, after overcoming many obstacles, is born from the snake body into life. Atum was described as the great god who moves upon Nun.

The position of Atum on wooden stelae and coffins of Dynasties 25 and 26

During the second half of Dynasty 25, Atum appears only rarely in human form on stelae (Leiden AH 25 [Boeser 1907, 97 (7); van Wijngaarden 1932, 6, pl. II, 7; Munro 1973, 224; el-Leithy 2012, cat. 628], and Bologna KS 1951 [Bresciani 1985, 94–5 (36), pl. 50; Munro 1973, 223; el-Leithy 2012, cat. 632]), where he stands among a group of gods including Ra-Horakhty and the four Sons of Horus. In contrast, Atum more frequently appears on the wooden stelae and coffins in the form of a snake among a group of gods as part of the judgement scene illustrating BD 125.

The main scene of the wooden stelae of Dynasty 25 represents the deceased standing before a group of deities, consisting chiefly of three gods in addition to one of the four Sons of Horus, and sometimes Isis, Nephthys or Maat (stela Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9447). The three main gods in this scene are Osiris, Ra-Horakhty and Atum in the form of a snake. Atum appears on the wooden stelae in Dynasty 26 in human form wearing a short tunic and a short kilt with a bull's tail, together with a sun disc encircled by a *uraeus* upon his head, and bearing all the divine symbols (Bierbrier 1987, 21–2, pl. 35; Munro 1973, 200, 205, 217; el-Leithy 2012, cat. 404; Zayed 1968, 164–5, pl. 14b; Wegner 2010, 177; Allen 1974, 12–14). In this period, the stelae retained their standard components, and the division into three registers (Chicago OIM 12220: el-Leithy 2012, cat. 385; Munro 1973, 200; Zayed 1968, 164–5, pl. 14b; Wegner 2010, 177). However, the middle register — which contains the main scene — is divided into two parts, right and left, each having a depiction of the deceased standing before an altar and

² 'Moreover, when you have left this place, you will not see this island again; it will have become water' (Lichtheim 1973, 214).

³ 'I will destroy all that I have made. This land shall return into the Deep, into the flood, as it was aforetime. (Only) I shall

survive together with Osiris, after I assumed my forms of other (snakes) which men know not and gods see not' (Allen 1974, 184 [b]); see also Bonnet 1952, 72.



Fig. 13: Coffin of Peti-Imen-menu, Hamm Museum 5500
(published in von Falck and Fluck 2004, 70–1).



Fig. 14: top: Coffin of Padiet, Leiden AMM 19/M.24 (Pleyte 1896, M. 24–7);
bottom: Coffin Leicester 303.1882
(© Leicester Arts & Museums Service).

adoring a god, either Atum or Ra-Horakhty. In these examples, the name of the god is mentioned in the label above the deceased, in front of the god. On some of the earlier stelae from the second half of Dynasty 25, the names of the gods are inscribed above all the figures except the snake, which is anonymous (Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9447), and in some examples there are no names at all (el-Leithy 2012, cat. 228).

On the coffins, there is no major change in the position of Atum, who appears in the form of a snake among a group of gods: Osiris, Ra-Horakhty, Isis, Nephthys and the four Sons of Horus. The snake usually stands at the head of the line of gods, although in some examples it occupies the second or third place. On none of the coffins known to the author is the name of the snake mentioned in the labels above the gods, with the single exception of the coffin in Berlin, referred to above, which names Atum together with Ra-Horakhty and Osiris.

Conclusion

The ancient Egyptians used many different materials and surfaces to register their wishes and to ensure their resurrection or rebirth, including the walls of the tomb chapels or the burial chambers, papyri, coffins, shabti boxes and funerary stelae made from both stone and

wood. This paper has attempted to connect the scenes on the Theban wooden stelae with those on coffins. Wooden funerary stelae, like coffins, were ritual and religious objects encoded with visual imagery that allowed the deceased to negotiate his/her identity, while at the same time signalling the religious attitudes of the ancient society (Saleh 2007, 13).

The religious iconography of the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period is particularly apparent on wooden funerary stelae, which were considered as a microcosm of the universe and integrated the heavenly sphere with the earthly realm (Saleh 2007, 13; Zayed 1968, 150). The sky is represented in the lunette of the funerary stelae and the earth is depicted in the lower register (Aston 2009, 349 [A]; Saleh 2007, 13). The central scene, in which either solar or Osirian concepts dominate, illustrates a transitional stage in which the mortal encounters the divine and the deceased is shown making an offering before a deity. This main scene may depict the successful conclusion of the judgement, based on BD 125, and it may be related to the solar aspect of the afterlife (Taylor 2003, 105; Saleh 2007, 13).

Perhaps the scenes on the stelae and coffins combine two important stages in the passage to rebirth: 1) the judgement and reception of the deceased by the gods; and 2) the deceased's entering into the solar cycle (represented by Ra-Horakhty and Atum).

Although the main image on the wooden stelae was adapted from the judgement scene, it was shortened. There are various possible reasons, such as the small size of the stelae and the artist's wish to highlight only the main purpose of this scene, or to emphasise the notion that the deceased was justified and had passed the divine tribunal. In contrast, the artist used all the spaces on the coffins and filled them with scenes and texts. For example, the depiction of the judgement is abbreviated on the wooden stelae, since the artist depicted only the scene after the weighing of the heart without representing the scales. However, on the coffins, he depicted the whole scene of the judgement, including the weighing of the heart, and after that the deceased conducted by Thoth to a group of gods (Atum in the form of a snake, Osiris, Ra or Ra-Horakhty, and Isis, Nephthys and the four Sons of Horus). Although the snake is rarely named in these scenes, the frequency of its appearance is an indication of the important role played by Atum in this context.



Fig. 15: Stelae: 1. London, British Museum EA 8453 (© Trustees of the British Museum); 2. Boston 72.4281 (Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); 3. London, British Museum EA 69521 (© Trustees of the British Museum); 4. Stela (Auction, Christie's London, 8 December 1993, lot 189. © 1993 Christie's Images Limited); 5. Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9447 (Photograph: Ahmed Amin, © Egyptian Museum Cairo); 6. London, British Museum EA 8452 (© Trustees of the British Museum); 7. Berlin Inv. 784 (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung); 8. Turin Museum C. 1596 (© Museo Egizio, Turin); 9. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1895.153 (© Ashmolean Museum); 10. Malta Stela (Courtesy National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta. Published in Janssen and Hall 1984, 20).

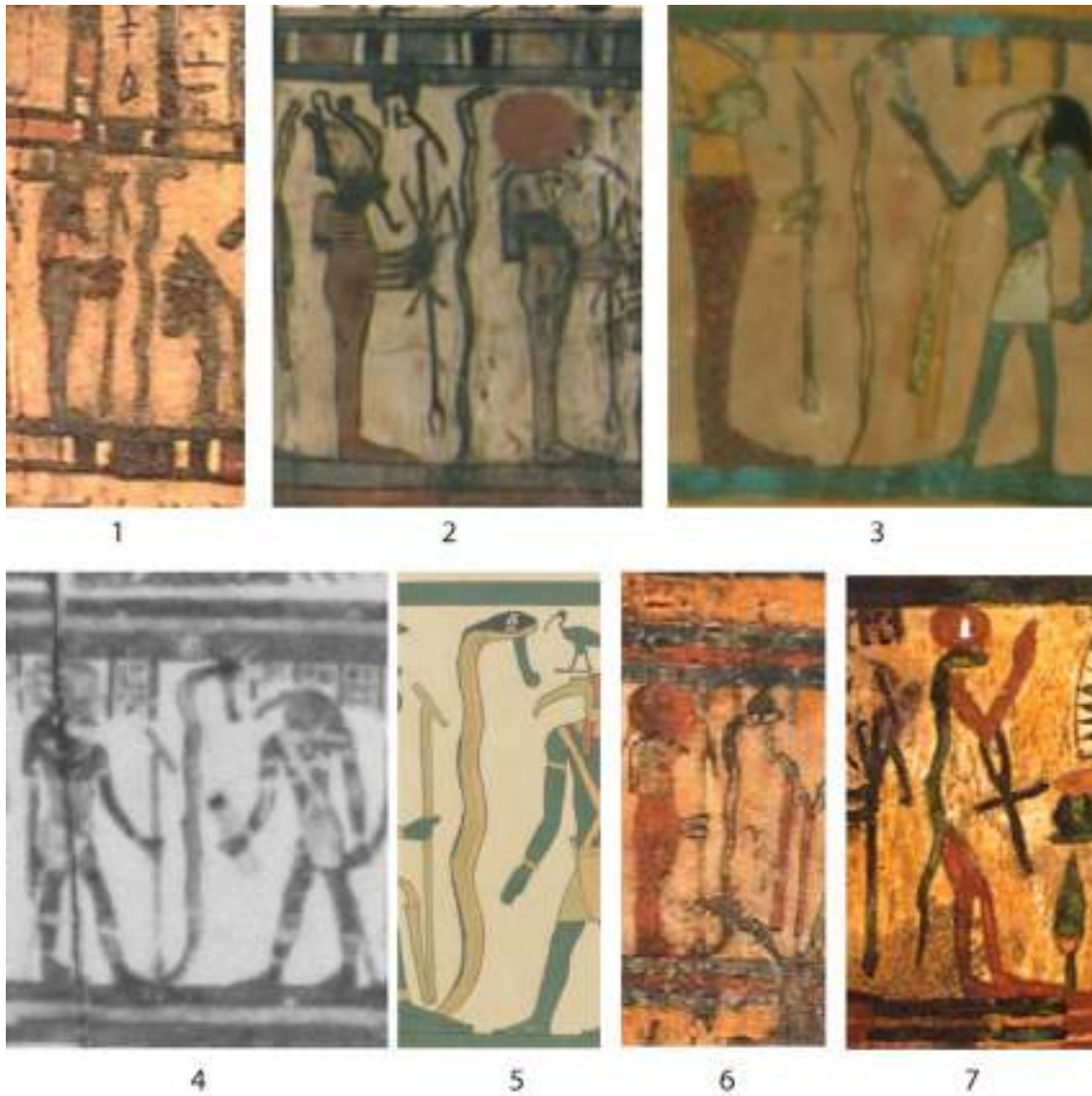


Fig. 16: Coffins; 1. Turin C. 2213 (© Museo Egizio); 2. Tübingen 150a-b (© Ägyptische Sammlung der Universität Tübingen, Museum Schloss Hohentübingen); 3. Zagreb, Archaeological Museum 667; 4. Leicester 303.1882 (© Leicester Arts & Museums Service); 5. Leiden M24 of Padieste (Pleyte 1896, M. 24–7); 6. Turin C. 2220 (© Museo Egizio); 7. London, British Museum EA 22814 (© Trustees of the British Museum).

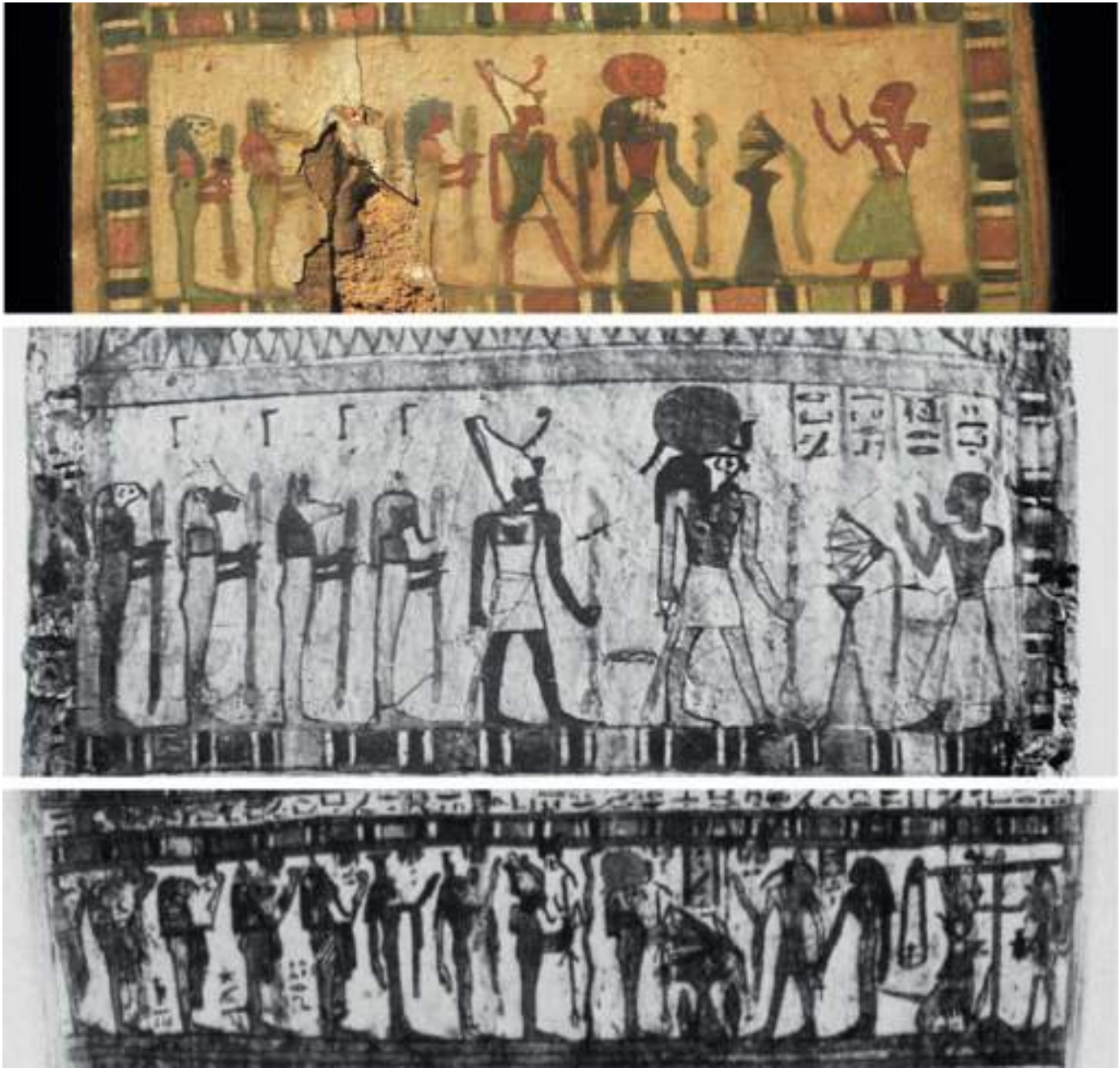


Fig. 17: top: Stela Leiden AH 25 (National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden); middle: Stela Bologna EG 1951 (© Courtesy of the Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna); bottom: Coffin Tübingen 150a-b (© Ägyptische Sammlung der Universität Tübingen, Museum Schloss Hohentübingen).



Fig. 18: Detail of the coffin Berlin 17940 showing the snake and its name
(© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung).

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Fig. 19: Stela Cairo, Egyptian Museum SR 9418
(Photograph: Ahmed Amin, © Egyptian Museum Cairo).

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