

MESOPOTAMIAN—STYLE CERAMIC “BATHTUB” COFFINS FROM TELL EN-NASBEH

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1947 report of the excavations of Tell en-Nasbeh (probably biblical Mizpah of Benjamin) brief mention is made of fragments of a ceramic box found on the tell (*TN I*:251, 302; Pl. 92:2). The possibility that this box was “an ossuary or sarcophagus” was rejected in favour of the idea that it was a household storage box, as the use of such a coffin on the mound was considered “hardly possible.”

It is my contention that the excavators’ initial understanding was correct, and that the fragment is indeed from a coffin, one of Mesopotamian form.¹ It has a thick, projecting rim, below which is a narrow clay band with finger impressions at regular intervals producing a rope-like effect (Fig. 1). Near the corner, below the rope band, is a rounded handle. Apparently we have here a corner fragment of a so-called “bathtub” coffin, specifically the type with one squared end having two handles and a narrow end having one handle, sometimes two (German: “Hockersarg”, “Hockersarkophag”). On the corner the excavators wrote (upside-down):

R. 79

6/22

This indicates that the piece was excavated on June 22nd in Room 79. According to the photograph number series and excavation records, this was in the 1927 season. A search through the millimeter record cards for Room 79 yielded only one object, a chisel. A search through all the 1927 season cards was similarly disappointing. Apparently this piece, and all record of it save for the photograph, were lost early on. From the scale in the photograph it would appear to be ca. 40 cm. high.

The area in which Room 79 is located witnessed several modifications throughout the Iron Age II, perhaps into the Babylonian period (Zorn 1993:826–831). Thus the stratigraphic context of the piece is uncertain.

In his ceramic typology for Tell en-Nasbeh Wampler published a rim fragment of a handmade vessel, Room 326 x4, with a vertical wall, a 5 cm. thick rim, and a rope band made by finger impressions about 5 cm. below the rim (*TN II*:184; Pl. 78; here

¹ I would like to thank the Bade Institute for permission to reproduce here photograph No. 237 and Figures 2 and 3 from the archive collection. Prof. Oded Borowski and Dr. John Hayes read a draft of this paper and provided many useful comments; any errors are solely the responsibility of the author.

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Fig. 2a), which he suggested was a "bath (?) tub". Three other examples of such rims were found. AB16 x34 (Fig. 2b), is a rim fragment with a 7.5 cm. thick projecting lip, a vertical stance, and seems to preserve traces of a rope-like band. It was white-washed inside and out. It was wheelmade, which may weigh against identifying it as a "bathtub" identical with Room 326 x4. Both pieces came from disturbed contexts.

The other two examples, Room 522 x31 and AB12 x25, are only rims showing no trace of any rope decoration, and either the stance of the wall is not vertical or the rim is round, not square and projecting as in true bathtub coffins.

Thus there is at least one, perhaps as many as three, fragments of large bathtub-shaped containers from Tell en-Nasbeh.

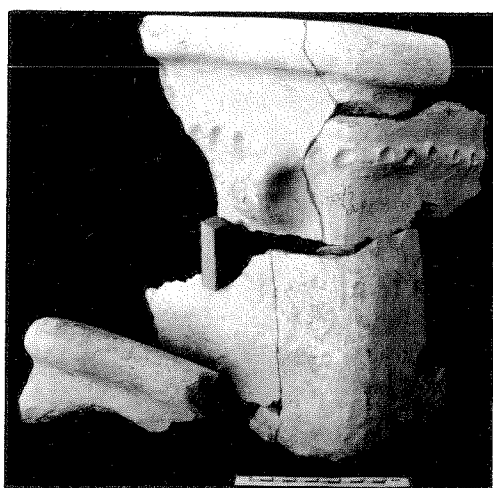


Fig. 1. Coffin fragment.

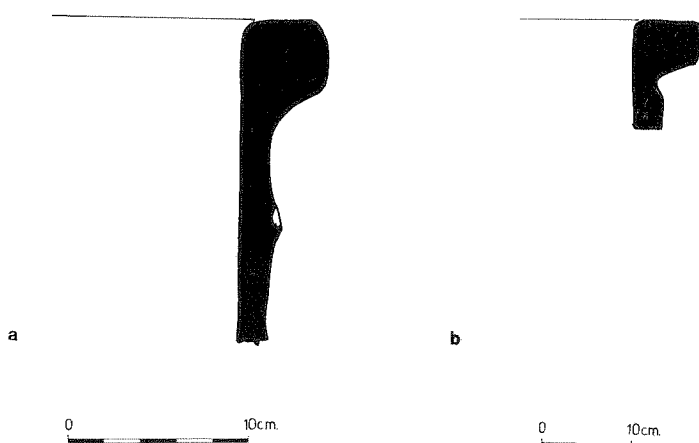


Fig. 2. a) Coffin(?) rim fragment AB16 x34; b) Coffin rim fragment Room 326 x4.

Parallels and Distribution

Ceramic coffins from Iron II have been found at several sites in Israel and Jordan (Bloch-Smith 1992:189, 222–223; also Stern 1982:84–86). These include: Tell Abu Hawam — one example (*TAH II*:24; Pl. XXXVI:100), Amman — three (Harding 1953:59–60, 67; Pl. 6:47), Dothan — one (Free 1959:25; Fig. 3), Tell el-Far'ah — three (de Vaux 1951: Pl. XVI:1:3; Chambon 1984:57; Pl. 47:10–12), Tel Halif — one (Borowski 1992:119; pers. comm.), Jerusalem — one (Bloch-Smith 1992:223), Manahat — one (Clermont-Ganneau 1899:459), Tell el-Mazar — one (Yassine 1984:29, 142–143; Figs. 2, 24), Megiddo — six (Schumacher 1908:145; Photograph 216; *Megiddo I*:182.91; Pls. 18.91, 54.91), Tell el-Qitaf — one (Amiran 1959:129; see Fig. 3),² and Shechem — one (Stern 1980:90–94; Figs. 3–5; Pl. XIII A/B).³

True bathtub coffins, most similar to the Tell en-Nasbeh fragments, come from Dothan (?; only the bottom survives), Tell el-Far'ah, Tell el-Mazar, Megiddo (those excavated by the Chicago team), and Shechem. These all have one squared end and one rounded end. The Tell el-Far'ah, Megiddo (Chicago), and Tell el-Mazar pieces all have rope decorations above or below the handle. The best preserved Tell el-Far'ah piece and the Tell el-Mazar example bear two handles on the square end and one on the round end; the Shechem coffin has four handles on the square end, the round end was not preserved; the Megiddo (Chicago) examples are too fragmentary to be certain of the number of handles. The coffins range in length from ca. 60 cm. to about one meter. The stratigraphy and associated finds suggest a late 8th century B.C.E., or later, date for most of these pieces, though the Shechem coffin is assigned to the 6th-early-5th centuries (Stern 1980:105–107).

The Tell Abu Hawam coffin was about 75 cm. long at the base and 1.15 m. across the top; it had two handles attached to the long sides and no rope decoration. The Amman coffins (from the Adoni-Nur tomb area) were longer, up to 1.5 m., and had

2 A photograph of the ceramic coffin from Tell el-Qitaf is reproduced here by kind permission of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

3 Barkay (1984:105) lists a ceramic bathtub coffin from the area of Khirbet el-Qom in the possession of the Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem. This citation was picked up by Bloch-Smith (1992:223). However, the staff of the HUC-JIR NGSBA were unable to locate any record of a coffin from this area. It is possible that the coffin in question is the Bronze Age specimen from Gezer which has been on display for many years. From Ashdod come several large oval decorated ceramic "basins". They possess a raised horizontal band below the rim, from which descend raised vertical bands; they do not seem to have had handles. Moreover, some contained water outlets in their bases. The Ashdod basins come from Area M, Stratum 11, which is attributed to the Iron I (*Ashdod IV*:11–12; Fig. 6.6; Pl. 11.5–12). These basins are far removed in decoration, form and date from the coffins from the later part of the Iron II; thus they fall outside the bounds of this study. I wish to thank Baruch Brandl of the Israel Antiquities Authority for this reference.

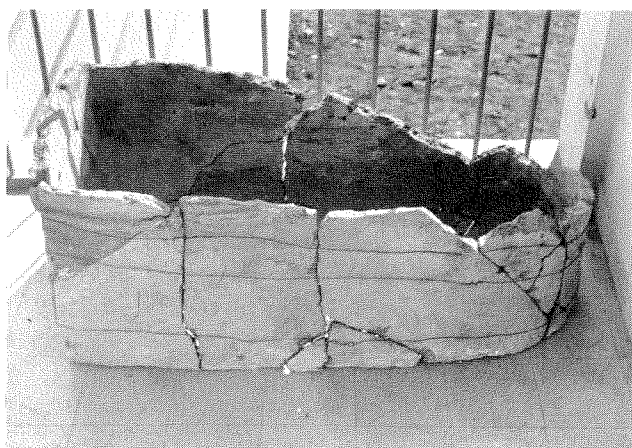


Fig. 3. Ceramic coffin from Tell el-Qitaf.

two handles at each end (one square, the other rounded); there was no rope band. Schumacher's example from Megiddo was 84 cm. long, roughly rectangular with rounded corners, without handles or rope decoration. It was constructed of two pieces held together by an outer shell. The Halif example was too broken to be certain of its shape. There are no detailed published descriptions of the pieces from Jerusalem, Manahat, or Tell el-Qitaf.

The Dothan, Tell el-Mazar, Megiddo (Schumacher), and Shechem examples contained bones; the rest either did not or were disturbed when found. The Amman, Tel Halif, Jerusalem, Tell el-Mazar, Tell el-Qitaf, and Shechem examples come from extramural funerary contexts; however, the Tell Abu Hawam, Dothan, Tell el-Far'ah and Megiddo (Chicago) examples, like that from Tell en-Nasbeh, all came from inside the settlements. The fact that some were found in definite cemeteries, and some contained bones, suggests that all these examples were coffins, despite the fact that many of them originated within towns.

Bathtub coffins were not indigenous to ancient Israel and Jordan. They were a Mesopotamian, originally Assyrian, burial form which probably spread with the expansion of the Assyrian empire. Examples have been found at: Carchemish — six pieces (Woolley 1939:21–37), Til Barsip — two (Thureau-Dangin 1936:76–78); in southern Mesopotamia: Babylon — 42 (Reuther 1926:212–234; Pls. 67–72, 78), Nippur — 43 (McCown, Haines and Hansen 1967:119; Pl. 157; Gibson 1975:74–75; Figs. 62–63; Gibson a.o. 1978:70–71; Figs. 51:4a-b, 74:1; McCown a.o. 1978:54), Tell al-Laham — three (Safar 1949:161–163), Ur, over 150 (Woolley 1962:52–87), and Uruk — at least 21 (Boehmer 1987:3, 68–69, 91; Pls. 3a, 4, 19a-c, 69–72, 75, 78c, 79c, 80a-b, 98–101; Finkbeiner 1984:109; Fig. 12; Nöldeke, Heinrich and Schott 1933:24; Pl. 18d; Rau 1987:246; Fig. 4); in Assyria: Ashur — 39 (Haller

1954:4, 54–58; Fig. 66 is an especially good parallel), Khirbet Qasrij — one (Curtis 1989:50; Fig. 42:290) and Nimrud — three+ (Oates 1957:37–38; Pl. VI:2; Oates and Oates 1958:153–157; Pl. XXXd; Mallowan 1966:114–116, 190). They have even been found as far a field as Bahrain, at Qala'a — three examples (Glob 1954:167–168; 1956:172–173; Figs. 3–4 on pages 166–167). These coffins all have one square end and one round end, rope decorations (often two bands), but usually no handles. They tend to be 85–105 cm. long and 45–55 cm. in width and height.

Some of the non-bathtub Syro-Palestinian coffins also have parallels among the Mesopotamian types. Schumacher's coffin could be a "trogarkophag" (Haller 1954:59; Fig. 72). The Amman coffins could be "trogärge" (Reuther 1926:245–249; Pls. 85–87) or "wannensarkophage" (Haller 1954:74–85).

The Carchemish examples were dated to the 7th or early 8th centuries B.C.E. (Woolley 1939:17–19); the Til Barsip pieces to the Persian period (Thureau-Dangin 1936:76–78). Those from Babylon are not later than the Neo-Babylonian period (Strommenger 1964:159–164), the Nippur examples are primarily 8th century into the Persian period (McCown, Haines and Hansen 1967:77; Gibson 1975:74–75; Gibson 1978:70–71; McCown a.o. 1978:54), those from Ur belong to the Persian period (Woolley 1962:54–55), and those from Uruk were dated 550–480 B.C.E., or later (Finkbeiner 1984:109; Boehmer 1987:69, 91;). The Nimrud examples are late 8th or early 7th century B.C.E. (Mallowan 1966:114–116, 190). The earliest examples come from Ashur, the late 2nd millennium B.C.E., the majority being Neo-Assyrian with one post-Assyrian (Haller 1954:4, 54–58).

Strommenger thoroughly reviewed the data on the dating of these bathtub coffins up to 1964. She concluded that they were in use in Babylonia from the 8th century into the Persian period, being especially prominent in the latter part of the Babylonian and Persian periods (Strommenger 1964:170). If some of the Nippur coffins are truly Hellenistic this may push the limit lower (McCown a.o. 1978:54). The Assyrian examples began in the Middle Assyrian period, but she does not give their lower limit (Strommenger 1964:170). Ceramic coffins, of different types, continued to be used in Mesopotamia and Iran at least into the Parthian period (Schmidt 1957:121–122; Oates and Oates 1958:153–157; Finkbeiner 1982).

The Carchemish coffins were used to cover urns holding the cremated remains of the deceased (Woolley 1939:14–15); one of the Til Barsip pieces was found covered with mudbrick, possibly re-used from the floors of the Assyrian buildings (Thureau-Dangin 1936:76). In Mesopotamia the coffins which had not been robbed usually contained bodies, and if well preserved, these were in contracted positions on their sides. Occasionally Mesopotamian coffins were used as covers for bodies or to contain cremated remains. The Mesopotamian examples were covered with split palm logs, baked clay or unbaked bricks, or a combination of materials, and occasionally were coated with bitumen on the interior or on both surfaces (Safar

1949:161; Glob 1956:172–173; McCown a.o. 1978:119). These coffins were buried within the settlements; the deceased interred below the floor of the family's home (Woolley 1962:52; Strommenger 1964:157, 159).

The Mesopotamian sites have also yielded hundreds of other clay coffins of different types, from large "krater"-shaped vessels, to longer coffins in which the bodies were almost fully extended, to sarcophagi with "Egyptianizing" lids (e.g. Koldewey 1925:102, 117, 153, 170, 212–215, 227, 231, 265–270).

Further examples of the square-end/round-end bathtub coffin, but made of bronze, are known from Zinjirli — one specimen (Luschan 1911:303–305; Andrae 1943:118–119, 171; Pl. 57b-d), Ur — two (Woolley 1962:56, 113; Pls. 16–18), and Ajrān — one (Alizadeh 1985:49–52, 57–60; Fig. 2). The infamous Ziwiye treasure from Iran was said to have been found in one, pieces of which are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Godard 1950:13–18; Barnett 1956:114–116; Pls. XV–XVII; Wilkinson 1960:213–214; Muscarella 1977). A complete example, said to come from Iran, was in the hands of an antiquities dealer in Cologne (Curtis 1983:85). A fragment of yet another Iranian bronze coffin of unknown provenance is in the Ashmolean Museum (Moorey 1971:259–260; Pl. 78:494b). The Ur and Ajrān examples were found *in situ* with their burials intact. The Zinjirli coffin may have been re-used as an actual bathtub (Luschan 1911:303–305; Curtis 1983:86–87).

The bronze coffins were made in two halves and joined on their long sides by rivets. On the Ur and "Ziwiye" coffins the rivets were hidden by vertical bronze strips decorated with goats standing on rosettes, while the others had plain strips (Curtis 1983:85; Alizadeh 1985:49–52). The rim, base and handles were also joined by rivets. The "Ziwiye" coffin was decorated around the rim by a procession of men, some bearing gifts (Curtis 1983:85). The Ur coffins had wood covers, while that from Ajrān had a bronze lid (Woolley 1962:56; Alizadeh 1985:50). Curtis assigned these coffins to the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E.; Woolley originally also dated the Ur coffins to the 7th century, but later believed them to be Persian, though perhaps in re-use (Woolley 1962:55–56, 68; Curtis 1983:86–87).

Conclusion

Ceramic coffins are a rare form of burial in Iron Age Israel and Jordan; bathtub coffins make up the majority of these. The type originated in Assyria and spread to areas which were incorporated into that empire.

The discovery of such coffins at Tell en-Nasbeh is puzzling. This Iron Age II site (Stratum 3) was a densely occupied Judean border town/fortress until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. (Zorn 1993:114–162).⁴ Why would Assyrian coffins be

4 In *TN I* and *TN II*, Roman numerals were used to designate the strata. In this author's revised stratigraphic scheme for Tell en-Nasbeh, Arabic numerals are used for the strata in order to avoid confusion with the earlier system.

found in such a settlement? The answer may lie in dating these coffin fragments to the following Babylonian period (ca. 586 to 539 B.C.E.) when Mizpah was, for a short time, the capital of the Babylonian province of Judea (2 Kgs. 25:22–23; Jer. 40:5–10). As the examples from Ur and Shechem attest, such coffins continued in use into the Persian period. Tell en-Nasbeh Stratum 2, which probably represents this capital (Zorn 1993:163–185), is characterized by a series of large four-room house complexes and even larger buildings, perhaps of an official nature.

Normal Judean burial practice was to inter the dead in a cave or rock-cut tomb outside the town (Bloch-Smith 1992:55–59, 138–139). These fragments, however, came from inside the town walls, according to the Mesopotamian tradition. Their presence within the town, far from being evidence against their role as coffins, is in fact in accord with such useage. Perhaps Babylonian officials stationed at Mizpah, or Judeans emulating Babylonian fashion, were buried in these coffins, below (or near?) their homes.

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