

# An Ossuary and A Coffin in the Ancient World

The Ossuary and Coffin's Narration of Culture in the Ancient Near East



Image Courtesy of Kelsey Museum



Image Courtesy of Kelsey Museum

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Ossuaries, objects common to burial practices in ancient Jerusalem, were stone, rectangular boxes in which bones of the deceased were placed. From the stone used to construct the ossuary, the carved designs on the box, the pottery buried in them, and the inscriptions on the ossuaries, archaeologists have been able to deduce a remarkable amount of information regarding the burials and culture at the time. This exploration has given historians and archaeologists alike a glimpse into the ideas of “‘death, burial, and [the] afterlife’ in ancient Judaism, in Roman culture and early Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Coffin of Djehutymose, an Egyptian coffin, gives us a glimpse into the ideas of life, death and the afterlife from around 625-580 B.C. From these objects and the larger context of the time periods in which they were used, we are able to understand the burial practices, what influenced the rituals, and the people, culture, and social life at the different times.

During the Graeco-Roman Period, the collapse of the Hasmonean State in 63 B.C.E. was a result of Roman conquest. A civil war between the Hasmoneans’ last leaders aided the Romans in the take over. The Roman Period, as the time is known, spanned from 63 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. during which time Herod the Great ruled Judea from 37 B.C.E. to 4 B.C.E. Herod, of Edomite origin, was a client king to Judea. He served under the greater authority of the Roman Emperor Augustus. It was during Herod’s rule, in between 20 B.C.E. and 15 B.C.E. that “ossuary burial became a common mode of internment among the elite.” This time period is significant because it coincides with Herod’s reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount as well as his massive building projects at Caesaria, Masada, and Herodium. These massive building projects, that continue to have lasting influences today, resulted in an increase of stone masons who would ultimately use their skills to make the ossuaries. Another unique aspect of this period was its

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<sup>1</sup> Fine, Steven. “Death, Burial, and Afterlife.” *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, 2010, pp. 1-26., DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0025.

mixture of Greek and Roman culture which is apparent in the ossuaries. More recently, beginning with the modern founding of Israel in 1948, the study of burials from the Second Temple Period, using archaeology from excavations, writings of Josephus, and rabbinic sources recovered from the Hasmonean and Roman Periods, has emerged.<sup>2</sup>

The modern excavations uncovered the practice of secondary burials for the elite and wealthiest Jews in ossuaries within loculi tombs. These tombs consisted of a square burial chamber with benches on each side. Once the flesh was completely decomposed, family or grave workers would move the bones into an ossuary. The rectangular box of the ossuary was made by stone masons from stones such as soft chalk and limestone. The sizes of the boxes varied but a majority were around 60 x 35 x 30 cm. Within the ossuaries, the bones were placed in a specific order with the long bones lengthwise at the bottom, the bones from the arms and hands on one side, and the bones of the legs and feet on the other. The extra bones and the skull were then placed on top.<sup>3</sup> While the ossuaries were primarily for one individual, family members within their respective ossuaries were placed in the same loculus within the tomb. These tombs were often expensive and were used for a few generations which is the reason only the wealthiest Jews could be buried in them. This practice highlights the importance for the Jews of the time to keep their families together in life and death and the social structure at the time in terms of the divide

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<sup>2</sup> Hachlili, Rachel, and Ann Killebrew. "Jewish Funerary Customs During the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 2, 1983, pp.109-139., DOI: 10.1179/peq.1983.115.2.109.

<sup>3</sup> Hachlili, Rachel, and Ann Killebrew. "Jewish Funerary Customs During the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 2, 1983, pp.109-139., DOI: 10.1179/peq.1983.115.2.109.

between the rich and poor. Therefore, we are able to learn about the significance of the family in Jewish culture at this time, their familial mindset, as well as basic social structure.<sup>4</sup>

The ossuaries were not just plain rectangular boxes. On the outside of the ossuaries there were chip-carved decorations. Some of the most common designs and motifs were “two or three rosettes in a frame” or other “geometrical and architectural designs.”<sup>5</sup> The rosettes paralleled the mosaics at the palace at Masada as well as the decorations at the synagogue of Gamla. Other images on the ossuaries included funerary monuments, other monumental buildings, “colonnades with columns whose capitals bear close resemblance to Herodian capitals,” as well as other images that clearly resemble and highlight Herodian masonry, capitals, and buildings styles.<sup>6</sup> These Herodian aspects demonstrate the Greek and Roman influences on Jewish culture and practices. It also gives us a clearer picture of the physical landscape of Judaea and its monuments at this time.

In addition to the designs on the boxes, there were inscriptions that recorded information of the deceased and preserved their memory. This was especially important at this time as families’ social status was dependent on their ancestors which is further illustrated by the use of the phrase “House of David” that was found on some of the boxes.<sup>7</sup> The inscriptions were primarily written in Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> Another factor determined through the

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<sup>5</sup> Hachlili, Rachel, and Ann Killebrew. “Jewish Funerary Customs During the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis.” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 2, 1983, pp.109-139., DOI: 10.1179/peq.1983.115.2.109.

<sup>6</sup> Fine, Steven. “Death, Burial, and Afterlife.” *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, 2010, pp. 1-26., DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0025.

<sup>7</sup> Steven. “Death, Burial, and Afterlife.” *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, 2010, pp. 1-26., DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0025.

<sup>8</sup> Magness, Jodi. “Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 124, no.1, 2005, pp. 121-154.

examination of the inscriptions was the ancestry of the individuals buried. If the name of a place was written on the box, it references the Diaspora origin of the person who lived in Jerusalem. These factors present further evidence about the background of people at this time, the common languages used, the importance of status and ancestry as well as the importance of social status at the time.

Another source of evidence used to learn more about the culture at the time was the pottery that was found within the ossuaries. These included “bowls, Herodian lamps, and cooking pots.” These objects are believed to have been the items that were often used at the same time as the ossuaries. The practice of burying loved ones with objects is another example that shows outside influence on Jewish practices as this practice was widespread among Romans and Greeks. Despite this, Jews distinguished themselves because the goods were not placed in ossuaries to be used in the afterlife. Instead, they were used to make the mourners feel better.<sup>9</sup> Another artifact found in ossuaries were coins of Herod Agrippa I which further links ossuaries to the time of Herod. The existence of the pottery allows us to learn about the objects frequently used at this time, which gives insight into the people’s daily lives based on the objects, as well as the influences that have shaped Jewish practices and action.

The use of ossuaries by Jews during the Graeco-Roman period in and of itself demonstrates the transformation of Jewish practices through the integration of Roman and Greek culture into their customs and rituals especially with regards to burial rituals. This period during Herod’s reign was known for the Hellenistic and Roman influences on Jerusalem and the people there, which is apparent in the ossuaries. Similarly, the use of ossuaries for burials demonstrates

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<sup>9</sup> Hachlili, Rachel, and Ann Killebrew. “Jewish Funerary Customs During the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis.” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 2, 1983, pp.109-139., DOI: 10.1179/peq.1983.115.2.109.

the influence of Nabatean burial practices on Jewish burial practices. Some sources argue that this transformation occurred because ossuaries allowed for a “monumentalized form of burial, in the Roman mode,” that was not cremation, which is not supported by the Jewish faith. Also, it allowed for recognition of individuals “for their Graeco Roman euergetism in the Jewish public realm.”<sup>10</sup> Other individuals, such as Levine and Foerster, have also pointed out how the appearances of ossuaries were very similar to Greek and Roman objects including Roman cinerary urns, which were also rectangular boxes with lids and inscriptions. These connections and comparisons further explain how the idea of ossuaries transpired in Jerusalem and the Roman and Hellenistic influences on Jewish practices. The source of inspiration for ossuaries is further supported because of “the frequent use of the Hebrew or Aramaic terms *gelasqma* and *kauka*” which come from Greek words as well as mosaics that decorate the ossuaries which appear to be in Roman-style.<sup>11</sup>

Archaeologists, when excavating, were also able to deduce which specific sect of Judaism used ossuaries. They believe that the ossuaries were primarily used by the Pharisees. This is significant as this sect of Judaism believed in resurrection.<sup>12</sup> This notion is supported by Rahmani who believes that ossuaries prevent the separation and loss of individual’s body parts. When someone is resurrected they will need all of their body parts, which makes the use of ossuaries important for keeping each individuals bones together. Additionally, the “decay of the flesh is connected with the expiation of sin” which purifies and prepares individuals for

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<sup>11</sup> Magness, Jodi. “Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 124, no.1, 2005, pp. 121-154.

<sup>12</sup> Fine, Steven. “Death, Burial, and Afterlife.” *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, 2010, pp. 1-26., DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0025.

resurrection.<sup>13</sup> This belief presents another facet of the people who used ossuaries which is useful when creating a comprehensive understanding of the time from ossuaries.

Another discovery that archaeologists made was that ossuaries were discovered in Asia Minor as well and have been traced back to roughly the same time. Similarly, Afyon urns were found that closely resemble ossuaries in their size, shape, and lids.<sup>14</sup> There was also connections found between the Egyptian loculi tombs and the ones in Judaea. These similarities and the existence of ossuaries in many countries further demonstrates the influences of other cultures on each other at this time and the susceptibility of religions to transformation in the presence of other groups.

Similar to the many aspects of the ossuaries that give us insight into the time of Herod, the Coffin of Djehutymose has many characteristics that allow us to piece together a greater picture of Egypt and the surrounding areas from 625-580 B.C. After the end of the Kushite Period, the Saite Period began. During the Saite Period, the time period in which the coffin dates back to, the Egyptians experienced “an era of great artistic revival.”<sup>15</sup> In these years the Egyptians prospered, and it was not until the Persians conquered Egypt that this period came to an end. Despite the end of the Saite Period, the artifacts from the time especially the Coffin of Djehutymose continue to have lasting influences until this day.<sup>16</sup>

The discovery of this coffin gives insights into the beliefs and practices at the time. After death, many ancient Egyptians were placed in coffins. These coffins were made from wood,

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<sup>15</sup> “Staff Favorite.” *Kelsey Museum*, 11 May 2015, <https://kelseymuseum.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/staff-favorite-2/>.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, James and Marsha Hill. “Egypt in the Late Period (Ca. 712-332 B.C.).” *The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lapd/hd\\_lapd.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lapd/hd_lapd.htm).

plaster and paint. Once the people had been mummified, they were placed in a coffin. These coffins were used for only one individual. Therefore, from the coffins we are able to learn about the importance of the individual in death in Egyptian culture at this time, and that the use of coffins was not exclusive to the wealthiest individuals in society.<sup>17</sup>

The Coffin of Djehutmose is not just a plain wooden coffin. On the outside of the coffin there are illustrations of natural events, “magical spells from the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead and images of protective gods and goddesses.” These decorative elements demonstrate the beliefs at the time. The protective elements give us insight into the fears surrounding the afterlife and the desperate need to protect the dead as they continue on in life. The mummification of the dead also demonstrates this concept as the whole point of this practice was to preserve the bodies of the dead so they would continue to be lifelike after death.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the illustrations and protective elements on the coffin, there were also texts that identify the coffin as belonging to Djehutmose and his ancestry. Additionally, there were also religious texts written on the coffin. These texts are important as they give us information about the writing at the time, religions, and the importance of lineage and ancestry. These aspects allow us to better understand the languages, religion and societal beliefs at the time.<sup>19</sup>

The ossuaries and Coffin of Djehutmose bear many similarities. Both had many decorative elements and inscriptions or texts to affirm who was buried inside and their ancestry. While the ossuaries’ construction, designs, and apparent Greek and Roman influences, as well as the parallels to other regions demonstrates the distinct Jewish culture that was a culmination of

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<sup>17</sup> “Staff Favorite.” *Kelsey Museum*, 11 May 2015, <https://kelseymuseum.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/staff-favorite-2/>.

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<sup>19</sup> “Staff Favorite.” *Kelsey Museum*, 11 May 2015, <https://kelseymuseum.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/staff-favorite-2/>.



Greek and Roman influences and uniquely Jewish practices, the construction and use of coffins demonstrates a unique Egyptian culture. Another similarity is that both burial practices stress the importance of life after death. Many of the people who used the ossuaries believed in resurrection. Similarly, the Egyptians also believed that individuals would continue to live after death. However, the Egyptians believed that they would live on in a different world. Both burial practices also shed light onto the social structure at the time. While both societies likely had a hierarchical structure, the ossuaries were exclusive to the wealthy. In contrast, a broader range of individuals in Egypt were buried in coffins. Despite some coffins being more elaborate than others, there was a commonality within burial practice between different social classes which was not seen in Jerusalem.

All of the different aspects of the ossuaries and the Coffin of Djehutymose studied continue to shape our picture of the people and culture in Jerusalem and Egypt at these times. For ossuaries and coffins, as well as many other ancient objects, archaeology has played a major role in giving us a glimpse of the past. While other objects provide us with different perspectives of the culture and people present in society over time, the narration of Judaism through the lens of ossuaries came to a close when Jericho was destroyed by the Romans and the use of ossuaries ceased.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the narration of Egypt through the lens of coffins, similar to those of the Coffin of Djehutymose, came to a close when the practice of mummification stopped. Despite this, the knowledge learned from ossuaries and coffins have played and continue to play a large role in our understanding of Herod's Judea and ancient Egypt.

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