

Funerary Culture Re-Examined

Madeline Jacobson
madjacob@umich.edu



Archaeologists use material remains to reconstruct the daily lives of those from the past. From royal dynasties to impoverished peoples, the remnants of their time on Earth has left archaeologists with an immense amount of knowledge about the ancient world. However, An archaeologist's work is not finished with the analysis of everyday items, rather a complete picture of an ancient civilization cannot be formed without focusing on funerary culture as well. Archaeology can be used to talk about honoring the dead, even two seemingly different cultures. In fact, funerary objects from the eastern part of the Roman Empire, namely modern day Israel and Egypt, provide outstanding evidence for dispelling cultural divides because, at the end of the day, all people just want to be treated with respect. The care and complexity given to the process of honoring the dead sheds light on the means in which the Jews and Egyptians fused their own beliefs into the empire wide elite norms, proving death is no less reflective of a people than how they composed themselves when they were alive.

The first object from the Kelsey is an ossuary, a stone, clay, or wooden box used to hold the bones of someone who has died. According to ancient Jewish texts along with the archaeological record, ossuaries functioned in antiquity as a Messianic instrument of resurrection, ensuring the correct number of bones belonging to the deceased. Therefore, when the Messiah came, the dead would be brought back to life with no missing limbs. Jews of second temple period buried the dead in two main stages. First, the body was placed in a cave for the flesh to rot, ensuring that only the bones remained. The bones were then arranged in an ossuary and taken to the family tomb.

The ossuary in the Kelsey is a rather common construction, measuring 30 cm high, 23 cm wide, and 59 cm long, with walls 2.5 cm thick. Hand hewn from a large block of soft local

limestone, most likely from a stone quarry in Jerusalem, this ossuary would have been relatively easy to carve. Specialists would have used stonecutters, mallets, and chisels for the box itself and varied tools to create a design including carving knives and a compass (Hachlili, 94-95). Tan in color, the front incorporates a geometric floral design, outlined by a thin, double line border and a geometric design flanking all four corners. The top edges of the ossuary are level, suggesting a flat lid is missing. Though parts are heavily damaged, with discoloration and pieces flaking off the surface, the composition is still well in tact and clearly rendered to the naked eye. Individual scrapes from the artist's tool are still visible on the inside of the box as well. These details preserved well due to the high relief the artist used while carving the design, enhancing the contrast between the deep and shallow incisions. Though it is not perfectly symmetrical and contains little imperfections, it can be proposed that the myriad of fractures range from damage undertaken in antiquity to modern wear and tear from handling the object. Still, it is carved with purpose deep into the stone.

The motif on the front contains two six petalled rosettes on each side with a foliage type design, most likely representing the tree of life, separating the two in the middle. Made by chip carving, the petals attached to the flower on the right are closed while the one on the left is in full bloom. Jews would have read this piece from right to left, in accordance with the Hebrew language being read as such. As a result, this ossuary provides a beautifully artistic story of the journey of resurrection, going from the closed flower representing death to the open, blossomed flower representing life. Overall, while it is a magnificent artifact for modern scholars to study, there is nothing that would have classified it as lavish or opulent in its own time considering its simple carving technique into a soft limestone rectangle and no immediate traces of pigment.

There is still debate among scholars who dispute the exact purpose of ossuaries being an instrument of resurrection due to the fact that incomplete skeletons and multiple skeletons have been found within a single ossuary (Magness, 130-136). There is argument for the idea that Hellenistic and Roman urns provided the inspiration for ossuaries. However, placing this artifact within its original context alongside primary Jewish texts of the period provides extensive evidence for messianism playing a large role in the background. Hellenistic and Roman tombs influenced some of the decorations found on ossuaries, but there is no direct comparison that can be made between ossuaries and urns. Ossuaries fall in line with the an-iconic art of that religious time period and iconography popular on urns are absent as well (Hachlili, 99). Not only did urns contain the cremated remains of a person as opposed to their bones, the ritual processes for each do not line up. Because most ossuaries were fairly simply designed and made from fairly common materials, there is no compelling evidence to say that Jews participated in this ritual because elite gentiles did. However, that is not to say social status played no role. Substantial archaeological evidence proves the impact of Hellenistic and Roman influence on Jerusalem's elite, evident in consumer goods, food preparation, and wine imports (Magness, 138-139).

That being said, there is no known correlation between the wealth of the deceased and the ornamentation of the ossuary, since relatively plain ossuaries have been found within the tombs of some of ancient Jerusalem's most prominent families (Magness, 130). Therefore, it is almost impossible to know who this ossuary belonged to and the status of said person. Nonetheless, it can be observed that great care was taken in ensuring the proper steps for resurrection. From that, one gathers the importance of such rituals, being a way to reassure family members the deceased is cleansed of sin and entitled to resurrection (Rahmani, 27).

The second object on display in the Kelsey is a mummy portrait which was an integral part of Egyptian traditions and rituals surrounding death. Commonly known as Fayum portraits, due to the area in which many have been found, they are formed using planks of wood on which a bust of the deceased is painted. Placed inside or outside the physical mummy wrappings, they were intended to help those who were mummified achieve immortality (Trimble, 59). As such, they were produced for wealthy Egyptians who had the means to be mummified in the first place.

This specific Fayum portrait in the Kelsey measures 40.5 cm long, 17.8 cm wide, and 1 cm thick. Discovered in Egypt, dating back to the first and second centuries CE, this work is contemporaneous with the ossuary discussed above and is made from encaustic pigments and gold leaf on a wood panel. The portrait has pieces peeling off the front along with the left eye nearly completely faded. The sides of the portrait are somewhat rough with a smooth top. However, considering the portrait is made from wood, it has preserved quite well. Traces of linen mummy wrappings were fixated on the back, providing evidence for their place and function in antiquity (Trimble, 59).

Preserving the identity of the deceased was important from the Old Kingdom on, manifesting in Fayum portraits. They constitute one of many funerary practices in Roman Egypt and provide extensive evidence for giving individuality and beauty to mummies (Trimble, 59). Even though the deceased is now identified as a woman, this mortuary artifact is unique in its ambiguity of gender. Egyptian art typically uses skin tone to reveal the gender of who is depicted, with red being seen as a masculine color and yellow feminine, but this portrait is a noteworthy case because it is not painted as such. Thus, turning to the details help to distinguish

that she is a woman (Trimble, 59-60). For example, her elaborately tied up hairstyle and golden jewelry not only classifies her gender, but also her wealth. Representations of jewelry painted on Fayum portraits symbolized the woman's real jewelry and ensured its continuation with her into the afterlife. Depictions of jewelry were connected to a woman's dowry, making it easy to discern her elite status. Gold, in particular, was desirable in a funerary context due to its association with the sun god and representing life (Trimble, 60-63). However, age is not something in which we can turn to details because portraits were idealized versions of human beings. Thus, what is depicted on the portrait itself bears little relation to the actual age of the deceased (Trimble, 59). Hence, the age of the person depicted here is unknown, even though she is portrayed as splendid and youthful.

Moreover, larger cultural trends in the Mediterranean world under the Roman Empire played a role in depictions found on these portraits (Trimble, 63-64). As seen with the ossuary, observable traces of Hellenistic and Roman influence on this artifact provide an interesting look into the effects the empire had on Egyptian funerary culture. Fayum portraits are a concrete example of Egyptians trying to adapt into their Romanized world, as they are a clear representation of actively responding to social and cultural developments. The Hellenized style in which you find depictions of the deceased only further displays that adaptation of Egyptian interest.

These portraits checked off the religious aspect by being one step in the process of achieving immortality as well as referencing empire wide elite cultural norms (Trimble, 59). Contrasting the ossuary, however, the Fayum portrait is essential to the representation of social identity and status in life. Clearly revealing local elite behavior, the artifact displays her wealth

and prestige. Meanwhile, as aforementioned above, the ossuary has no distinguishable marks from the outside to represent the status of the person placed inside.

It may seem as though these objects share no correlation beyond the fact that they are both concerned with dead bodies and the afterlife, but they are more closely related than one would think. Production of both the ossuary and Fayum portrait had an effect on the economy. Craft specialization made it possible for both of these to exist, and as such, specialists needed to be hired to produce such works. Stone quarries needed to have materials and the resources to cut and transport stone while artists needed to be hired to carve and paint these objects. Additionally, both require a lot of thought and preparation. The longevity of the process is paired with the longevity of its use. Once the ossuary is made, which is a lengthy process in itself, the body does not go directly into it and stuck in a tomb, rather there is a significant ceremony that takes place around a year later once the flesh has rotten off. As with the ossuary, there is evidence for a long life of the Fayum portrait before it was used for its main function of assisting in the afterlife. The portraits were not immediately buried with the mummy, rather subtle damage suggests exposure to the elements over time (Trimble, 60). Both have extensive preparation, demonstrating a level of respect both groups of people have for their dead.

Societies in antiquity placed great emphasis on all that leads toward death and the afterlife. These objects shed light on the cohesion and stability that took place under the Roman Empire with the integration of their own beliefs into a wider scheme. Whether it be an idealized version of oneself or a simple container, in the end, no matter the belief system or social status, people just want to be treated with dignity and care. Even though these two artifacts hold

separate religions, traditions, and commandments, archaeological evidence provides insight for understanding how ancient societies yearned to honor their dead.

Works Cited

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