

# Death on the Nile: Uncovering the afterlife of ancient Egypt

23 February – 22 May 2016 | Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Free admission

The Fitzwilliam Museum is marking its bicentenary anniversary celebrations with an exhibition on its remarkable collection of Egyptian coffins. Going beyond the images of mummies, animal-headed gods, pharaohs and mystery often associated with ancient Egypt, *Death on the Nile* will explore the beliefs and working practices behind these objects and reveal fascinating new information on how they were made.

Golden yellow, and covered from head to toe in bright hieroglyphs and pictures in reds, greens and blues, the set of coffins belonging to the man named Nespawersheft (also known as Nes-Amun) was one of the very first gifts to the Fitzwilliam collection, given by two members of the University of Cambridge in 1822, just a few years after the Museum was founded in 1816. The following year Giovanni Belzoni presented the University with the seven-ton granite sarcophagus lid of Ramesses III which he had retrieved from the Valley of the Kings. These and other gifts, as well as material from excavations, for which the Museum was a sponsor, created the remarkable collection of Egyptian coffins at the Fitzwilliam today.

The coffins of Nes-Amun are not only incredibly beautiful, they also contain valuable clues to the man who commissioned them and to precisely how Egyptian coffins in his time were made. It is one of the finest coffin sets of its type in the world and in an outstanding state of preservation. To uncover its hidden secrets, the coffins have been extensively studied with X-radiography at the Museum. And in February this year, the inner coffin was sent for CT scanning at the radiology department of Addenbrooke's Hospital, part of Cambridge University Hospitals (CUH).

Julie Dawson, Head of Conservation at the Fitzwilliam Museum and co-curator of the exhibition, spoke about what they discovered: "The inner coffin box is made up of a multitude of pieces of wood, including sections from at least one older coffin. Evidence of re-use includes cuts across old dowel holes, patching to change the profile of the coffin sides and a number of places where old mortise holes have been filled in and new ones cut beside them. Wood was a precious commodity and the craftsmen were incredibly skilled at making these complex objects from sometimes unpromising starting materials."



Coffin from coffin set of Nespawersheft, circa 1000 BC  
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Press | The Fitzwilliam Museum

“The radiographs and scans also reveal how people tried to restore or preserve the coffins in the past. Some parts of Nespawershefyt’s coffins are held together with 19<sup>th</sup> century ironmongery. Without these old repairs the coffins might not have survived so well, but they are quite intrusive on the original object and have rusted into the wood in places, causing damage.”

Examining the surface revealed other surprises, including several 3,000 year old fingerprints, suggesting that the craftsmen moved the lid of the inner coffin before the varnish had dried. Nes-Amun clearly commissioned his coffins during his lifetime, presumably at the point where he could afford a set worthy of his status as a priest of Amun-Re. However, by the time of his death he had risen in rank and his new titles – as supervisor of craftsmen’s workshops in Karnak and the supervisor of temple scribes of Amun-Re – had to be inscribed over the top of the old ones. This shows the importance attached to being properly prepared for death in ancient Egypt, even while one was still alive.

The Nes-Amun coffin set is one of many stunning objects in *Death on the Nile*, the majority from the Fitzwilliam’s collections and complemented by loans from the British Museum and the Musée du Louvre.

Through scientific analysis, the woods and the pigments and varnishes used by the craftsmen to make the decoration have been identified. Evidence of working practices, from the variety of tool marks found on the wood to the drawing and painting techniques used to make the images, have been revealed through close study and a range of imaging techniques. All this information helps bring us closer to the people who made the coffins as do the very human touches and stumbles – secret repairs hidden underneath a perfect finish, mistakes in drawings that had to be changed in the final painting and even the odd practice doodle on the underside of a coffin box.

A series of reconstructions will show how some of the coffins were made and, in a live conservation area, visitors will be able to examine in more detail the scientific techniques and the materials and construction methods uncovered during the project.

Helen Strudwick, Egyptologist and exhibition co-curator said: “This is a chance for us to encourage visitors to look more closely at these extraordinary objects. A coffin artisan in ancient Egypt had to deal creatively with many practical problems and sometimes restrictions on materials available because of the economic or political climate. Objects always had to be tailored to cost, but the finish had to meet the high aspirations of the customer. The coffins show the skill and care with which the Egyptians prepared for the afterlife. To us, for whom death is a taboo subject, this seems like a morbid preoccupation. In fact, it was an obsession with life and an urgent wish to ensure its perfected continuation.”

“This is also a very appropriate exhibition for our bicentenary year. Not only did the Museum’s collection of Egyptian artefacts start with the gift of a beautiful set of coffins, that gift was also given in the year that Egyptology as a subject was born: 1822 was the year that Jean-François Champollion first announced his theories on the hieroglyphic script. And, as part of the University of Cambridge, it is an excellent opportunity for us to bring the research we are carrying out on the Museum’s Egyptian coffin collection to the attention of a wider audience.”

*Death on the Nile: Uncovering the afterlife of ancient Egypt* is at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge 23 February – 22 May 2016. Admission is free.

- Ends -

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**Notes to editors:**

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB  
FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 – 17.00  
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00  
CLOSED: 24–26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

**Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum** is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam’s collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

The Fitzwilliam is celebrating its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016.  
[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)