

BRONZE 'BATHTUB' COFFINS

IN THE CONTEXT OF 8TH-6TH
CENTURY BC BABYLONIAN, ASSYRIAN
AND ELAMITE FUNERARY PRACTICES

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Preface

The present work is a much-expanded, updated and corrected version of an honours thesis of the same title submitted to The University of Sydney, Australia, in October 2012. After the passing of almost two years, during which time the bronze ‘bathtubs’ were allowed to rest in peace, I decided it was time to return to the task and give these fascinating vessels the attention they deserve. My sincerest thanks to Profs Javier Álvarez-Mon and Gian Pietro Basello for supporting my quest to revive this work and have it published, and thank you to my family and friends who tolerate with such good humour my pre-occupation with death and the long-dead.

[...] mankind
They took [] for his destiny.
[...] you have toiled without cease, what have you got?
Through toil you are wearing [yourself] out,
You are filling your body with grief,
You are bringing forward the end of your days.
Mankind, which is like a reed in the cane-brake, is snapped off.
Man and woman in full flower of youth
[] . . . death.
No one can see death.
No one can see the face of death.
No one [can hear] the voice of death.
But savage death snaps off mankind.
For how long do we bring families into existence?
For how long do we make wills?
For how long do brothers divide the inheritance?
For how long is there to be jealousy in the land(?) / among sons(?)?
For how long has the river risen and brought the flood?
So that dragonflies drift on the river,
Their faces staring into the face of the sun god?
Suddenly there is nothing.
The prisoner and the dead are alike,
Death itself cannot be depicted,
But Lullu - man - is incarcerated.
After they had pronounced the blessing on me,
The Anunnaku, the great gods, were assembled,
And Mammitum, creatress of destiny, Decreed destinies with them.
They established life and death.
Death they fixed to have no ending.¹

¹ Tablet X, column VI: lines 4-32 of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, late edition (Lambert 1980: 55).

Introduction

The ensuing pages are dedicated to the examination of a small corpus of bronze U-shaped burial receptacles from ancient Mesopotamia and Elam, dubbed ‘bathtub’ coffins for their characteristic apsidal shape, reminiscent of a style of 19th and early 20th century bathtub (Curtis 1983: 87). The coffins are approached in this work as a distinct corpus because they are almost identical in appearance and manufacture, and are known to have been produced and used for only a relatively short time-span by three closely interacting societies. In total the corpus comprises eight excavated bronze ‘bathtub’ coffins found in burial contexts dating to the 8th-6th centuries BC.² Five are from sites in present-day Iraq; three at Nimrud in the north and two at Ur in the south. Another three have been uncovered in the Zagros foothills of southwest Iran; one at Arjan and two at Ram Hormuz. One further bronze ‘bathtub’ was excavated at Zincirli in North Syria, although unlike the others it had not been deposited in a mortuary context. A handful of other unprovenanced whole and fragmentary examples are available, but because they lack archaeological context it is not known whether they served as funerary containers.

These fascinating and unusual burial receptacles have garnered surprisingly little academic interest. Largely overshadowed by their rich assemblages of grave goods, which are evidently considered to be of much greater value and art historical interest, the coffins themselves tend to be treated as an incidental aspect of the burial. They are addressed accordingly in only the most minimal terms as functional containers, useful for dating the burial assemblages and little else. An unfortunate aspect of this already narrow scope of bronze ‘bathtub’ coffin treatment is the emphasis on the examples without archaeological context, particularly a series of fragments purportedly belonging to a coffin from ‘Ziwiye’ in northwest Iran. These pieces have been widely published across a range of volumes on ancient Near Eastern art and their unusual inscribed figural iconography has been the subject of much discussion and debate (e.g. Ghirshman 1964a: 307; Parrot 1961: 144; Porada 1965: 124-27). The tendency for any study of the coffins to gravitate around these decorated, unprovenanced examples can be seen as rather symptomatic of the traditional object-oriented, art historical emphasis of Near Eastern archaeology.

Each of the bronze ‘bathtub’ coffin burials found in archaeological context has been published in an excavation report in which the description of the find is invariably characterised by its brevity. While some of the more impressive grave goods are shown, few, if any, supporting images of the burials in situ or the coffins are provided. The only one of these burials to have been subject to any comprehensive analysis is the Arjan tomb, which was treated in Javier Álvarez-Mon’s (2010) *The Arjan Tomb, at the Crossroads of the Elamite and the Persian Empires*.

² All dates henceforth are BC.

In this work the archaeological context of the burial is thoroughly described and aspects of the coffin such as its iconographic motifs and method of manufacture are examined. However, its priority is the analysis and contextualisation of the grave goods within their mid-1st millennium artistic milieu and therefore the author delves little into the funerary context and significance of the finds.

The only scholar to have expressed any real interest in the bronze ‘bathtub’ coffins as a corpus is John Curtis. In a journal article entitled ‘Late Assyrian Bronze Coffins’ Curtis (1983) presented a study of the two bronze ‘bathtub’ burials from Ur, which were the only excavated examples known at the time of writing. He addressed the coffins’ iconography, form, manufacture and possible workshops, and considered a likely range for their production and deposition dates. Curtis (2008) has since followed up with a short chapter ‘The Bronze Coffins from Nimrud’ in the edited volume *New Light on Nimrud*, which provides an update on the corpus to include the more recently discovered Nimrud and Arjan examples (the Ram Hormuz coffins were not yet publicly available). While these are important foundational works, they have left open the opportunity for a more in-depth examination of the eight coffins together as a corpus and an exploration of their funerary significance for the societies who employed them to bury their dead.

The marginalisation of funerary contexts in the study of the bronze ‘bathtub’ coffins is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the archaeologies of ancient Mesopotamia and Iran were both founded upon a tradition of large-scale excavations in which grave goods were retained for the development of ceramic sequences, art historical analysis and display on museum shelves, while the funerary significance of the finds was ignored to the degree that the skeletons and burial containers were routinely discarded in the field. Discussions of funerary ritual were generally limited to the imaginative reconstruction of grand royal funeral ceremonies,³ and attitudes toward death and the hereafter studied primarily through translations and interpretations of Sumerian and Akkadian literature; sources considered pre-eminent over archaeological material, which was only drawn in to support particular interpretations of the texts.⁴ Within this framework the systematic analysis of mortuary remains in the archaeological record as a means for understanding these societies’ funerary practices was virtually unheard of.

Yet the tides have slowly turned with the increasing recognition that burials are, as Michael Parker Pearson (1999: 8) has emphasised, ‘one of the most formal and carefully prepared deposits that archaeologists encounter’. Because

³ Such as that of Charles Leonard Woolley (1930: 71-73) for the ‘Royal cemetery’ at Ur.

⁴ Zettler (1996: 81-82) has emphasised the tendency to privilege the textual record. The notion that the archaeological record may serve as ‘supplementary’ material to texts is still prevalent (e.g. Scurlock 1995: 1883).

the moment of burial is often carefully planned and imbued with meaning, funerary remains allow us to infer beliefs about death and the afterlife and the construction of social ideology. Recent approaches have therefore stressed the need for meticulous recording, collection and analysis of burial data as a more reliable means for reconstructing mortuary practice, and in line with a more widespread rejection of culture-historical and object-oriented paths of inquiry across the field of archaeology, attention is now directed to the social and cultural aspects of funerary ritual visible in these remains (Laneri 2007: 1). To be fair, it should also be added that some of this change in attitude towards burial data can be attributed to advances in archaeological science, which have vastly increased the amount of information that can be obtained through the examination of human skeletons, animal bones, soil samples and other organic remains.

Despite this elevated interest in funerary material, one major aspect of the mortuary record remains consistently overlooked in Mesopotamian and Iranian archaeology; the burial container. Yet if we are to recognise the centrality of the dead body to the funerary process (Stutz and Tarlow 2013: 6), it must likewise be acknowledged that the central material feature of the emotionally and symbolically charged act of burial is likely to have been the burial container holding the corpse (Preston 2004: 178). In an attempt to address this lacuna in existing scholarship, the present work examines the corpus of bronze 'bathtubs' with their important funerary role placed at the forefront.

This book is organised into five main chapters. The first is dedicated to the presentation of the bronze 'bathtub' coffins together as a corpus. Each burial is introduced by a brief literature review, followed by an enumeration of all available information about the archaeological context and the coffins themselves. The collation of this data facilitates a subsequent analysis of the method of the coffins' manufacture, a search for possible workshops, and an assessment of the probable date range for the production and use of the corpus as a whole.

The second chapter attempts to situate the corpus within the broader context of contemporary mortuary remains. Before proceeding into the description of this material, the reader is alerted to the problematic nature of its recovery and recording which has largely negated the possibility of producing a full or clear picture of mortuary practices for any period in Mesopotamia and Elam, and has made critical, in depth discussion of the topic beyond reach (Álvarez-Mon 2005: 119; Seymour 2011: 784). Working within these limitations a basic picture of Neo-Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, and Neo-Elamite mortuary practices is presented using data drawn from excavation reports and various secondary works, and the bronze 'bathtub' coffins are then further examined within these regional contexts. Throughout this chapter particular attention is paid to the evidence for the much more ubiquitous U-shape coffin made of clay, which is considered to have been linked to the bronze 'bathtubs'.

The third chapter explores the conceptual foundations underlying the deposition of this mortuary material. Here

it will be seen that the most pervasive phenomenon in both the textual and archaeological evidence for all three regions is, as aptly coined by Karel Van der Toorn (2014: 81), 'the social survival of the dead'. From an ancient Mesopotamian perspective death was an undesirable but inevitable fact of human life (Bottéro 1980: 27; Jacobsen 1980: 19; Pollock 1999: 196) which required careful management by the living. This gloomy outlook on death, evidently shared by the Elamites, entailed an eternal existence of misery and discomfort which could only be relieved by the proper care of a dead person's 'ghost' by living descendants who in return enjoyed its blessings and protection. The first vital step in the creation of this reciprocal relationship was an appropriate burial for the deceased and thereafter bonds were nurtured through the regular, long-term provision of funerary offerings. It is within this system of logic that we must examine the treatment of the dead, because as insightfully observed by Daniel T. Potts (1997: 234) 'without an understanding of the specifically Mesopotamian [and Elamite] approach to the care and tending of the death spirit, much of the archaeological record of burial in the region would be stripped of its intrinsic meaning.'

The outline of Mesopotamian and Elamite funerary practices and beliefs in the preceding chapters provides the framework for a consideration in the fourth chapter of the possible meanings invested in the bronze coffins by the burying societies. Certain aspects of the burial context which scholars might normally expect to have symbolic significance are first reviewed; namely, the burial location, orientation and arrangement of the corpse. Then the possible ideology invested in the coffins themselves is explored, beginning with an investigation of two main aspects of their materiality likely to have had embedded meanings, their distinctive U-shaped form and bronze material; avenues of inquiry inspired by recent scholarly emphasis on the mutually constitutive relationship between humans and the material world with which they interact (e.g. Johnson 2010: 224-26; Knappett 2012). Following this investigation the possible symbolism of the motifs engraved on the surface of a small number of the coffins is examined. To round out the chapter, discussion then turns to the conspicuous manifestation of elite Assyrian, Babylonian and Elamite social rank in all of the bronze 'bathtub' coffin burials.

It is the distribution of this distinctive coffin corpus in elite funerary contexts across these three regions of the ancient Near East, each of which is considered to have been home to its own unique culture, that stands out as its most remarkable feature. The fifth and final chapter of this study is therefore dedicated to painting an historical backdrop of relations between these separate, yet intricately interconnected, cultural areas during the late 8th to mid-6th century to facilitate an assessment of whether the coffins might represent a shared funerary practice. What ultimately emerges at its conclusion is the significance of the bronze 'bathtub' coffins as a surviving testament to the multi-faceted and dynamic three-way relationship between late Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Elamite elite society.