

BRONZE ‘BATHTUB’ COFFINS

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

Yasmina Wicks

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 174 4
ISBN 978 1 78491 175 1 (e-Pdf)

© Archaeopress and Y Wicks 2015

Cover image: Photograph of the Arjan Bronze 'Bathtub' Coffin in the National Museum of Iran
(image courtesy of Javier Álvarez-Mon)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

Printed in England by Oxuniprint, Oxford
This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

Contents

List of Figures	iii
Preface	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins of Mesopotamia and Elam.....	3
1.1. Introduction	3
1.2. The Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffin Corpus	5
1.2.1. The Nimrud Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins	5
1.2.2. The Ur Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins	16
1.2.3. The Arjan Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffin	22
1.2.4. The Ram Hormuz Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins	27
1.2.5. The Zincirli Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Vessel	30
1.2.6. Unprovenanced Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Vessels.....	33
1.2.7. Additional Bronze Coffins of Varying Forms	37
1.3. Manufacture	38
1.4. Workshops	43
1.5. Dating and Origins	44
Chapter 2: Mortuary Remains of Mesopotamia and Elam.....	47
2.1. Introduction	47
2.2. Babylonia	49
2.2.1. Burial Typology	51
2.2.2. Grave Goods	57
2.2.3. Burial Location	58
2.2.4. Commentary	59
2.3. Assyria	61
2.3.1. Burial Typology	61
2.3.2. Grave Goods	69
2.3.3. Burial Location	71
2.3.4. Commentary	72
2.4. Elam	74
2.4.1. Burial Typology	74
2.4.2. Grave Goods	76
2.4.3. Burial Location	77
2.4.4. Commentary	77
2.5. Summary Notes	79
2.5.1. Summarising the Mortuary Remains of Babylonia, Assyria and Elam	79
2.5.2. Notes on Clay U-shape ‘Bathtub’ Coffins in Assyria, Babylonia and Elam	80
Chapter 3: Death, the Afterlife and Funerary Ritual in Mesopotamia and Elam.....	85
3.1. Introduction	85
3.2. Death, the Afterlife and Funerary Ritual in Mesopotamia	86
3.2.1. Death and the Afterlife	86
3.2.2. The Funeral	88
3.2.3. Ongoing Care for the Dead	91
3.3. Death, the Afterlife and Funerary Ritual in Elam	93
3.4. Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffin Burials in the Context of Death, the Afterlife and Funerary Ritual	94
Chapter 4: Ideological Aspects of the Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Burials.....	98
4.1. Introduction	98
4.2. Location, Orientation and Body Arrangement	98
4.2.1. Location	98
4.2.2. Orientation and Body Arrangement	99
4.3. Form, Material and Iconography of the Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins	100
4.3.1. Form	100
4.3.2. Material	111

4.3.3. Iconography	114
4.4. Social Rank	115
Chapter 5: Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins in Historical Context.....	119
5.1. Introduction	119
5.2. Assyrian, Babylonian and Elamite Interaction in the 8th-6th Centuries	119
5.3. The Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffins in Historical Context.....	122
5.4. The Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffin: a Shared Funerary Tradition?.....	126
Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks	128
Bibliography	130
Appendix 1: Catalogue of Bronze ‘Bathtubs’	144
Appendix 2: Nimrud Bronze ‘Bathtub’ Coffin Grave Good Inventory	154
Appendix 3: Texts	166

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Map indicating main sites mentioned in text, locations of bronze 'bathtub' discoveries marked by a star	4
Figure 2 - Plan indicating locations of the four main tomb chambers in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal at Nimrud	6
Figure 3 - Plan showing bronze 'bathtub' coffins in the antechamber of Tomb III at Nimrud	7
Figure 4 - Coffin 2 in situ in the antechamber of Tomb III at Nimrud	8
Figure 5 - Nimrud Coffin 1 showing grave goods in their location of discovery	9
Figure 6 - Nimrud Coffin 2 showing grave goods in their location of discovery	11
Figure 7 - Nimrud Coffin 3 showing grave goods in their location of discovery	12
Figure 8 - Plan of the 'domestic wing' of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud i.	14
Figure 9 - Drawing of the vaulted complex underneath Rooms 74 and 75 of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud	15
Figure 10 - Plan of Ur including the area of the <i>giparu</i> of Kurigalzu	17
Figure 11 - Drawings of the Ur PG1 and PG2 burial chambers	18
Figure 12 - Ur bronze 'bathtub' coffins PG1 and PG2 in situ.	18
Figure 13 - Ur bronze 'bathtub' coffin PG1 in situ inside its roughly made chamber	19
Figure 14 - Decorated side-strips of bronze 'bathtub' coffins PG2 (left) and PG1 (right)	20
Figure 15 - Ur burials PG1 (left) and PG2 (right) with locations of selected grave goods marked.....	20
Figure 16 - Location of the Arjan Tomb on the left bank of the Marun River	23
Figure 17 - Line drawings of the Arjan tomb chamber and contents	24
Figure 18 - Line drawings of the Arjan bronze 'bathtub' coffin and contents (left) and photograph of the coffin (right)	25
Figure 19 - The Arjan bronze 'bathtub' coffin handles, lid handle and lid fragment	25
Figure 20 - Approximate location of the Ram Hormuz burial chamber	27
Figure 21 - Location of the Ram Hormuz tomb chamber relative to the Jubaji archaeological site	28
Figure 22 - Ram Hormuz tomb chamber showing bronze 'bathtub' coffin fragments in situ and line drawing of the burials	28
Figure 23 - Metal vessels placed between the West and East Coffins in the Ram Hormuz tomb chamber	29
Figure 24 - Metal vessels deposited on the Ram Hormuz tomb chamber floor between the two coffins	29
Figure 25 - Plan of the Zincirli palace indicating Room L6 where the bronze 'bathtub' was found	31
Figure 26 - Bronze 'bathtub' from Zincirli.....	32
Figure 27 - Zincirli bronze 'bathtub' in its present fragmentary state	32
Figure 28 - One of the Zincirli bronze 'bathtub' handles with rosette bases.....	33
Figure 29 - Bronze 'bathtub' said to be from Dailaman-Amlash, with side-strip detail	33
Figure 30 - Bronze 'bathtub' said to be from eastern Anatolia	34
Figure 31 - 'Ziwiye' side-strip fragment	35
Figure 32 - 'Ziwiye' rim fragment	36
Figure 33 - Watercolour painting of the Persian 'princess' bronze coffin burial from Susa.....	37
Figure 35 - Ur PG1 with aspects of manufacture indicated	39
Figure 36 - Section of the Zincirli 'bathtub' showing zig-zagged rivet arrangement	39
Figure 37 - Top section of the Arjan coffin showing two rows of zig-zagged rivets attaching the rim	40
Figure 38 - Ur PG1 coffin lower section showing the use of two rows of zig-zagged rivets to attach the base	40
Figure 39 - Section of the Zincirli 'bathtub' showing the larger setting heads on the inner surface a.....	41
Figure 40 - Bronze 'bathtub' handles	41
Figure 41 - Arjan coffin bronze lid fragment.....	42
Figure 42 - Wall relief in Room 28 of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh depicting two scribes recording tribute or booty ..	46
Figure 43 - Table showing variances in nomenclature used for referring to U-shape coffins, oval coffins and single pot burials.	48
Figure 44 - Burial types: a. tomb chamber b. earth/pit c. sherd	50
Figure 45 - Single pot burials.....	52
Figure 46 - Double-pot burials.....	53
Figure 47 - Jar burials	56
Figure 48 - Burial types.....	56
Figure 49 - Burial types.....	62
Figure 50 - Burial types.....	64
Figure 51 - Burial types	66
Figure 52 - Plan of the kings' tombs under the Old Palace at Ashur	67
Figure 53 - Humaidat tomb chamber. Top left: stone sarcophagus.....	68
Figure 54 - Left: clay coffin with moulded rope-like band from Susa; right: line drawings of coffins from Babylon graves	78
Figure 55 - Table of clay U-shape 'bathtub' coffins.	81
Figure 56 - Double-handled 'coffin' from Alaca Höyük.....	84
Figure 57 - Terracotta 'feeding tube' of Tomb II in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud	91
Figure 58 - Early Dynastic period basin from the temple of Ningirsu at Girsu (Tello), c. 2500-2300 BC	101
Figure 59 - Photograph and plan showing U-shape depression in Room 12 of Sargon's palace at Khorsabad	102
Figure 60 - Relief panels from the Room 12 'bathroom' of Sargon's palace at Khorsabad	103
Figure 61 - Photograph and plan showing U-shape depression in Room 29 of Residence K at Khorsabad	103
Figure 62 - Photograph (after Mallowan 1966: Fig. 7) and plan.....	104
Figure 63 - Plan showing U-shape depressions in Rooms 17 and 26 of the ZT Wing of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud	104
Figure 64 - Photograph and plan showing U-shape depression in Room 9 of the palace of Adad-nirari III, area PD. 5 at Nimrud	105
Figure 66 - Plan showing Rooms T4 and T5 at Fort Shalmaneser where U-shape depressions were found	106
Figure 65 - Plan showing U-shape depression in Room 15 of the Burnt Palace at Nimrud	106
Figure 67 - Plan showing Room SE21 at Fort Shalmaneser where a U-shape depression was found	107
Figure 68 - Plan showing Rooms I and L in the Nimrud State Apartments East Wing	108

Figure 69 - Photograph of U-shape depression in Room 65 and plan showing its location in the Northwest palace of Ashurnasirpal ...	109
Figure 70 - Plan showing U-shape depressions in Rooms XXVII and XLV of the Assyrian palace at Til Barsib	110
Figure 71 - Fragments of a glazed panel from Khorsabad depicting a goat standing atop a rosette	114
Figure 72 - Kneeling 'prayer' pose.	116

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.