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Kneeling Knight

1939 Purchase Fund

Pompeo Leoni (1533-1608)

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

SUBSCRIPTION ONE DOLLAR

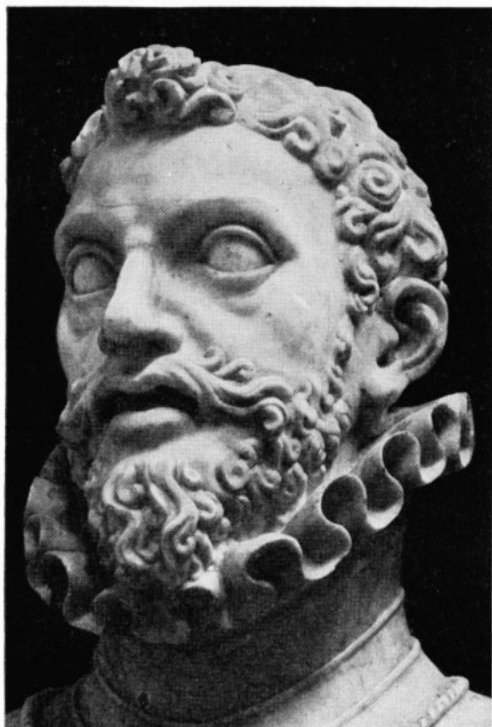


Fig. 12. Kneeling Knight (detail) Pompeo Leoni
1939 Purchase Fund

a spiritualized equivalent of the kneeling tomb statues but is not a mere modification of the traditional effigies which were conceived to parallel the *gisants* lying above a sarcophagus. The previous type is now replaced or at least impenetrated by the idea of a votive and memorial monument, based in essence on the typical representations of the donor in painting and sculpture. Our statue, wherever it was placed, is not characterized by any connection with a tomb; it is a full round figure, not aloof or isolated in a compartment of the wall but partaking of the life and the actual surroundings of the church. In the same way, contrary to tradition, the act of prayer is not depicted by any circumstantial features. Here is neither an impassible attitude nor an attachment to a visible object illustrating prayer, but the topic is the representation of the perpetuated spiritual attitude. This is, however, not an unreal conception and its effect is even more specific than that of the adoring figures of the earlier period. In spite of its ideal character, the outward direction of the attitude is positively defined. It is not the reaction to a celestial vision, as later in Baroque conception, but applies to a real object; although not to one which is connected with the image itself, but with a real object of adoration in the church such as an altar or a crucifix. Such relation of sculpture to space, its spiritual and functional activation through and in architectural distances, is actually a momentous premonition of the coming Baroque.

GEORG SWARZENSKI.

An Ethiopian Royal Sarcophagus

FOR more than twenty years an enormous granite sarcophagus has stood in the crypt in front of the main lecture hall (Fig. 1).¹ Most visitors to the Museum pass it without much notice for its decoration is difficult to see and there is little about it other than sheer bulk to attract attention. The sarcophagus of Aspalta, a king of Ethiopia who died about 568 B.C., is the heaviest single exhibit in the Museum. It weighs about fifteen and a half tons and its lid alone weighs four tons. When it arrived from our Expedition in 1923 it presented a serious engineering problem, for a survey of the building revealed that, without major structural alterations, there was no place on the Main Floor where such a weight could be put, and indeed the only safe place for it even on the Ground Floor was its present location. It is unfortunate that these physical necessities required the separation of the sarcophagus from the other exhibits of the Egyptian Department, but even more regrettable is the fact that its extremely interesting decorations—in the lowest of sunk relief—can hardly be seen because of the poor lighting in the crypt. This unsatisfactory state of affairs has been recognized for years by those responsible for the Department, and we have considered either moving the piece, after making the required structural alterations, or installing specialized lighting in the present location. Both of these procedures involve difficulties which we have felt unable to solve under present conditions, and so, about a year ago, we decided to place a small-scale reproduction near the original, to serve as an interpretation. (Fig. 2.)

All the surfaces of the sarcophagus except the base are covered with inscriptions and figures, as also are all parts of the lid, and our first task was to make facsimile copies of these decorations. Rubbings of all surfaces, both inside and out, were made on large sheets of tracing paper; other sheets were placed over these rubbings and the hieroglyphs and figures were carefully outlined on them in pencil; these outline drawings were then collated with the original under raking light and necessary corrections were made; lastly these corrected drawings were inked in, so that we ended with a complete set of reproductions in black and white, much easier to make out than the low relief of the original. The final step was to photograph these full-scale drawings one-tenth the original size, to make two scale models of the sarcophagus in wood, and to paste the photographs on them, one model showing the exterior decoration and the other the interior surfaces. These models are now installed in a small case near the sarcophagus and add considerably to the interest taken in it. The whole process of making the copies and models took about six months. Mrs. Glanville Downey of the Classical Department was good enough to make the rubbings, the writer made the outline drawings and did the collating, and Miss Suzanne Chapman inked them in. It was necessary

¹Length 3.05 m., height 2.02 m., width 1.71 m. Reg. No. 23.729.

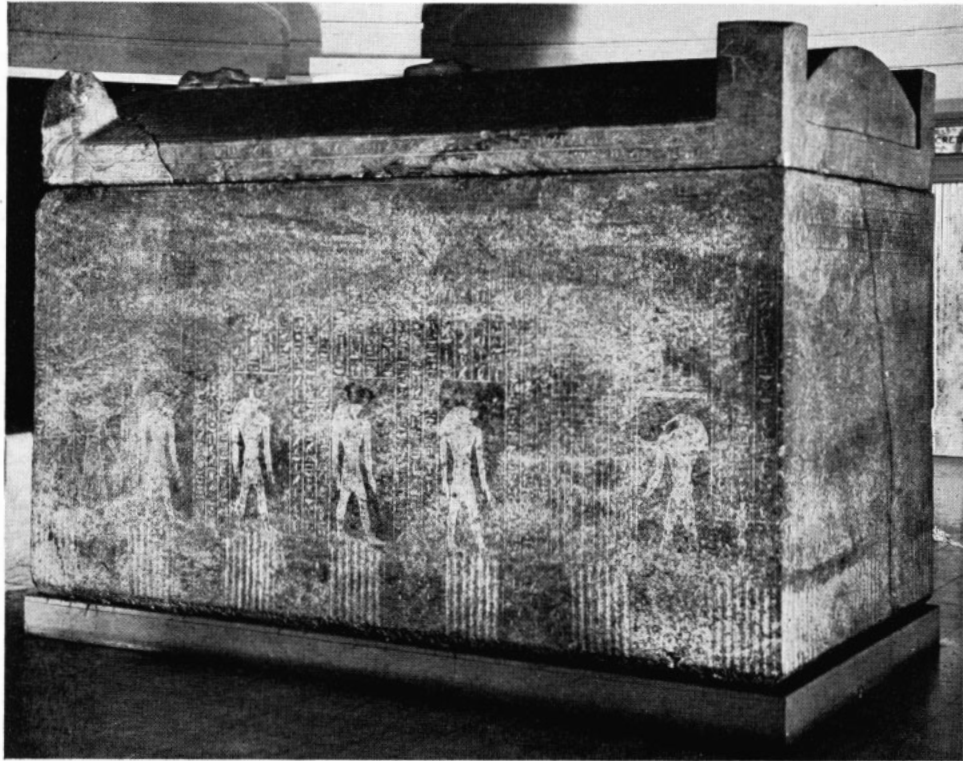


Fig. 1. The Aspalta Sarcophagus: face and front

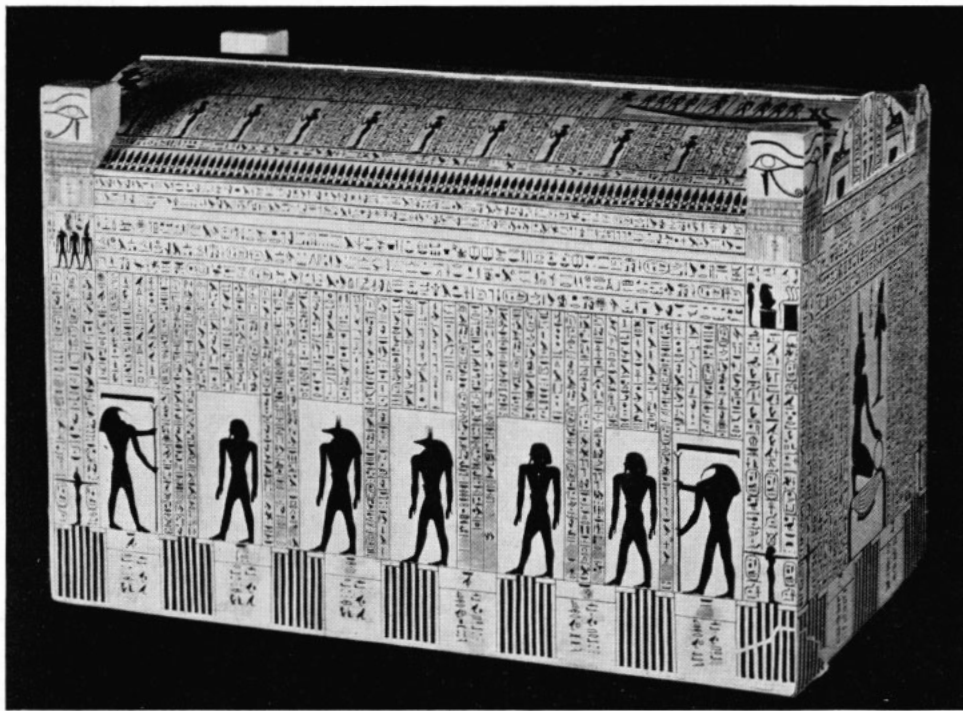


Fig. 2. Scale model of the Sarcophagus: back and foot

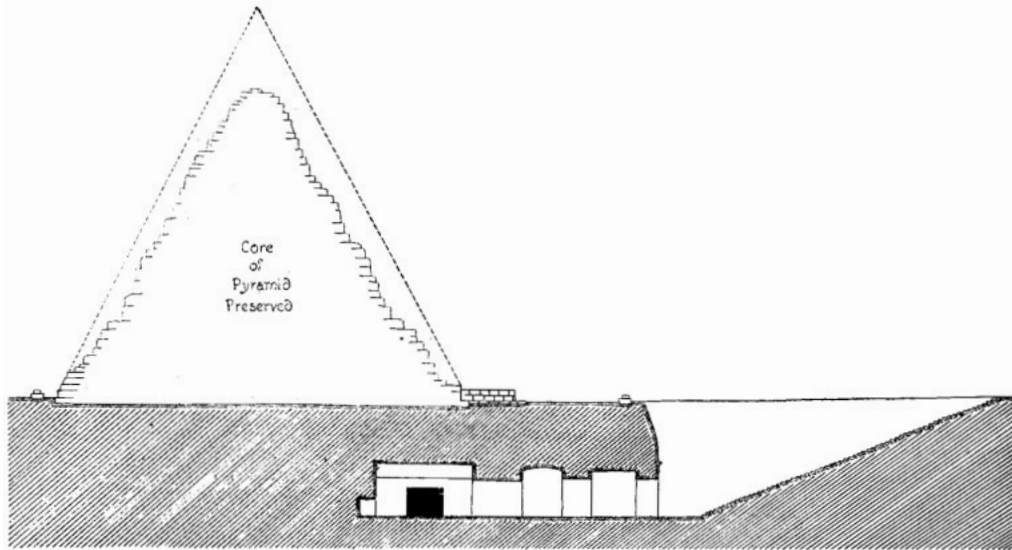


Fig. 3. Sectional Drawing, showing Sarcophagus in original position under the pyramid

for us to raise the four-ton lid for work on the interior, where we labored for many hours in the confined space; an experience which was rendered entertaining at times by the curiosity of the public, who were attracted by the presence of a mysterious light and the sound of an occasional "voice from the tomb." We did not keep a detailed record of the number of pencils, bottles of India ink, and square feet of paper consumed, but the inking of the seven-foot figure which covers the floor of the box inside required one full bottle.

The sarcophagus was found by the Museum's Expedition in 1916 when Dr. Reisner excavated the tomb of King Aspalta of Ethiopia at Nuri in the Sudan. It stood in its original position in the innermost of three subterranean chambers under the royal pyramid (Fig. 3). The floors of these chambers were twenty-four and a half feet below the surface, and they were reached by a flight of sixty-four steps descending at an angle of twenty-one degrees. Transporting the sarcophagus from the tomb to Boston was an arduous undertaking. It had to be dragged through two underground chambers to the base of the stair, then up the steps, across about a mile and a half of desert sand to the Nile on a specially constructed light railway, trans-shipped to a river barge, and taken down the Nile to railhead at Kareima, where it was boxed and transferred to the Sudan Railways. This first leg of its journey to Boston was the most difficult and would have presented well nigh insuperable problems had it not been for the courtesy of the local government officials. They lent us winches, jacks, and other equipment from the shipbuilding yards at Kareima where river steamers are constructed for the government mail services through Dongola Province. From Kareima the sarcophagus went by train to Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast, where it was loaded on a freighter direct for Boston, and so eventually reached the Museum.

The decoration of the Aspalta sarcophagus is one of the most complete known, and the effect of the grouping of the hieroglyphs and figures is striking; yet the content of the inscriptions is entirely routine. For the most part the texts are wholly traditional and can be paralleled in other coffins and sarcophagi ranging in date from the New Kingdom to Saïte times. This is not the place for a technical discussion of them, and it must suffice to record here that they include four passages from the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, parts of nine different chapters from the Book of the Dead, about half of the texts recorded on royal sarcophagi of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and many passages paralleled on wooden coffins of the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Dynasties in Cairo. The texts on the top of the lid have been identified as similar to passages from the Temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, recorded by the scholars of the Oriental Institute in Chicago but not yet published, and only some twenty-two lines of the total have not as yet been identified.¹

Of more general interest are the figures in sunk relief. Although conventional and stereotyped, their quality is excellent and their decorative effect striking. These characteristics are well illustrated in the view of the head end of the exterior (Fig. 4), and the symbolic significance of the various figures is also worthy of mention. The two corner posts show the "Eye of Horus" standing over a conventional representation of the door and façade of a tomb or palace. In the tympanum formed by the arching end of the lid the central group of large hieroglyphs symbolizes "eternity and purification," flanked by the names of the deceased king identified with

¹These texts have been identified in part by Dr. John A. Wilson of the Oriental Institute and in part by Dr. Walter Federn of the Brooklyn Museum, a task involving proficiency in a highly specialized field and much hard work. The writer gratefully records his debt to both gentlemen for their help freely and ungrudgingly given. For Egyptologists who may be interested in the texts, the Department has on file photographs of all the copies and detailed reference material.



Fig. 4. Decoration on the head end and the lid of the Sarcophagus (drawing)

Osiris. These names are again flanked by Anubis-jackals lying upon conventional sarcophagi. In the main field below, the kneeling female figure represents the goddess Nephthys, sister of Isis, who with the latter is intimately associated with Osiris, with whom the dead king is identified. In front of her stands Osiris himself, "Foremost of the West." Above this group one sees the falcon of royalty holding the symbol of life, and standing on the *ded*-pillar which represents stability. To the right is the jackal representing Anubis, god of death and embalming, while on the left the lion represents Osiris again, the god of resurrection. It is interesting to note parenthetically that the conception of the

resurrection is also symbolized by the lion in Christian iconography.

The decoration of the vaulted lid is devoted to the cycle of day and night. The front half shows the bark of the sun-god being drawn across the subterranean river of night from west to east by the "Souls of the West" in the guise of jackals (Fig. 5), while at the opposite end a kneeling figure of the king recites a hymn to the setting sun, and below twelve female figures with stars on their heads represent the twelve hours of night, each with an appropriate inscription. On the other side of the lid a parallel scene shows the sun-god sailing across the heavens by day (Fig. 6), the king recites a hymn

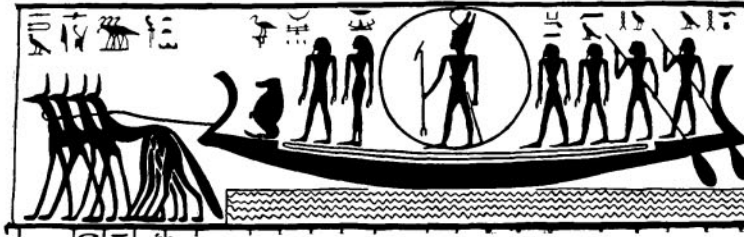


Fig. 5. Detail from lid: the bark of the Sun-god at night



Fig. 6. Detail from lid: the Sun-god traversing the heavens by day

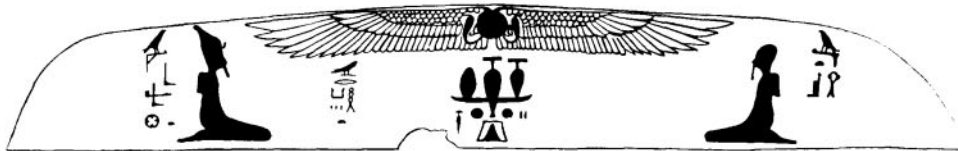


Fig. 7. Detail from interior of lid: head end

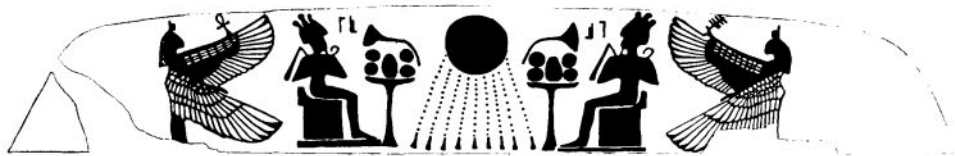


Fig. 8. Detail from interior of lid: foot end

to the rising sun, and the twelve female figures have sun-discs on their heads and represent the twelve hours of the day.

Finally the two little lunettes formed on the inside ends of the lid by the vaulting are decorated with symbolic scenes. At the head end (Fig. 7) the winged sun-disc, labelled "great one of magic," hovers in protection over a table of offerings for the dead, while on either side kneeling figures of Ptah (right) and Osiris (left) act as guardian spirits. At the opposite end (Fig. 8) a disc with descending rays fills the centre of the space. On either side sit figures of Osiris at tables of offerings, while behind each seated god stands a figure of his sister-wife Isis with wings spread in protection.

The scope of this brief article does not permit a discussion of the remaining figures and scenes; sufficient has been said to indicate the general nature of the decoration and its funerary character. While

much of what remains to us from ancient Egyptian civilization comes from tombs and is associated with death and the after-life, it is remarkable that so much of it reflects the life of the people on earth, a fact for which we have to thank the Egyptian's belief that his life after death was to be very much what it had been in this world. Yet the receptacle destined to contain the mummy was, par excellence, the one place where the ritual and religious conceptions about death would naturally find their fullest expression. And so in this sarcophagus we miss the lively human interest which we expect to find in much of Egyptian art. But even here, despite its rigid formalism, the artistic genius of ancient Egypt reflects the accustomed feeling for good design and proportion, and the inimitable sense of form and outline which is its outstanding characteristic.

DOWS DUNHAM.