



Ibis Mummy Containers During Late Period in the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum

حاويات مومياء أبو منجل خلال العصر المتأخر في متحف الزراعة المصرية القديمة

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Abstract

الملخص

The ibis bird, belonging to the Bubulcus ibis family but larger in size, is frequently found in areas with abundant water, particularly swamps. Currently, its habitat extends to Sudan and Ethiopia. This study focuses on samples exhibited at the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum; a specialized museum dedicated to agricultural artifacts from ancient Egypt. Established in 1996, the museum showcases the evolution of agriculture in ancient Egypt across two floors, featuring agricultural tools, panels depicting agricultural scenes, animal and bird mummies, and mummified seeds and fruits.

This paper aims to identify and explain the main functions and characteristics of the Ibis mummy containers at the Late Period in ancient Egypt through answering the following questions: Is it possible to identify the distinctive characteristics of Ibis mummy containers despite the absence of their inscriptions? How do the different aspects of the Ibis' personality and religious significance influence the iconography and representations on these containers? Do the forms, materials, and decorative elements of the Ibis mummy containers vary according to the period and their intended function? To what extent can the Ibis mummy containers be used as a criterion for dating Late Period funerary practices in ancient Egypt? Therefore, this paper tries to present and clarify the representations, functions, and significance of these ibis mummy containers in Late Period by studying unpublished Ibis mummy containers which exhibit at the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum (AEAM).

يتناول هذا البحث طائر أبو منجل، المنتمي إلى عائلة Bubulcus ibis ولكنه أكبر حجمًا، والذي يتواجد بكثرة في المناطق الغنية بالمياه، وخاصة المستنقعات. يمتد موطنه حاليًا إلى السودان وإثيوبيا. تركز الدراسة على عينات معروضة في متحف الزراعة المصرية القديمة، وهو متحف متخصص في الزراعة في مصر القديمة. تأسس المتحف عام ١٩٩٦، ويعرض تطور الزراعة في مصر القديمة عبر طابقين، حيث يضم أدوات زراعية، ولوحات تصور مشاهد زراعية، ومومياوات حيوانات وطيور، وبذور وفواكه محنطة.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحديد وشرح الوظائف والخصائص الرئيسية لحاويات مومياء أبو منجل في العصر المتأخر في مصر القديمة من خلال الإجابة على الأسئلة التالية: هل من الممكن تحديد الخصائص المميزة لحاويات مومياء أبو منجل رغم غياب نقوشها؟ كيف تؤثر الجوانب المختلفة لشخصية أبو منجل وأهميته الدينية على الأيقونوغرافيا والتمثيلات على هذه الحاويات؟ هل تختلف أشكال ومواد وعناصر زخرفة حاويات مومياء أبو منجل وفقًا للفترة الزمنية ووظيفتها المقصودة؟ إلى أي مدى يمكن استخدام حاويات مومياء أبو منجل كمعيار لتأريخ الممارسات الجنائزية في العصر المتأخر في مصر القديمة؟ وبالتالي، يسعى هذا البحث إلى تقديم وتوضيح التمثيلات والوظائف والأهمية لحاويات مومياء أبو منجل هذه في العصر المتأخر من خلال دراسة حاويات مومياء أبو منجل غير المنشورة والمعروضة في متحف الزراعة المصرية القديمة.

Keywords: Agricultural Museum; Ibis, Mummy Containers; Late Period.

الكلمات الدالة: متحف الزراعة؛ أبو منجل؛ حاويات المومياوات؛ العصر المتأخر.

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1. Introduction

The Ibis bird belongs to the Bubulcus ibis family but is larger in size. It is frequently found in areas with available water, especially swamps. Currently, it is found in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt (Manzala Lake). There are two types of this bird. The first type, Ibis aethiopicus, has white plumage and a black, feather-free head and neck. The second type, Plegadis falcinellus, has bright black feathers covering its entire body and a large, crooked beak (نظير، n.d., pp. 161-162). The ancient Egyptians forbade the hunting of the ibis bird, with the punishment for killing one being death (نظير، n.d., p. 164).

Despite the abundance of ibis mummies discovered in Egypt, there is a notable lack of comprehensive analysis of their containers, particularly those from the Late Period. This research addresses this gap by examining the diverse forms, materials, and decorative elements of ibis MCs, aiming to establish a more detailed typology and chronology. The study seeks to understand how these containers reflect broader religious, economic, and technological developments in ancient Egyptian society. By focusing on this understudied aspect of Egyptian funerary practices, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the period's material culture and its socio-religious implications. This approach not only enhances knowledge of ibis mummification but also provides a window into the broader cultural landscape of Late Period.

This paper aims to identify and explain the main functions and characteristics of the Ibis mummy containers at the Late Period in ancient Egypt through answering the following questions: Is it possible to identify the distinctive characteristics of Ibis mummy containers despite the absence of their inscriptions? How do the different aspects of the Ibis' personality and religious significance influence the iconography and representations on these containers? Do the forms, materials, and decorative elements of the Ibis mummy containers vary according to the period and their intended function? To what extent can the Ibis mummy containers be used as a criterion for dating Late Period funerary practices in ancient Egypt? Therefore, this paper tries to present and clarify the representations, functions, and significance of these ibis mummy containers in Late Period by studying unpublished Ibis mummy containers which exhibit at the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum (AEAM).

The Research methodology combined systematic documentation, comparative analysis, detailed qualitative description, and contextual interpretation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ibis mummy containers and their significance in ancient Egyptian society. The interdisciplinary approach leveraged both primary data from the museum's collection and secondary sources from the academic literature.

The researcher will use the following abbreviations to facilitate reading: AEAM (Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum), BM (British Museum), EM (Egyptian Museum), LP (Late Period), MC (Mummy containers), MMA (Metropolitan Museum of Art), OIM (Oriental Institute Museum), and PP (Ptolemaic period).

The research is basically divided into two major parts as follows: (I) **Ibis in Ancient Egypt**, and (II) **The Documentation and Analysis of Ibis MC from the LP**.

I. Ibis in Ancient Egypt

The practice of animal worship in ancient Egypt, particularly that of the ibis, offers a unique window into the religious and cultural landscape of the Late Period. This section explores the historical

significance of the ibis in Egyptian theology, its association with the god Thoth, and the broader context of animal cult practices that flourished during this period.

1. The ibis in Ancient Egyptian culture

Animal worship in ancient Egypt, persisting longer than in other civilizations, intertwined with more advanced beliefs. This practice originated from the concept of kinship between animals and humans, akin to totemism. Each locality or tribe had a sacred animal species, which was preserved and ritually consumed. The worship extended to various animals, including serpents, hawks, lions, baboons, and bulls, each associated with specific divine attributes or anthropomorphic gods (Petrie, n.d., p. 20-27, 70-80).

The veneration of selected sacred animals has a long history in Egypt, extending back at least to the Predynastic period, as revealed by recent excavations of elaborate fauna burials at Hierakonopolis (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2012, p. 36). This phase in Egyptian belief, such as the worship of animals, developed most strongly in the minds of the people. Sacred snakes (For further information, see the Cobra Goddess of Ancient Egypt during the Predynastic, Early Dynastic, and Old Kingdom Periods, refer to Johnson (1990).), birds, rams, and cats were cherished, and providing for their burial was considered a meritorious act (Erman, 1907, p. 170; see also Richardin et al., 2017).

The Egyptians have mummified almost forty kinds of birds, although not all were worshipped. Extensive cemeteries have been found in various locations, the most notable being Tuna El-Gable cemetery. The ibis was universally venerated throughout Egypt, with its primary early cult center located in Khemennu, or Hermopolis. At this site, the bird was associated with both the Moon and Thoth, the divine scribe (Budge, 1904, p. 373-376).

2. Religious significance of the ibis and its connection to Thoth

In ancient Egypt, the ibis was the embodiment of the god Thoth, who is considered the father of science (سوروزيان, n.d., p. 25). Thoth, a deity closely associated with Ra, served in a capacity analogous to a royal vizier. Renowned for his wisdom and knowledge, Thoth's most significant celebration occurred during the first month of the Coptic calendar, which in modern times is designated as Thoth or Tut in the Coptic language (Cerny, 1996, p. 77). In El-Ashmunin theology, Thoth was the local god and protector of knowledge, who created the eternal eight gods by his word (سوروزيان, n.d., p. 27).

Thoth's most common titles include "Lord of the Divine Books" and "Lord of the Divine Words," referring to formulas that render the deceased subject to the obedience of friend and foe alike in the afterlife. In later periods, as Thoth became represented by the ibis, his attributes expanded to encompass letters, science, and mathematics. His role in creation appears similar to that of "Wisdom" as described in the Biblical Proverbs (Budge, 1908, p. 87-88).

Those who intentionally killed a sacred animal forfeited their own lives, and in the case of an ibis, even accidental killing was considered a capital offence (Erman, 1907, p. 176). Those who, either by accident or design caused the death of these animals were often put to death as punishment. Diodorus Siculus stated, "He who has voluntarily killed a consecrated animal is punished with death; but if anyone has even involuntarily killed a cat or an ibis, it is impossible for him to escape capital punishment; the mob drags him to it, treating him with every cruelty, and sometimes without waiting for judgment to be passed". This treatment inspired such terror that if any person happened upon one of these animals dead, they would distance themselves from it, crying and groaning to indicate they had found it deceased (Pettigrew, 1834, p. 170).

3. Overview of animal mummification practices in Late Period Egypt

In the LP, sacred animals were raised in temple sanctuaries. When one of them was chosen to serve as the "living image" of God, it was natural to mummify the animal upon its death (Richardin et al., 2017; Rady, 2000). Other animals also enjoyed mummification, such as falcons, ibis birds, cats, and monkeys, with hundreds of thousands of mummies found. These animals appear to have been raised in temple the sanctuaries before being killed and mummified to be sold to pilgrims making vows to Gods (پليشتبرج، ١٩٩٧، & دونان (p. 108).

Unlike sacred animals, votive mummies did not have unique markings identifying them as gods. Instead, they acted as emissaries to the gods, purchased and offered by pilgrims at shrines dedicated to the relevant gods (Ikram, 2005, p. 9).

A votive mummy (For more about votive mummies, see Ikram, 2015; McKnight et al., 2018) is generally identified as an offering consisting of a specific mummified animal dedicated to its corresponding divinity so that the donor's prayers would be addressed to the god throughout eternity.

Votive mummies functioned similarly to candles burned in churches but lasted longer. For example, cats were offered to the goddess Bastet. Because the ancient Egyptians amalgamating the divine attributes of cats and lionesses under the singular divine entity of Bastet. The worship of Bastet was not isolated but intricately interwoven with that of other major deities, notably Isis, the goddess associated with love and beauty, and Hathor, the bovine goddess. (بليغ، بدون تاريخ، ص ٩٤ - ١٠٩)، while ibis and baboons, totemic animals of Thoth, the god of learning and wisdom were given to him (Ikram, 2005, p. 9).

Scholars commonly explain that these mummies were produced for a flourishing pilgrimage industry (See Kessler, 2017-2018). According to this view, travelers visiting sacred sites on festival days throughout Egypt would buy a votive offering, such as a mummy or bronze figure, and dedicate it to the sanctuary of the god (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2012, p. 39).

Inside the catacombs, thousands of jars made of burnt clay in conical shapes were found, each containing one or more birds. Other birds were placed in small stone coffins and placed in niches carved into the catacombs walls. The bowels of the ibis birds were not extracted; only water was removed, likely due to their relatively small size. Conversely, the wrapping style often signified mastery, sometimes featuring a borrowed head with a beak, topped with the distinctive crown of Thoth.

An important ibis cemetery was discovered in Abydos (For further information about Ibis mummies at Abydos, see McKnight, 2020), where large pottery pots containing nearly a hundred birds were found, bandaged with scrolls and accompanied by eggs. Another cemetery was located in northern Saqqara (پليشتبرج، ١٩٩٧، & دونان (p. 121).

The ancient Egyptians embalmed the ibis throughout Egypt, particularly in Hermopolis (Pettigrew, 1834, p. 179). Hermopolis, Tuna El Gebel, is estimated to house the remains of at least one million birds (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2012, p. 43). For more information about Tuna el-Gebel, see Ali (n.d.), p. 540-560).

The birds were squeezed together and lost their shape, except the ibis, which, according to Belzoni, was formed like a fowl ready to be cooked and bound with linen like the rest (Pettigrew, 1834, p. 181). No amulets have ever been found on the mummies (Pettigrew, 1834, p. 182). These mummified animals were prepared in special embalming houses *w^{ab}.t*. After purchase, they were presented to

the god by the priests and kept in storage. Once a year, during a special festival, the mummified animals were taken in procession and buried en masse in extensive catacombs, sealed with mud brick walls until the next celebration. These extensive catacombs, known as Houses of Rest, have been found at many sites, such as Tuna al Gebel, Armant, and Saqqara (Ikram, 2005, p. 10).

After death, either natural or induced, the birds were taken to the *wꜥb.t* (purification room), where they were embalmed, mummified, wrapped in linen, and often placed in ceramic jars before being deposited in the *ꜥwy htp* (house of rest). Egyptians considered the entire animal sacred, and elaborate wrappings suggestive of an entire bird sometimes hold only a few feathers or bones. From the archive of Hor, A member of the administration for the cult of the ibis and falcon at Saqqara in the PP, we know that reforms in the treatment of ibis mummies stipulated one bird per vessel, although multiple birds were often deposited in a single container. Short votive prayers, such as those preserved on jar fragments in the OIM collection, were sometimes written on the exterior of these vessels on behalf of a person. Most inscriptions do not identify the person by title, but in several cases, we know that these donors were personally involved with the association tasked with caring for the sacred animals. The technicalities of sponsoring a burial are unknown, but a Demotic letter now in the BM preserves a son's promise to pay for the "burial of the ibis" if his father is relieved from illness (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2012, p. 38).

Avian mummy interment practices varied by location: in Memphis, they were placed in vases; in Hermopolis, small oblong cases of wood or stone were used; while in Thebes, they were simply wrapped in funerary envelopes. The mummy pots, typically elongated and conical, were crafted from common stone, blue ware, or hard polished stone (Pettigrew, n.d., p. 209).

The veneration of the ibis in ancient Egypt has deep historical roots, yet the earliest substantiated evidence of their mummification and interment practices dates back to the New Kingdom period. This is exemplified by fragmentary archaeological findings, such as a ceramic vessel bearing a hieratic inscription that documents the discovery and subsequent burial of an ibis in "the canal of Ramses I." While ibis cult centers were distributed throughout Egypt, they experienced a marked surge in popularity and proliferation in the late period. (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2012, p. 37).

The practice of animal mummification, particularly that of ibises, during the Late Period of Ancient Egypt represents a complex interplay of religious beliefs and artistic expressions. This study focuses on the development of these features through the examination of four significant ibis mummy containers housed at the Ancient Egyptian Agricultural Museum. The selection of these artifacts is based on their diverse shapes, materials, and religious iconography, offering a comprehensive view of the ritual practices of the time. Understanding this context is crucial for the subsequent documentation and analysis of ibis mummy containers, which will be explored in depth in the following section

II. The Documentation and Analysis of Ibis MC during the LP.

This section presents a detailed examination of four ibis mummy containers from the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum, dating to the Late Period. Through careful analysis of their materials, forms, and manufacturing techniques, the researcher aim to elucidate the diversity and sophistication of funerary practices associated with ibis mummification.

1. The Documentation of the four Ibis MC's from the AEAM.

The researcher selected four ibis mummy containers (MC) at the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum (AEAM) as a sample to study the different shapes and functions; dating them to the LP. The basic data for this MC was obtained from the records and databases of the Egyptian Agriculture Museum.

The Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum, inaugurated in 1996, is a significant component of Cairo's Agricultural Museum complex. It holds the distinction of being the second museum of its kind globally, following Hungary's Agriculture Museum, and the first in the Arab world. Established during King Fuad I's reign in 1938, it was initially named the King Fuad I Museum. The museum complex spans approximately 125,000 square meters, with 20,000 square meters allocated to museum buildings and the remainder dedicated to diverse gardens (عبد الرحمن، ; نور الدين، بدون تاريخ، ص ٢٣-٢٤) (٢٠٠٢، ص ١٧-٢١).

These four MC showing the variety of ibis mummy containers used in Late Period Egypt, ranging from simple, undecorated stone sarcophagi to more elaborate figural coffins. Their presence in the Ancient Egyptian Agricultural Museum highlights the importance of animal mummification in Egyptian religious practices and the connection between these practices and agricultural life in ancient Egypt.

A) Frist Ibis canopic vase coffin

Figure: 1

Material: Terracotta

Museum: AEAM

ID: SR.334 (A-C)


Showcase Number: 50



Provenance: Shona al-Zabib







Dating: 26th Dynasty



Dimension: H 50 cm

Description:

A canopic jar with a falcon-head lid, crafted from terracotta. I contain an ibis mummy wrapped in linen. The removable lid depicts a falcon head adorned with a headdress and collar. The eyes are painted in the wedjat eye form , and the beak is small and curved.

The jar's body is conical and hollowed to accommodate the ibis mummy. Its decoration features a central column of hieroglyphic inscriptions, surmounted by a winged scarab  holding the shin sign . To the

right stands the god Horus, holding an offering  and a large band . Above him is the sky sign , with the goddess Nekhbet  behind, wearing the white crown. To the left, in a mirrored composition, stands the god Thoth , with Nekhbet  behind wearing the red crown.

On the rear, between two wedjat eyes on the (nb) sign , stands the winged goddess Maat  in human female form. She has a sun disc and her feather upon her head, a tripartite wig with a headband, a tight dress, and a collar. Her arms extend into large wings.





(Mariette, (1812-1881), p. 580)

htp di nsw dhwti nb hmnw di=f prt-hrw t hnkt ? 3w

An Offering given by the king (to) DHwti, twice great, the lord of Hermopolis (Leitz, 2003, p.717), that he may give an invocation offering of bread and beer (?) the greats.

Comment

This canopic vase coffin represents a well-preserved example from the LP, specifically the 26th Dynasty. This dating is evidenced by the design, decorations, and the depicted deities. The coffin's form echoes anthropoid coffins of the LP, with the distinctive falcon-head lid representing one of the four sons of Horus. The vertical inscription featuring the (htp di nsw) formula is a characteristic element.

This sample shares similarities with example found in the EM, particularly in its overall form and decorative elements typical of the Late Period. However, this piece stands out for its excellent state of preservation and the fine detail of its decorations and inscriptions. Similar examples can be found in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum (37.1953Ea-b; 14.656a-b) and the MMA (13.186.4a-c), though those often feature more pronounced lids.



Figure 2 Ibis Ibis-form Mummy in Jar. Retrieved

ID: 37.1953Ea-b, Brooklyn museum

Retrieved September 25, 2024 from:

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/118457>



Figure 3 Ibis Ibis Jar Coffin

ID: 14.656a-b, Brooklyn museum

Retrieved September 25, 2024 from:

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/8648>



Figure 4 Sacred animal mummy of an ibis inside a jar

ID: 13.186.4a-c, MMA

Retrieved September 26, 2024 from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552293>

B) Second Ibis sarcophagus

Figure: 5

Material: Lime stone

Museum: AEAM

ID: SR.1580

Showcase Number: 7

Provenance: Hermopolis (Tuna el-Gebel)

Excavator: Dr. Sami Gabra

Dating: 26th Dynasty

Dimension: L 46 cm, H 16 cm, W 23 cm

Description

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An oval sarcophagus of limestone containing an ibis mummy and covered with plaster. It is devoid of colors and decorations. The surface is not polished well. There is a semicircular crack extending on the upper side of the sarcophagus.



Comment

This artifact is a limestone sarcophagus for an ibis mummy, dating to the 26th Dynasty of the LP. The sarcophagus has an oval shape with a flat base and a slightly domed top. Its dimensions are approximately 46 cm in length, 16 cm in height, and 23 cm in width.

The surface of the limestone is rough and unpolished, showing tool marks and natural imperfections. There is a visible semicircular crack on the upper surface. The lid appears to be seamlessly integrated with the body, suggesting it was carved as a single piece. This type of sarcophagi, undecorated limestone sarcophagus is characteristic of mass-produced ibis mummy containers from the LP.

C) Third Ibis sarcophagus

Figure: 6

Material: Lime stone

Museum: AEAM

ID: SR.1581

Showcase Number: 7

Provenance: Tuna el-Gebel

Excavator: Dr. Sami Gabra

Dating: 26th Dynasty

Dimension: L 41 cm, H 20 cm, W 22.5 cm

Description

An oval sarcophagus of limestone containing an ibis mummy and covered with plaster. It has no colors and decorations. The surface is not polished well. The sarcophagus remains closed.

Comment

This artifact is another limestone sarcophagus for an ibis mummy, also dating to the 26th Dynasty. It shares many characteristics with figure 5, including the oval shape and undecorated surface. Its dimensions are slightly different: 41 cm in length, 20 cm in height, and 22.5 cm in width.

The surface texture appears slightly smoother than figure 5, but still shows evidence of tool marks. There are no visible cracks or significant damage. The top is more uniformly flat compared to figure 5.

This sarcophagus represents a common type found in large ibis necropolis like Tuna el-Gebel. Its simplicity and lack of decoration are typical of mass-produced containers meant for votive offerings.



D) Fourth Ibis coffin

Figure: 7

Material: Wood and bronze

Museum: AEAM

ID: SR.3380

Showcase Number: 49

Provenance: Tuna el-Gebel

Excavator: Dr. Sami Gabra

Dating: 26th Dynasty

Dimension: Statue L 49 cm, Base 51 cm

©H.Ghanem

Description

A wooden coffin figured as an ibis bird in kneeling position on an oval base topped with a long rectangular piece of wood. The body and the base are made out of wood, while the rest is made out of bronze. It contains the ibis mummy.

The small head is shown without plumage. It has a long, slender curved beak. The small rounded eyes were inlaid with yellow material. The ears are shown as very small hales. It has a slender, curved bald neck. The body is elongated, and the curves on it give an indication of the wings. It was covered with dark yellowish plaster. The ibis is resting on its feet, which are stretched forward.

Comment

This artifact is a wooden coffin in the form of an ibis, dating to the 26th Dynasty. It consists of a wooden body representing the ibis, with bronze elements for the head and legs. The coffin rests on a rectangular wooden base.

The body of the ibis is carved from wood and painted or stained a reddish-brown color. The surface shows some weathering and possible traces of ancient varnish or resin. The bronze head features a long, curved beak characteristic of the ibis. The eyes appear to be inlaid, possibly with glass or stone.

The posture of the ibis is in a resting position, with the legs tucked under the body. This style of ibis coffin is less common than the stone sarcophagi but represents a more elaborate form of votive offering. Similar examples, though often with more details, can be found in the Brooklyn Museum (37.417E) and the MMA (04.2.460; 53.185a).



Figure 8 Ibis coffin

ID: 37.417E, Brooklyn Museum

Retrieved September 25, 2024 from: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/117070>



Figure 9 Ibis on a shrine shaped box, probably for an animal mummy

ID: 04.2.460, MMA

Retrieved September 26, 2024 from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552025>



Figure 10 Ibis

ID: 53.185a, MMA

Retrieved September 26, 2024 from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546053>

2. Discussion of the analytical table

To facilitate a comprehensive comparison of the four ibis mummy containers examined in this study, Table1 presents a comparative analysis of their key characteristics. This analytical overview highlights the similarities and differences among the samples, providing a foundation for the subsequent discussion and interpretation of results.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Ibis Mummy Containers from the LP

Characteristics	Canopic Jar	Stone Sarcophagus1	Stone Sarcophagus2	Wooden coffin
ID	SR. 334 (A-B)	SR.1580	SR.1581	SR.3380
Material	Terracotta	Limestone	Limestone	Wood and bronze
Dimensions	H:50cm	L:46cm, H: 16 cm, W:23 cm	L:41 cm, H: 20 cm, W: 22.5cm	Statue L: 49 cm, Base: 51 cm
Provenance	Shuna al-Zabib	Tuna el-Gebel	Tuna el-Gebel	Tuna el-Gebel
Dating	26th Dynasty	26th Dynasty	26th Dynasty	26th Dynasty
General Form	Large conical jar with falcon-headed lid	Oval sarcophagus	Oval sarcophagus	Kneeling ibis statue
Decorations	Rich inscriptions and paintings	Undecorated	Undecorated	Sculptural bird details
Inscriptions	Column of hieroglyphic text	None	None	None
Preservation State	Good, with clear details	Semicircular crack on upper side	Good, remains sealed	Good, traces of dark yellow plaster
Special Features	Removable lid, wedjat eyes painted	Surface not well polished	Surface not well polished	Eyes inlaid with yellow material, bronze beak and legs

Additional Notes about these four containers:

1. All samples date to the Late Period, specifically the 26th Dynasty.

2. Three out of four specimens were discovered in Tuna El-Gebel, indicating the site's significance for ibis burials.
3. There is a clear diversity in materials and forms used, reflecting multiple styles and techniques in mummy container production.
4. The canopic jar is the only specimen bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions, potentially indicating its special importance or distinct use.

This table provides a comprehensive overview and quick comparison of the studied specimens, facilitating the reader's understanding of the differences and similarities among the various containers.

3. Results and Discussion:

The analysis of ibis mummy containers from the Late Period, based on four samples from the Ancient Egyptian Agriculture Museum, reveals significant insights into the religious, economic, and technological aspects of ancient Egyptian society. The containers exhibit a remarkable diversity in form, material, and decoration, suggesting a complex interplay of factors influencing their production and use.

The varied shapes and sizes of the ibis coffins appear to be influenced by the manufacturing material, the size of the mummy, and the intended purpose. This diversity extends to the materials used, which include terracotta, limestone, wood, and bronze. Such variety not only indicates an evolution in manufacturing techniques but also hints at potential socioeconomic distinctions among donors and adaptation to different functional requirements.

Decorative elements on the containers range from intricate designs, as seen on the canopic jar, to unadorned surfaces on limestone sarcophagi. This spectrum of ornamentation may reflect differences in the religious or social significance of the mummies, the economic resources of the donors, or distinct ritual purposes for different types of containers.

The manufacturing and sealing methods observed suggest ongoing technological advancements in container production during the Late Period. Moreover, evidence points to specialized production in certain cities, indicating the existence of dedicated workshops, local traditions, and techniques in different regions. This specialization underscores the significant economic role of this industry in ancient Egyptian society.

Stone sarcophagi exhibit minimal polishing and decoration but demonstrate durability and masterful sealing techniques for mummy protection. Wooden coffins, on the other hand, often take sculptural forms resembling ibis statues, integrating wood and bronze elements. These coffins serve a dual purpose as both statues and mummy containers, emphasizing overall form rather than intricate carving.

Canopic vase coffins, despite their large size, are made of pottery and feature rich decorations and clear inscriptions. The adaptation of falcon-headed lids, possibly for practical reasons, and their relative rarity suggest higher production costs for these distinctive containers.

The persistent mummification of ibis birds indicates the continued importance of Thoth worship and the adaptation of religious practices to practical considerations. The continuation of ancient magical texts, such as the *ḥtp- di- nsw* formula, into the Late Period further emphasizes this religious continuity.

The existence of a specialized industry for these containers and mummies implies a significant economic aspect to this religious practice, with a structured system of production and distribution catering to different socioeconomic groups. The close integration of art and religious practices is evident in the decorations and inscriptions on some containers.

The large number of mummies found at sites like Tuna el-Gebel suggests a semi-industrial production of both mummies and containers. Furthermore, the variety in size and elaboration of containers may reflect different categories of votive offerings, varying financial capabilities of donors, and possible gradations in religious or social status associated with different types of offerings.

These findings contribute substantially to our understanding of ibis mummification and burial practices in the Late Period, highlighting the complex relationship between religious tradition, technological innovation, and socioeconomic factors in shaping these funerary customs.

4. Conclusion

The examination of ibis mummy containers from the Late Period offers a multifaceted window into the complex interplay of religious practices, technological advancements, and socioeconomic structures in ancient Egyptian society. The remarkable diversity observed in the form, material, and decoration of these containers reflects a sophisticated system of production that catered to a wide spectrum of religious, social, and economic needs. The continued practice of ibis mummification and the specialized industry surrounding it underscore the enduring significance of Thoth worship in Egyptian culture. Simultaneously, the adaptations and innovations evident in container design and production techniques demonstrate the dynamic nature of Egyptian funerary traditions, capable of evolving while maintaining core religious principles.

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