

A canopic jar lid (W159)



Photos showing carved face on lid, and base of lid (DE)

W159 is the limestone lid of a canopic jar showing the face of Imsety. It is 9.5 cm high, with a diameter of 10 cm. The carving is fairly crude, and the shape is rather square compared to other examples which show finer features and more rounded heads. The base is clearly incised so the lid will fit into the top of a jar. It came to the museum as part of the Wellcome Loan in 1971. It was acquired by Wellcome at Stevens Auctioneers on 25th November 1919. It is stored in cupboard 16 in the Keir Hardie building.

It is one of 7 stone or wood canopic jar lids in store. We also have 4 alabaster* lids depicting the 4 Sons of Horus (EC151,388,389 & W1024) and one 26th Dynasty alabaster canopic jar with Imsety lid (W498) on display in the mummification case in the House of Death. However, the text on the jar refers to Qebehsenuf, so the jar and lid are not a genuine match, although they were sold together. Part of a canopic chest (EC385) and a canopic jar base (EC380) are also in the collection.

Canopic jars are depicted on some coffin fragments ((EC364, EC1055) and on Tashay's shroud (W650) in the House of Death. This is of particular interest, as the shroud is from the Graeco-Roman period, when canopic jars were no longer used in mummification (see below).

The four sons of Horus, whose heads grace many canopic jars, and who are assigned to guard different organs (see below) are also found on various amulets in our collection, including a set of beadwork amulets (W948 c-f); and on a coffin fragment (EC1059).

The function and development of Canopic jars

The term 'Canopic' comes from Canopus in the Delta. This settlement was named after the Greek god Kanopus, who was regarded as a form of Osiris, and human-headed jars were used as part of his worship. The Ancient Egyptians used the term 'embalming jars', and they were an important element of the mummification process for a long period. When early archaeologists first came across the jars, they named

them after the similar jars at Canopus. Canopic jars were used to contain mummified vital organs, in the belief that they would be returned to the body in the afterlife so it would be complete and perfect.

Their use was first discovered in modern times by Champollion (1790-1832), the French Egyptologist who also cracked the meaning of hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone. He noted:

'Fibrous tissue...Animal smell/Object covered in a thick layer of balm/Found at the bottom of the vase/ Just wrapped in cloth.../Liver and brain or cerebellum' (quoted in Dunand & Lichtenberg 1994: 29).

Removal of the abdominal organs dates from the end of the Third Dynasty (2649-2575 BCE). At the burial of Queen Hetepheres, the wife of Snefru, (start of Fourth Dynasty, c. 2600 BCE), her internal organs were removed, coated in natron and placed in a travertine box divided into four sections. The earliest examples of canopic jars come from the 4th dynasty tomb of Queen Meresankh III at Giza, in the reign of Menkaure.

In later Fourth Dynasty burials, separate jars appear, and the separate organs are each guarded by a separate deity, one of the four sons of Horus:

Qebehsenuef, with a **falcon's** head, guarded the **intestines**. Under protection of the goddess **Selket**.

Duamutef, with a **jackal's** head, guarded the **stomach**. Under protection of the goddess **Neith**.

Hapy, with a **baboon's** head, guarded the **lungs**. Under protection of the goddess **Nephthys**.

Imsety, with a **human** head, guarded the **liver**. Under protection of the goddess **Isis**.

(Up to the early Middle Kingdom, Imsety was sometimes considered to be female)

Texts on the jar would invoke the protection of the gods. A typical example inscribed on a jar containing the liver found in the 13th Dynasty tomb of King Hor stated, "Isis, extend your protection about Imsety who is in you, O honoured before Imsety, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Awibre (Hor)"(quoted in Dunn).

The jars were usually made of pottery, travertine* or limestone, and placed in a canopic chest, either cut from stone or carved out of the wall or floor of the tomb.

During the First Intermediate Period (2181-2055 BCE), lids or stoppers with human heads appear. The removal of the organs became widespread during the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650BCE). At this time, the canopic chest usually consisted of a divided inner wooden chest and an outer stone container. In the early Middle Kingdom, the first jars with wooden lids depicting human heads and mummy masks appear.

Mummification reached its high point during the Eighteenth Dynasty of the New Kingdom (1550-1069BCE), when the four sons of Horus reappear on the lids. Jars and lids were made of stone, clay, wood, faience or cartonnage. Royal burials during the Eighteenth Dynasty often had more elaborate canopic chests, and jar lids with human royal heads. For example, a jar of the Amarna princess Merit-Aten is a possible self-portrait (Cairo Museum). And in the New Kingdom tomb of Hatnefer, there were 3 jars with human heads and one with a jackal head inside the canopic chest (Grajetzki, 2003: 70).

Tutankhamun's calcite* canopic chest was placed in a gilded wooden shrine guarded at the corners by 4 gilded statues of goddesses (Isis, Nephthys, Neith, Selket). The interior of the chest was coated with resin. The shrine was placed under a canopy, on a sledge. This canopy is unique to his burial. The calcite jar lids depict human heads with the pharaoh's features, and within each of the 4 jars is a miniature gold coffin containing an internal organ, embalmed and wrapped in linen (Cairo Museum).

By the Third Intermediate Period (1069-747 BCE), canopic jars fell out of favour. Indeed, in the Twenty Second Dynasty, canopic jars were more or less restricted to high-ranking burials. Instead, innards were wrapped and returned to the body, sometimes with beeswax models of the four sons of Horus, as in the tomb of Irtu at Deir el-Bahari (Grajetzki 2003: 106-7). Tombs often contained empty canopic jars, and later, solid dummy jars. Furthermore, Duamutef was often associated with a falcon's head and Qebehsenuef with a jackal's head at this time.

Jars were re-introduced during the late 25th Dynasty, and the latest canopic jars found date from 589-570 BCE (the Late Period).

Mummification persisted into the Graeco-Roman period (332 BCE-AD395), even when Christianity spread to Egypt (third and fourth centuries AD). Indeed, the British Museum has the mummy of a Christian woman from Sudan, carbon dated 655-775 AD.

Particular features of W159

As noted above, the lid is square in shape with a flattened head, and the features of the face are carved very crudely. Now, without context (ie the matching jar or set of jars/lids or chest) and original provenance (ie the tomb where it was originally discovered), it is very difficult to date the lid. Furthermore, it is very hard to say whether it is simply a human head, or the head of Imsety, the human-headed god and son of Horus.

A fairly extensive search of the online databases of large Egyptian collections has not yet revealed a similar styled jar lid. However, Reisner (1967) does list some human-headed canopic jars in the Cairo collection where the top of the head is rather flat. The crude carving would suggest to me a fairly late date, originating from a middle to low-ranking burial. Of course, it may also be a fake...

In Conclusion

An orphan canopic jar lid of little artistic merit and unknown provenance has led to a consideration of the changing styles and shapes of canopic jars and their lids over the 3000 plus years of mummification in Egypt, and is just one aspect of how this process changed and evolved throughout that long time span. When we perform a 'deluxe' Eighteenth Dynasty style mummification on Bob the dummy mummy, it is important to remember that mummification practices changed over time, and according to the wealth of the individual.

Dulcie Engel

* References to alabaster probably refer to Egyptian alabaster, also known as travertine, which is also referred to as calcite.

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