Book Review

The Ornamental Calcite Vessels from the Tomb of Tutankhamun. By Lise Manniche. Pp. xvi–46 and pls 55. Leuven and Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2019. ISBN: 9789042937215. Price €62.

After a 35-year hiatus in production – not an entirely unusual lag in Egyptology, it must be said – it is a pleasure to be able to welcome this volume on the 21 ‘ornamental’ travertine vessels (or parts thereof) from the tomb of Tutankhamun. Like so many of the objects from KV 62, these individual pieces are known chiefly from the selectively focused and cropped photographic reproductions of their details. And like most other items from the tomb, these calcite vessels have frequently been decontextualized on display and in discussion, abstracted and vaunted for their ‘charm.’ Undoubtedly, as the author notes (p. 3), they perfectly fit the Zeitgeist of the time at which they came to light, the 1920s – although now they may be considered rather less attractive than they once were. Perhaps the most emotive echo of their rather sentimental reception is that a translation into English of the text of the spuriously-named ‘wishing cup’ (Carter’s obj. no. 14; p. 8–10) appears on the gravestone of Howard Carter in Putney Vale cemetery (not noted by Manniche). The challenge is, therefore, to approach the vessels’ use and meaning in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt.

Following a brief introduction, the book is divided first into a catalogue raisonné of 21 relevant pieces, organised and referred to throughout by Carter’s numbering system. This allows for consistency when referring to other published discussions of individual pieces, although a sequential series of catalogue numbers might have aided comprehension by a general reader of this volume. Full description with bibliographic information is followed at the end by recent colour images of differing angles and details. Carter’s handwritten object cards additionally provide the excavator’s perspective on some pieces. Hieroglyphic texts are generally of a standard formulaic nature, based mainly on the royal titulary, and are transcribed by the author with minimal comment.

The catalogue is directly followed by a commentary on the purpose and symbolism of the vessels and of their possible roles before and after the funeral rites. A short section on the display history of the items under consideration, noting travelling exhibitions and replicas, offers a valuable acknowledgement of the afterlife of Tutankhamun’s objects in popular culture – showing that the once-fringe place of ‘reception studies’ now belongs in such a ‘primary’ publication as this.

It is immediately clear that the existence and circulation of widely-recognisable photos of these objects has not been matched by their serious consideration in print. Lise Manniche is ideally placed to frame a discussion of these objects using her expertise in the visual culture of the New Kingdom, especially of Thebes. The discussion is exemplary, and the present reviewer can only offer the most minor observations in addition.

Overall, an interpretational problem with much of the Tutankhamun material is that it is repeatedly presented as particularly luxurious and decadent, the props from some fantastical opera (to paraphrase Carter himself) of the golden boy king’s life. It is not simply the touring exhibition and glossy publication market that reinforces this stereotype of the opulent oriental palace; the word ‘ornamental’ carries that implication of Eastern frippery too. The word might better have been dropped from the title of this work; otherwise, it would have been useful to offer a definition of what counted as ‘ornamental’, particularly which criteria might be used to distinguish these from other inscribed calcite vessels from the tomb, such as the ‘heirloom’ pieces naming Thutmose III (nos 404, 410) and Amenhotep III (nos 483, 588) published earlier in the Griffith Institute ‘Tutankhamun Tomb series’1 of which the present text is a continuation.

The volume provides a sound basis from which to compare features of KV 62 specimens with other pieces. Although it is clearly Manniche’s purpose to make the Tutankhamun material available and not to give exhaustive comparanda, it may be worth noting one case of a detailed parallel for the hunting scene of hounds attacking various animals, framed by a border of wavy lines (p. 28, pls 32–8). This arrangement is closely paralleled by examples of containers in wood from the later Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Dynasties, for example: Boston MFA 49.493, from Saqqara (?); Manchester Museum 6975, from Sedment; UC16028, from Gurob.2 These selective examples show that the vessels of Tutankhamun that carry the scene are likely to be just the most prestigious surviving examples of a wider object category often executed in more perishable materials.

1 A. Khouli, R. Holthoer, C. A. Hope, and O. Kaper, Stone Vessels, Pottery and Sealings from the Tomb of Tutankhamun (Oxford, 1993).

2 A. Kozloff, ‘Ritual implements and related statuettes’, in A. Kozloff and B. Bryan (eds), Egypt’s Dazzling Sun: Amenhotep III and his World (Cleveland, 1992), 341, 343 n. 64.

3 H. Franzmeier, Die Gräberfelder von Sedment im Neuen Reich: materielle und kulturelle Variation im Bestattungswesen des ägyptischen Neuen Reiches, II (PdÄ 34; Leiden, 2017), 725.

4 G. Brunton and R. Engelbach, Gurob (London, 1927), pl. xxv.
materials. Thus, as noted by Manniche, attenuated vessels (obj. nos 344, 475) replicate in travertine the well-known pottery types from the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

Attribution of function and purpose must remain speculative in most cases. With no little literary flair, Carter pronounced object no. 578—a model ibex-headed boat on an elaborate plinth-receptacle—to be ‘a “centre-piece” (for what else could it be?)’, implying some imagined fin-de-siècle state banquet. Almost inevitably we view the past through our own experiences of the present—although Carter also assumed, and stated in the same publication, that the boat ‘represented perhaps a funeral barque’ of the king. The present reviewer has always assumed that the rectangular ‘pavilion’ (p. 32) upon the boat was supposed to represent a catafalque; while this is only speculative, the screen walls of Ptolemaic temples (suggested p. 32 n. 78) seem to me a less plausible comparison.

Although most of the ‘ornamental’ vessels have been accessible in the form of Harry Burton’s photographs, detailed commentary from Manniche’s pen integrates these objects as evidence for wider iconographic trends and evaluates the significance of individual motifs. Several interesting and apparently novel interpretations are offered. Particularly revelatory to this reviewer is the brief discussion of the so-called sema tawy motif as not primarily a symbol of the ‘unification’ of the two lands but one signifying the arrival of the inundation and the symbolism of that rejuvenation for the king’s reign and afterlife (p. 41–2). Thus, as well as presenting the material in a comprehensive and reliable fashion, the author provides new insights, highlighting the ongoing potential for material from this most well-known archaeological context to contribute to future Egyptological discussion.

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5 H. Carter, The Tomb of Tutankhamun (London, 1972), 207–8.