

Back to Egypt: the 2021 season of the Ankh-Hor project in Luxor

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Since 2018, the LMU Munich Ankh-Hor project has been focusing on unpublished finds excavated between 1969 and 1977 in the Asasif, the most important Late Period necropolis in Western Thebes, Egypt. Most of the finds are coming from the tomb of Ankh-Hor, TT 414 (Figure 1). Ankh-Hor was a high official and died around 590 BCE. His monumental tomb was used from the sixth century BCE to the second/third century CE and attests to family burials of various generations, re-burials, extensions and additions of burial chambers and multiple looting.

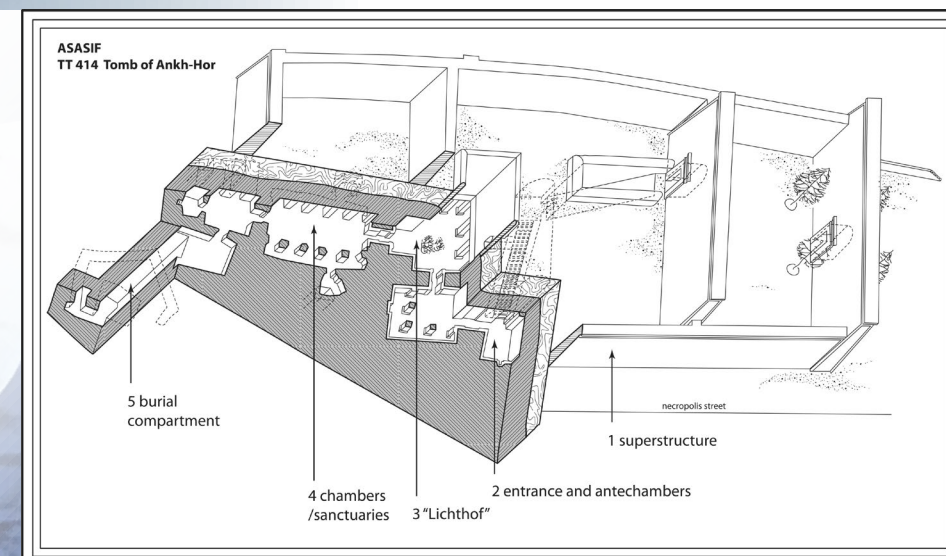


Figure 1: The tomb of Ankh-Hor, TT 414.

The objects from TT 414 are still stored in a provisional magazine in the Asasif, an ancient rock tomb excavated by the Austrian mission. The Ankh-Hor project aims not only to study the finds but also to move them to an official storage place of the Egyptian authorities. The main objective is to reconstruct the individual phases of use of TT 414. The outcome of the project will be the publication of all objects from the tomb of Ankh-Hor, thus the presentation of a huge corpus of Theban funerary art which will be highly relevant for future work. As a large set of painted wooden and cartonnage coffins deriving from the same provenance, this material allows addressing funerary practices, religious iconography and the prosopography of ancient Thebes.

The current 2021 season

The 2021 season in Asasif, the first since the pandemic crisis, has been running since mid-September with the kind support of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Egypt. A team of 12 archaeologists, Egyptologists and conservators from Egypt, Austria and Germany is working on finds from the tomb of Ankh-Hor and continues sorting in the provisional magazine. The local authorities support us, and we adhere to hygiene protocols to safeguard all persons against COVID-19. Our current focus is on consolidating and documenting wooden and cartonnage coffins, primarily Ptolemaic in date. Furthermore, ceramics and small finds of various kinds are getting documented and prepared for publication (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Recording of ceramics and small finds during the 2021 season.



Figure 3: Consolidation work on Ptolemaic coffins.



The conservation programme

The conservation work of the Ankh-Hor project is conducted in cooperation with the Austrian Archaeological Institute (OeAI) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and with aid from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna (Figure 3). The programme for cleaning and consolidation is carried out by a team of young conservators from Austria with the support of Egyptian conservators from Luxor.

The first task is to clean the objects mechanically using different brushes and, if possible, with latex sponges (Akapad) and polyurethane sponges. In most cases, it is necessary to partially consolidate the unstable or flaking paint layers before taking this step. The adhesives used for consolidation are applied via syringes or fine brushes. For powdery paint layers, Klucel G (hydroxypropyl cellulose) is used in different concentrations in Ethanol. To consolidate unstable flaking paint layers and cracks, Klucel G and Klucel E in Ethanol is used in most cases. Loose wood fibres and matching fragments were glued with Paraloid B44 (30 per cent in Acetone) and fish glue. To provide stabilisation, when necessary, a filling with wood flour or bast fibres in Tylose

or fish glue was applied to close gaps between fragments and paint layer bubbles.

After consolidation and cleaning, the pieces are ready for the detailed recording, and all will be photographed with the full-frame camera of the Ankh-Hor project.

A gigantic jigsaw puzzle

Besides consolidation and cleaning, documentation by drawing and high-resolution photographing (full-frame camera), the main task of work within the magazine is finding matches and missing pieces for registered coffins. The biggest challenge is reconstructing all joining pieces for one object since several coffins are still scattered within the magazine. For most of these fragments, there is no indication of find location or find number—the identification of the objects relies on the original documentation and photos by the Austrian mission of the 1970s and sometimes requires luck and a diagnostic feature on the piece like a personal name or title. All in all, this is a time-consuming, complex jigsaw puzzle but worthy of all the efforts. Previously overlooked pieces with names and titles now added to specific pieces allow the more detailed identification of the owner and his/her parents and contribute to a better understanding of

Example for first results with IR-photos



Regular photo in 2007 (JPG)

Figure 4: First tests with infrared photography on coffin boards from TT 414.

the prosopography of people buried in TT 414. Furthermore, some unexpected finds showed up during consolidation work like new Book of the Dead papyri and mummy labels. The quality of the reassembled pieces is very high, and they will allow establishing a coffin typology.

Introducing infrared photography

Back in 2018, the conservator of the Austrian Archaeological Institute, Daniel Oberndorfer, made some tests with infrared photography with very good results. For coffins with stains of bitumen above the paintings, the original decoration became visible again. Since the pouring of bitumen above the coffin and the mummy was very common in Ptolemaic times, this seemed like a suitable way to deal with our set of material from TT 414.

For the 2021 season, I purchased a second-hand Sony Cybershot DSC-F828 camera. First tests with a magnet and the use of an IR filter were successful. The decoration and the texts of some pieces are much clearer with this kind of photography (Figure 4). What appears as a 'black coffin' because of its current surface becomes visible as a formerly colourful piece completely covered with resin. The original JPGs and RAWs will be further processed and will assist us to fully document the design of the coffins from the tomb of Ankh-Hor.



Infrared photo in 2021 (original JPG)



Infrared photo in 2021 (original RAW)

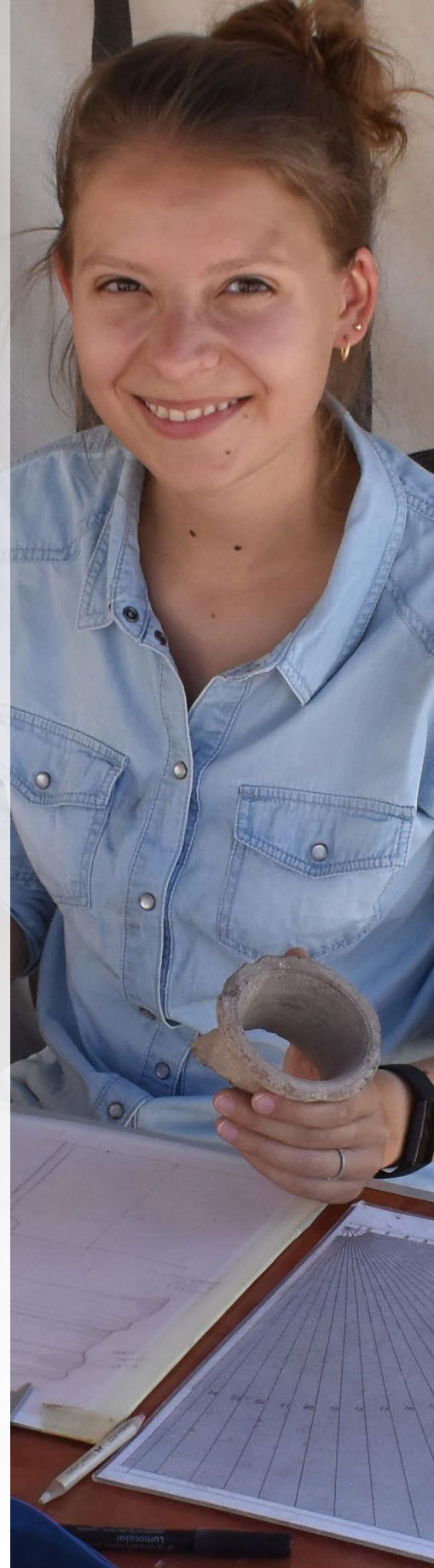
Potential of the project

The main tasks of future research are establishing a concise coffin typology of all styles and variants used in TT 414 throughout the centuries, high lighting stylistic criteria and technical features.

Diverse matters of reuse within TT 414 are related to these aspects and have already been studied by the example of selected pieces. The tomb of Ankh-Hor offers clear evidence that both very similar and diverse types, styles and qualities of coffins were used at the same time by members of the same family. On the other hand, we encounter very similar styles and types of objects that are centuries apart in their origin and belong to diverse members of different statuses.

TT 414 clearly has great potential to serve as a case study to analyse various attitudes of later generations towards the original owners of Theban burial places. To understand the complete, very complex use life of TT 414, a more in-depth study is therefore much needed. In this regard, the rich prospective of the detailed work on the finds from TT 414 became very clear during our recent study seasons. However, large amounts of coffins, fragments of wooden and cartonnage coffins from the Late Period to Ptolemaic and Roman times remain to be cleaned, consolidated and restored.

The exhaustive documentation of the objects from the tomb of Ankh-Hor represents the unique opportunity to both study and preserve a large corpus of material coming from scientifically up-to-date excavations and covering a time span of almost 1,000 years. This will enable us to increase the understanding of the connections, interrelationships, and developments between Late Period, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt regarding the funerary customs. The corpus of coffins from TT 414 will illustrate key aspects of Late Egyptian religious iconography, its evolution through the centuries and offer new insights about the coffin owners. The 2021 season in Asasif is another important step towards achieving these goals.



SUMMARY

The Ankh-Hor project studies neglected finds from the tomb of Ankh-Hor in Asasif, Egypt. This monumental tomb from the 6th century BC yielded evidence for more than 200 burials over several centuries. The project aims for the reconstruction of the complete use life of the tomb, highlighting important new aspects of Egyptian funerary customs.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Ankh-Hor project is based at the Faculty for the Study of Culture at LMU Munich, Germany. Collaboration partners is the Austrian Archaeological Institute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna (support with conservation programme and archive of Austrian excavations of TT 414).

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Born in Vienna, Julia Budka received her PhD in Egyptology from the University of Vienna in 2007. Currently Professor for Egyptian Archaeology and Art History at LMU Munich, Budka has been working on international archaeological excavations in Egypt and Sudan since 1997. She is one of the leading experts in Late Period funerary archaeology, especially for the region of Thebes/Asasif.

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