



Clay Funerary Mask

- Cyfartha Castle, Merthyr Tydfil CCM 199.996
- Face section of a Clay sarcophagus/burial pot
- sculpted from clay or Nile silt
- Third intermediate period, 1070 B.C - 664 B.C



Dimensions

Length: 20.5cm

Width: 26cm

Depth: 4.5cm

Object analysis by Oliver Cook

This object is the face section, or face mask, from a Clay burial pot, or sarcophagus. It can be assumed that it was constructed around the third intermediate period, as the potential use of Nile silt in the mask suggests that this was constructed to some sort of budget, as at the time it was significantly cheaper to use Nile silt in constructions, as opposed to other materials such as stone. In ancient Egyptian culture, the afterlife was held in a high regard, and part of the rituals surrounding the burial of the deceased was to preserve the corpse in a way that it would be in perfect condition for the afterlife. As a result, the Egyptians had specific ways of going about this. The mummification process for a corpse was a meticulous process, which involved the storage of the internal organs in small casks, named "Canopic Jars". As for the body, it would have been placed inside a small yet intricate inner coffin, with a more affluently detailed outer coffin protecting it. However, in the case of this object, the body would have been placed inside the pot-like sarcophagus, with the sarcophagus being sealed shut with the face section. This allows us to place the mask around the third intermediate period¹, as later sarcophagi were more shaped around the deceased, and the earlier anthropoid coffins of the New Kingdom had no strong resemblance to a human body, looking more like a large pot, with a cartoon-like face on the removable section of the coffin.

The Mask itself portrays a young, almost feminine-like face, with large, pronounced eyes, slim lips and nose, and displays large protruding ears out of the side of what could either be a headpiece or the hair. The mask is around 20.5cm long, 26cm wide and is around 4.5cm deep. Taking into consideration Egyptian beauty standards from the time, it is possible that this mask looks nothing like the person that would have been inside the coffin, as they would have wanted the face on the front of their sarcophagus to be an ideal version of themselves. There are several fractures around the mask, along the side of the face, where the ears are attached and where the headpiece/hair meets the face. This implies that the different elements of the face would have been sculpted separately and attached to one another prior to the firing process. This suggests that some level of craftsmanship was involved during the construction of the mask, as if not for the fractures around the mask caused by the firing process of the clay, it would have been difficult to spot which of the facial features were separate. Indicating that this mask may have come from a later Anthropoid coffin is the fact that along the top is a small rim. This could be to do with the fact that once the deceased had been placed within the sarcophagus, it would have been sealed up with a large section of the coffin, which would have held the face.

There are a few points of damage around the mask, the most notable being a small section of erosion right at the end of the nose. It is likely that this is from general wear and tear due to the age of the item, but it is also possible that this could have come from poor handling in the later years of the object's life, for example a ring or a watch may have caught it at some point. Another point of significance is the small 1.5cm hole on the top left-hand side of the mask. Due to the almost perfect nature of the hole, and the fact that the sides are relatively smooth, it is entirely possible that at some point before the Cyfartha Castle museum took on

¹ *Ancient Egypt timeline* (2015) *Ancient Egypt timeline*. Available at: <https://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/ancient-egypt-timeline.html> (Accessed: February 12, 2023).

ownership of the item, it would have been mounted by a previous owner during the 19th/20th century. During the years leading up to and including the Victorian period, it was a popular pastime of the wealthy to collect artefacts as a display of their wealth, so it is entirely plausible that at some point in its lifetime, the object would have had that small hole drilled into it, in order to have it mounted within a house. Where the damage is visible on the nose, the clay appears to have an almost reddish tinge, as well as several visible imperfections which could suggest that it may have been sculpted out of clay made from Nile silt. Nile silt was widely used throughout the years of the Ancient Egyptians, as it was readily available for use in construction², which meant it would have been cheaper to use than stone in terms of smaller scale projects such as pottery or in this case coffins.

As previously mentioned, it is possible to place the mask within the third intermediate period, due to the styling. The early wooden, and in some cases clay, coffins of the New Kingdom were fairly simplistic in their design, with any human features being simplified, so the face and arms would have been almost flush with the coffin³. In addition, the face and the facial features would have been stretched to fit the coffin. In stark contrast, the sarcophagi of the Late Period are more recognisable, as they are more proportional to a humanoid figure⁴. They feature a well-proportioned face and defined limbs. While it cannot be said for sure about the object having any definitive limbs, the fact that it has the rim across the top of the face implies that this would have been more like the early New Kingdom sarcophagi, but the detail in the face is more like that of the Late Period.

Bibliography

² Hassan, F.A. (1976) "Heavy minerals and the evolution of the modern Nile," *Quaternary Research*, 6(3), pp. 425–444. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0033-5894\(67\)90006-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0033-5894(67)90006-3).

³ Hopkinson, R. (2023) *The mystery of the anthropoid coffin: Uncovering the ancient egyptian ...*, *The mystery of the Anthropoid coffin: Uncovering the Ancient Egyptian journey to the afterlife*. Funeral direct. Available at: <https://www.funeraldirect.co/the-mystery-of-the-anthropoid-coffin-uncovering-the-ancient-egyptian-journey-to-the-afterlife/> (Accessed: February 14, 2023).

⁴ MacLeod University of British Columbia, C.A. (no date) *The development of the Egyptian coffin*, ARCE. American Research Centre in Egypt. Available at: <https://www.arce.org/resource/development-egyptian-coffin> (Accessed: February 15, 2023).

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