

Rare sarcophagus, Egyptian scarab found in Israel

April 9 2014, by Daniel Estrin



This undated photo released by Israel's Antiquities Authority shows a sarcophagus found at Tel Shadud, an archaeological mound in the Jezreel Valley. Israeli archaeologists have unearthed a rare sarcophagus featuring a slender face and a scarab ring inscribed with the name of an Egyptian pharaoh, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Wednesday April 9, 2014. (AP Photo/ Israel's Antiquities Authority)

Israeli archaeologists have unearthed a rare sarcophagus featuring a slender face and a scarab ring inscribed with the name of an Egyptian pharaoh, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Wednesday.

The mystery man whose skeleton was found inside the sarcophagus was most likely a local Canaanite official in the service of ancient Egypt, Israeli archaeologists believe, shining a light on a period when pharaohs governed the region.

"This is a really beautiful face, very serene," said Edwin van den Brink, an Egyptologist and archaeologist with Israel's government antiquities authority. "It's very appealing."

Van den Brink said archaeologists dug at Tel Shadud, an archaeological mound in the Jezreel Valley, from December until last month. The archaeologists first uncovered the foot of the sarcophagus and took about three weeks to work their way up the coffin. Only on one of the excavation's last days did they brush away the dirt to uncover the carved face.

The lid of the clay sarcophagus is shattered, but the sculpted face remains nearly intact. It features graceful eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, a long nose and plump lips. Ears are separated from the face, and long-fingered hands are depicted as if the dead man's arms were crossed atop his chest, in a typical Egyptian burial pose.



This undated photo released by Israel's Antiquities Authority shows a sarcophagus is seen at Tel Shadud, an archaeological mound in the Jezreel Valley. Israeli archaeologists have unearthed a rare sarcophagus featuring a slender face and a scarab ring inscribed with the name of an Egyptian pharaoh, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Wednesday April 9, 2014. (AP Photo/ Israel's Antiquities Authority)

Experts last found such a sarcophagus about a half a century ago in Deir al Balah in the Gaza Strip, where some 50 similar coffins were dug up, mostly by grave robbers, van den Brink said. Some of them greet visitors today at the entrance to the archaeology wing at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Dozens were previously found in Beit Shean in Israel's north.

Found alongside the new sarcophagus was a scarab seal ring encased in gold, carved with the name of Pharaoh Seti I, who ruled ancient Egypt in the 13th century BC. Seti I conquered the area of today's Israel in the first year of his reign, in order to secure Egyptian trade routes and collect taxes for Egypt, said archaeologist Ron Beeri, who participated in the dig. The man buried in the sarcophagus might have been a tax collector for the pharaoh, Beeri said.

Seti I was the father of Ramses II, often identified as the pharaoh in the biblical story of the Israelite exodus, though Beeri said there is no historical evidence to support that.

DNA tests may be conducted to determine if the man in the sarcophagus was Canaanite or Egyptian, Beeri said.



This undated photo released by Israel's Antiquities Authority shows a scarab seal ring encased in gold, carved with the name of Pharaoh Seti I, who ruled ancient Egypt in the 13th century BC, found at Tel Shadud, an archaeological mound in the Jezreel Valley. Israeli archaeologists have unearthed a rare sarcophagus featuring a slender face and a scarab ring inscribed with the name of an Egyptian pharaoh, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Wednesday April 9, 2014. (AP Photo/Israel's Antiquities Authority)

The recent archaeological discovery, like most in Israel, came by happenstance. Israel's natural gas company called in archaeologists to survey the territory before laying down a pipeline. Van den Brink said the Antiquities Authority excavated only a small, 5-by-5 meter (16-by-16 foot) area, but that was enough to find the sarcophagus, the scarab and four other human remains.

Van den Brink said the site likely was a large cemetery, with other sarcophagi likely waiting to be found in future digs.

"It's just a small window that we opened," he said.

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