

# Insights into sealed ancient Egyptian animal coffins

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Animal coffin EA36151, surmounted by a human-headed part-eel, part-cobra creature wearing a double crown, associated with the ancient Egyptian god Atum. Credit: The Trustees of the British Museum.

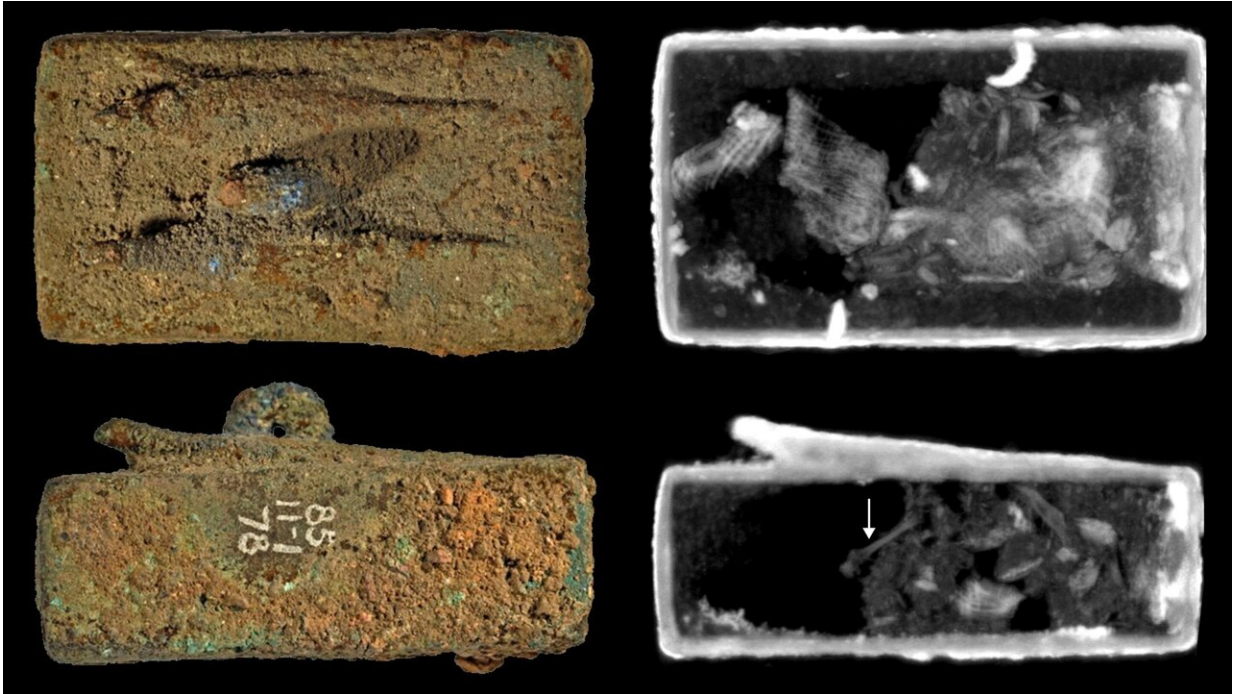
The contents of six sealed ancient Egyptian animal coffins—which were

imaged using a non-invasive technique—are described in a new study published in *Scientific Reports*.

The mummification of animals was a widespread practice in ancient Egypt, and previous research has suggested that some mummified animals were believed to be physical incarnations of deities, while others may have represented offerings to deities or have been used in ritual performances.

Daniel O'Flynn and colleagues imaged the contents of six sealed animal coffins using neutron tomography—a technique that creates images of objects based on the extent to which neutrons emitted by a source can pass through them—after previous attempts to study the coffins with X-rays were unsuccessful. All six of the coffins are made of copper compounds. The authors note that it is rare for such coffins to still be sealed.

Three of the coffins, topped with lizard and eel figures as well as loops, have been dated to between 500 and 300 BCE and were discovered in the ancient city of Naukratis. A fourth [coffin](#), topped by a lizard figure, has been dated to between 664 and 332 BCE and was discovered in the ancient city of Tell el-Yehudiyeh.



Animal coffin EA27584, surmounted by two lizard figures (top and side view). Neutron imaging shows textile wrappings and an 8mm long bone (arrow). Credit: The Trustees of the British Museum and O'Flynn et al.

The two other coffins, topped with part-eel, part-cobra figures with human heads, have been dated to between approximately 650 and 250 BCE and are of unknown origin.

The authors identified bones in three of the coffins, including an intact skull with dimensions similar to those of a group of wall lizards containing species that are endemic to North Africa, as well as evidence of broken-down bones in a further two coffins.

They also identified textile fragments within three coffins that were possibly made from linen, which was commonly used in Ancient Egyptian mummification. They propose that linen may have been

wrapped around the animals before they were placed in the coffins.

The authors also found lead within the three coffins without loops, which they suggest may have been used to aid [weight distribution](#) within two of them and to repair a hole found in the other. They speculate that lead may have been selected due to its status in ancient Egypt as a magical material, as previous research has proposed that lead was used in love charms and curses.

The authors did not identify additional lead within the three coffins topped with loops. They suggest that the loops may have been used to suspend these lighter coffins from shrine or temple walls or from statues or boats used during religious processions, while the heavier lead-containing coffins without loops may have been used for different purposes.

The findings provide further insight into the manufacture and use of animal coffins in ancient Egypt.

**More information:** Daniel O'Flynn, Neutron tomography of sealed copper alloy animal coffins from ancient Egypt, *Scientific Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-30468-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-30468-4).  
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