

<b>Institution:</b> University of Cambridge		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Sharing knowledge about ancient Egyptian coffins		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Julie Dawson	Head of Conservation	1984-present
Helen Strudwick	Curator (Ancient Egypt)	2002-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research into the decoration, construction and owners of ancient Egyptian coffins was shared through a 2016 exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, <i>Death on the Nile</i>. Innovative 'pop-up' museums increased the reach of this work and enabled the team to work directly with under-served audiences in Wisbech (Cambridgeshire, UK) and Cairo and Alexandria (Egypt), leading to enhanced cultural participation.</p> <p>The team's innovative research and engagement methodology was also shared with other museum professionals. This collaboration enabled curators and conservators to develop and deliver their own 'pop-up' museums and workshops to transform professional museological practice and stimulate further cultural engagement within their local communities.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Cutting-edge interdisciplinary research into the Fitzwilliam Museum's internationally-significant collection of more than 200 ancient Egyptian coffins and coffin fragments underpins this case study [R2, R4 and R5]. The project is reliant on a close collaboration and dialogue between Egyptologists (Pitkin, <b>Strudwick</b>), conservators (<b>Dawson</b>, Marchant), a pigment analyst, an expert in historical painting techniques, an ancient woodworking specialist (Killen) and a consultant radiologist (Turmezei) [R2].</p> <p>Since 2012, the study of coffins has been the 'hot topic' in Egyptology around the world. While other institutions have usually approached this by studying discrete aspects of each coffin, Egyptological investigations (textual and iconographic evidence) are kept separate from technological studies (construction/decoration). At the Fitzwilliam, integrated study involving Egyptologists and conservators (and other specialists) has been fundamental to our approach and has yielded richer results than would be obtained by maintaining a separation between specialists [R4]. This approach led to jointly researched and written papers, presented at the 2016 conference <i>Ancient Egyptian Coffins: Past, present and future</i> and published in its proceedings [R1]. John Taylor (Assistant Keeper, The British Museum) has observed of this approach that, '<i>when combined with more conventional iconographic and analytical studies, it provides a more complete picture than was previously possible</i>' from which he '<i>personally learned much</i>' [E2]. Through fusing these previously disparate approaches, the interdisciplinary team has been able to provide significant quantifiable data about ancient economics, social situations, and craft specialisation over thousands of years, taking this beyond a focus on religious aspects into these new areas of interest and study [R4, R5]. Our investigations into re-use have also enabled new insights into concepts of ownership, social behaviours and attitudes to the afterlife which gives new routes into the coffins: they are not just examples of religious practice [R2].</p>		

One of the most ground-breaking results was applying Computed Tomography (CT) scanning (in collaboration with Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge) to coffins, revealing unprecedented insights into ancient joinery techniques, the construction of coffin substrates and the prevalence of re-using and recycling wood to make new coffins [R4, R5]. These insights around construction, decoration and the stories of the coffins' owners have provided the methodology and content for engaging with wider audiences. The *Death on the Nile* exhibition (23 February-22 May 2016) presented the history of ancient Egyptian burial practice and coffins from c. 4000 BC to c. AD 300, bringing together scientific techniques with historical and socio-cultural insights.

Conventional museum practice dictates that many direct engagements with audiences are undertaken primarily by learning and engagement professionals, but our work challenges this approach, as the research team interacts directly with our audiences, ensuring that it has a direct impact on our research. For instance, discussing saw marks with practitioners who have experience of using these tools helped us to improve our interpretation of saw marks on ancient Egyptian coffins. The 2016 exhibition included a live conservation studio, giving audiences new ways of interacting with the research team and understanding the objects in different ways [R2]. The 2019 'pop-up' museum developed this approach: curators and conservators travelled to Wisbech, a Cambridgeshire town facing high levels of social and economic deprivation. The aim was to enable members of the public to engage with interdisciplinary research and our collections in venues that they usually visit (e.g. supermarkets and pubs) via Museum objects, replicas and 3D scans. Tactile engagement activities gave visitors new routes to understanding ancient Egyptian culture shaped around the key research findings. For instance, making and painting with a replica paintbrush enabled audiences to join together technology with visual analysis [R3].

The next stage of the project built on these established engagement methodologies and pre-existing contacts within Egypt. Working with the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Dawson and Strudwick transferred knowledge around curatorial and conservation practice and methodologies, and supported curators and conservators to run their own 'pop-up' museum [E5, E8].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R4 and R5 have been peer-reviewed. R1 and R2 have been published by presses of international standing.

**R1:** Strudwick, H. and J. Dawson (eds.) (2018). *Ancient Egyptian Coffins: Past, present, future*, Oxford: Oxbow Books.

**R2:** Strudwick, H. and J. Dawson (eds.) (2016). *Death on the Nile: Uncovering the Afterlife of Ancient Egypt*, London: D. Giles Ltd.

**R3:** Dawson, J. (2018). *How to make an Egyptian coffin: The construction and decoration of Nespawershefy's coffin set*, Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum.

**R4:** Dawson, J and T. Turmezei (2020). 'Re-cut, re-fashioned, re-used: CT scanning and the complex inner coffin of Nespawershefy', in A. Amenta, R. Sousa and K. Cooney (eds.), *Bab El-Gasus in context: Rediscovering the tomb of the priests of Amun*, Rome: L'Erma Bretschneider, pp. 485-510 [delayed].

**R5:** Strudwick, H. (2017). 'The enigmatic owner of the coffins of Nespawershefy at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge', in A. Amenta and H. Guichard (eds.), *Proceedings of the First Vatican Coffin Conference, 2013*, Rome: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, pp. 387-394.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

#### Developing a deeper understanding of cultural heritage

*Death on the Nile* exhibition [E1] reached 91,782 visitors, which represents 70% of the Museum's total visitors during that period [E9, p. 28]. Typically 50-55% of the Museum's visitors specifically visit to see a major exhibition, in spite of both the exhibition and wider

Museum gallery spaces being open to all free of charge. A tracking study following ten visitors found an average viewing time of forty-two minutes and forty-six seconds [E3]. Although a very small sample size, these findings indicate deep engagement with the content. Comments collected from exhibition visitors also reveal exceptionally high levels of interest and enjoyment in discovering the findings of the research, *'it was all so compelling. I learned many new things and I think I'll remember it as well because of the clarity and connection'* [E4]. These comments also demonstrate that the exhibition, including the integration of scientific data from CT scans with study of the iconography, was very successful in enhancing understanding of Egyptian burial practice, *'I came with a reasonable knowledge of ancient Egyptian life but this late [sic] me to another level I think. It's easy to forget how technology and working practices, natural resources, etc are as important as the more obvious aesthetic "glam" and "the deconstruction of the coffins made things come alive I'd never thought about it before'* [E4].

The conservation lab hosted within the footprint of the exhibition provided an opportunity for members of the public to develop their understanding of ancient artefacts, enabling them to touch, smell and interact with replica objects and materials, and talk directly to the research team about methods of investigation and conservation practice. Several visitors commented that their attitudes to the ethics of conservation had been changed by engaging with the conservator, and that this had further stimulated their interest in the exhibition and the research it presented. One visitor stated that they *'learned a lot here and made me look at the rest of the exhibits with greater reverence for the care taken over them'* [E4].



**Fig. 1.** 'Live' conservation studio within *Death on the Nile*.

### **Enhancing the cultural participation of culturally-underserved audiences**

The 'pop-up' museum was designed to reach audiences unlikely to have visited the *Death on the Nile* exhibition or Fitzwilliam Museum to enhance the accessibility of the underpinning research and reach a group of marginalised, under-engaged and diverse audiences.

From February-July 2019, the curators and conservators took the 'pop-up' museum to eight different community venues in Wisbech, a Fenland town in an area with high levels of social and economic deprivation. The 'pop-up' museum was visited by 5,458 members of the public over the course of the project [E5]. Evaluation survey data revealed that the 'pop-up' museum was successful in stimulating interest in ancient Egypt and participants reported a heightened level of happiness and wellbeing after taking part and talking to the project team [E5]. As a result of their initial engagement with the pop-up museum, nine Rosmini Community Centre members, many of whom speak English as an additional language, visited the Fitzwilliam for the first time and took part in a special tour by the project team [E8]. These examples demonstrate increased cultural participation from an under-engaged audience.



**Fig. 2.** 'Pop-up' Museum in Wetherspoons in Wisbech.



**Fig. 3.** Egyptian Museum colleagues delivering 'pop-up' Museum.

### **Enhancing international curatorial and conservation practice**

Building on the success of the conference (7-9 April 2016) and workshop (4-6 April 2016) held during the *Death on the Nile* exhibition, the research team went on to develop longer-term local and international collaborations with curators and conservators.

In Egypt in July 2019 the Fitzwilliam team trained twenty-seven curators, conservators and students from the Egyptian Museum and University of Cairo at a workshop, which was followed by a practical demonstration of the 'pop-up' Museum [E8]. Colleagues at the Egyptian Museum are tasked with documenting and interpreting the Museum's internationally-significant collection of 600 ancient Egyptian coffins but they lack experience and modern equipment. The Fitzwilliam's aim was to share their collaborative, interdisciplinary research praxis, and an effective approach to documenting ancient Egyptian coffins, enabling Egyptian Museum colleagues to become self-sufficient curators and conservators interpreting, displaying and engaging audiences with their outstanding collections (January-July 2019). One Egyptian Museum curator noted that she will now '*look at the coffins in my museum in a very different way*' and noted her intention to use the information during her PhD, as well as in future supervisions of Masters and PhD students, demonstrating a strong contribution to their continuing personal and professional development and how research findings are being used in their working practice [E6].

The workshop was repeated in Alexandria in November 2019, this time with the Egyptian colleagues who had been trained in July taking the lead supported by the Fitzwilliam researchers [E8]. Both workshops provided practical suggestions for museum workers to apply within their day to day practice; one participant noted how the workshop gave them '*a structured way to analyse coffins in general [...] Usually what I used to do is to just, maybe, depend on what I see, but I didn't have a kind of a structure*' (November 2019) [E6]. Another participant reported a few days later that she had '*already started doing a workshop yesterday with some children about the way that things were made, where they were made of wood, and using tools*' [E6]. The Director of the Antiquities Museum, Alexandria noted how '*this workshop also opened a field of scientific research for other objects*' and that '*as one of the main tasks for museum staff is to speak about artefacts (including coffins) during school and group visits, the course has, indeed, helped the staff restructure and adapt their presentation [...] in a more efficient, educative and attractive manner*' [E7]. This shows how the Fitzwilliam research has supported the adoption of new or improved methods and has improved the efficiency and quality of their professional services for schools.

### **Enhanced professional practice leads to increased cultural participation of marginalised audiences and new ways of thinking**

In Egypt, colleagues from the Egyptian Museum followed the example of the Wisbech pop-up museum and also found it was a successful way of engaging culturally-underserved audiences

within their local community. As a result of the initial training session described above, they went on to create their own 'pop-up' at a furniture store in Maadi, Cairo. Egyptian Museum colleagues went on to lead pop-up museums at a furniture factory, the public library and a sports centre in Damietta in the Delta (at the heart of Egypt's woodworking/furniture production) [E8]. These pop-ups further developed public interest and engagement with the original research but also gave participants new ways to understand their cultural heritage. One carpenter commented how *'today I realized that ancient Egyptians are the origin of many tools and techniques that we still use today and they left us a great legacy'* [E6]. A workshop participant noted how working with tools *'makes you imagine how the ancient Egyptians did it and it makes you think a bit like them and start to perhaps analyse things that you can just see by looking at them: okay it was made like that, but not this way. You have to use your hands, not just listen. So it's quite important to use the tools by yourself, feel the material, this is the right tool for that or this is not the right tool'* [E6]. These testimonials demonstrate how effective the hands-on nature of the pop-up model workshops were in encouraging participants to make links between their own experiences and research on technological innovations of the ancient Egyptians. The testimonials also show how the research team's collaboration with museum professionals in Egypt resulted in enhancements to cultural heritage interpretation. The resulting enhancements in professional practice have now become embedded Egyptian museological professional practice going forward.

In October 2019 the strength of the work was recognised by a University of Cambridge Vice Chancellor's award for impact in the collaboration category, in recognition of the success of our interdisciplinary approach to audience engagement. The project has also been shortlisted for a Museums and Heritage Show award and an International Council of Museums (ICOM) University Museums and Collections award [E10].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**E1:** *Death on the Nile: Uncovering the afterlife of ancient Egypt* online presence:

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/deathonthenile/>

**E2:** Testimonial from Assistant Keeper, Department of Egypt and Sudan, The British Museum.

**E3:** Exhibition report. For exhibition visitor numbers see p. 2.

**E4:** Visitor feedback and comments including exhibition visitor feedback and conservation lab feedback.

**E5:** Project report for University of Cambridge Arts & Humanities Impact Fund, which funded the 'pop-ups' in Wisbech.

**E6:** Transcription of interviews with curators, conservators, workshop participants, carpenters, pop-up museum attendees and presenters from July and November 2019.

**E7:** Testimonial from Director of the Antiquities Museum, Alexandria.

**E8:** Various blogs from the Egyptian coffins website, giving an overview of activity:

<https://egyptiancoffins.org/news/cairoworkshop>

<https://egyptiancoffins.org/news/Alexandriaworkshop>

<https://egyptiancoffins.org/pop-ups/rosmini-community>

**E9:** Fitzwilliam Syndicate report.

**E10:** Fitzwilliam Press Release on awards and nominations:

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/news/double-nomination-egyptian-coffins-project>