

The Falcon Mourned Over You: Considering the Intangible in Conserving Dissociated Ancient Objects

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Introduction

The Queen's University Master of Art Conservation Program (MAC) study collection contains a number of Egyptian coffin lid fragments (fig. 1).



fig. 1. One of ten fragments received from the CCI. Eight of the fragments are painted with images associated with the afterlife and hieroglyphs of funerary offering formulae.

These fragments originated from several coffins formerly belonging to the Stanford University Museum of Art (fig. 2). Following an earthquake that severely damaged the museum in 1989, the fragments were deaccessioned, divided, and donated for research and education to the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum and the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). In 2014, the CCI donated ten of its fragments to the Queen's program.

After examining the objects at Queen's, students from the graduating classes of 2015 and 2016, chose to address not only the physical integrity of the objects, but to focus on conserving an aspect of the pieces' intangible value, in their new context as dissociated fragments.



fig. 2. Archival image from the Stanford Museum collection before deaccessioning showing nearly complete coffin lids. The MAC program's ten fragments are now physically separated from the remaining fragments and their associated lids and further dissociated from their cultural and spiritual function as funerary objects.

Project Goals

At the time of this research, associated fragments were housed in three institutions in two separate countries. Thus, physical reunification and reconstruction of the coffin fragments were not within the scope of the project. To address the challenge of preserving the objects' intangible value along with their physical integrity, the following goals were outlined to allow the reintegration of the fragments into a conceptual whole while they remain physically divided:

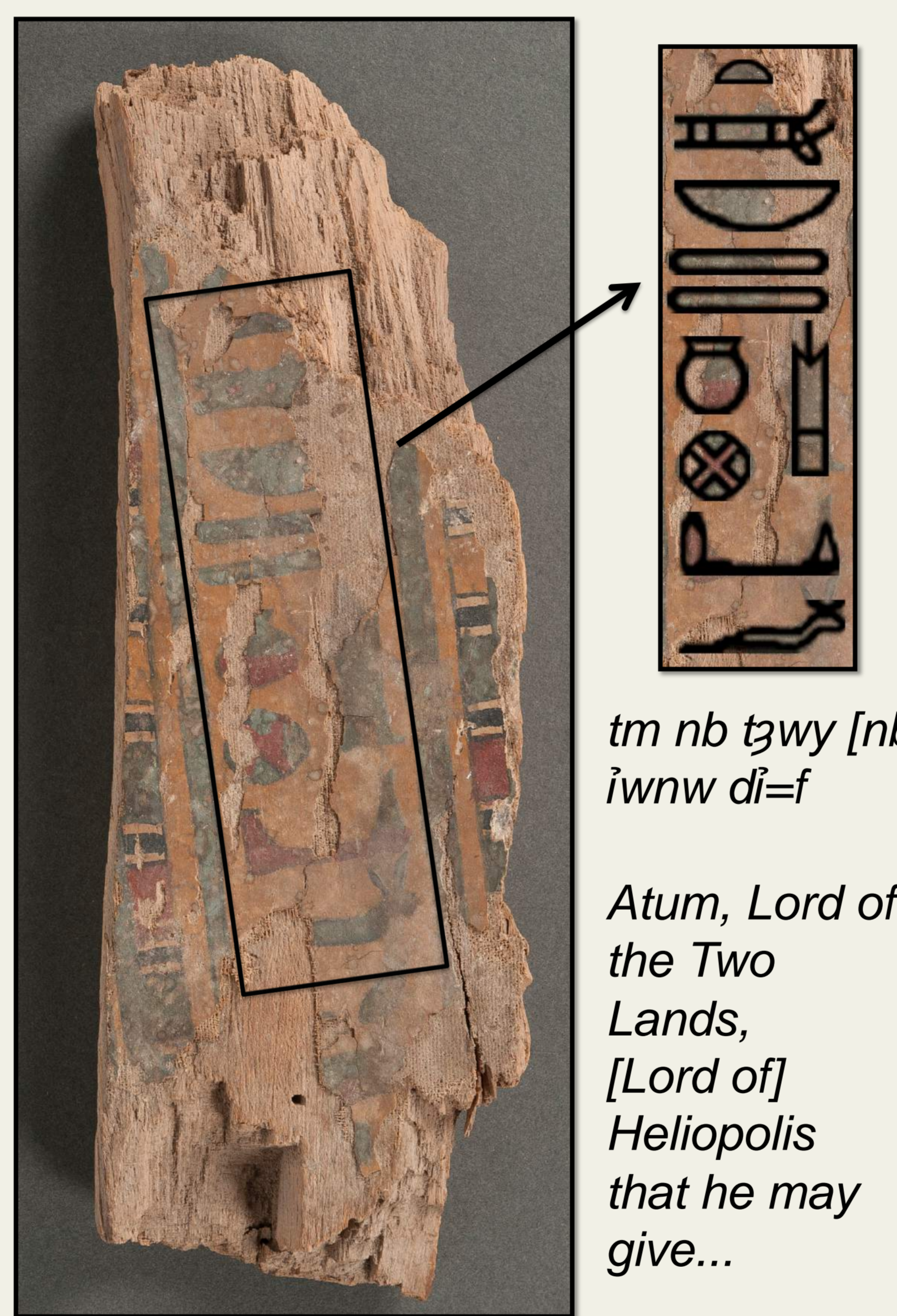
- treat the fragments respectfully as funerary objects, relating them both to their wider cultural and religious purposes as well as to the afterlives of specific individuals;
- examine and document the materials and textual content of the fragments through non-invasive, non-destructive methods;
- ensure actions implemented during the project will not result in outcomes that in the future could further complicate the dissociation of the fragments;
- assess the potential of using digital technologies, such as digital photography, 3D scanning, and audio recording as reconstruction tools.

Oral Tradition: Context and Meaning

The fragments are identified as belonging to Egypt's Third Intermediate Period (1069-663 BCE).

Coffin texts, like those that appear on these objects, are written prompts for the oral recitation of spells which were required for the continued sustenance of the deceased in the afterlife. Upon death, various elements of a person's being were thought to disperse. The reunification and maintenance of these elements were essential to enable the deceased to live on in a purified form (*akh*). Should the body be destroyed, various parts of the soul could inhabit images of the deceased, such as those found on anthropoid coffins.

These fragments therefore represent more than mere aesthetic decorations. The spoken recitation of the spells, the deceased's name, and the maintenance of their image were thought to be of great importance, preserving and providing for the parts of the Egyptian 'soul' which rendered the deceased unique.



*tm nb tꜥwy [nb]
iꜣnw dī=f*

*Atum, Lord of
the Two
Lands,
[Lord of]
Heliopolis
that he may
give...*

fig. 4. One of ten fragments, with hieroglyphs transliterated and translated. This process led to the creation of an audio recording. This allowed for a unique aspect of these fragments to be retained, respecting a fundamental belief of the source community that these spells should be read aloud.

Results and Discussion

A number of digital photographic documentation methods were used to further investigate the fragments (fig. 3).

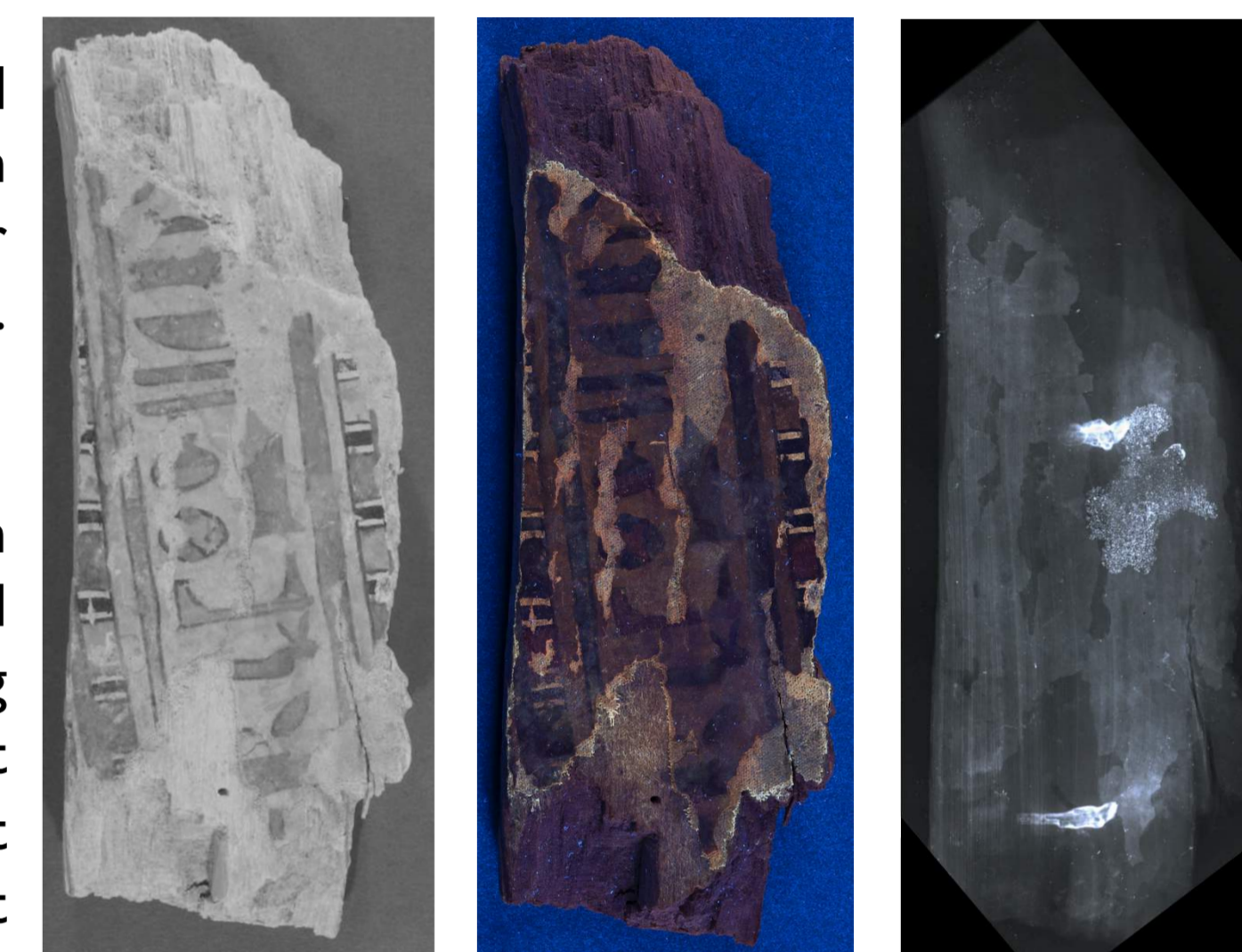


fig. 3. Imaging techniques from left to right: infrared photography provides higher definition detail of the surface decoration; ultraviolet induced fluorescence emphasizes distinct layers of surface media and restorations; and x-radiography reveals internal elements.

Analysis was performed on previously detached media and splinters found in the packaging materials. Significant information was gleaned about the physical materials that make up the fragments from this analysis, and no further dissociation was caused by direct sampling.

Physical intervention of these fragments, such as infilling and toning, was deferred for later consideration, as these interventions could not be implemented consistently across all pieces of the coffins while they remain separated.

3D imaging techniques and digital reconstruction softwares were assessed. Choosing a suitable product that fits the needs of this project is underway.

AUDIO RECORDING

The text was transliterated and then translated into modern English according to standard Egyptological methods (fig. 4). An audio recording was then created to respect the intrinsic value of the spoken spells. Reconstructions of the text fragments as well as a complete offering formula were recited and recorded. The pronunciation of ancient Egyptian is not known, and standard methods produce academic phonetic renderings that are intentionally vague. Liturgical Coptic, the descendant of ancient Egyptian, was used in this case, to further inform the pronunciation of the text to enable an oral reading of the spells.

Dissociation

The field of conservation has evolved to recognize many facets of value. Dissociation is identified by the Canadian Conservation Institute as one of the ten 'Agents of Deterioration'. Unlike the other agents, which primarily affect the physical state of the object, dissociation can result in the loss of an object's intangible value.

"The effects of dissociation include compromise or loss of objects, collections, and the data that give them value through context and meaning." (CCI, 2015)

The coffin lid fragments' extant legible hieroglyphs contain segments of a funerary offering formula (fig. 4), which is meant to be spoken aloud. Dissociation of the fragments and text poses a challenge to preserving their context and meaning. Addressing this disruption in the objects' intangible value was deemed a priority. As the text was created by an ancient civilization, however, the question becomes how to respectfully address this dissociation without a living community to consult.

Next Steps

The creation of an audio recording allowed for a unique element of these fragments to be retained, respecting the belief of the source community that these spells should be read aloud. This constitutes a successful step in the project's overall goals to bridge connections between the coffin lid fragments and their intangible value.

Recently, the CCI donated the remainder of their fragments to the Queen's study collection, physically reuniting a portion of the coffins (fig. 5). The increased number of fragments broadens the scope of the project for future research and may open treatment avenues such as physical reconstruction. Thanks to the current efforts, future phases of this project will build upon a contextual understanding and respect of an ancient cultural and spiritual practice when formulating physical treatment strategies.



fig. 5. Top: details of the Stanford Museum image (fig. 2). Bottom: newly acquired fragments under examination in the Queen's University Objects Conservation lab.

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