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# A ROMAN TREE TRUNK COFFIN FROM THE MUSEUM OF ANAMUR IN ROUGH CILICIA (SOUTHERN TURKEY)

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## ABSTRACT

This brief paper presents a tree trunk coffin from the Museum of Anamur in western Rough Cilicia in southern Turkey. As wooden sarcophagi of the Roman period are rarely known in scholarly literature, this previously unknown example is of importance for the current research.

## ÖZET: ANAMUR MÜZESİ'NDE BULUNAN ROMA DÖNEMİ'NE AIT AHŞAP BİR LAHİT

Bu makalede tanıtılan ahşap lahit Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, Kültür Varlıkları ve Müzeler Genel Müdürlüğü'nün 31 Mayıs 2001 tarih ve B.16.0.AMG.0.10.00.01/ 707.1.(9) sayılı ile 27 Nisan 2006 tarih ve B.16.0.K.VM.200.11.02.02.14.01.222.11.(TA 014/G).65675] sayılı izinleri ile çalışılmış ve yayımlanmıştır.

Bu kısa makalede Anamur Müzesi'nde sergilenmekte olan bir ahşap lahit tanıtılmaktadır. Roma Dönemi ahşap tabutlar Anadolu arkeolojisinde oldukça ender rastlandıkları için, bu daha önce yayımlanmamış örnek güncel arkeolojik araştırmalar için oldukça önemlidir.

**KEYWORDS:** Wooden sarcophagus, tree trunk, coffins, Roman period, Late Roman period, Anamur, Rough Cilicia, Asia Minor.

**ANAHTAR KELİMELER:** Ahşap lahit, tabutlar, Roma Dönemi, Geç Roma Dönemi, Anamur, Dağlık Kilikia, Anadolu.

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## Introduction: wooden coffins in ancient eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor

Wooden coffins are known in several periods and in various civilizations from the Indians of America to the aborigines of Australia. The earliest evidence of wooden coffin remains, dated at 5000 BC, was found in the Tomb 4 at Beishouling, Shaanxi in northwestern China. In the ancient eastern Mediterranean world they have been known since the Bronze Age<sup>1</sup>. As well-known, the number of ancient Egyptian wooden coffins found in museums all over the world and their studies is immense, but the actual number of unpublished wooden coffins could be much larger.<sup>2</sup> Also ancient eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures have widely different styles of wooden coffins. In Judaism, for example, the coffin must be plain, made of wood and contain no metal parts or adornments. These coffins use wooden pegs instead of nails. In the eastern Mediterranean it is archaeologically recorded that in the case of a death at sea, there have been instances where trunks have been pressed into use as coffins.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, wooden sarcophagi were dug in the Roman forum that looked like a tree trunk which was normally a feature of some prehistoric burials over a wide geographical range, especially in northern Europe. This practice survived Christianization into the Middle Ages. Burials in wooden coffins obtained from trunks appear in Italy to be particularly frequent in Late Antiquity. As hollowed trunks suggest, dugout boats, such burials are sometimes described as boat burials.

The wooden sarcophagi, which are mostly decorated on their exterior, should be distinguished from a simple coffin created for the burial or the preservation of the body in a funeral chamber. In the eastern Mediterranean the typology,

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<sup>1</sup> For the literature on wooden coffins, cf. among others Hägg–Sieurin 1982; and Lipshitz 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For the Egyptian wooden coffins, among others, cf. Taylor 1989; Niwiński 1988; Davies 1995; Killen 1994; and Crestini–El Hadidi–Palleschi 2009. Wooden coffins from Graeco-Roman Egypt are also reported; for example, for the conservation of a first-century cypresswood coffin hollowed from a single log from a burial at Touna El Gebel, cf. Zidan–Handoussa–Hosni–El Hadidi 2006. For a wooden Nabataean coffin box from Jordan, cf. Ahmad–Elserogy–Al-Muheisen–Villeneuve–El-Oqlah 2018.

chronology, distribution and production of the wooden coffins are known only within limits. Archaeologically the best known wooden sarcophagi are the Egyptian ones which were in use from the third millennium BC until the Late Roman period<sup>3</sup>. But also several examples are known in Israel as well as Jordan in scholarly literature. For the pre-Graeco-Roman Asia Minor, coffin fragments made of cedar are known at Gordion in central Anatolia and dated to the sixth century BC<sup>4</sup>.

In Turkey the number of wooden sarcophagi of the Greek, Roman and Byzantine periods is extremely limited in the local museums. Although numerous burials have been excavated in Asia Minor, only a small number of wooden coffins were discovered in them. This is due mainly to the damage wrought by human intruders, and to the humid conditions in most tombs, which are not conducive to preservation of wood. Thus far, seven sites have yielded remains of wooden coffins, which are dated to the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods<sup>5</sup>. In some excavation reports, such as Rhosus in Syria<sup>6</sup>, Sagalassus in Pisidia, Parium in Mysia on the Hellespont, Zeyve Höyük (Porsuk) in Cappadocia, Juliopolis in Galatia<sup>7</sup>, Maltepe in Ankara<sup>8</sup> in Galatia or Maşattepe in Malatya<sup>9</sup> in Cappadocia one can find very restricted information on them (**fig. 1**). A necropolis area excavated near Ankara in 2009 contained three barrel vaulted grave chambers with the remains of wooden coffins<sup>10</sup>. In Syria and Lebanon the wooden sarcophagi from the Roman period are rarely preserved, although they were rather more common in the pre-Roman period<sup>11</sup>. For the Roman and Late Roman periods, wooden coffins were found in numerous sites in Palestine (from the late Second Temple period ending in AD 70 with the Roman conquest of Jerusalem)<sup>12</sup>. In the Bosphoran Kingdom wooden sarcophagi are known from the fourth century BC onwards, and ones that appear decorated on the outside begin from the first century BC<sup>13</sup>. Subsequently they appear to be carved according to the models of Asia Minor with columns or even with terracotta applications<sup>14</sup>.

The wooden sarcophagi, unlike those of terracotta or stone, generally could not be used several times, since the liquids of the decomposition of the dead bodies could, in the absence of particularly favourable conditions, attack and destroy the wood. For this it was also necessary to look for particularly hard and durable wood, which had to be properly treated before being able to accommodate the body of a deceased. For these reasons



Fig. 1. Map of the main findspots of wooden sarcophagi in Roman Asia Minor (by S. Pataci, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. note 2 above.

<sup>4</sup> Greenewalt–Majewski 1975, 138.

<sup>5</sup> According to Nili Liphshitz 1996, in Israel the number of such coffins from these periods are ten: Liphshitz 1996, 93. Regarding wooden coffins from the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea region, cf. Avigad 1962; Hachlili 1999; and Hadas 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Süslü 1999, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Akkemik–Metin 2011, 105–114.

<sup>8</sup> Arslan–Aydın 2011, 306, 308 and 311.

<sup>9</sup> A wooden coffin was excavated in a Roman tomb at Maşattepe in 1989 (Ayabakan 1991, 49–62); the coffin was, however, not preserved and published. According to Peter Kuniholm, it was left in the tumulus, along with the bones, and was broken up by locals searching for additional treasure. The finds are clearly Early Roman, i.e. about AD 50-100. We would like to thank Dr Chris Lightfoot (Kyrenia) for alerting us to this coffin.

<sup>10</sup> Niewöhner 2017, 352.

<sup>11</sup> De Jong 2017, 326.

<sup>12</sup> Hachlili 2005, 75–94.

<sup>13</sup> Wasowicz 1994, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Jijina 2007, 70–71.

it seems wrong to believe that the wooden coffin, even when it was not decorated on the outside, could be an inexpensive substitute for the terracotta coffin. Therefore, we must think that their use was mainly reserved for members of the wealthier classes. For example, clay anthropoid coffins like those found at Tell el-Far'ah, an archaeological site on the bank of HaBesor Stream in the northern Negev region in Israel, would have been considered cheaper than wooden examples, since wood was a rare and costly commodity in Egypt<sup>15</sup>.

We believe that the principal woods used for the coffins discovered in Asia Minor were sycamore, cedar, cypress, jujube and pine<sup>16</sup>. In evaluating these finds it should be kept in mind that in several cases there are signs that the timber used for the coffins was in secondary use.

### The Museum of Anamur and Anemurium

The Museum of Anamur is the archaeological and ethnographic museum in Anamur which is located ca. 220 km west of Mersin in southern Turkey. Archaeological excavations initiated by US American and Canadian scholars in Anemurium in the 1960s brought up the idea of building a museum in Anamur. The first official collection in Anamur was initiated in 1984. After the completion of the building's construction in 1990, the museum has been inaugurated in 1992. The collection of the Museum of Anamur consists of finds mainly from Anemurium, Nagidus and Kelenderis, three major sites in western Rough Cilicia.

Anemurium (Ἀνεμούριον) was situated near a high promontory (Cape Anamur) that marks the southernmost point of Asia Minor, only 64 km from Cyprus. The site was already existing during the Hellenistic period. In AD 260, it was captured by the Sasanians, an event that sent Anemurium into decline for many decades, but it continued to be prosperous until the mid-seventh century when it was more or less completely abandoned, probably because the Arab occupation of Cyprus made the coast unsafe. Not much is known, however, on the archaeology of the area around Anemurium which was lying on the sea route of the regions, such as Cyprus, Syria and Lebanon, where massive timber was abundant.

### A Roman tree trunk coffin from the Museum of Anamur in Rough Cilicia

In the course of our research on the terracotta sarcophagi in Cilicia<sup>17</sup>, we encountered a wooden coffin-like find with a skull in the Museum of Anamur. This large fragment of a coffin box that was hollowed out of a single massive log, is a lower part and base of a wooden coffin that was most probably found in the area of Anamur and lacks a lid (figs. 2-3). The coffin was prepared from a single piece of wood – a tree trunk which is the wide central part of a tree, from which the branches grow. Typologically most parallels for this modest coffin are from the classical world. However, these were prepared from several pieces of timber, cut to size and assembled together. The Anamur coffin was most probably made of a coniferous wood (softwood), such as Lebanon cedar, i.e. *Cedrus libani* that occurs naturally in the mountains of Lebanon, Syria and southern Turkey, oak or elm. The use of Lebanon cedar for construction of coffins and other objects in antiquity has widely been reported<sup>18</sup>. But it was not possible for us to carry out any optical microscopy or to make thin sections in order to identify the wood of the Anamur coffin, as the Museum was closed for an uncertain period of time immediately after our researches.

Typologically the coffin from Anamur is a funerary casket in form of a rectangular box used for keeping a corpse for burial and was carved with three sides plus the bottom. It was approximately 163 cm max. long, 51 cm wide and 36 cm deep. The coffin box was rectangular cuboid in shape with a rounded head-area. It is characterised by tapered ends and has one-piece sides, curved at the shoulder instead of having a join which resembles a half-barrel in shape. Its thickness as well as the shape of the upper part to accommodate the lid is similar to a sarcophagus, albeit devoid of decoration, than of a coffin destined to be buried. It did not contain any wooden dowels or pegs, but mortise openings were evident along the upper surface of the sides of the box, where the lid must have been secured in the past. The inside of the coffin box was carved for the corpse to fit in. Noteworthy is the fact that a headrest was shaped on the bottom which was an ancient Near Eastern tradition particularly implemented in Egypt. This simple wooden casket form was perhaps most suitable for a clean skeletonization, as can be judged from the bones found in the coffin. In scholarly literature of any parts of the eastern Mediterranean, however, there is no proper parallel to this type of coffin, cut from a single piece of timber.

Inside the coffin some bones were preserved. Osteologically these human bones have various dimensions, but it was not possible to attribute them to an individual and to determine if they belong to a male or a female,

<sup>15</sup> Braunstein 2011, 22 and 26. Also, cf. Cooney 2008.

<sup>16</sup> For a comparison with Israel and Egypt, cf. Liphshitz 1996, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Laflı–Buora 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Cartwright 2001.

as we lack archaeo-anthropological records of essential information by the Museum regarding the situation of the findings. If they are indeed the bones of the last deceased, the length of the femur indicates that it belongs to an adult, which also corresponds to the surviving part of the skull. Many of the rectilinear dimension of the skull appear to be multiples of one unit, namely, the breadth of the cranium directly over the external passage of the ear. It seems that no other material has been found in the coffin.

The practice of inhumation suggests that the date of its sole or multiple use should not be placed earlier than the second century AD, but any evidence or typological comparanda for its more precise dating is lacking. These non-cremated bones should be sent to a C14 laboratory by the Museum's directorate.

### Conclusion

Our coffin from Anamur appears not decorated and unfinished, as occurs in other areas. It resembles to a tree trunk on the outside. Dug burials within a tree trunk are known in Italy especially in Late Antiquity. For example, in Mutina (today Modena) three graves were dug inside an oak trunk and the tree trunks were subsequently placed in the ground<sup>19</sup>. There is news of the discovery of a similar burial in Aquileia, which is now lost. Even in the Lombardian necropoleis in Pannonia, the deceased were often buried in wooden crates made from a tree trunk. Based on these comparisons, we assume that our coffin can be dated to Late Antiquity.

### Notes and acknowledgements

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<sup>19</sup> A tree trunk coffin excavated in 1932 is not preserved. A tree trunk from the Tomb no. 136 which was found in 1988 in Piazza Grande, is now curated in the Museo civico archeologico etnologico di Modena; cf. <<http://www.aemiliaonline.it/reperti/tomba-in-tronco-dalbero/tomba-in-tronco-di-quercia>> (accessed on 1 June 2022); and Cardarelli–Pulini–Zanasi 1988, 576. Another tree trunk was excavated in 2017 in Piazza Mazzini.



*Figs. 2–3. A Roman tree trunk coffin exhibited in the Museum of Anamur (by E. Laflı, 2006).*

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