

# Three wines for Tutankhamun's Transfiguration

Maria Rosa Guasch Jané explores the significance of three wine jars found in the burial chamber of Tutankhamun's tomb.



**T**wenty-six wine jars – or amphorae – were found by Howard Carter in the tomb of Tutankhamun (c. 1336-1327 BC) in the Valley of Kings (KV62) at Western Thebes. All but three of these wine jars were found in the Annex Chamber, together with alabaster vessels and more than a hundred baskets of fruits. According to Carter, the Annex Chamber had been intended as a store-room for the oils, unguents, foods and wines buried with Tutankhamun. Nevertheless, the Annex also served as a convenient storage area for boxes, stools, chairs and bedsteads that were piled on top of them, all in a disorganised manner.

In the Burial Chamber itself, where the sarcophagus of the king was discovered, another three wine jars were found lying on the ground between the outermost shrine and the wall. The first amphora to be found lay beside the eastern wall next to the entrance of the Treasury

Chamber (no. 180 in the Carter Archive, *Journal d'Entrée* [JE] 62316 of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo); the second (Carter no. 195, JE 62314) was found beside the western wall, and the third (Carter no. 206, JE 62315) beside the southern wall. Why were these three wine jars here instead of with the rest of the wine in the Annex? And does the position of these wine jars (E, W, S) have any meaning?

## Tomb Robberies

In contrast to the Annex Chamber, the arrangement of the objects in the Burial Chamber was in order. Although there is no evidence of theft of the wines in the Annex, some amphorae were broken, probably by thieves during the first robbery, which occurred shortly after the sealing of the tomb. A second robbery took place soon after the first one, and this time the thieves had access to the

OPPOSITE PAGE

Tutankhamun's Annex Chamber full of objects: baskets with fruits, alabaster vessels containing oils and unguents, wood furniture and the wine jars.

Photo: Griffith Institute.

THIS PAGE

RIGHT: Amphorae in the northern corner of Tutankhamun's Annex Chamber; some of them were found broken.

Photo: Griffith Institute.

BELOW: A schematic drawing of Tutankhamun's Burial Chamber. Three wine amphorae were found lying on the ground surrounding the king's mummified body: the red wine to the west, the white wine to the east and the *shedeh* to the south.

Photo: Celso Pereira.



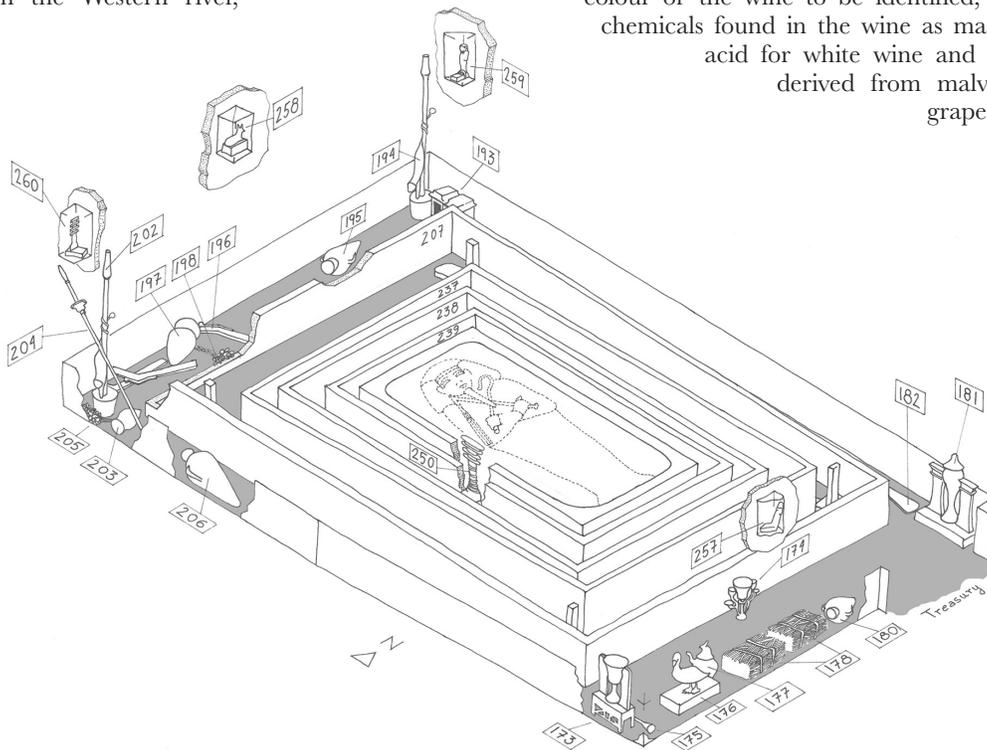
Treasury Chamber, through the Burial Chamber, where they stole a large amount of jewellery. The seals of the three amphorae in the Burial Chamber were missing, leading Carter to state:

*"... little damage had been done by intruders, except that the folding doors of the great shrine had been opened for the purpose of peering in, and that the sealings of the wine-jars, placed between the shrine and the walls, had been broken."*

Hieratic inscriptions on these three wine jars indicate differences in vintage, origin and production of the wines. The eastern amphora (180) contained 'Year 5, wine of the Estate of Tutankhamun, Ruler of Thebes, in the Western river,

chief vintner Khaa'; in the western amphora (195) was 'Year 9, wine of the Estate of Aten in the Western river, chief vintner Sennufe', while the southern amphora (206) contained 'Year 5, very good *shedeh* of the Estate of Aten in the Western river, chief vintner Rer'. To the north, no wine jars, but eleven oars were found.

Examinations of the three amphorae carried out at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo found traces of sediments inside: a "dry residue of a light brown colour" for the eastern amphora, a "dry and blackish residue" for the western amphora and a "dry residue of a black colour" for the southern *shedeh* amphora. The residues were analysed by using liquid chromatography with mass spectrometry (LC/MS/MS), a technique which allows the colour of the wine to be identified, using certain chemicals found in the wine as markers: tartaric acid for white wine and syringic acid, derived from malvidin, for red grapes.



RIGHT

The *shedeh* amphora (Carter no. 206, JE 62315) was found in Tutankhamun's Burial Chamber to the south. The inscription reads: "Year 5, very good *shedeh* of the Estate of Aten of the Western river, chief vintner Rer", and "very good" is repeated on the top.

Photo: Griffith Institute.

BELOW

In the north side of Tutankhamun's Burial Chamber, between the outermost shrine and the wall, were found eleven oars. Photo: Griffith Institute.

*Shedeh* was a much appreciated beverage in ancient Egypt that appeared at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and was valued more highly than wine. The raw material for *shedeh* has been the subject of much discussion, with pomegranates and grapes being the most popular suggestions. According to Papyrus Salt 825 at the British Museum (BM 10051), *shedeh* was filtered and heated. However, its botanic origin was a mystery until this sample from Tutankhamun's tomb was analysed.

The results of the analysis proved that there was a red wine in the western amphora and a white wine in the eastern amphora, while in the southern amphora, inscribed *shedeh*, there was a red-grape wine which, according to Papyrus Salt 825, had a more elaborate preparation.

These results indicate that these three amphorae, found surrounding the king's mummified body in three geographical orientations, contained different products. Was this for symbolic reasons?

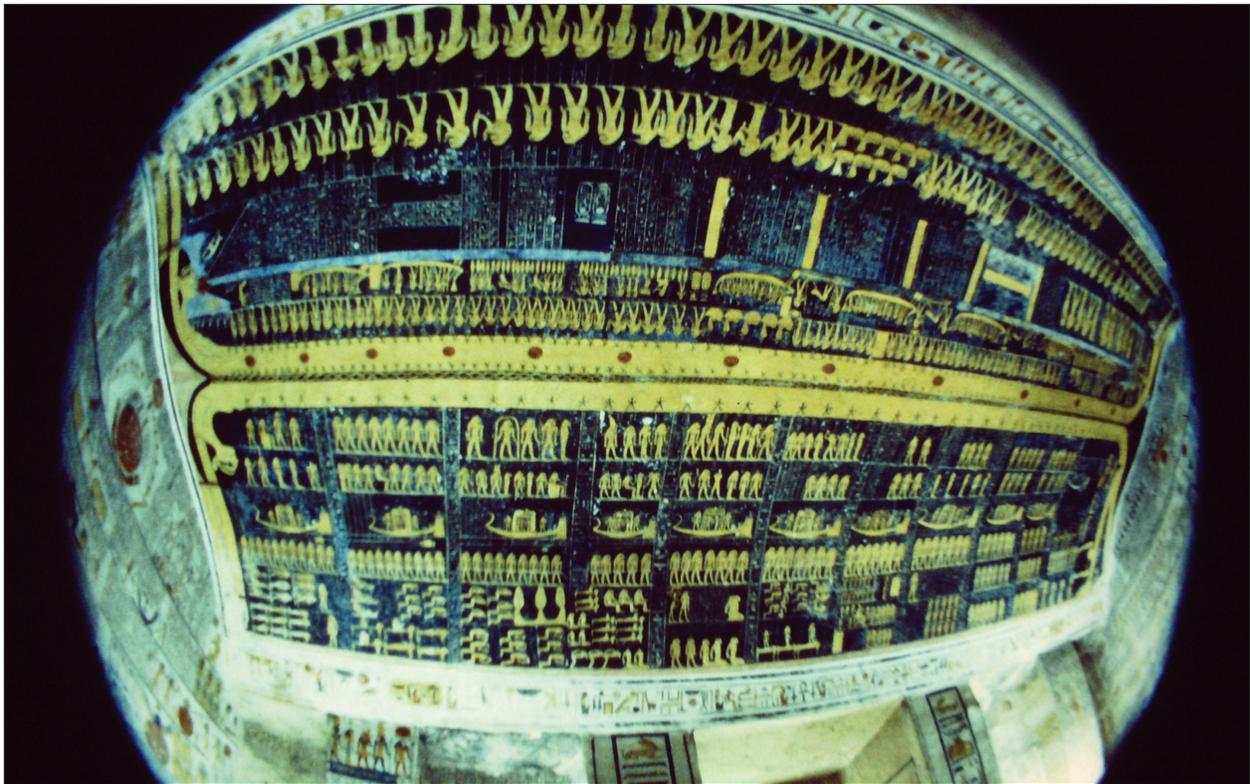
### The Symbolism of Wine

In Ancient Egypt, the symbolism of red wine was based on its red colour and the coincidence between the grape harvest and the annual Nile flood, when reddish deposits were brought down from the Ethiopian mountains. Red grapes and wine were therefore seen as symbols of



resurrection. According to Egyptian mythology, the god Osiris 'Lord of the Westerners' was the first being to undergo resurrection, and in the late Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts he is described as the 'Lord of wine'. In Egypt, the west represented the location of the necropolis and it was also the location of the entrance of the *Duat*, the underworld. This gives a possible reason for why the red wine in the tomb was located to the west, but why would a white wine be placed to the east?

Egyptian mythology assumed that the dead sun-god Ra travelled in his night boat inside the body of the sky-goddess Nut, to be reborn in the morning as Ra-Horakhty. This is seen in the New Kingdom *Books of the Netherworld* which were painted on the ceilings of the royal burial chambers during the Ramesside Period (c. 1292-1075 BC) in the Valley of Kings, (for example the tombs of Rameses VI (KV 9) (see opposite) and KV 6, the tomb of Rameses IX). The transformation of the sun god Ra from red at sunset to yellow in the morning is represented: the red sun disk is entering the mouth of the goddess Nut on the west, symbolising sunset, and she is giving birth to the yellow sun disk in the east at dawn. Ritual swallowing was a normal



magical practice for obtaining the benefits of bread, dates or wine. So just as Nut ate the red sun at sunset, the king was to drink the red wine; as the red sun was transformed into the yellow sun when Nut gave birth to the new sun at sunrise, so the king was to drink the white wine in the morning.

This idea is suggested in texts in the Pyramids of Pepy I and Queen Neith of the Sixth Dynasty (c. 2321-2287 BC), both located in southern Saqqara, where the relationship between Nut and wine is stated: “*The sky has become pregnant with wine.*” Furthermore, the symbolic relation between Ra and wine is suggested in the Pyramid of Unas, of the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2345 BC), at Saqqara: “*The water of Unas is wine, like the sun.*” These references to wine and Nut in the

Pyramid Texts during the king’s rebirth point to the idea that the wine jars in Tutankhamun’s Burial Chamber are relics of the burial ritual.

However, why was a *shedeh* amphora found to the south, and no amphora to the north? An explanation may be found in the disposition of other celestial bodies. In the southern Egyptian sky there are stars (the decans) that rise and set like the sun; they are Sothis or Sopdet (Sirius) and the constellation Orion. Orion was the most visible southern constellation and the astral aspect of Osiris, the god with whom the king rowed through the *Duat* (the Underworld) and sailed through the night sky before dawn. By contrast, in the northern Egyptian sky, the circumpolar (Imperishable) stars of the Great

#### ABOVE

A photograph taken with a ‘fish-eye’ lens of the whole of the ceiling of the burial chamber of Rameses VI in the Valley of the Kings.

Across the centre of the ceiling, the elongated body of the goddess Nut is shown (twice, back-to-back), swallowing the red ball of the sun on the left, which passes through the length of her body (the series of red dots) and emerges as a yellow ball on the right of the picture.

#### BELOW

The lower end of the body of Nut, showing her giving birth to the yellow ball of the morning sun.

Photos: RBP.





ABOVE

The combination of Ra and Osiris is represented in the second inner shrine of Tutankhamun (Carter no. 237).  
Photo: Griffith Institute.

Bear constellation do not rise and set, but rotate around the north celestial pole, always above the horizon. The critical part of the king's renewal after death took place during the sixth hour, when the union of Ra as his *ba* (soul) and Osiris as his corpse occurred, and these hours had to be painted in the southern wall, as in Thutmose III's tomb (KV 34). The supply of *shedeh* by Tutankhamun's south wall may thus have been intended to reinforce the king in his most difficult step: his trip through the southern sky. The *shedeh* was an exquisite wine and this might be the rea-

son why this beverage, and not an ordinary wine, was chosen to support and symbolise his transfiguration into Osiris.

### Consequences of the Amarna Revolution

Tutankhamun's predecessor Akhenaten (c. 1352-1336 BC), founded a new capital city at el-Amarna and a new non-polytheistic religion. This was a radical variant of the New Solar Theology of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1550-1295 BC) that centred upon the course of the sun and asserted that all life was a creation of the sun, continually created, with theological interpretations of the cosmic phenomena. In Amarnan religion, the god Aten was worshipped only in the form of the sun, his sole form of manifestation, conceived as the god of light; the constellations of traditional religion were abolished.

The nocturnal phase of traditional beliefs no longer meant the regeneration of light in the darkness, but merely its absence, and the wakening of the dead to new life was no longer accomplished nocturnally in the *Duat*, but in the morning in the light of the rising sun. At Amarna everything was oriented to the east, even the tombs, and corporeal regeneration became irrelevant. The existence of a living *ba* (soul) was the crucial aspect, and Osiris became redundant to the concept of the after-life. But after Akhenaten's death, a new unity of Ra and Osiris developed. An Osiris hymn in the private Saqqara tomb of Horemheb (Tutankhamun's Commander in Chief) describes Osiris as the nocturnal manifestation of Ra. In the relief, Horemheb is shown adoring Osiris, the ram-headed nightly incarnation of the sun god. Interestingly, the north wall was left entirely undecorated; as Osiris was visible during the night as Orion in the southern sky, this may have been the reason why was the south wall and not the north chosen for the hymn.

A unique cryptographic text on the exterior of Tutankhamun's second inner shrine (Carter no. 237), describes the rejuvenation of the sun in the east overseen by the giant figure of the unified Ra-Osiris (see left). The innovation is that, at night, Osiris becomes Ra and illumines the darkness of the *Duat* as a nocturnal sun god, and when morning comes, Ra arises from the arms of Osiris to be reborn as Ra-Horakhty.

Related texts are only later found in the ceiling of corridor G of Rameses VI's tomb and in the enigmatic wall of Rameses IX's tomb. The emphasis on the solar Osiris of the eastern horizon after Amarna was a continuation in mortuary mythology not with Atenist influence but with growing Heliopolitan influence.

### Conclusions

It is curious that the seals of the three burial chamber amphorae are missing. Although Carter supposed that tomb robbers opened the vessels, it is not clear how they could have had access to the western amphora in particular, with many objects around it both to the north and the west, or why only the seals would have been stolen, leaving the amphorae there. Importantly, the clay plugs were missing as well and only the amphorae with wine inside were left. To the east, two lamps were found which retained slight traces of oil (Carter no. 173 and 174). This implies that these three amphorae had been opened last thing by officials, who had also left the lamps burning.

To summarise, in Tutankhamun's burial chamber, the western red wine was for his transfiguration as Ra in the evening whereas the eastern white wine was for his transfiguration as Ra-Horakhty in the morning. For Tutankhamun's most difficult step, his nocturnal trip through the southern sky, the highly appreciated *shedeh* wine-jar was selected. Meanwhile, the wines found in the annex were no doubt offerings of the usual kind for his sustenance in the afterlife. These findings now open the door to the investigation of other objects in the burial

chamber to see if their particular geographical orientation can shed further light on their presence in the tomb.

### Maria Rosa Guasch Jané

Maria Rosa obtained her Ph.D. on the subject of wine in Ancient Egypt at the University of Barcelona. She is currently directing a project for documenting the corpus of viticulture and wine-making scenes in the Egyptian tombs, funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia in Portugal.

### Further Reading

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