

## The Poles of the Ark: On the Ins and Outs of a Textual Contradiction

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The ark, the primary cult object in the Hebrew Bible, is described in detail in the priestly tabernacle pericopes of the Pentateuch. Within these texts, a difficult contradiction arises with regard to its **בָּדִים**, which are universally understood as carrying poles.<sup>1</sup>

In the commands for the construction of the ark (Exod 25:10–16), after it is specified that the carrying poles are to be inserted into four gold rings at each of the ark's four feet (vv. 12–14), it is added that the poles are to stay in the ark's rings and never to part from it (**בְּטִבְעֵת הָאָרֶץ יִהְיוּ הַבָּדִים לֹא יִסְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ**; v. 15). This requirement is not paralleled in the cases of the other three tabernacle objects that have carrying poles – the table, the bronze altar, and the incense altar – nor is its fulfillment reported in the account of the ark's construction (Exod 37:1–5). It is, however, comparable to two other requirements within the priestly tabernacle texts: first, that the breast-piece is to be tied to the ephod and is not to come loose from it (Exod 28:28 = 39:21); second, that the robe of the ephod is to have a binding around its opening and is not to tear (Exod 28:32 ≈ 39:23).

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<sup>1</sup> The **בָּדִים** of the ark are mentioned in Exod 25:13–15; 35:12; 37:4–5; 39:35; 40:20; and Num 4:6. Outside the Pentateuch, they are mentioned in 1 Kgs 8:7–8 ≈ 2 Chr 5:8–9, in the context of the temple in Jerusalem. In the only other biblical occurrences of **בָּדִים** as solid, human-made objects, they are transportation-facilitating accessories to other major items in the tabernacle: the table (Exod 25:27–28; 35:13; 37:14–15; Num 4:8), the bronze altar (Exod 27:6–7; 35:16; 38:5–7; 39:39; Num 4:14), and the incense altar (Exod 30:4–5; 35:15; 37:27–28; Num 4:11).

The command regarding the poles can be understood to mean that they are to be inserted into the rings in such a way that it is not *possible* for them to part from it. This understanding was proposed by the Amora R. Aha b. Jacob and rejected in the Talmud (b. Yoma 72a). It may also be reflected in the Septuagint, which has in place of the phrase לֹא יִסְרְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ the single word ἀκίνητοι, “immovable.”<sup>2</sup> But the command is more commonly understood to mean that it is not *permissible* for the poles to part from the ark. Hence the Amoraim R. Eleazar and Abaye considered their removal a violation of a pentateuchal prohibition (b. Yoma 72a, Makkot 22a). Either way, the text creates a picture in which, in practice, the poles never part from the ark. This picture is consistent with the testimony of a separate tradition in Kings that the ark retained its poles when it was at rest in the temple (1 Kgs 8:7–8 ≈ 2 Chr 5:8–9).

However, in the priestly instructions regarding the preparation of the tabernacle for transport from place to place in the wilderness (Num 4), we read that in the course of preparing the ark for carriage, its carrying poles are to be “put in”<sup>3</sup> by Aaron and his sons (וַיָּשֻׁמוּ בָדָיו: v. 6). The same action is prescribed for the table (v. 8), the incense altar (v. 11), and the bronze altar (v. 14), and these three objects pose no problem. But if the poles of the ark are always “in,” how can they be “put in” when preparing the ark for transport? It cannot be answered that the author of Num 4 was adhering heedlessly to a rigid formula, because this is clearly not the case. On the contrary, he included two peculiarities in the instructions for the ark vis-à-vis the other objects: it was to be wrapped in the tabernacle’s own screening curtain (v. 5), as opposed to a generic dyed cloth (vv. 7, 9, 11, 12, 13), and its leather covering was to be wrapped again in a “pure blue” cloth (v. 6).

This contradiction has received an immense amount of attention, beginning around the eleventh century CE and continuing to the present, with modern scholars often

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<sup>2</sup> NETS: “fixed.” The Greek word, however, may also describe an object that *can* be moved but *should* not be, as in Herodotus, *Hist.* 6.134 (regarding the nefarious intentions of Miltiades in the Shrine of Demeter near Paros): κινήσοντά τι τῶν ἀκινήτων, “moving something that should not be moved.”

<sup>3</sup> As translated in the following English-language Bibles: Wycliffe (Vulgate: *inducunt*), Tyndale, King James, Challoner, Webster, ERV, ASV, RSV, and ESV. Other translations include “draw in” (Douay-Rheims), “put . . . therein” (Coverdale), “put to” (Geneva), “put *to it*” (Darby), “put in place” (NAB, NIV, NJPS, NRSV, NLT), “place” (YLT), “set” (JPS), and “insert” (NASB, NKJV, NET; cf. Septuagint: διαμβалоῦσιν).

repeating – knowingly or unwittingly – solutions already proposed by medieval Jewish commentators. Attempts thus far to solve the inconsistency can be divided into four groups. (1) Exod 25:15 does not really mean that the poles are always in the rings.<sup>4</sup> (2) Num 4:6 does not really mean that the poles are to be put into the rings.<sup>5</sup> (3) One or the other of the instructions is not universally applicable but is restricted in some way.<sup>6</sup> (4) The ark had two sets of poles, and each passage refers to a different

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<sup>4</sup> Rather, it means either (a) that the poles are to be fixed firmly in the rings so that the ark does not slide back and forth along them during carriage: Moses b. Jacob of Coucy, in Jacob Gellis (ed.), *Sefer Tosafot hashalem: Commentary on the Bible* (Jerusalem: Harry Fischel Institute, 1993; Hebrew), 41 par. 4; see also Joseph Bekhor Shor, in Menahem Cohen (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer': Exodus* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007; Hebrew), 73; or (b) that they are to be fixed in such a way that the ark does not *accidentally* fall off of them altogether: Arnold Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel: textkritisches, sprachliches und sachliches* (7 vols.; Leipzig 1908; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 1:366–7; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus III* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 2000), 378–9.

<sup>5</sup> Rather, it means either (a) that the poles are to be adjusted in some way within the rings: Saadia b. Joseph Gaon, in Mordechai L. Katzenelbogen (ed.), *Torat Chaim: Numbers* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991; Hebrew), 22; Eliakim b. Meshullam of Speyer, in Dov Genachowski (ed.), *Commentarius in Tractatum Yoma: Auctore R. Eliaqim* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdanim, 1964; Hebrew), 222; Rashi, in a gloss published in Menachem Cohen (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer': Numbers* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press 2011; Hebrew), 18–19; Nahmanides, *ibid.*, 19; Meir of Rothenburg, in *Tosafot on b. Yoma 72a*, s.v. כְּחֵי, published e.g. in Gellis, *Tosafot*, 41–43 par. 6; Isaac b. Judah Halevi, *ibid.*, 41 par. 5; anonymous tosafist, *ibid.*, 43–44 par. 10; Menachem Meiri, in Haim B. Ravitz (ed.), *Beit Habbira on Tractate Yoma* (Bnei Brak: Ktavim, 1969–1970; Hebrew), 214–5; Hezekiah b. Manoah, in Chaim D. Chavel (ed.), *Hizkuni: The Torah Commentaries of Hezekiah b.R. Manoah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981–1982; Hebrew), 289, 431; George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), 34–35; Benno Jacob, *Der Pentateuch: Exegetisch-Kritische Forschungen mit Figuren und zwei Tafeln* (Leipzig: Veit, 1905), 166; Julius H. Greenstone, *Numbers: with Commentary* (Holy Scriptures 3; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1939), 34; (b) that they are exposed: Meyuhas b. Elijah, in Shlomo Freilich (ed.), *Rabbenu Meyuhas b.R. Elijah: Commentary on the Book of Numbers* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977; Hebrew), 8; or (c) that they are placed on the shoulders of the ark's porters: Abraham ibn Ezra, in Cohen, *Numbers*, 19; Jacob of Orleans, in Gellis, *Tosafot*, 41–43 par. 6 at 42 col. 1; Eleazar b. Judah of Worms, in Julius Klugmann and Sons (eds.), *Rokeach: A Commentary on the Bible by Rabbi Elazar of Worms* (3 vols.; Bnei Brak, 1981; Hebrew), 3:15.

<sup>6</sup> Num 4:6 is a one-time command: Joseph Bekhor Shor, in Cohen, *Exodus*, 73. Exod 25:15 does not apply to the disassembly of the tabernacle: Abraham ibn Ezra, *ibid.*, 72; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch,

set.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, some modern scholars maintain (5) that the two passages are indeed contradictory and cannot be reconciled with each other.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, a new solution will be offered in the vein of Group 2, based on semantic analysis and an examination of relevant material and iconographic data.

## II. SEMANTICS OF וָשָׂמוּ

The two verses are only contradictory if וָשָׂמוּ in Num 4:6, 8, 11, and 14 is understood in the sense of “put in.” But this sense begs an indirect object (e.g., וָשָׂמוּ עָלָיו בָּדָיו\*), which is absent here. Every other time the verb וָשָׂמוּ appears in the tabernacle pericopes without an indirect object, it conveys the broader sense of “set up.” These occurrences are all in Exod 40: in v. 8, the verb pertains to the tabernacle’s court, and it is paralleled in v. 33 by וָקָם, “erect.” In v. 18, it pertains to the frames; and in v. 21, it pertains to the curtain. To these we should probably add two parallel occurrences in vv. 5 and 28, which pertain to the entrance screen, though in these instances the word לְמִשְׁכָּן might be understood as an indirect object rather than part of the name of the screen.

These data suggest that the four occurrences of וָשָׂמוּ בָּדָיו in Num 4 do not mean “and they shall put in its poles,” but rather “and they shall set up its poles.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Aaron and his sons should perform whatever actions are necessary so that the poles of each object are in the proper position for their use, i.e. for transporting the objects, just as in Exod 40 Moses is to perform whatever actions are required for the various parts of the tabernacle to be in the proper position for their use, i.e. for enshrining the divine presence. The author of Num 4 need not have had in mind that the precise

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*Commentary on the Old Testament* (repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 1:3:25; A. Noordtzijs, *Numbers* (BSC; trans. E. van der Maas; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah di Trani, in Gellis, *Tosafot*, 43 par. 7, and see 41 par. 3; Hezekiah b. Manoah, in Chavel, *Hizkuni*, 431; see also Abraham ibn Ezra, in Cohen, *Exodus*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Exod 25:15 is a gloss: Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Mikrâ ki-Pheschutô: Der Pentateuch* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1899; Hebrew), 188–190. Exod 25:15 and Num 4:6 belong to different strata of P: Gray, *Numbers*, 2–3, 34–35; Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. James D. Martin; London: SCM Press, 1968), 41–42. The priestly writer erred or there was a contradiction in his sources: William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40* (AB 2b; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 383.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these occurrences of וָשָׂמוּ are listed in *BDB* under the definition “put in position,” and in *DCH* they appear under “set, put in position.”

physical operations involved in setting up the poles would be identical in all cases.<sup>10</sup> The poles of the table and the altars might very well need to be inserted into their rings, while “setting up” those of the ark might only involve positioning them correctly within the rings.

### III. MATERIAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC DATA

But what nature of positioning the poles of the ark could the priestly writer have had in mind? It has recently been argued that the ark is properly understood as a portable wooden chest made in typical Egyptian style, and that extant chests from the ancient Near East, particularly Egypt, reveal parallels to almost every detail of the ark as described in priestly and other biblical texts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, consideration of actual chests from the ancient Near East may provide the answer. And indeed, there is one such object that is equipped with carrying poles: a gable-lidded chest found in the tomb of the fourteenth century Pharaoh Tutankhamun [Figure 1].<sup>12</sup>

This chest exhibits general similarities to the ark as described in the priestly account. All three of its dimensions are based on the cubit and its width equals its height, as is the case with the ark (Exod 25:10 = 37:1).<sup>13</sup> The chest is also crowned with a cavetto cornice, a feature that has been identified with the  $\aleph$  that adorns the ark in the priestly account (Exod 25:11 = 37:2).<sup>14</sup> And, like the ark, the chest is made of wood (cf. Exod 25:10 = 37:1; also Deut 10:1, 3). Noting that the chest’s wood is red, certain scholars have asserted that it is “probably” or “certainly” cedar.<sup>15</sup> In this regard the chest would differ somewhat from the ark, whose wood type is said to be acacia (Exod *ibid.*; Deut *ibid.*) But the authors of a recent study on wood types in ancient Egypt

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<sup>10</sup> Pace Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 301 n. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Raanan Eichler, “The Ark and the Cherubim” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Object no. 32 in Howard Carter’s system. See: Jaromir Malek (dir.), *Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation*, n.p. [cited 3 November 2015]; online: <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/032.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Eichler, “Ark.”

<sup>14</sup> Raanan Eichler, “The Meaning of *zēr*,” *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014): 1–15.

<sup>15</sup> *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (no credited author or editor; London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1972), Exhibit 14 (n.p.); Geoffrey Killen, *Ancient Egyptian Furniture II: Boxes, Chests and Footstools* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1994), 51.

present two conclusions that may be pertinent: first, that many identifications of wood from Egyptian objects as cedar are almost certainly mistaken; and second, that acacia wood, which is also red, was widely used to make Egyptian furniture.<sup>16</sup>

A British Museum catalogue entry on the chest displays a photograph of its poles [Figure 2] and includes the following description:

Unlike the other chests found in the tomb this chest, no doubt because of its size and weight when full, was provided with four poles so that it could be carried by bearers on their shoulders. Each pole slides backwards and forwards through two bronze rings, attached to boards which are fixed at the bottom of the box. A collar at the back end of the pole, greater in circumference than the ring, prevents the pole from slipping forward through the inner ring.<sup>17</sup>

The priestly account has usually been understood to mean that the ark had two poles, each of which was fitted through two rings at different corners and was long enough to protrude both in front of the ark and in back. However, neither this account nor any other text in the Hebrew Bible actually states how many poles the ark (or the table and altars) had.<sup>18</sup> In light of the meticulous and number-loving character of the priestly author, the absence is understandable only if he assumed that the number of poles would be obvious to the reader. The fact that in his account the golden altar has poles (in the plural), though it only has *two* rings (Exod 30:4–5 = 37:27–28), reveals that he envisioned – and expected the reader to envision – that each pole is held by only one

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<sup>16</sup> Rowena Gale, Peter Gasson and Nigel Hepper, “Wood [Botany],” in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (ed. P. T. Nicholson and I. Shaw; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 334–71 at 335–6, 349.

<sup>17</sup> *Treasures*, Exhibit 14.

<sup>18</sup> Oddly, the question of how many poles the ark and the other objects of the tabernacle have is almost never directly addressed by commentators. Meiri (Ravitz, *Beit Habhira*, 214–5) explicitly wrote that the ark had two poles as described above. Other medieval Jewish scholars did not say so explicitly, but it can be inferred from their comments that they thought the same. Keil and Delitzsch (*Commentary*, 1:2:167) casually stated that the ark had four poles. Propp (*Exodus*) is silent in his comments but includes two illustrations (figs. 1a, 1b), each showing the ark with two poles.

ring. This indicates that the priestly author, who gave the ark four rings, meant to portray it as having four poles, like the Tutankhamun chest.<sup>19</sup>

The photograph and description express several other details in which the poles of the Tutankhamun chest are similar to those of the ark as described in Exodus: they are made of wood (cf. Exod 25:13 = 37:4); they are slid through metal rings near each of the chest's four feet (cf. 25:12 = 37:3); and they are aligned along the chest's long sides (cf. 25:14 = 37:5). They are also fashioned and positioned in a way that would make it difficult to slide them out of the rings and remove them entirely from the chest, recalling Exod 25:15.

Most significantly for our discussion, these carrying poles are retractable: "When the chest was not being carried, the poles could be pushed back until the collars of two axially opposite poles were touching each other and the poles were then entirely concealed from view."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the poles could be slid under the chest, in the space between its underside and the bottoms of its feet, while still held by the metal rings [Figure 3]. When the chest was to be carried, the poles could be drawn out again in preparation, still held by the rings.

Earlier depictions of chests equipped with carrying poles exist from Old Kingdom Egypt. Some of these have sufficient detail to show the poles slid through rings like those of the Tutankhamun chest [Figure 4], demonstrating, in the judgment of Geoffrey Killen, that the poles were designed to slide underneath the chests in the same manner.<sup>21</sup>

## IV. CONCLUSION

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<sup>19</sup> The Tutankhamun chest actually has a pair of adjacent rings at each corner, eight rings in all. In this feature it differs from the ark, which, according to any view of its poles, has one functioning ring at each of its four corners. The purpose of the ring doubling is presumably to keep the poles straight. This aim could be achieved using only one ring for each pole either by ensuring a tight fit or by giving the bands that form the rings substantial width.

<sup>20</sup> *Treasures*, Exhibit 14.

<sup>21</sup> Killen, *Boxes*, 20, fig. 40.

If carrying poles on ancient Egyptian-type chests were *normally* retractable, as Henry Fischer seems to conclude from the evidence just adduced,<sup>22</sup> or at least if this was the practice with which the author of Num 4:6 was acquainted, then both he and his audience would most naturally expect that the ark's poles would need to be "set up" in preparation for transport, even if they had never been removed from it: they would still need to be drawn out from underneath it so that they could be grasped by its porters. If this is the case, Exod 25:15 does not contradict Num 4:6. As stipulated by the former verse, the poles of the ark were indeed never to part from it or to leave its rings; and וְשָׂמוּ בָדָיו in the latter verse simply means that in preparation for transport they were to be drawn out, while still in their rings, from underneath the ark's body.

This possibility may also explain why the requirement that the carrying poles remain affixed applies to the ark but not to the table and the altars.<sup>23</sup> Only chests are shaped in such a way that their carrying poles can be hidden from sight while still attached to them, as their feet create a low, narrow space between their lower surface and the ground. Thus, only in the case of the ark would such a requirement be compatible with the goal of an aesthetic tabernacle. The carrying poles of the table and altars would presumably need to be removed and stowed elsewhere.

This study demonstrates how the observation that the biblical ark is described as a portable wooden chest, aided by an investigation of actual and depicted objects of that type from the ancient Near East, can help solve an exegetical difficulty in the biblical text. It also adds an important element to the image of the ark that the priestly writer apparently intended to convey, one which those familiar with ancient Near Eastern crafts would have understood unaided.

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<sup>22</sup> Henry G. Fischer, "Möbel," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 4:180–9 at 182.

<sup>23</sup> The most attractive explanation for the requirement in the first place is that it is a measure to prevent people from touching the body of the ark, an action which, according to a tradition in 2 Sam 6:6–7, is fatal (See Bekhor Shor on Exod 25:15, in Cohen, *Exodus*, 73). However, the priestly Num 4:15 indicates that it would be fatal even for a designated porter to touch the body of any of the major tabernacle objects; so, by the same token, the table and altars should have permanently attached poles as well.



Figure 1. Red chest from the tomb of Tutankhamun, equipped with carrying poles, shown with poles extended. Burton photograph 1557. From Malek, *Tutankhamun*.



Figure 2. Underside of same chest, showing rings and (removed) carrying poles. From *Treasures*, Exhibit 14 (n.p.), credited to the Cairo Museum.

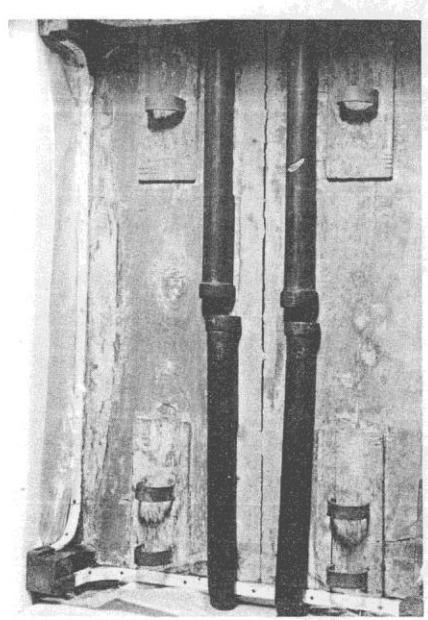


Figure 3a. Same chest, shown with poles in retracted position. Burton photograph 0090. From Malek, *Tutankhamun*.



Figure 3b. Diagram of same chest illustrating pole retraction. Carter card 032-5. From Malek, *Tutankhamun*.

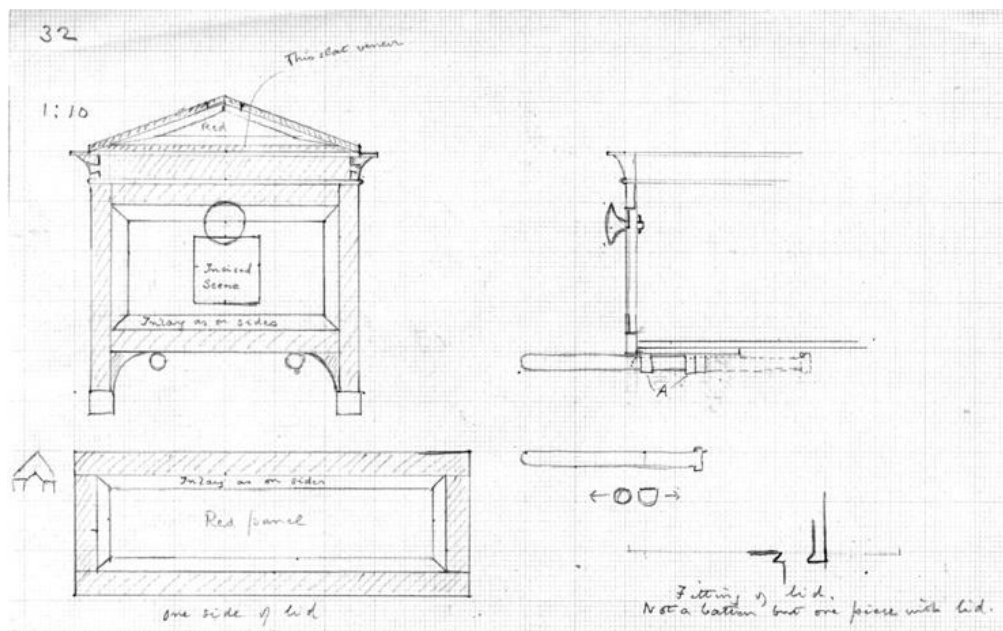


Figure 4. Sixth Dynasty depiction of a chest with carrying poles. From Ludwig Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Ša<sup>3</sup>ḥu-Re* (WVDOG 26; 2 vols.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910–1913), 2: pl. 60.

