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Basem Gehad

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A Report on a Mid-Ptolemaic Graveyard with Gable-roof Coffins from Ancient Philadelphia

BASEM GEHAD^{*}

ABSTRACT

The burial ground in ancient Philadelphia necropolis is thought to be the only source for the ancient population that lived during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods at this village. During the Egyptian mission's excavation work at the ancient Philadelphia necropolis, a set of exceptionally preserved burials dating back to the mid Ptolemaic period were revealed. Individual burials were discovered in the graves, with some of them placed within rare instances of gabled roof shaped coffin lids, some of which were also painted and decorated with Hellenistic themes. Various findings in this well-secured context show various burial rituals and funeral art in Egypt at this period.

Keywords: Ptolemaic period, gable-roof coffin, Philadelphia, Fayum, cemetery, Isis Aphrodite.

RÉSUMÉ

Le cimetière de l'ancienne nécropole de Philadelphie est l'unique source d'information connue concernant la population ayant vécu dans cette localité aux périodes ptolémaïque et romaine. Au cours des fouilles menées par la mission égyptienne dans l'ancienne nécropole de Philadelphie, un ensemble de sépultures exceptionnellement bien conservées datant du milieu de la période ptolémaïque a été mis au jour. Des inhumations ont été découvertes dans

^{*} Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Supreme Council of Antiquities, Director of Egyptian excavation project at ancient Philadelphia necropolis.

les tombes, certaines d'entre elles étant placées à l'intérieur de rares exemples de cercueils au couvercle en forme de toit à pignon, dont certains étaient également peints et décorés de thèmes hellénistiques. Les découvertes effectuées dans ce contexte bien préservé nous renseignent sur les divers rituels funéraires et l'art funéraire en Égypte à cette période.

Mots-clés : période ptolémaïque, cercueils à toit à pignon, Philadelphie, Fayoum, nécropole, Isis Aphrodite.



THIS ARTICLE presents the results of the Philadelphia Necropolis Project's excavation in the area labeled "Graveyard 2." The area is important for three reasons:¹ first, it is an undisturbed context in a cemetery that has been repeatedly looted; second, its burials date consistently to the mid-Ptolemaic period (late 3rd–2nd centuries BCE); and, finally, most of these securely dated and untouched burials contain gable-roof coffins. While this type of coffin is a well-known feature of Ptolemaic funerary customs,² no examples have yet been published with a full scientific discussion of their complete archaeological context.³ The new information from the Philadelphia necropolis reveals that gable-roof coffins, which borrow their shape from Greek temples, appear with funerary equipment that derives from Greek culture. It is particularly noteworthy that women were buried in 87.5% of the graves in this area of the cemetery. These results raise two important questions: first, whether this style of burial was connected to the immigrants from different parts of the Mediterranean world who came to Philadelphia in the early Ptolemaic period and, second, whether there was a correlation between burial practices and gender in this Ptolemaic town.⁴

After a brief introduction to the Philadelphia necropolis and the place of Graveyard 2 within it, the main part of this article will be a detailed presentation of the graves and their funerary furnishings. It will then focus on examples of coffin burials with gable roof from the site that are significant for the style of coffin or the materials placed inside; among a rich number of examples is a rare and important female terracotta statuette type that has never been published with its archaeological context. Finally, I will suggest some ways to correlate this set of data with important questions about the ethnicity of citizens in Philadelphia.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Prof. Yvona-Trnka Amrhein (CU Boulder university), Ann-Kathrin Jeske (DAIK) and Prof. Lorelei H. Corcoran (Memphis university), together with Prof. Robert Cioffi at Bard college for proofreading my article. The work at the site would not have taken place without the permission granted by Dr. Mustafa Waziri and the support of Dr. Ayman Ashmawy, Dr. Adel Okasha and Dr. Mohamed el-Seidy.

² This type of Ptolemaic coffin was classically defined by EDGAR 1905. See also PARLASCA 1991 and for a broader overview SUMMERER, ÜYÜMEZ 2016.

³ For the only currently published gable-roof coffin with archaeological context see WATZINGER 1905, pp. 26–44.

⁴ For the Greeks of Philadelphia, see MUELLER 2006, also the papyri P. Phil. Nec. inv. 8 in GEHAD et al. 2023, pp. III–120.

THE ANCIENT PHILADELPHIA NECROPOLIS

Ancient Philadelphia was established on the north eastern side of the *Arsinoite nome* during the land reclamation project initiated by Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the 3rd century BCE. The town settlement⁵ currently has little potential for providing significant evidence about the general population of the community resident in Philadelphia due to the levelling of almost all urban structures by *sebakhins*.⁶ The necropolis has however revealed a wealth of untouched graves, despite waves of looting throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Philadelphia Necropolis Project has so far uncovered catacombs, rock cut tombs, burial shafts, and three groups of graves. Since these graves have been arranged in burial grounds and seem to cluster around larger monumental tombs, we have called them graveyards.⁷ Graveyard 1, located just to the east of the settlement at the west end of the cemetery, contains graves from the 2nd century CE. Graveyard 3, situated to the north of Graveyard 2 and to the east of Graveyard 1, dates to the late 2nd century BCE. Graveyard 2, the subject of this paper (Fig. 1), is located in the center of the necropolis; it dates from the 2nd century BCE, and appears to be associated with Catacomb VT 10, which was in continuous usage from the 2nd BCE to the end of the Ptolemaic period.⁸ While Graveyard 2 and Catacomb VT10 are adjacent, we are not yet able to state with any certainty the chronological relationship between the two.

Graveyard 2 was originally cut into the top of a ridge that formed naturally from a layer of compact sand and gravel over limestone formation (Fig. 2). In 2019-2020 our team excavated a sector that contained twenty-two graves. It measured 25 meters along its north-south axis and 45 meters along its east-west axis.⁹ All the graves were used for individual burials, and most were discovered intact.¹⁰ Four graves were left unfinished;¹¹ four graves held bodies alone; five contained tube-shaped pottery coffins; seven held gable-roof coffins (cf. Table 1), some of which were painted (Fig. 3). It is interesting to note that the only two male individuals discovered in this cemetery rested in unpainted gable-roof coffins (Fig. 4); one of them was buried in a vaulted tomb, unique in this area of the cemetery. In addition, both the burials without coffins and those in pottery coffins¹² contained infants (0-3 years)¹³ and children (4-12 years).¹⁴

⁵ The settlement is currently the focus of a new research project led by IFAO; see MARCHAND et al. 2018.

⁶ DAVOLI 2015.

⁷ GEHAD et al. 2022a. See also GEHAD et al. 2020.

⁸ Catacomb VT 10, a vaulted hypogeum with eight loculi excavated in 2019, appears to be a family tomb used by at least four generations.

⁹ Excavation team: Basem Gehad (director), Mahmoud Ibrahim (field archaeologist), Omar Fekry (field archaeologist), Heba Adly (field archaeologist), Rasha Awad (osteology specialist), Mouhamed Atef (pottery specialist) and Mohamed Samah (photographer).

¹⁰ There were two graves disturbed by looters. They are located in the north part of Graveyard 2 adjacent to a vaulted catacomb that was also found looted.

¹¹ The unfinished graves likely represent premade burial spaces. It is known from papyri that different families of *choachites* had exclusive rights to specific areas of the necropolis. Since burial was a business, it seems probable that graves were dug in advance. It should be noted, however, that structural instability was identified in this area where the graves were cut into and they were accordingly abandoned as being useless. This topic is beyond the scope of this article, but I will write about it in future.

¹² Similar examples of tube- or cigar- shaped pottery coffins were found at *Quesna-Monyfia* in the Delta, dating from mid- to late-Ptolemaic Egypt. See ROWLAND 2010, p. 32. In contrast to other examples from different cemeteries, Philadelphia tube pottery coffins from this part of the cemetery were exclusively used for infants and children.

¹³ BUIKSTRA, UBELAKER 1994.

¹⁴ BASS 1995.

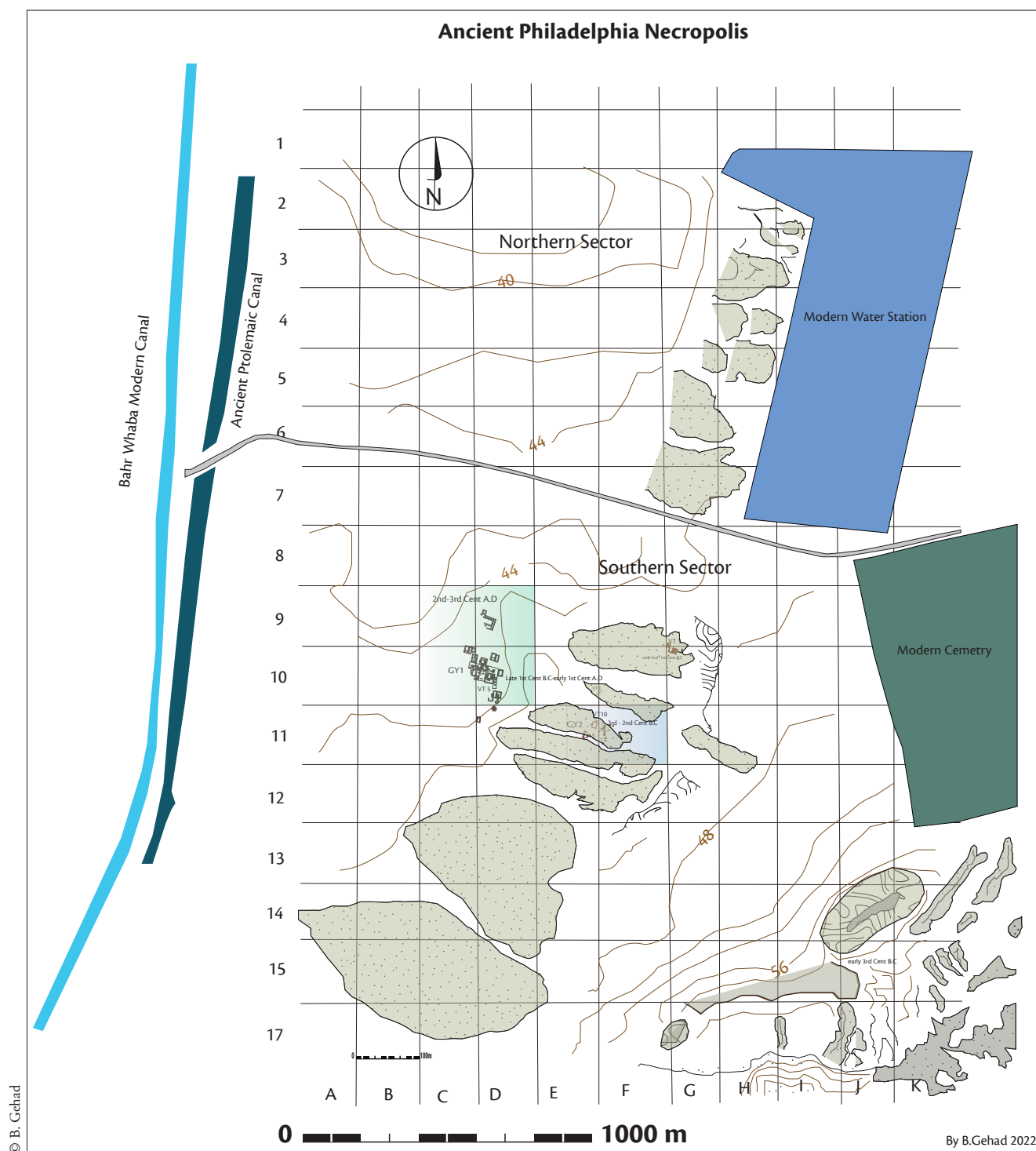


FIG. 1. General plan for Philadelphia necropolis indicating GY2 location.

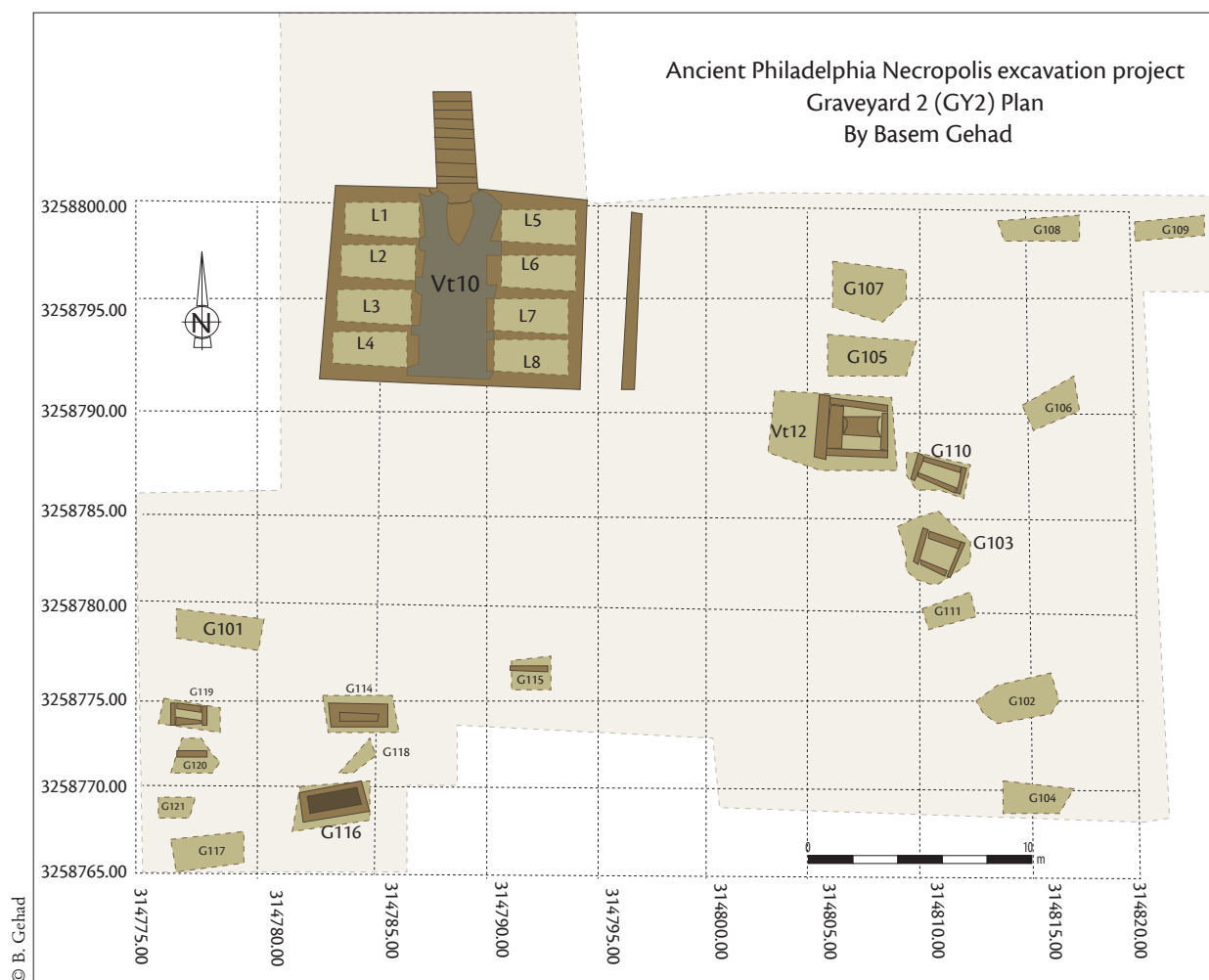


FIG. 2. Plan of excavated area and graves of GY2.

Grave no.	Type of coffin, if present	Age in years	Sex	Orientation of Grave	Orientation of Burial	Grave Goods	Diagnostic Pottery	State of Preservation	Coffins measurement
G101	Tube pottery coffin	4-5	F	West-East	Head to east	No	Yes	Intact, in bad condition	L. = 110 cm Diameter (Ø) = 38 cm
G102	Gable-roof coffin	6	F	West-East	Head to east	No	Yes	Intact, fair condition	L. = 130 cm W. = 40 cm H. = 35 cm
G103	Painted gable-roof coffin	12	F	West-East	Head to west	No	No	Intact, fair condition	L. = 130 cm W. = 50 cm H. = 45 cm
G104	Remains of wooden coffin	Disturbed burial where no bones were recovered. No exact coffin or burial orientation could be identified.							
G105	No coffin	Disturbed burial where no bones were recovered.							
G106	Remains of wooden coffin	To be Identified	TBI	West-East		No	Yes	Intact, in bad condition.	
G107	Unfinished grave								
G108	Unfinished grave								
G109	Tube pottery coffin	8	F	West-East	East-West	No	Yes	Intact, in bad condition	L. = 100 cm Ø. = 35 cm
G110	Painted gable-roof coffin	12-14	F	West-East	West-East	Yes	Yes	Intact, in good condition	L. = 133 cm W. = 35 cm H. = 50 cm
G111	Tube pottery coffin	1-3	F	West-East	West-East	No	No	Intact, wrapped skeleton in bad condition	L. = 120 cm Ø. = 40 cm
G112	Unfinished grave								
G113	Unfinished grave								
G114	Painted gable-roof coffin	37-41	F	West-East	East-West	No	No	Intact, in bad condition	L. = 188 cm W. = 40 cm H. = 33 cm
G115	Tube pottery coffin	0.6-0.9	F9	West-East	East-West	No	No	Intact, in bad condition	L. = 51 cm Ø. = 28 cm
G116	Gable-roof coffin	55	F	West-East	West-East	No	Yes	Intact, in fair condition	L. = 179 cm W. = 46 cm H. = 70 cm
G117	Painted gable- roof coffin	47	F	West-East	West-East	Yes	Yes	Intact, in fair condition	L. = 170 cm W. = 45 cm H. = 65 cm
G118	No coffin	6-7	F	West-East	East-West	No	No	Fair condition	
G119	No coffin	9-10	F	West-East	West-East	No	No	Bad condition	
G120	No coffin	5	F	West-East	West-East	No	No	Bad condition	
G121	No coffin	5	F	West-East	West-East	No	No	Bad condition	
VT12	Gable-roof coffin	60+	M	West-East	West-East	No	No	Intact, bad condition	L. = 170 cm W. = 45 cm H. = 65 cm

TABLE 1. Summarized data for excavated graves in GY2.



FIG. 3. *In situ* photo for the painted gabled roof coffin in grave G117.



FIG. 4. *In situ* photo for the gabled roof coffin in grave G116.

DESCRIPTION OF GRAVES AT GRAVEYARD 2

The graves in grave yard 2 were cut roughly into the natural geological formation (Figs. 5 and 6). The graves without coffin with a gable-roof coffin range in depth from 1.5 to 2m, with no mudbrick reinforcing or lining for the subterranean cut. Those with gable-roof coffins are of the same depth; the difference lies in the substructures of these graves, which consists in either a stepped flat roof as in grave G 116 (Fig. 7) or, on rare occasions, a semi-barrel vault ceiling. Both types of graves contain tube pottery (Fig. 8), the second type of coffins in these burials. The tube pottery coffin was either placed behind a small mudbrick wall as a blocking for the undercut (Fig. 9) or between two small mudbrick walls to prevent the sides of the tombs from collapsing onto the graves. Due to the fragile nature of the soil into which these graves were carved, tombs that have coffins with gable-roof probably had these mudbrick buildings with roofs to protect the valuable wooden coffins from post-burial alteration.

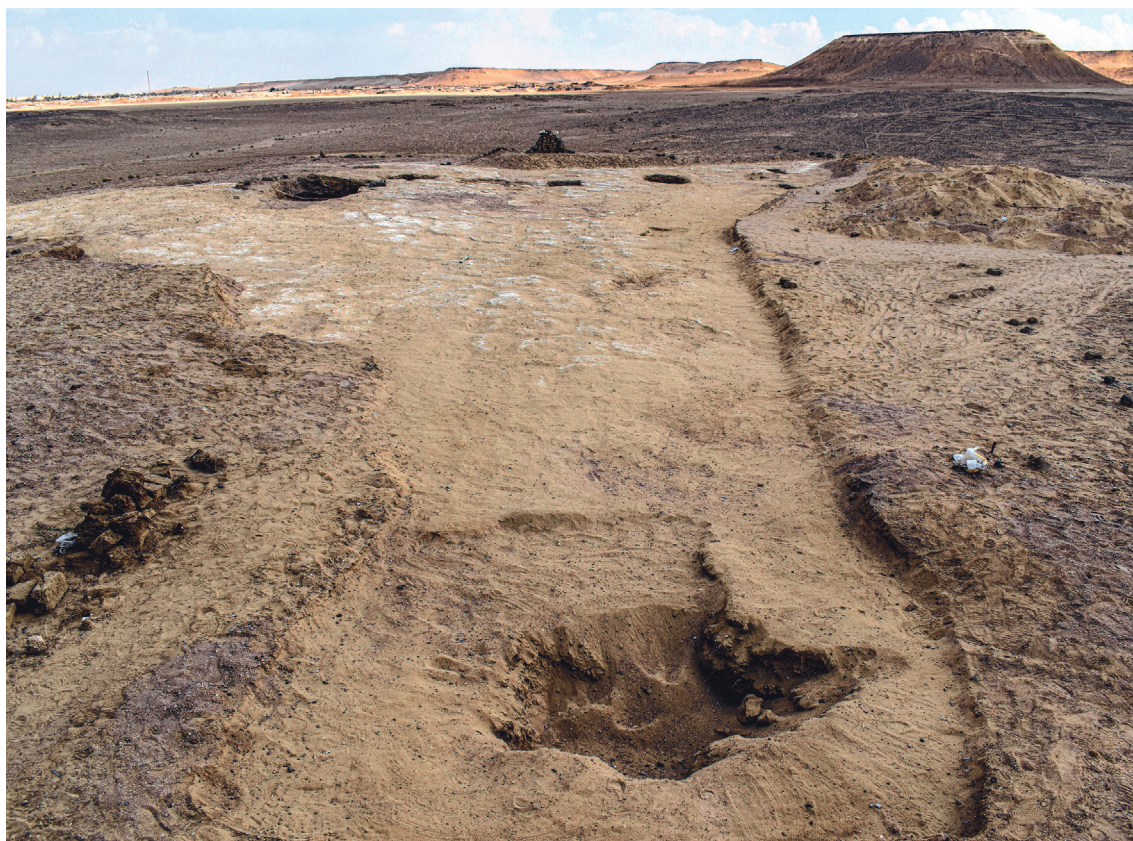


FIG. 5. General view for the excavated area of GY2 looking east.

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© O. Fekry



FIG. 6. Grave cut of graves G114 and G116 looking east.

© M. Ibrahim



FIG. 7. Mudbrick substructure in grave G116.



Fig. 8. Tube pottery coffin for child in grave G115.



Fig. 9. Child burial in grave G121.

The graves are no more than 2.8 m long and 1.5 m wide, which suggests that they were cut precisely to fit the dimensions of the coffins or the person buried. The tombs appear to have been used in this location later than the primary, enormous hypogea described as Catacomb VT10.¹⁵ This conclusion is based on the superstructure's mudbrick wall, which serves as an enclosure wall from both the west and the east sides of VT10. This wall delineates the boundaries of the tomb's substructure and outlines the occupied underground space. Excavation of this region between the west and east enclosures revealed that it had never been utilized for grave digging. It is possible that it was left untouched intentionally in order to avoid digging the graves of GY2 in an area that had been previously occupied.

The burials that have been discovered in GY2 were either partially mummified and poorly preserved (Fig. 1) or only skeletal remains, frequently without any traces of the burial shroud and seldom with more than one layer of linen fabric. Due to direct contact with the embalming resins or mummification materials, which caused the carbonization of the shroud's organic material, the textile remains were severely desiccated. The twenty-two burials were examined using osteological techniques in order to determine the sex, age, physical condition of the deceased, and any pathological characteristics that may be discerned from bone examinations, in addition to taphonomical changes. A case study and sample of people who were buried in this area of the necropolis can be provided by the analysis of the 22 graves, where 15 burials were discovered and examined.

While those found in gable coffins were wrapped in a single layer of poorly preserved textile, in some cases, the head was placed on textile pillow, and floral remains were discovered in the coffin (e.g., in GI03, GI16). Those discovered in ceramic coffins had their heads towards the west, facing up, and the embalming resin was only found on the skeletal remains, which therefore become attached to the interior of the pottery tube. The estimated length of those who died between the ages of 4 and 6 is 760 to 1170 mm. Adults were interred in gable-roof coffins with inconsistent head position, hands placed over the pelvis. The majority of the bodies were found as skeletal remains, even if wrapped. Some obvious residues of embalming material and resin were discovered on various places of the body and the shroud, indicating a poor body treatment and perhaps an inexperienced mummification process, or that mummification was not the top priority, based on the customs for these group of people buried within this section of the cemetery. The body was covered in a single layer of linen-textile shroud or one layer of wrapped linen shroud, face anterior up, and body extended. Clear examples for this are the burials in graves GI14, GI16, GI17, GI02 and VT12 (see Fig. 10).

According to the primary pathological and taphonomic observations,¹⁶ there are signs of anemia in the supraorbital edge, distortion in the contour of the skull, and large missing bone fragments including two scapulae, the proximal end of two radii, one left rib and eight right ribs, and five metacarpals. Significantly, for juvenile graves, such as GI18 and GI19, there

¹⁵ The vaulted catacomb VT10 has eight large loculi and is located to the north west of the GY2 area. The loculi are segmented on both the east and west sides and arranged around a vaulted court accessed by a stair that runs from north to south. All the walls of the hypogea and its loculi were covered with a white lime plastered. On the upper portion of one of the loculi three large capital Greek letters ΑΘΗ appear in an inscription that was made before plastering. To my opinion they might stand as an abbreviation for the word Ἀθηναῖαι. If so, it might be another indication of non-Egyptian ethnic group that lived and buried at ancient Philadelphia.

¹⁶ The burials were investigated and recorded *in situ* by Basem Gehad, Mahmoud Ibrahim, Abd Allah Abdo and Omar Fekry; osteological studies were done by Rasha Awad and Marwa Komsan.



FIG. 10. Burials as found inside coffins of graves G102, G116 and G117.

were erosion batches and holes in the skull. While trauma was identified on the occipital G116 burial, periodontal disease, applicable to adult graves, tooth decay, tooth calculus, mandibular abscess under the premolar, tooth loss before death, and enamel hypoplasia were found in G114. In addition, a compression fracture on a vertebra was found in G117.

DATING OF THE GRAVES

35 sherds of pottery dating to the mid-Ptolemaic period were found in the 22 graves of Graveyard 2 (Table 2). Cooking pots, bowls, jars, and *ungentaria* are among the shapes found both inside the wooden coffins and in the graves' coarse sand fill (Figs. 11 and 12—illustration for pottery). The pottery's date matches the date determined by the recorded size of the mudbricks. The burials were constructed/lined with $34 \times 17 \times 10$ cm, which are frequently documented in mid-Ptolemaic tombs of Philadelphia¹⁷.

No.	Excavation No.	Pot No.	No. of grave	Description	Dating ¹⁸
1	G102-A/d-2	Phc. 97/2021	102	Small bowl	Late period to Ptolemaic period ¹⁹
2	G102-A/d-2	Phc. 98/2021	102	Small bowl ²⁰	Late 3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent. BC
3	G106-A/c-2	Phc. 99/2021	106	Small bowl	Late 3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent. BC
4	G102-A/c-2	Phc. 104/2021	102	Jar	Ptolemaic period
5	G101-A/c-2	Phc. 99/2021	101	Jar	Ptolemaic period
6	G102-A/e-2	Phc. 105/2021	102	Unguentarium	2nd half of 3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent. BC
7	G106-A/c-2	Phc. 106/2021	106	Jug with ovoid body and one handle	Ptolemaic period
8	G106-A/c-1	Phc. 107/2021	106	Cooking pot with two handles	Ptolemaic period ²¹
9	G110-A/c-4	Phc. 103/2021	110	Large carinated bowl	3rd cent. BC
10	G110-A/c-2	Phc. 102/2021	110	Cooking pot	Ptolemaic period

TABLE 2. Summarized information of diagnostic pottery sherds found in GY2 graves.

¹⁷ For this reason, and as part of our work at the site, we collected mudbrick measurements. The results will be published in another article. They allow us to place the mudbrick buildings at various phases of use for the site, from the early Ptolemaic period to the late Roman period. We noticed the change in mudbrick size used for building from various dates. Representative examples of the change in sizes of a mudbrick unit from Philadelphia necropolis: Early-Ptolemaic graves and tombs (mudbrick size: $35 \times 17 \times 10$ cm and $35 \times 23 \times 11$ cm); mid-Ptolemaic period (mudbrick size: $33 \times 16 \times 10$ cm); Roman period tomb (mudbrick size: $26 \times 13 \times 9$ cm, as an example).

¹⁸ WODZINSKA 2010, pp. 22–50.

¹⁹ ASTON 1999, pp. 348–349.

²⁰ SCHREIBER 2016.

²¹ LAUFFRAY 1995, p. 94.



FIG. 11. Examples of pottery found in graves of GY2.

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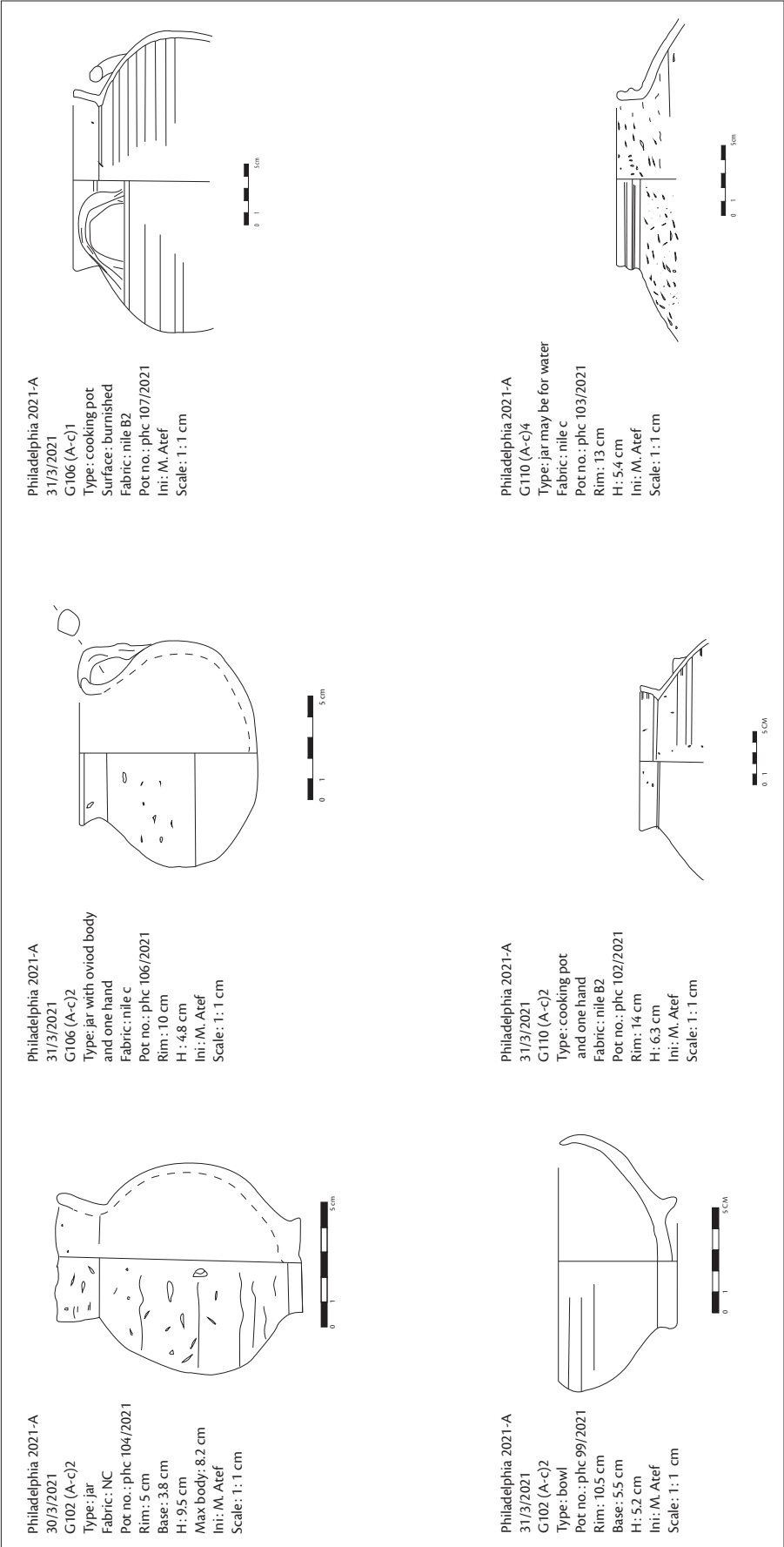


FIG. 12. Illustration of pottery found in graves of GY1.

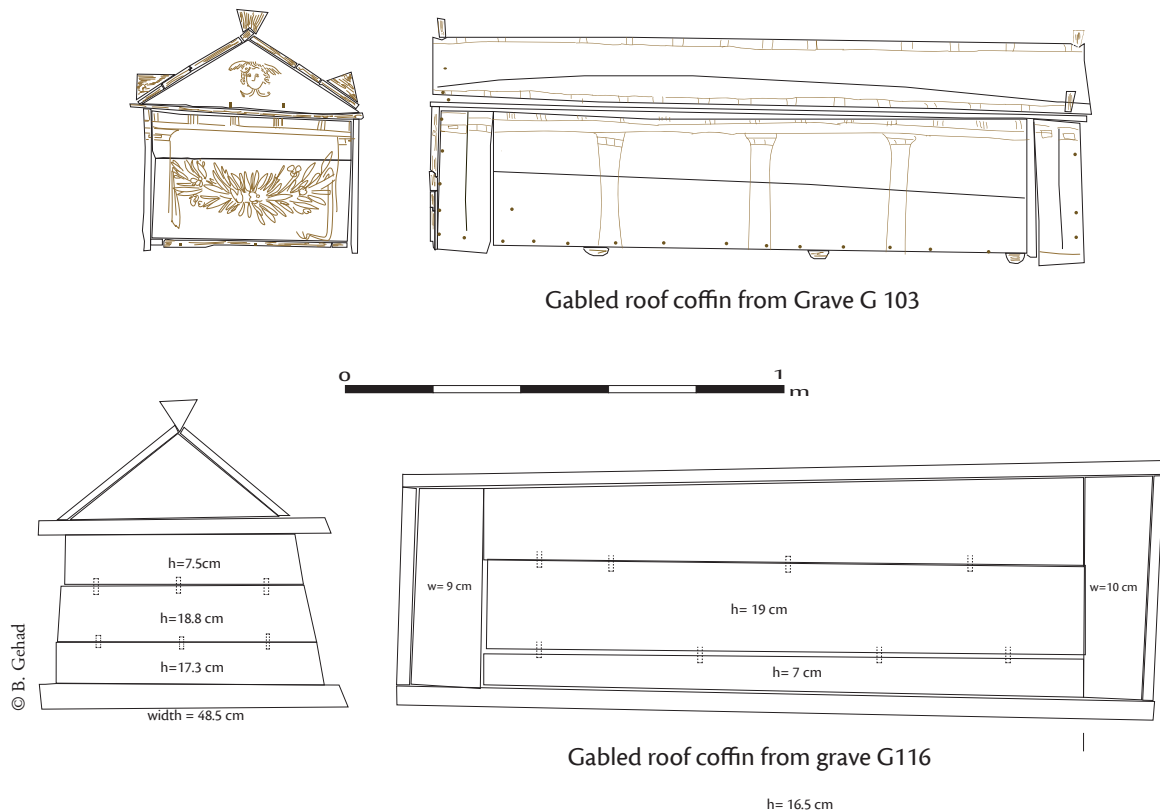


FIG. 13. Illustration of G103 and G115 gable-roof coffins and wood joining.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GABLE-ROOF COFFINS

These rectangular coffins have a pointed-top lid, also known as a gable roof. The gable-roof coffins were either painted, the paint having been applied directly to the wood without any preparation, or left unpainted, the wood planks having only been connected and polished. The painted examples may have been created in the same workshop since they share nearly identical decorating patterns and colors. The coffins found in G103 and G110 provide excellent examples of this style. G110 is a gable-roof coffin, made mostly of two boards that are joined at a 45-degree angle by a short piece of vertical plank; both sides are secured and attached with wooden pins. The roof or the lid is painted with a thin white strip with black bands flowing in a horizontal direction; there are strips of thick black lines on the central portion of the top of the roof as well as on the lower end of either side of the lid. Three double black and red lines and three broad white lines painted on a white background adorn the end of the lid where it joins the tympanum. The tympana—triangular-shaped wooden pieces on both sides of the lid with two sides, which are 20 cm long and have no paint—measure 35 cm at the base. Acroteria were a common element on practically every coffin with a gable roof that was discovered. Each tympanum had three acroteria attached to it: one on the top and two on the sides. The rectangular coffin box is built of thin wood panels, 133 cm long and 35 cm tall. The coffin box's flat horizontal wooden panels are decorated with a thick white background

band at the upper edge and, on the lower third, with a thin red line. Then, a vertical group of three black lines is regularly used. This ornament may be an imitation of the triglyph seen on the upper frieze of the entablature of a Greek temple. Three floral garments, or festoons, are painted in the middle of the horizontal side panels below. The festoon is primarily painted green with white and red accents and miniature white and red flowers. A red margin or swag runs vertically down each side of the festoon. Two vertical wooden pieces were placed at the ends of the horizontal side planks of the coffin and painted to resemble Doric columns. Another example of a Greek style coffin painted to resemble a Greek temple was not only this coffin from G110, but also the painted gable-roof coffin from G103 (Fig. 14), which was decorated in the same style as the coffin from G110, with three white Doric columns enclosing four spaces decorated with festoons. The pattern used in these coffins is widely attested: it was painted and represented in a wide range of media during the Ptolemaic period, including wall paintings, coffins of various materials, stone coffins,²² and also painted goblets.²³ In these depictions, garlands are typically shown suspended from the walls with ribbons hanging down. Similar representations can be found on a Ptolemaic sarcophagus from Alexandria's Gabbari cemetery.

Another Greek ornamental pattern found on the tympana of G103 coffin was the head of Gorgon or the gorgoneion, which projected what could be the medusa. According to Greek myth, this is utilized for protection and fortification, as well as a feminist symbol of power, that might also fit quite well with the identified sex of the human remains found inside the coffin for a young female.

Examples of unpainted gable-roof coffins were found in burials G102, G116 and VT12 at graveyard 2. These coffins feature the same design as the painted ones. However, additional information of manufacturing technology could eventually be understood and recorded. The wooden coffin from G116 is a helpful illustration for this. The coffin is constructed from 33 thin boards of wood. The dimensions of each component are as follows (see Fig. 13): two sides made out of three rectangular pieces joined one on top of the other, the width at the upper part of the sides of the coffin box was 45 cm and the width at the lower piece connected to the bottom of the coffin box was 48.5 cm, ensuring the coffins sides to tilt to an acute angle towards the top as well as the lid of the coffin. The two tympana are 39 cm long at the bottom of their rectangular shape, with a maximum height of 16 cm at their pointed end of each tympanum, where another rectangular wooden piece called *acroteria* is attached upside down. This little piece has a maximum length of 4 cm and a maximum width of 4 cm. The sides of the wooden coffin are composed of thin jointed wooden boards as well. Each of the three long planks measures 160 cm long and boasts a height of 7 cm for the bottom piece, 19 cm for the middle piece, and 17.7 cm for the upper piece. The three wooden planks are joined from both sides to two vertical sections that are almost 9 cm wide and 47 cm tall. The thickness of these wooden planks or boards was 1 cm thick in most of the parts, except for the bottom of the rectangular wooden box of the coffin, which was 2 cm thick, most likely to retain the body weight inside the coffin.

²² NENNA 2018.

²³ RODZIEWICZ 2020, p. 120 and Fig. 208. GRM inventory number 3772.



Painted gabled roof coffin from grave number G103.



Painted gabled roof coffin from grave number G110.



Gabled roof coffin from grave number G116.

FIG. 14. Examples of gable-roof coffins from GY2.

IMPORTANT FINDS AND RELATION TO THE BURIALS

Aside from the gable-roof coffins, grave goods and cultural materials discovered with the burials, particularly inside the coffins, were among the most significant discoveries at the site. These objects are strongly associated with Greek culture and demonstrate its impact on these burials. A female figurine terracotta statue was discovered inside the painted gable-roof coffin of grave G110, beside the wrapped young girl's left leg. The naked female figurine (Fig. 15) measures 56 cm in length, 15 cm in width, and is 5 cm thick. It was made of brown Nile silt with mica. A firing hole could be observed on the back, indicating that it was a hollow figurine cast from a two-piece mould. The details show the high quality of the workshop and the condition of the mold used; the clay terracotta is whitewashed and painted only from the observer's perspective (the reverse is unpainted). The statue is a standing female figurine with her arms extended at her sides, legs closed, and hands flat on her thighs; she wears sandals with red ropes. The body is rounded, with white hips, and the pubic area is emphasized with black paint. The curly hair is painted black and arranged in two rows; it may be seen from the back, imitating the statues of Ptolemaic queens. A painted kalathos, or fruit basket, which could be termed her crown, adorns her head. The lips are red, the body is a light shade of pink, and the eyes are brown. The figurine is adorned with clay-modelled representations of expensive jewels and accessories, including an anklet on each leg, bracelets on the upper left arm and wrist, and a necklace. The shoulders rise above her breast. Two belts that cross each other extend across the torso. One, made of clay, emerges from the right shoulder and is painted black. It has a central knot and a piece of jewellery is painted red in the middle and green around the edge. The other belt is depicted only with red and green paint. According to Martin Fink, the naked style and naked figurine statues were symbols of fertility.²⁴

Parallel examples can be found in the British Museum, such as the terracotta figurines identified by Donald M. Bailey as Hathor (catalogue no. 2993 EA, 2994 EA, 2991 EA). They were purchased by Chauncy Murch, according to Budge from a collection of family tombs.²⁵ Although the exact provenance



FIG. 15. Painted female terracotta figurine found inside gable-roof coffin of grave G110.

²⁴ FINK 2008, abb 1.

²⁵ BAILEY 2008, pp. 22–23.

remains unknown, they are most likely from Tuna el Gebel, where other gilded coffin fragments were purchased around the same time, or from Meir, both locations in Middle Egypt, where such terracotta were common. All three were dated on stylistic grounds to the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC.²⁶ These examples thus fit with the dating of our example from the necropolis of ancient Philadelphia, which is based on pottery, typology of graves, and mudbrick sizes. Thus, based both on its archaeological context and comparison with other examples, this statue can be dated to the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC.

Nevertheless, I am aware of no parallels from scientific excavations or with known provenance. Because of this murky context, a precise date for these figurines in general and the identity of this figure in particular, remains an open question. Although the statue could be a representation of Hathor, the absence of the solar disc and horn that are usually depicted on the frontal part of the kalathos of other examples of Hathor makes the identification of this terracotta as Hathor doubtful.²⁷ Neither is our example identical to terracotta depictions of Isis, Isis Anasyromene, or Isis Thermuthis.²⁸ Marie-Dominique Nenna identified as Isis-Aphrodite similar terracotta statues from Alexandria dating from the Ptolemaic period, as well as other examples from Athribis and an example of unknown provenance and debated date currently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (accession No. 1991.76).²⁹ Therefore, the nature and function of this female terracotta statue could be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, some features and parallels of this statue could identify it as a representation of Isis-Aphrodite, while others point to a type of Hathor statue type that was found in both domestic and funeral contexts.

Just as the statue's identity is uncertain, it could also serve multiple functions. For instance, the statue might represent a protective and rebirth deity or, perhaps, these figurines were used as a child's doll to be kept in the afterlife, although such an interpretation would be an underestimation of the statue's artistic value, as discussed by M.-D. Nenna.³⁰

Twenty-five amulets were discovered inside the painted gable-roof wooden coffins (Fig. 16). Made of stones and semi-precious stones, they were found in an array of shapes, including pigs, a frog, a hand, a leg, inscribed scarabs, and various beads. These beads and amulets appear to have formed a necklace worn by the deceased child. These amulets are almost miniatures of larger examples. Twelve of them are made of either bone or ivory; the composition of the others requires further investigation, because sampling was nearly impossible due to the size of the object. Two of the bone (ivory?) ones are shaped like an arm with a hand; one is a closed hand while the other is opened. Two represent pigs; one is in the shape of a frog; another in the shape of a leg with foot; one is in the shape of a comb; and, finally, there are three small domestic birds, most likely a duck and two pigeons. One cylindrical amulet was made of quartz, three of carnelian, three of natural shell, one of which still has the traces of the scarlet

²⁶ See the other parallel examples in BESQUES 1992 from Alexandria, dated to the second half of the 3rd century BC; ADRIANI 1952, pl. XIV from Ras el-soda, dated to the Ptolemaic period (3rd to 2nd centuries BC); also SZYMANSKA 2005, plate no. 24 dated to the beginning of 2nd century BC from Athribis.

²⁷ BAILEY 2008, p. 23, object no. 2997 GR.

²⁸ For Isis Anasyromene see BAILEY 2008, terracotta no. 3001 EA for Isis, no. 3017 EA, 3018 EA for Isis Thermuthis, 3006 EA, 3007 EA.

²⁹ The museum has dated this statue to the middle of the 2nd century AD, but I hope to discuss the date in a future article.

³⁰ NENNA 2012. An overview in BALLETT 2020, pp. 129–132.



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FIG. 16. Set of amulets found with the burial inside the coffin of G110.



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FIG. 17. Floral wreath found inside gabled roof coffin of grave G116.

cord that was used to tie the amulet set together, and three of faience, two of which resemble scarabs and one Bes. Another is made of wood in the shape of a male African face. Some or all of these may be examples of so-called *crepundia*.³¹ If so, they would be rare examples of *crepundia* in Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The word *crepundia* originates from the verb “to rattle,”³² and may have been employed to quiet fussy newborns. Hence, *crepundia* becomes a sign of infancy. During the Hellenistic and Roman eras, these rattles were handcrafted and featured unique figures. Because they were produced specifically for a certain child, these *crepundia* may have been used to identify missing children. A similar principle might be used for the afterlife, allowing the family to recognize their cherished child.

Flower wreaths or plant-made crowns were among the cultural materials discovered with burials in GY2 (Fig. 17). Two floral wreaths were wound around the heads of an adult male in GI16 and a toddler in GI19; they were made of plant reeds and leaves of basil (*Ocimum basilicum*; Arabic حَبَّ forming an ovoid or horseshoe-shaped crown. The basil grows on the bank of the present canal of Bahr Wahba near the site’s western boundary, which is now only a few metres from the path of historic Ptolemaic canal’s path, where this dried-up basil was most likely harvested.

CONCLUSION

Rituals and cultural identity are a complicated phenomenon—both not only for our modern interpreters but, also, for ancient communities. One of the few ways to comprehend the interconnectedness between ritual and belief is through the study of funeral procedures and customs. It is striking that the burial ground studied in this article revealed no ancient Egyptian anthropoids (human-shaped coffins), whereas such anthropoids were widespread and had previously been discovered in ancient Philadelphia in a separate area. Nevertheless, this was not the case with Graveyard 2. The majority of coffins discovered at Philadelphia at GY2 were gable-roof/lid wooden coffins (painted and unpainted), in addition to the tube ceramic coffins in infant graves. Could this be a result of the identity of the people buried there?

The presence of many aspects of Greek art in the cultural material, coffins, and burial customs observed in this area at the cemetery—especially the gable-roof coffin with its Greek influenced motives—leads me to propose that Philadelphia, as a new village, was a new attractive hub for people, from different nations around the Mediterranean during the late 3rd century³³ and increasingly during the 2nd century BC. Indeed, during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, the village of ancient Philadelphia was a veritable microcosm where virtually every ethnic group lived with their own customs and beliefs³⁴. This has been demonstrated by published papyrological materials, as well as new data obtained by the Egyptian mission in recent years. Among these are the inscription at VT10 and the Greek petition of Leonides the Thracian discovered

³¹ DASEN 2015, pp. 293–318.

³² CHRISTOPHER 2007, p. 17.

³³ MANNING 2010, pp. 55–72.

³⁴ MUELLER 2006.

during the sixth season of our excavation.³⁵ He resided in ancient Philadelphia between 179 and 154 BC, while Theodoros was the *epistates* of Philadelphia.³⁶ This information is vital, not just because it was discovered near GY2, but also because it corresponds extremely well with the date of the tombs studied in this article.

Without exception, all of the graves were oriented east to west. The condition of the substructure building varied, but in most cases a single person was buried in the grave, either directly or undercut with mudbrick blocking or other special preparations. The group of graves that were excavated and recorded within the GY2 area could be understood as Greek (Hellenistic) burials of individuals who resided in Philadelphia during the mid-Ptolemaic period, or as examples of Greek influence on Egyptians who were living side by side with Greeks and others. Although it is not (yet) possible to decide definitely between these two possibilities, they do suggest the consistent use of burial customs in one area of the cemetery. Furthermore, these findings may show how distinct ethnic groups, who were living in ancient Philadelphia but following different customs, used the space in the necropolis.³⁷ Aside from anthropoid ones, architecturally shaped coffins were also known in Egypt at least as early as the New Kingdom and started to be used more often during the Third Intermediate Period.³⁸ These coffins did not, however, have pointed tops or gables like those discussed here; notably, those from the Third Intermediate Period had barrel vault lids, which, according to some experts, had an architectural design resembling the Per Nu or the palace of the north; they are sometimes referred to as *grsw*-coffins.³⁹ While examples of these coffins have been found in Egypt at several places, the specimens (gable-roof coffins) from Philadelphia discussed in this article were the first to be recorded from this location.

Concerning the ceramic/pottery tubular coffins⁴⁰ discovered in GY2, parallel examples for the small, cylindrical-shaped coffins, occasionally closed on one or both sides by ceramic slabs, bricks, or stones were documented in the el Gabbari necropolis in Alexandria used since the

³⁵ GEHAD et al. 2023. See also GEHAD et al. 2022a.

³⁶ The same village *epistates* is addressed in another petition BGU 6.1251 (155/144 BC); another element for dating the same papyrus was the presence of the officer Galestes, whose name appears in dated contracts executed during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor (between 180–164 BC and 163–145 BC).

³⁷ According to what was discovered from the excavation results at the ancient Philadelphia necropolis, the architectural types of burial shafts and burials placed inside wooden anthropoid coffins with ancient Egyptian style and decorative program (for example, scenes and texts from the Book of the Dead) could only be found in the far south-east section of the site. This previously mentioned architectural type entirely disappears as one moves towards the cemetery's central and western area. Hypogea and built catacombs with loculi have replaced Pharaonic Egyptian stereotype shafts. The reason is yet unknown. However, these Greek-influenced coffins and graves are rare examples of what has been reported from other sites at Fayoum, while strong parallels have been found in Alexandria. The argument to establish Philadelphia for new residents from the Mediterranean or ancient Greek world might be presented. These new settlers either affected burial practices or used specific cemetery spots for their own funeral practices. The subject is currently one of main research questions of our excavation project. At the time of writing this article, we have been able to attribute the presence or absence of certain architectural styles, but we are currently working on the actual cause of the vast spectrum of architectural styles. It should also be noted that papyri tell us about the Alexandrian artists, craftsmen, and architects who came to work in Philadelphia (for example, the Zenon archive, see Papyrus no. P. Cair.Zen.59782), which might also explain how the architecture and burial practice from Alexandria were transferred to the newly established village. See NOWICKA 1984.

³⁸ For example, the coffins of Heresenes, Padiamunet, Nespaqashuty, Shauamunimes.

³⁹ MAY SHEIKHOESLAMI 2018.

⁴⁰ Similar but not identical examples were recorded from Abusir—north Saqqara, see COTELLE-MICHEL 2004.

3rd century BC.⁴¹ The poor level of mummification—especially compared to other very well embalmed mummies found in Egyptian anthropoid coffins from the same date from burial shafts in the southeastern area of the cemetery in ancient Philadelphia—was one significant finding from the examination of the buried individuals. All these findings may suggest a clear division between the designated burial space within the cemetery’s organizational structure; these spaces would have been demarcated in terms of the burial rituals followed and performed, as well as the undertakers’ rights to carry out their duties in designated cemetery regions in accordance with the beliefs of the group of people these undertakers were in charge of.⁴² Alternatively, this area may consist of burials of upper middle class individuals who were either Hellenized Egyptians or Greeks inspired by Egyptian rituals. Greek coffin designs are combined with an Egyptian wrapping style, and various other funeral materials, such as the floral wreath, that may correspond with Egyptian beliefs. For instance, spells 19 and 20 of the Book of the Dead were to be read while a floral wreath was placed on the deceased’s brow in anticipation of the one that was awarded after being vindicated in the hall of judgement for slaying Osiris and Ra’s enemies.

Another finding was the predominance of female individuals buried in GY2 in the excavation site area: 13 female and just 2 male individuals. It is possible that this reflected the mortality rate for women.⁴³ The majority of prevalent diseases in antiquity were associated with various community life styles; nearly 50% of the funerals were of children under the age of 10.

Finally, the cultural artefacts discovered in some of these graves, such as a painted terracotta figure, a group of miniature amulets, and others provide important data about the rituals and beliefs of the community of ancient Philadelphia. While these grave goods are common in many burial contexts, they take on a unique significance when they are included in a Greek-style coffin. This is especially true of the terracotta statue that may reflect to some extent the union of Isis and Aphrodite. Consequently, the findings from recent excavations at the ancient Philadelphia necropolis show how the newly founded Ptolemaic village was a multi-cultural society. These findings contribute to our understanding of how people lived in this society during the Ptolemaic period; they show that they practiced the same “Alexandrian” style of life and death that persisted until the end of the Roman period.⁴⁴

⁴¹ NENNA 2012.

⁴² For more about undertakers and their work in Philadelphia see: ARMONI 2013. See also CLAYTOR 2022.

⁴³ The female to male percentage in this section of the necropolis remains the highest among all excavated and studied areas, it is worth noting that in all of the tombs and graveyards that have been excavated at Philadelphia, the percentage of females to males turned out to be 3:1, and the percentage of child (from birth age to subadult) to adult was 2:1. This might suggest the high risk of death for both children and women as a result of various challenges linked to health care, particularly at a young age, as well as pregnancy complications and immunity in such circumstances.

⁴⁴ For more about Roman part of the cemetery at ancient Philadelphia see GEHAD et al. 2022b.

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