

FUNERARY SYMBOLISM IN ROMAN TIMES IN OXYRHYNCHUS (EL-BAHNASA)



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Abstract

In the 2019 excavation season, a new sector (Sector 36) was opened in the Upper Necropolis one of the most important and extensive area of Oxyrhynchus that covers a very wide chronological framework: from the Saite period to the Christian-Byzantine period, including the Persian and Ptolemaic-Roman times (664 BC 7th century).

The archaeological works in this sector have continued during the years 2022-2020 and the results have been very satisfactory. Here we have found several Ptolemaic-Roman tombs built with limestones blocks, many mummified female and male individuals, some of them cover with a thin gold leaf and with or without polychrome cartonnages, golden tongues and mud seals with figures of animals, divinities and inscriptions.

Keywords: Upper Necropolis, Saite period, Christian-Byzantine period, cartonnages, mummy

ملخص البحث

الرَّمْزِيَّةُ الْجَنَائِزِيَّةُ خِلَالِ الْعَصْرِ الرُّومَانِيِّ بِأُوكْسِيرِينْخُوسِ (الْبَهْنَسَا)

خِلَالِ مَوْسَمِ حَفَائِرِ ٢٠١٩ م تَمَّ فَتْحُ مَنطَقَةٍ جَدِيدَةٍ (القطاع ٣٦) بِالْجَبَانَةِ الْعُلْيَا وَهِيَ إِحْدَى أَهَمِّ وَأَشْمَلِ مَنَاطِقِ أُوكْسِيرِينْخُوسِ حَيْثُ تُغَطِّي مَدَى زَمَنِي كَبِيرٍ لِلْغَايَةِ: مِنَ الْفَتْرَةِ الصَّاوِيَّةِ حَتَّى الْفَتْرَةِ الْمَسِيحِيَّةِ الْبِيْزَنْطِيَّةِ، بِمَا فِي ذَلِكَ الْعَصْرِ الْفَارْسِيِّ وَالْبَطْلَمِيِّ الرُّومَانِيِّ (مِنْ ٦٦٤ ق. م - الْقَرْنُ السَّابِعِ). اسْتَمَرَّتْ أَعْمَالُ الْحَفَائِرِ بِهَذِهِ الْمَنطَقَةِ خِلَالِ الْأَعْوَامِ ٢٠٢٠ - ٢٠٢٢ م وَكَانَتْ النَّتَائِجُ مَرْضِيَّةً لِلْغَايَةِ، حَيْثُ تَمَّ الْعُثُورُ عَلَى أَلْعَدِيدِ مِنَ الْمَقَابِرِ الْمَبْنِيَّةِ بِالْكُتْلِ الْجَبَرِيَّةِ تُورِّخُ لِلْعَصْرِ الْبَطْلَمِيِّ الرُّومَانِيِّ، وَالْعَدِيدِ مِنَ الْمَوْمِيَاوَاتِ لِذَكَوْرٍ وَإِنَاثٍ، غَطَّى بَعْضُهَا بِشَرَائِحَ ذَهَبِيَّةٍ رَقِيْقَةٍ، مَعَ اسْتِخْدَامِ أَوْ بِدُونِ كَارْتُونَاكِجٍ مُتَعَدِّدِ الْأَلْوَانِ، أَلْسِنَةِ ذَهَبِيَّةٍ، وَأَخْتَامٍ طِينِيَّةٍ صُوِّرَ عَلَيْهَا أَشْكَالُ حَيَوَانَاتٍ وَمَعْبُودَاتٍ وَزَخَارِفٍ.

الكلمات الدالة: الجبانة العليا - العصر الصاوي - العصر البيزنطي المسيحي - كرتوناك.

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The Archaeological Site of Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa) the ancient city of Per-Medjed in Saite period, is located 190km South of Cairo on the banks of the Bar Yusuf. In the year 2019 (February 26th-March 22th)¹ we opened a new area called Sector 36 in the Upper Necropolis, one of the most important and extensive area of Oxyrhynchus that covers a very wide chronological framework: from the Saite period to the Christian-Byzantine period, including the Persian and Ptolemaic-Roman times (664 BC-7th century) (fig.1 foto aerea)

This area is located to the west of the Roman Tomb N° 3 (Erroux-Morfin 2014: 199-212) and the Saite Tomb N° 1.² During four seasons (2019-2022) we have worked in this Sector and it is really it is very interesting for the study of the funeral rites in Oxyrhynchus because we have found eight Ptolemaic-Roman tombs.³

All the Roman tombs are built with white limestone blocks (more or less 50cm length), they have one or more chambers, a vaulted ceiling, always have the entrance by a shaft or a stair kind and they are not complete. All the graves had mummified individuals with bandages with a rhomboidal pattern and in a supine position. In general they have their hands placed on their thighs and are in bad state of conservation.⁴ In the season 2019 we found two Roman tombs (39 and 40).⁵

TOMB 39

The tomb 39 had the entrance by the South with a staircase with 5 steps and two chambers.⁶ Inside the first funerary chamber and next the door we found five mummified individuals⁷ and in the middle of it had seven mummies.⁸ In general the mummies were in bad condition but the most important thing is than one of them⁹ had between the bandages (pelvis) two mud seals,¹⁰ one with the image of Hawk-Horus framed in a square and the other one circle.

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[2] Padró (2014), 21-35.

[3] We have also found eight tombs of the Persian period very relevant in Oxyrhynchus because until the season of 2019 we had never found tombs of this period, and two Saite tombs, one of them totally untouched and with all the funeral equipment.

[4] The study of these individuals has made by Dr. Bibiana Agustí and Francesca Pullia.

[5] In this season we found under the room 1 of Christian-Byzantine period a Persian Tomb (N° 38) built with big limestone blocks. Padró et al. (2019), 11-14; Mascort and Pons, (2021a), 371-382; Mascort and Pons, (2021b), 707-710, figs. 1, 2; Mascort and Pons (forthcoming 1); Pons and Mascort (forthcoming 2).

[6] Measures of the first chamber: 4.55m of length; 2.86m of wide. The second room was smaller than the first and was totally empty. Measures: 1.89m of length; 2.67m of wide.

[7] 36036-36039 and 36051.

[8] 36053-36058.

[9] 36058.

[10] 2019/32a-b. Measures: 3.3cm x 3.4cm.



TOMB 40

The tomb 40 was situated to the West of the grave 39 and it has also two chambers but the entrance is through a shaft. Although this tomb was discovered in 2019 the archaeological works were finished in the season 2020 (February 14th –March 14th).¹¹

In 2019 we documented in the first room¹² seven mummified individuals with remains of polychrome cartonages in bad conditions. Six of them were in a south-north position¹³ and the other was placed in the opposite direction (north-south).¹⁴ Only one of them had two mud seals between the bandages,¹⁵ one of them with the images an ureus in front of a hare framed in a square. Unfortunately it is not possible to identify the image of the other seal (fig. 2). The pottery found inside these tombs have been dated from the Imperial period, probably around the second-third centuries CE.

In season 2020 we discovered the shaft of the entrance to this grave and we continued working in the first funerary chamber.¹⁶ Here we found other five mummified individuals, four of them were in a south-north position,¹⁷ another one was placed in the opposite direction (north-south).¹⁸ One of them was a baby who preserved part of a cartonnage and a plaster mask with on the side the representation of a sphinx. Near of him we found other mask covered with gold leaf and the image of a ureus however it was in bad state of conservation. Unfortunately it is not possible to know the owner of this object. In addition to finishing the work in the tomb 40 we discovered two new Roman tombs (42 and 48).¹⁹

TOMB 42

The Tomb 42²⁰ has only one funerary chamber with the entrance by the east with a shaft. It was very interesting to see that the limestone blocks of the voussoirs of the roof were preserved vertically and not horizontally as is customary in the Roman period.²¹

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[12] Measures of the first chamber: 5.35m of length; 2.70m of wide. The second room was empty. Measures: 2.15m of length; 2.70m of wide.

[13] 36086-36091.

[14] 36092.

[15] 2019/46. Measures: 3.3cm x 3.5cm; 2019/47. Measures: 3.4/3.3cm.

[16] Mascort et al. (2020): 9-10, 30; fig. 41-24, 91.

[17] 36173, 36175, 36183, 36185.

[18] 36184

[19] In 2020 we discovered also six Persian tombs built with big limestone blocks, three of them under the floor of room N^o 7 of Christian-byzantine period (N^o 41, 43 and 44), three under the floor of the Tomb 42 (N^o 46 and 47) and one under the floor of the Roman Tomb 40 (N^o 45).

[20] Mascort et al. (2020): 11-15, 27, 29-31, 33-34; figs. 41a-b, 71, 87, 90, 92, 93, 102-104, 107-108; Mascort and Pons (2021b): 710-715, figs. 4a-e, 5, 6a-e, 7a-d; Mascort and Pons (forthcoming 1); Pons and Mascort (forthcoming 2).

[21] Measures: 5.7m of length and 2.75m of wide.

In the eastern side of the tomb we found seven mummified individuals of which six presented an east-west orientation.²² Two of them, a male 36182 and a female 36181, were located next to the north wall and they had the bandages in a well state of conservation (fig. 3). The male mummy had two mud seals and the positive of one of them.²³ The female mummie 36181 was covered with a polychrome helmet mask in bad condition and the face was very destroyed. The mask had a black long curls, eyes and eyebrows painted in black color, a headband with a sun disk and two Uraei with gold leaf,²⁴ two blue earrings and a necklace with a half-moon pendant²⁵ covered with gold leaf as the chin. The pectoral of the the helmet mask had geometric motifs and a symmetrical decoration with the images of Osiris, Isis and the deceased with the raised arms, one cartouche in the centre and very prominent breasts in blue and covered with gold leaf and the nipples also highlighted with gold leaf (fig. 4.). This individual had four mud seals on the pelvis, thighs and ribs²⁶ and two fragments of papyri in connection with the seals.²⁷

The body 36144 had a mud seal on the pelvis with the image of Anubis framed in a square;²⁸ the mummy 36186 had four mud seals²⁹ and one fragment of papyrus on the ribs³⁰ and the body 36188 had other mud seal with the imagen of a hare framed in a square.³¹ The seventh deceased 36187 was a child and he had the orientation south-north and preserved one mud seal.³²

On the western side of this tomb we found other six mummified individuals in a bad state of conservation and some disarticulated bones which was impossible to ascribe to a specific individual. The mummy 36204 had between the bandage a very interesting mud seal because it had the Egyptian inscription "Eternal Life"³⁴ (fig. 5).

²² 36144, 36145, 36181, 36182, 36186, 36188.

²³ 2020/141. Image of a hare. Measures: 2.4cm x 2.3cm; 2020/142. Measures: 2.3cm x 3.5cm; 2020/143. Positive of the seal 2020/142. Measures: 2.8cm x 3.8cm.

²⁴ We have some cartonnages with a headdand very similar. Codina and Pons (2014),1220; Pons (2015), 300.

²⁵ In the Area 32 of the Upper Necropolis we located in 2012 a cartonnage and a female stone sculpture with a very similar pendant. Codina, y Pons (2014): 1221; Padró et al. (2012):4-5.

²⁶ 2020/65. Image of Anubis framed in a square (ribs). Measures: 2.7cm x 3.1cm; 2020/66. Identifiable image (pelvis). Measures: 3cm x 3.4cm; 2020/67. Image of a two figures and an offering table framed in a square (thighs). Measures: 3cm x 3.1cm; 2020/70. A hole in the centre (thighs).

²⁷ 2020/68; 2020/71. The study has been made by Dr. Leah Mascia. The papyri are written in Greek language although too little in order to comprehend the exact nature of these documents.

²⁸ 2020/64. Measures: 2.9cm x 3.2cm.

²⁹ 2020/76. Image of half of a hare framed in a square (chest) Measures: 2cm x 2.8cm; 2020/78. Image of a rectangle (vertebrae). Measures: 4.1cm x 4.6cm; 2020/79. It was in very bad condition (pelvis). Measures: 2.6cm x 2.3cm; 2020/77a. Measures: 2.1cm x 3.6cm.

³⁰ 2020/77b. See the footnote 23.

³¹ 2020/83. Measures: 2.5cm x 2.7cm.

³² 2020/69. Measures: 2.4cm x 2.6cm.

³³ 36201, 36203-36208.

³⁴ 2020/110. Measures: 4.6cm x 4.7.6cm

Finally, on the northwest was found other mummified individual 36192 who was covered by a white mummy case finely decorated. The head and the mask were found separated of the body.³⁵

The facial features of the mask are very coarse. It has a black short curls, eyes and eyebrows painted in black color. The body of the cartonnage has the arms folded over the torax with the fists touching, and presents a zoomorphic decoration with the image of two fishes: an oxyrhynchus and a lepidote facing each other very similar to other cartonnages that we have located in previous seasons³⁶ and a sarcohgahus found in the room 1 of Roman Tomb N^o 3.³⁷

In addition of these two fishes the cartonnage is also decorated with two Apis Bulls as well as several Egyptian divinities such as the god Horus with a hawk-headed with a human body and a libation vessel, the goddess Isis, the god Anubis as chacal and the god Osiris (fig. 6).

These representations are accompanied by inscriptions in Greek both on the right side of the legs (painted in black color) and under the feet (incisions in red color). However, the inscriptions are in bad conservation and they cannot be completely identified and are under study but they refer to a men called Potamon son of Sarapionos Apamon.³⁸

Between the bandages had a mud seal decorated with a blade framed in a square³⁹

The pottery found inside this tomb have been dated from the Imperial period, probably around the second-third centuries CE.

TOMB 48

The Tomb 48⁴⁰ is located to the north of the Tomb 42 and has two fuenrary chambers with the entrance for the east. The first chamber conserved only part the walls while the second room had the walls and a big part of the vaulted ceiling.

In this season 2020 we were not able to finish the archaeological works of this tomb because in the beginning of March the COVID-19 arrived and finally we worked only in one part of the first funerary chamber. This room had a pseudo-anthromorphic limestone sarcophagus (anepigraphic) with a lid was broken in two parts and one of them was on the floor. It was looted and it only preserved remains of the male individual buried and a few bones of a subadult, which possibly ended up in the sarcophagus during the looting.

³⁵ Mascort and Pons (2023): 110-115.

³⁶ Padró et al. (2009), 10-13, figs. 25, 36, 37.

³⁷ Padró and Erroux-Morfin (2004): 402, 405, 406.

³⁸ The study of this cartonnage is being carry out by Dr. Leah Mascia.

³⁹ 2020/139. Measures: 2.8cm x 1.5cm.

⁴⁰ Mascort et ali. (2020): 15-16, figs. 42-44; Mascort and Pons (forthcoming 1); Pons and Mascort (forthcoming 2).

During the season 2021 (November 8th-December 10th)⁴¹ we continued working in the Tomb 48. First we started in the second funerary chamber but unfortunately it had been saqued and it was empty and we located only remains of an antropomophic polychrome coffin with geometric and floral motifs, a necklace and the representation of several divinities as the four sons of Horus, Hapi and the image of a winged goddess, perhaps Isis. The representations are accompanied by Egyptians inscriptions in black color.⁴² Then we decided to focus our work to the east of the first room to see if the entrance was a shaft or stair type, but we saw very soon that it was totally destroyed. However we found several fallen limestone blocks belonging to this grave and remains of bones of the Roman period. One of these bones was part of a skull (36359) and inside the mouth, on the tongue, there was a golden leaf with a marked central groove.⁴³ On the other hand, we worked also in the east and west area of the Christian-Byzantine Crypt N° 2. In the first strata of the west area we located two mummified individuals of Roman period in bad conservation (36220 and 36221), but the last of them (36221), a child of 11 year old, had a mud seal with a circle in the centre;⁴⁴ under these strata was other two mummies (36232, 36233), also in bad conditions, but one of them (36232) had 29 bottons of plaster covered with a very thin golden leaf (fig.7). These bottons should be placed in the center of the rhomboidal decoration of the bandages as the bodies of the Fayum Portraits. The four bodies had orientation north-south. In the first strata of the east zone we discovered another two mummified individuals both recovered with a polychrome cartonnage (35258, 36266). The cartonnage of the first body, a child of 5-6 years old, presented a pick color tunic up to the knee with black bands and geometric motifs in the zone of the feet but the cartonnage lacked of Egyptian images as Isis, Osiris, Horus or Thot. The feet had a sandals with black strips with a centrl botton. This kind of cartonnage is new in Oxyrhynchus because so far they had Egyptian representations. However the cartonnage of the second body, an adult, had a decoration with the image of winged hawk Horus in red and black color and two feathers representing to the Justice, and the feet are decorated with sandals in black strips and a botton in the centre (fig. 8).

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⁴² 36347. Mascort et ali (2020): 15-17, figs. 34-37.

⁴³ 2021/37. Measures: 4.8 cm x 2.4cm.

After cleaning the area of the east of the tomb 48 we found two Saite tombs (53 and 54). The grave 53 was saqued but inside had a female individual, the limestone sarcophagus, many beads belonging to the funeral mesh and only one headrest amulet of hematite, but the tomb 54 was untouched with the male mummified individual, the limestone sarcophagus and all the funerary objects (canopic jars with inscriptions and the viscera inside its, 399 shabtis, a jar with remains of textile for the mummification, many beads belonging to the funeral mesh and several amulets).

⁴⁴ 2021/9. Measures: 3.5cm x 1.9cm.



Next to this individual there was a clay pottery with two small handles and inside we found a human fetus of more or less five months (36363). After discovering all these individuals we continued digging in the west of Crypt N° 2 and we discovered other tomb of Roman period (N° 52).

TOMB 52

This grave had the entrance by the south and was in very bad conditions because it conserved only two rows of limestone blocks only.⁴⁵ In the upper strata (north area), we found five mummies (36237, 36316, 36317, 36322 and 36337). The first individual 36237 was in orientation south-west had a complete cartonnage with the decoration of a tunic up the unkles and over it had a toga with very marked folds and with two purple strips purple strips that indicate us that this man was possibly a magistrate. He have been dated to the 1st-2nd century. The face was almost lost but it conserved remains of a diadem and curls of black color.

On an immediately lower level of the 36237 there was the mummy 36322, also in orientation south-west, with a complete cartonnage with the decoration of a tunic up the unkles and over it had a toga with very marked folds. As the individual 36237 he had a tunic with two purple strips purple strips that indicate us that this man was possibly a magistrate. He had very decorated sandals in red and black color with a central botton and the nails were highly reviewed.

The aspect of the face was very interesting because he had a moustage and beard painted in black color, in adittion of Little curls also in black color. This type of face was unknown until now in Oxyrhynchus and because if it we think that perhaps this man was not Egyptian person or he was influenced by foreign customs, perhaps of the oriental area.

Under this body there was other deceased in very bad condition (36337) and unfortunately the cartonnage covered only part of the legs.

To the north-west of them had th body 36316, an adult female in very bad condition and arranged in a vertical position who had lost part of the legs and had remains of gold leaf covering several zones of the body: shoulders, arms, eyes and pelvis); close of her, the mummy 36317 was located in orientation north-south was a baby of 3/4 years old and had on the area of the abdomen a mud seal with the Egyptian inscription "Eternal life", very similar to the seal found in 2020, and under it a papyrus folded in several layers with fragments of tissue, often used in magical practices.⁴⁶ During the anthropological

⁴⁵ Mascort et al. (2021): 11-13, figs. 21-26; Mascort and Pons (forthcoming 1); Pons and Mascort (forthcoming 2).

⁴⁶ Mud seal: 2021/22. Measures: 4.4cm x 4.1 cm; Papyrus: 2021/23.

study was discovered a small golden tongue inside the mouth⁴⁷ (figs. 9-10). Finally on the pavement we have recuperated four mummified individuals in orientation east-west,⁴⁸ and other four more in orientation north-south (head to the south).⁴⁹ In this last case, the dead 36345, a child of 5/6 years old had a mud seal between the pelvis and the abdomen⁵⁰ and under it had a fragment of papyrus with a Greek inscription.⁵¹ All of them were in bad condition and they had lost part of the bandages.

Conclusiones

The Sector 36 belonging to the Upper Necropolis and opened in 2019 is one of the most important areas in the Site of Oxyrhynchus for the study of the funeral rites of the Roman period. As is customary in the graves of this period they are built with white limestones blocks and have one or more chambers, a vaulted ceiling and the entrance is always by a shaft or a stair kind. Inside them there are mummified individuals with bandages with a geometrical motifs, as well as many clay potteries or fragments of them. Some of the individuals are covered with polychrome cartonnages or plaster mummy case and have between the bandages mud seals and papyri with Greek inscriptions.

The archaeological works in the Sector 36 are not finished and we are sure that the next seasons will give us new and very interesting findings that they allow us to complete the study of the funeral rites in this relevant period of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus (Fig. 11).

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[47] 2021/29. Measures: 1.6cm x 0.9cm. In this season the anthropologists have work with a female mummy of 18/25 years old that was discovered in 2014 (Sector 26) and they found over the tongue a thin golden leaf. So far we have found in Oxyrhynchus 14 thin golden tongues belonging to the Roman period.

[48] 36346 (head to the west); 36352 (baby), 36353 and 36354. All these mummies had the head to east.

[49] 36267, 36275, 36344, 36345.

[50] 2021/33. Measures: 4.7cm x 4.6cm.

[51] 2021/48.

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Fig. 1 Aerial view of the Upper Necropolis

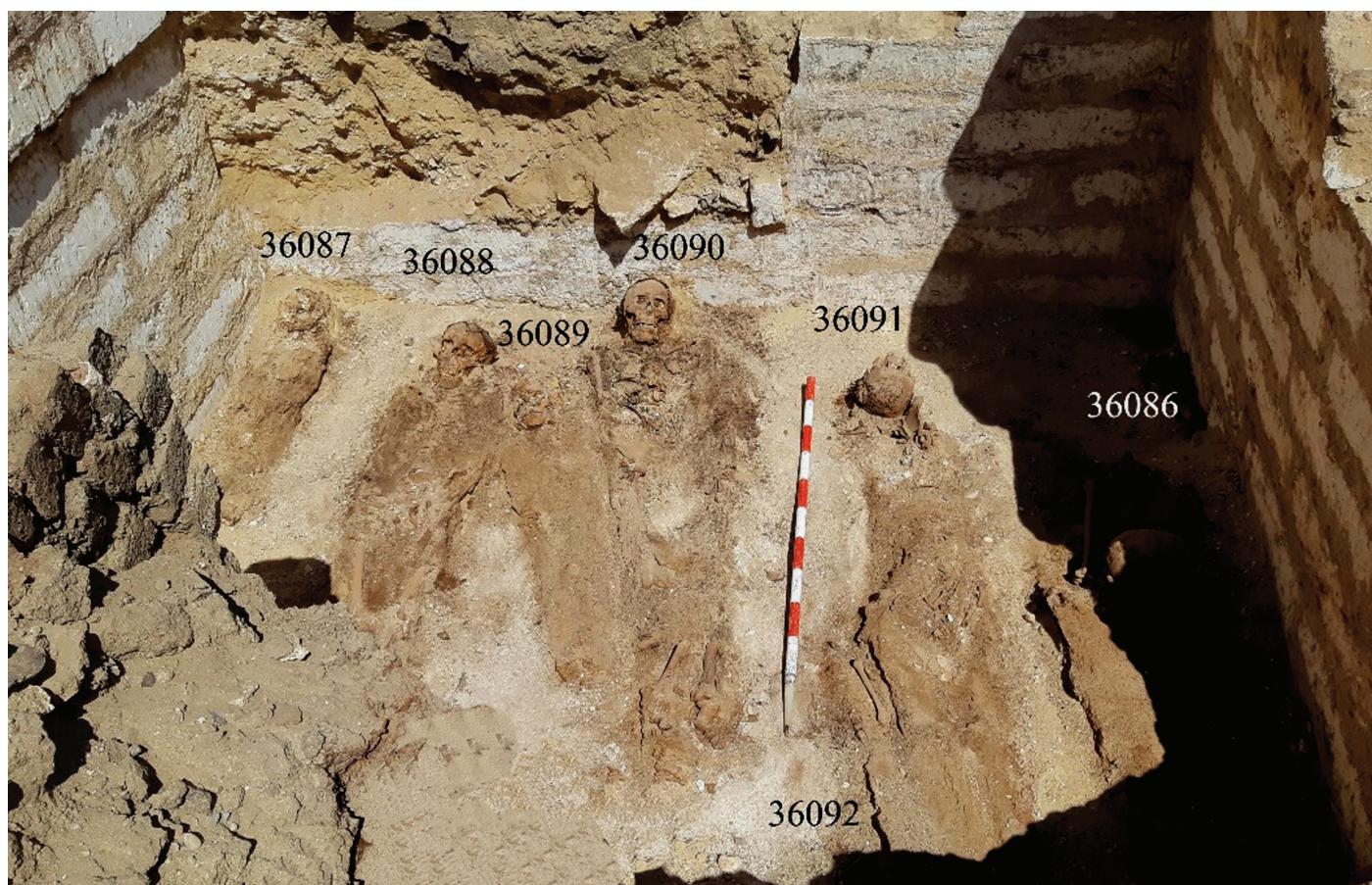


Fig. 2 Seven mummified individuals. Tomb 40



Fig. 3 Two mummified individuals. Tomb 42



Fig. 4 Helmet mask belonging to the individual 36181.Tomb 42



Fig. 5 Several mud seals found between the bandages of some mummies



Fig. 6 “Plaster mummy case” belonging of the deceased 36192. Tomb 42



Fig. 7. 29 buttons covered with a thin golden leaf



Fig. 8 A polychrome decoration with the image of a hawk Horus



Fig. 9 A golden tongue found over the original tongue



Fig. 10 Three golden tongues, one of them belonging of a child



Fig. 11 Aerial view of the Sector 36