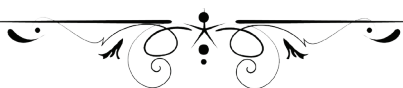

THE RECTANGULAR SUPERSTRUCTURE BYZANTINE TOMBS IN SECTOR 39 OF THE UPPER NECROPOLIS OF OXYRHYNCHUS THE CENTRAL ENSEMBLE OF TOMBS IN THE BYZANTINE CEMETERY OF SECTOR 39



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Abstract

The archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus, built over the locations of the Pharaonic Per-Medyed, is located 190 kilometres south of Cairo, on the left bank of the Bahr Yussef, next to the modern town of El-Bahnasa. The importance of Oxyrhynchus, capital of the XIXth nome of Upper Egypt, comes mainly from its strategic geographical location. It boasts a river port on the Bahr Yussef and a connection to the western desert route, particularly towards the Bahariya Oasis. The excellent location may have been the reason for its development during the XXVIth dynasty and the presence of a necropolis containing huge tombs of officials.

Per-Medyed has been known from geographical lists since Pharaonic times, but it was in the late 19th century when archaeological excavations began. Scholars such as Grenfell, Hunt, and Petrie, among others, worked in Oxyrhynchus and located some tombs from the New Kingdom, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods. The Supreme Council of Antiquities discovered tombs in the high Necropolis from 1982 to 1992, and since 1992, the Spanish Archaeological Mission has been conducting excavations.

Keywords: Necropolis, Oxyrhynchus, Byzantine cemetery

مُلخَص البَحْث

المقابر البيزنطية ذات البنية الفوقية المستطيلة في القطاع (٣٩) من مقبرة أوكسيرينخوس العليا، المجموعة المركزية للمقابر في المقبرة البيزنطية بالقطاع (٣٩)

يقع موقع أوكسيرينخوس الأثري، المبني فوق مواقع بر مديد الفرعونية، على بعد ١٩٠ كيلومترًا جنوب

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القاهرة، على الضفة اليسرى لبحر يوسف، بجوار مدينة البهنسا الحديثة. ترجع أهمية مدينة أوكسيرينخوس، عاصمة الإقليم التاسع عشر بصعيد مصر، بشكل أساسي إلى موقعها الجغرافي الاستراتيجي. وتتميز بميناء نهري على بحر يوسف واتصال بالطريق الصحراوي الغربي، خاصة باتجاه الواحات البحرية. ربما كان الموقع الممتاز هو السبب في تطورها خلال الأسرة السادسة والعشرين ووجود جبانة تحتوي على مقابر ضخمة للموظفين. عُرفت منطقة «برميد» من خلال القوائم الجغرافية منذ العصر الفرعوني، إلا أن ذلك كان في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر عندما بدأت التنقيبات الأثرية. عمل علماء مثل جرينفيل وهانت وبيتري، من بين آخرين، في أوكسيرينخوس ووجدوا بعض المقابر من عصر الدولة الحديثة والفترات البطلمية والرومانية. واكتشف المجلس الأعلى للآثار مقابر في الجبانة العالية في الفترة من ١٩٨٢ إلى ١٩٩٢، ومنذ عام ١٩٩٢ تقوم البعثة الأثرية الإسبانية بالحفريات.

الكلمات الدالة: أوكسيرينخوس، جبانة، الجبانة البيزنطية.

The archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus,⁴ built over the locations of the Pharaonic Per-Medyed, is located 190 kilometres south of Cairo, on the left bank of the Bahr Yussef, next to the modern town of El-Bahnasa. The importance of Oxyrhynchus, capital of the XIXth nome of Upper Egypt, comes mainly from its strategic geographical location. It boasts a river port on the Bahr Yussef and a connection to the western desert route, particularly towards the Bahariya Oasis. The excellent location may have been the reason for its development during the XXVIth dynasty and the presence of a necropolis containing huge tombs of officials.

Per-Medyed has been known from geographical lists since Pharaonic times, but it was in the late 19th century when archaeological excavations began. Scholars such as Grenfell, Hunt, and Petrie, among others, worked in Oxyrhynchus and located some tombs from the New Kingdom, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods. The Supreme Council of Antiquities discovered tombs in the high Necropolis from 1982 to 1992, and since 1992, the Spanish Archaeological Mission has been conducting excavations.

Currently, archaeological work is focused on a specific area: the Upper Necropolis, named for its location in the highest part of the classical metropolis, northwest of the ancient city and on the edge of the desert. This cemetery has continuously provided us with an occupation horizon spanning over 1000 years, with tombs dating from the Saite, Persian, Greco-Roman, and Coptic periods, as well as Byzantine funerary houses.

During the 2022 excavation campaign, the exploration of a new area within the Upper Necropolis began, designated as Sector 39. This sector is located to the east of the archaeological site.⁵ Its boundaries are defined by a large circular structure constructed

⁴ For information about the Oxyrhynchus archaeological site and the history of excavations, see Castellano, N. (2017), 197-231.

⁵ Mascort, et al. (2023), 13.

with fired bricks, which was excavated in 2018 and is believed to have served as one of the cisterns for supplying water to the Byzantine-era city⁶ (located to the west). Additionally, it is situated to the south of Sector 32, where a votive deposit of fish was discovered.⁷ To initiate the archaeological excavations, a rectangle measuring 8.60 meters in the north-south direction and 12.60 meters in the east-west direction was delineated. The uppermost layer consisted of a substantial deposit of windblown sand, beneath which a compact adobe pavement was revealed, containing a series of individual tombs that had been excavated. In general, the individual graves in Oxyrhynchus documented to date were rectangular pits dug into the pavement, with depths ranging from 1.50 meters to 3 meters. Thus far, within the necropolis, three typological groups have been identified, each containing structures of similar morphology (Fig. 1). There is evidence of planning, as the tombs are organized in rows running in a north-south direction, parallel to each other, with spaces or streets between different groups. The orientation of the graves is consistently east-west, following Christian tradition, although there is some tendency towards the southeast. The head of the tombs always faces the western area.

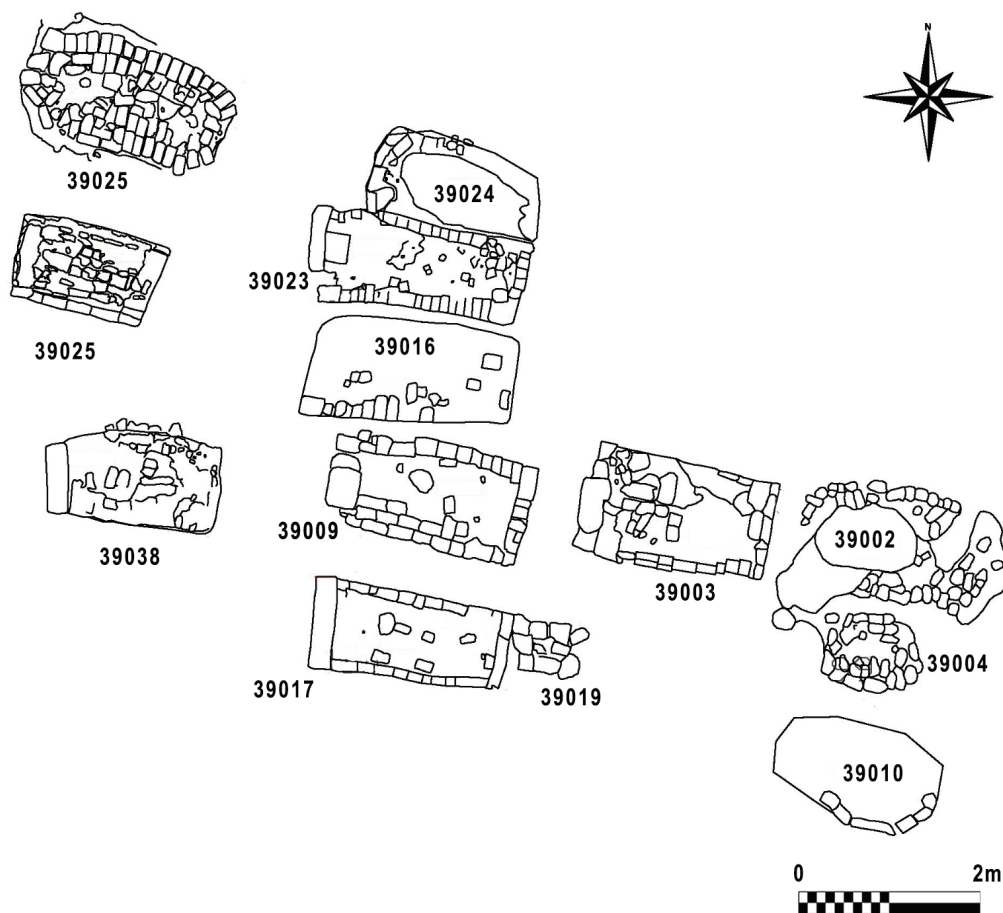


Fig. 1. Plan of Sector 39, including the three types of tombs.

⁶ Padry, et al. (2018), 3-5.

⁷ Mascort & Pons (2017).

In this regard, it's important to note that most individual graves in Oxyrhynchus are situated around religious edifices, as is the case with the cemetery in Sector 29 (Fig. 2), which surrounds the funerary church on its east, north, and south sides. Occasionally, however, these graves are also constructed atop older funerary structures, as seen in the cemetery situated above Saite tomb number 13. The layout of this funerary sector displayed an organization in rows, oriented in a north-south direction, with parallel streets.⁸



Fig. 2. Aerial view of Sector 29, featuring the funerary church and the necropolis.

During the 2022 campaign, a total of twelve tombs were excavated. Although they likely belong to different time periods, they can be chronologically framed within the Christian-Byzantine era, as indicated by the characteristics of the individuals found inside. These individuals were interred without mummification, and various decorative elements or

^[8] Padry, et al. (2006), 49.

burial items associated with them also point to this era.⁹ Despite differences among the various typologies, all these tombs were dug directly into the adobe pavement and generally exhibited an oval to rectangular shape. Inside these pits, a single individual was buried, often with very few or no burial items. In cases where burial items were present, they typically consisted of ceramic vessels or fragments of glass. In all instances, there were clear indications of wooden coffins and the shrouds in which the deceased were wrapped. Although twelve structures were excavated, only eleven individuals were exhumed, as in one of them, SU 36026, located at the northwest end of the sector, no burial was found.

Regarding the tombs, in all cases, they featured a superstructure constructed with fired adobe bricks (Fig. 3). In the case of rectangular-shaped tombs, small walls consisting of two or three courses of bricks were erected, with the bricks arranged in a stretcher and header bond pattern, reinforced with some blocks of white limestone. These stone blocks undoubtedly originated from the dismantling of some older structure within the Upper Necropolis. The sides of some tombs were crowned with decorative architectural elements.

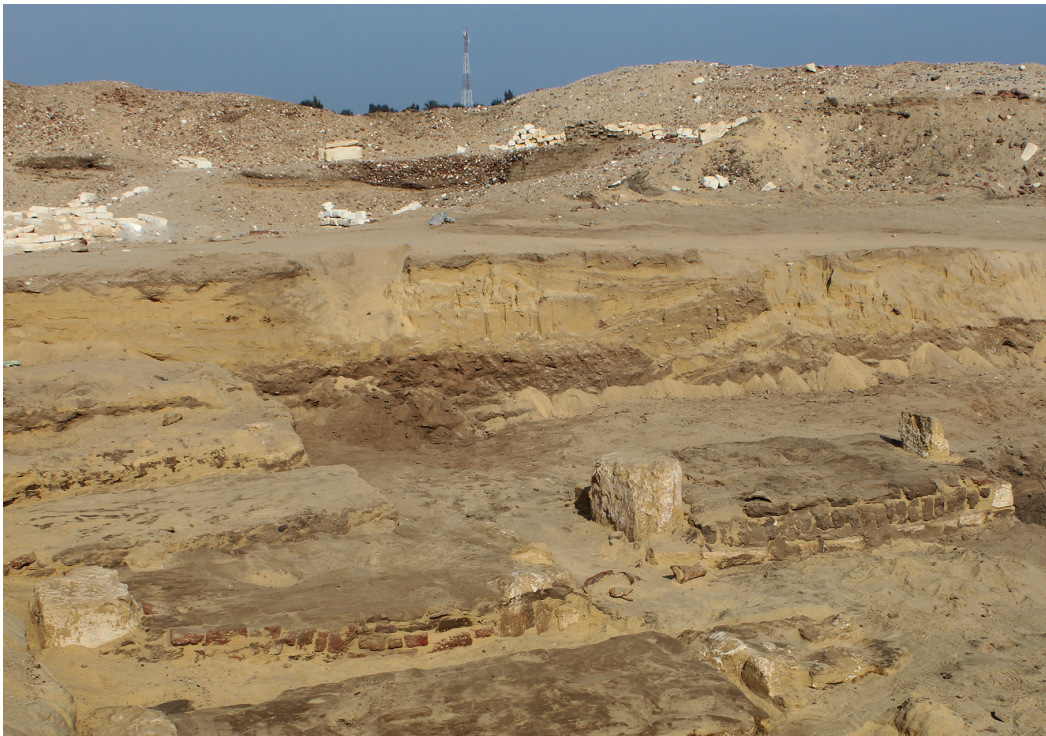


Fig. 3. General overview of the funerary superstructures at Sector 29.

This differentiation of tombs based on their superstructure can also be observed in the cemetery situated above Saite tomb 13. In this case, the simpler graves were pits cut into the pavement, and the deceased were placed inside them. The interred bodies were in

⁹ Mascort & Pons (forthcoming).

a supine position, with their heads oriented to the west. The arms of the deceased were placed at the sides of the body, with the hands either protecting the pelvis or positioned parallel to the body. The sarcophagus was a rectangular wooden box, and the bodies were protected with a similar structure made of palm leaves. Remnants of woven shrouds were found, tied with red textile cords. Each structure housed only one burial, except for one tomb where two skeletons were discovered, that of a woman and a fetus.¹⁰

The more complex tombs, on the other hand, featured a rectangular adobe superstructure, shaped like a niche with recesses, and were adorned with white stucco.

As for the cemetery in Sector 39, the first type of tombs (SU 39002, SU 39004, and SU 39010) is in the easternmost area and is the oldest of all, with a chronology placing the structures between the 5th and 6th centuries AD. This dating is based on the typology of amphorae (Late Roman VII) found as burial items in some of the tombs. These three tombs consist of an oval pit excavated in a very thick layer of dark brown sediment and are covered by a superstructure made of rectangular fired bricks. This slightly oval superstructure rested on the adobe pavement.

In the ensemble located in the northwest part of the same sector, three funerary structures were documented (SU 39038, SU 39025, and SU 39026), each with a unique typology and situated at a slightly higher level than the rest of the tombs. Stratigraphy indicates that at a certain point, the entire area was filled in, and it was briefly abandoned, as evidenced by a thin layer of windblown sand covering it. On top of this layer, the three westernmost tombs were constructed, excavated into an artificial pavement, which in turn covered the head sections of two of the tombs in the central area (SU 39016 and SU 39023). Ceramic fragments found confirm that this is the latest ensemble, dating from the late 6th to early 7th century AD.

In these cases, the superstructure was also made of rectangular fired adobe bricks, but they were placed in concentric rows, resembling a kind of vault, with a finish very similar to the Muslim tombs in the nearby Fat el-Bab cemetery. One of them (SU 39025) had a superstructure with traces of white stucco on the fired adobe blocks, as was also documented in some of the tombs in the upper section of Saite tomb 13.

Finally, in the central area of Sector 39, there was a group of six tombs of the same typology, which is the focus of this article. This ensemble exhibited highly homogeneous typological characteristics. These were pit tombs with an irregular rectangular superstructure. The tombs were arranged in three rows. The central row consisted of four structures parallel to each other, numbered from south to north as: 39017, 39009, 39016, and 39023. The other two tombs were located individually but were oriented in the same manner as

¹⁰ Padry, et al. (2005), 223-224.

the ones mentioned earlier. The first, 39003, was situated to the east of 39009, and the second, 39038, was on the west side of the same tomb 39009.

In all cases, the superstructures were finished with a layer of dark brown clay and some adobe blocks, covering a thin layer of white sand beneath which the burial pit was located. The burial pits had a rectangular tendency with slightly semicircular boundaries. The first structure found during the excavations was the one located farthest to the east, tomb 39003. It had a rectangular plan measuring 2.10 meters in length (east-west) by 1.20 meters in width (north-south) and a total height of about 30 cm. The most notable feature of this tomb was a decorated white stone block located at the head, positioned at the feet of the superstructure. This block, measuring 2.10 cm in length by 1.20 cm in width, had a deteriorated upper part. It featured relief decoration on the front, consisting of a horizontal base with volutes, on top of which two squares were represented, each containing flowers (Fig. 4). The superstructure was crowned by a large horizontal white stone block at the western boundary.



Fig. 4. Detail of tomb 39003 prior to excavation.

As in all cases, the superstructure was sealed with a layer of clay and decomposed adobe blocks, followed by a thin layer of white sand. Once all this upper part was removed, a rectangular wall made of adobe blocks set on a base composed of white limestone blocks was revealed. This wall enclosed a rectangular cut filled with loose brown soil

containing some ceramic fragments. At a depth of approximately 1.40 meters, a second, narrower cut was found inside of which an adult individual in a supine position was documented (number 39036).

In the second row, starting from the south, tomb 39017 was found. It was very similar in structure to the previous one but stood out for reusing long decorated blocks for constructing the base and head of the superstructure. The tomb's dimensions were 2.35 meters in length by 1 meter in width. A large white limestone slab measuring 1.09 meters in length by 0.46 meters in width and about 33 cm in height was prominently placed at the head (Fig. 5). This stone had a complete interior decoration consisting of three distinct horizontal bands. The lower part was plain without decoration, the central section featured a relief line of volutes with some traces of red and ochre paint, and the upper band, incomplete due to its poor state of preservation, was plain except for the center, where an eight-pointed cross was featured. This piece, like probably the other white limestone decorated pieces found in the funerary ensemble, was a reuse of an architectural element from a dismantled sacred building. The wall surrounding the pit of the burial was also constructed with some reused blocks from other structures, among which were one with a conch or sunburst-type relief decoration, another with floral decoration, and a third with red-painted decoration on the exterior.



Fig. 5. Detail of the relief-decorated block found at the head of tomb 39003.

The burial pit, as usual, was oval in shape and filled with loose dark brown soil, at the end of which, at a depth of 1.39 meters, an adult individual was found (number 39031). As a unique feature, a small semicircular structure (39019) made of white limestone blocks was located at the feet of tomb 39017 (Fig 6). This element measured 70 cm in length by 58 cm in width. The excavation of this structure did not yield any archaeological remains, either structural or material, and no other similar elements have been documented at the feet of the other tombs of the same typology, making its interpretation uncertain.



Fig. 6. Tomb 39017 and the structure 39019 at its base, prior to excavation.

The next tomb located in parallel, to the north, was tomb 39009. It was situated about 48 cm apart from the previous one. The dimensions of the superstructure were 2.30 meters in length by 1.17 meters in width. A large white limestone block measuring 47 cm in length and 34 cm in width was prominently placed at the head. On its north side, there were two smaller stepped blocks.

The stratigraphy was equivalent to that of the other tombs of this typology, featuring a layer of brown clay covering a rectangular wall inside of which appeared a cut at ground level. In this case, the wall was generally constructed with adobe blocks, although some white limestone blocks were also used on the north and east sides.

Beneath the superstructure, a burial pit with an irregular rectangular shape filled with dark brown soil was found, containing various ceramic fragments. At a depth of approximately 1.40 meters, an adult individual in a supine position was discovered (number 39040), positioned with the head to the west.¹¹

North of the previous tomb, about 30 cm away and slightly to the west, a new tomb with similar characteristics was found, tomb 39016 (Fig. 7). In this case, there was also a large irregular white limestone block at the head, although it initially appeared to be covered by the pavement. This block measured 2.38 meters in length and 1.14 meters in width.



Fig. 7. View of tombs 39009 and 39016 taken from the head.

The stratigraphy followed the same pattern as in the previously mentioned cases. Beneath the layer of dark brown clay covering the entire surface of the superstructure, a thin layer of white sand followed by the fill unit of the pit cut was revealed. In this case, the cut had a rectangular tendency, and at a depth of approximately 1.40 meters, an adult individual in a supine position was found (number 39049).

^[11] For the anthropological study, made by Francesca Pullia, see the next chapter.

Tomb 39023 was located north of tomb 39016, presenting similar characteristics and partially situated below a tomb of a different typology, tomb 39024 (Fig. 8). It was also partly covered by the pavement corresponding to the entire ground level of the northwest ensemble. It exhibited very similar characteristics to the others within the central ensemble, with a rectangular superstructure measuring 2.30 meters in length by 1.04 meters in width.



Fig. 8. General view of tomb 39023 and tomb 39024, already excavated, which were positioned at a higher elevation than the former.

Once the layer of compact clay covering the superstructure was removed, the two overlapping white limestone blocks at the head, one on top of the other, became visible. The superstructure's frame was mostly constructed with adobe blocks, and once the first layer of compact clay covering the surface was removed, a burial pit filled with dark brown soil containing ceramic fragments and faunal remains was revealed. At a depth of 1.50 meters, an elderly adult individual (number 39050) was found in a supine position with the head to the west.

The final tomb associated with the central ensemble was tomb 39038 (Fig. 9). Situated in the westernmost row, aligned with tomb 39009, this tomb featured a rectangular superstructure measuring 1 meter wide and 1.99 meters long. Upon clearing the surface clay layer, two sizable irregular white limestone blocks were uncovered at the head,

positioned one in front of the other, with the foremost block being larger in size. The majority of the superstructure's frame was built using adobe blocks. Upon removing the surface clay covering, a burial pit filled with brown soil and ceramic fragments was revealed. Within the pit, an adult male individual (number 39057) was found in a supine position, with the head oriented to the west.



Fig. 9. General view of the superstructure of tomb 39038, prior to the excavation of its burial pit.

Regarding burial items, it's worth noting that, being Christian tombs, very few objects were found inside the structures that could serve this function. However, outside the tombs, on the pavement and associated with the head of tombs 39009 and between tombs 39017 and 39009, two small jars containing frogs inside were found in similar positions. The possibility has been raised that these may be ritual objects related to the continuation of certain beliefs rooted in Pharaonic culture,¹² which is quite common and has been documented in other tombs in the same necropolis.¹³

Synthesis of the Anthropological Study of Human Remains Documented in the Tombs of the Central Area of Sector 39

The documentation begins in the field with the description of each individual found and excavated with a preliminary and macroscopic study; in the laboratory phase, the

¹² Mascort & Pons (Forthcoming).

¹³ Agustí & Riudavets (Forthcoming).

skeletonized and mummified remains are studied in detail, using usual anthropometric and paleopathological methodologies based on Ubelaker, D. (1999). The pathologies observed are multiple, and in the sample studied a high number of dental pathologies have been evidenced (caries, hypoplasia, and dental loss), the presence of degenerative osteoarticular pathologies has also been verified Ortner (2003). For the age estimation, the study has been based on the uses of the dental wear system according to White (2000), Lovejoy et.al (1985), and the system of changes in the morphology of the atrial facet by Suchey & Brooks (1990); for the estimation of height the estimation methods proposed by Raxter et al. (2008), Trotter and Gleser (1958) are used.

Individual 39036

The individual is positioned in a coffin and wrapped in a shroud. It is a female individual; aged between 18 and 25 years at death, with a height of 140 cm, and presents a graceful cranial and post-cranial morphology. It still retained some fragments of skin and fragments of dehydrated organs; long hair (Fig. 10), curly and pulled back in a hairstyle. At the pathological level, only the presence of hypoplasia in the first upper incisors determined by metabolic stress factors, and nutritional deficiencies have been detected.



Fig. 10. Detail of preserved hair in individual 39036.

Individual 39040

The individual was placed in a coffin and the body had remnants of a shroud and was likely buried inside a wooden coffin, but no preserved fragments of the coffin remained. The orientation was east-west, with the skull to the west in a dorsal decubitus position. The skeleton is positioned in anatomical connection with the appearance of the skull in the upper norm, verticalized clavicles, rib cage crushed and open, and upper limbs extended with both hands on the pubis. The lower extremities are also extended.

It is an adult individual; male about 25-35 years at death; in good condition, with a robust cranial and postcranial morphology; height calculated at 174 cm. He still had fragments of skin, nails, dehydrated brain (Fig. 11); most of the bones had a dark coloration due to the use of ointments during the ritual of preparation of the body. Degenerative pathologies have been detected mainly in the vertebral spine: lumbar and dorsal osteoarthritis with formation of Schmorl's nodules; and presence of dental pathologies with caries of the second and third right lower molar with total loss of the crown; hypoplasia of the first upper incisors.



Fig. 11. Dehydrated brain found in individual 39040.

Individual 39049

The skeleton was positioned in a coffin, decorated of which some fragments remained. East-west orientation with a skull to the west; dorsal decubitus position, the appearance of the skull in superior norm, narrow temporomandibular joint, verticalized clavicles,

semi-flexed upper extremities with the left forearm on pelvis and hand on pubis. The right forearm is also flexed and rests on the left and right hand on the ilium; a narrow coxo-sacral joint. The lower extremities are also extended and the right leg has a slight femur rotation.

It is an adult, male individual; age more than 40 years at death, presenting a robust general morphology; with a height of about 165 cm approx. He still had his hair, which was short, curly, and light brown (probably due to the use of ointments to treat the body); a dehydrated brain has also been found. The pathologies evidenced are mainly degenerative, due to the age of the individual: Schmorl's nodules and lumbar and thoracic disc hernia; Osteoarthritis in the first cervical vertebrae. Dental pathologies: presented an alveolar regression with medium exposure of the roots of the maxilla and mandible, with loss in life resorption of the alveoli of the first and second upper left molar and the second lower molars; the presence of dental calculi in the first incisors and left lower canine and the first left upper and left incisors

Individual 39031

The skeleton was in a painted coffin, some fragments were found and presented traces of white paint; the individual was wrapped in a shroud of which some fragments remain. He was buried in dorsal decubitus position, east-west orientation with the skull to the west. The appearance of the skull in the left lateral norm with a slight rotation of the first cervical vertebrae, clavicles little verticalized, upper extremities extended, and both hands on the pubis and lower extremities extended feet in the lateral norm.

Adult male individual, aged between 18-25 years at death, medium robust morphology, and height calculated 165 cm. Fragments of skin are preserved, and fragments of organs, the bones have a dark brown coloration, especially in some epiphyses by the use of ointments during the ritual of preparation of the corpse.

No particular pathologies have been observed, only the presence of cribra femoralis, and as dental pathology it has been possible to observe total caries in the right mandibular third molar; hypoplasia upper and lower incisors.

Individual 39050

The individual positioned in a coffin was probably covered with a red tissue of which some fragments are preserved in the area of the shoulders and skull. Fragments of the wooden coffin were also observed, but they were in such poor condition that no fragments could be recovered. The skeleton was in dorsal decubitus position, the appearance of the skull in the right lateral norm with slight backward rotation with fall of the jaw, movement due to the presence of a cushion of perishable material. It presents a lax

temporomandibular joint, crushed and open rib cage, upper extremities extended with both hands on pubis, the pelvis maintains its volume, narrow sacral coxal joint, and the lower extremities are extended.

It is an adult individual, a female more than 60 years at death; she had general gracile morphology and, a calculated height of about 153cm. Fragments of the brain and skin are preserved.

Pathologies have been determined due to the age of the individual: osteoporosis in the long bones; cribra femoralis; Schmorl's nodules in all lumbar, thoracic, and hernias of discs; Osteoarthritis affects the entire spine, especially the cervical spine, presence of osteochondritis dissecans in the femoral condyles. The individual presents maxillary and mandibular edentulia (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Detail of various pathologies associated with individual 390050.

Individual 39057

Individual positioned in a coffin, in dorsal decubitus position, east-west orientation with the skull to the west that appears in right lateral norm with rotation to the north. The body was wrapped in a shroud of which some fragments remain, with some portions in red and possible white decoration were observed. The clavicles are verticalized, rib cage partially retains its volume, upper extremities extended with left hand on the left ilium and right arm semi flexed with the right hand resting on the left and lower extremities extended with feet in the upper norm. The peculiarity is that the right hand was on the thigh while the left hand was holding the right hand

Female individual; general gracile morphology, age between 50-60 years at death, calculated height approx. 148 cm. It preserved hair and skin and by the dark coloration of the bones and by the fragments of skin, the body has been treated with ointments. The pathologies evidenced mainly affect the spine, with the presence of osteoarthritis in all the cervical, and the lumbar ones presenting a grade 2 with the creation of osteophytes. Dental pathologies: the individual presents a very marked grade wear in all the teeth, with loss in life of the first left upper incisor 1 and the first left lower molar.

In conclusion, the excavation of this sector in future campaigns will allow us to learn a little more about the funerary customs of Oxyrhynchus in the Byzantine era.

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