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Esther Pons Mellado

NEWS FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF OXYRHYNCHUS (EL-BAHNASA), EGYPT

The Archaeological Site of Oxyrhynchus, the ancient Per-Medjed, is situated in the small village of El- Bahnasa (Mynia), on the west bank of the Barhr Yussef, and some 190 km. south of modern Cairo. It was the capital of the XIX nome of the Upper Egypt during the Saite Period.

Oxyrhynchus was discovered and identified by Vivant Denon, a member of Napoleon’s Expedition to Egypt in 1798. In 1802 he published the book *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* with many drawings of the old architecture of this place.¹ Some years later, between 1896 and 1907, Grenfell and Hunt found thousand of papyrus rolls and drew up the designs of tombs of New Kingdom and Ptolemaic and Roman Period.² They were pioneers in the discovery and publication of texts on papyrus Graeco-Roman Egypt. From the First World War, when a railway line was built across the site to 1922, this place was spoilt systematically. After this year, Flinders Petrie³ and Breccia⁴ started to excavate in Oxyrhynchus. The first discovered the theatre and the monumental column of the Byzantine emperor Focas (602–610 AD) (Fig. 1), and the second identified some structures from the Roman period. Finally, the site was abandoned by the archaeologists for fifty years.

In 1982, the Service of Antiquities of Egypt (now Supreme Council of Antiquities) received news that clandestine excavators were looting a tomb in El- Bahnasa and from this moment Mahmud Hamza, the institution’s director for the Middle Egypt area, took over the excavations at Oxyrhynchus and continued for ten years.

¹ My gratitude to the members of the Archaeological Mission of Oxyrhynchus: Dr J. Padró (Director of the Mission), the archaeologists H. Ibrahim Amer, M. Erroux-Morfin, Maite Mancort, J. Martinez, Eva Subias, Nuria Castellano, Luz Mangado and Marta Saura; the topographer A. López; the restorers: B. Burgaya, R. Xarrié and D. Mafía; the architects: E. Algory, F. Estrada, I. Camiruaga, F. López, R. Matías, and the specialist in mummies A. Peraud.


Since 1992, the excavations in Oxyrhynchus have been shared with the Spanish Archaeological Mission of the University of Barcelona, whose Director is Dr. Josep Padró Parcerisa (Professor of the University of Barcelona).\footnote{5} Today, only the Spanish Mission is working here.\footnote{6}

One of the most important areas of this site is the big High Necropolis found within the walled area of the Graeco-Roman city, to the north west and in the center of the ruins of Oxyrhynchus with three essential phases of occupation.

The oldest corresponds to monumental stone tombs from the Saite period (Dynasty 26, 664–525 BC). In the tombs, some of them with paintings, we have found anthropomorphic stone sarcophagi, some of them of very good quality with hieroglyphic inscriptions of great religious and historical value, and funerary equipment: canopic jars, amulets, some of them of gold, pottery, sculptures of bronze, shabtis and several ornamental artifacts.\footnote{7}
The tombs of the Graeco-Roman period belong to the second phase of occupation. They are very similar to the Saite Period, but smaller, and the third and most modern phase in the High Necropolis is the Paleo-Christian of Byzantine period. These tombs are individual shafts and practically without funerary objects.8

During the campaign of November–December 2008 we focused on a southern part of the High Necropolis and found many archaeological funerary remains: a big complex of rooms built with mud-bricks without painting decoration of the Coptic period and three Graeco-Roman tombs built with rectangular stone blocks.

One of the most important rooms of this Coptic area is the funerary chamber A or chapel (5.66×3 m). This is a well preserved chamber which had a vaulted roof, missing today, and with two different kinds of mud-bricks: brown and red. Inside we found some coptic bodies with the head to the West and the hands crossed over the body. Some of them were in boxes made with narrow strips of wood in very bad condition or wrapped with palm-leaf ribs and with very few artifacts: some lamps with decoration of floral and geometries designs like grapes, flowers, circles, fragments of pottery and several bronze coins in very bad condition.

We have not yet finished working on this coptic area and we are now doing the anthropological study. We hope to have the results as soon as possible but we are sure that this complex of mud-brick constructions is related to the three Graeco-Roman tombs because inside of one them, we also found Coptic bodies.

The three tombs (Nos 18–20) were built with big blocks of stone (40/45×23/26 cm) and each one had a vaulted roof but only tomb No 19 was complete. Unfortunately, the three tombs are anonymous and do not have any hieroglyphic signs (Fig. 2).9

Tomb 18 has two rectangular funerary chambers joined by a short narrow corridor, and without a shadow of a doubt, the most important room is No 1.

This chamber (3.35×2.65 m) has the entrance from the East with stone steps. On the exterior of the entrance, we found an amphora Type Eglöf produced during the Roman period.

The east wall has two small holes to put the ceramic lamps used to illuminate the room. Both the ceiling and the west wall of the room have paintings applied on a layer of plaster, although some of them are in very bad condition.

The polychrome decoration of the ceiling shows the image of the sky-goddess Nut, whose body symbolized the vault of the sky. She is naked with a large belly in the shape of sun disk, an image of regeneration, and the deity Kepri, closely associated with the resurrection, with his outstretched wings and who is born from her womb in the morning.

Nut is very commonly found in the New Kingdom on the ceilings of temples as well as in tombs and on the underside of the lid of many coffins and sarcophagi, arching her body over that of the deceased.

The goddess is situated between two lines of friezes with drawings of waves in several colours: the black and green symbolized fertility and the first act of creation, yellow was the divine or perhaps the existence of the sun god, and red was the sign of power.

The West wall of the burial chamber has two very similar images to right and to left. In this case the iconographical program is an offering scene of food, drinks and incense, but only the painting on the right side is almost complete.

In the scene, the deceased or owner of this tomb is bringing offerings to the god Osiris, ruler of the dead, and holding in his hands a censer and a libation jar and between them there is an offering table with food to sustain the Ka. Osiris appears enthroned, and is depicted as a mummy. Through his wrappings is holding the royal insignia of crook and flail. Unfortunately, we don’t have the head of the god and the distinctive Atef crown, consisting of the tall ‘white crown’ flanked by two plumes, sometimes shown with the horns of a ram (Fig. 3). The red colour of his dress symbolized power, desert, and blood.

On the left side of this wall, we can see only a part of the owner of the tomb with another offering table and the feet of Osiris.

During the cleaning work in this room, we did not find any archaeological material but yet many painted fragments both from the ceiling and the walls. Two of the most interesting fragments were one with the hand of Nut holding the sun and other with the image of the Oxyrhynchus fish, the ‘sharp-nosed’, the chief deity of the region (Fig. 4).

In 1982, Mahmud Hamza found tomb No 13 with a painted decoration on the walls which has great similarity to this tomb, with the images of two fishes, one oxyrhynchus and one lepidotes, symbols of this geographic area (Fig. 5).

In room 2 (2,44×4,22 m) of this tomb, we found only one stone sarcophagus with a mummy inside it in very bad condition. The cover was broken and one of the fragments had a Greek inscription with the name De Polideuces. Unfortunately this chamber did not have any funerary material.

To the East of tomb No. 18 is tomb No. 19. This construction has only one complete funerary chamber (5,20 m in length×2,50 m in height×2,60 m wide), and the entrance is from the North via a narrow well of 3 m in depth.

Outside this tomb and close to its South wall, we found the remains of a deposit with more than 15 Egloff Type ceramic vessels and amphorae although some of them were broken.

When we took out the sand from the shaft, we found the entrance to the funerary chamber and inside it we could clearly make out piles of mummies, one on top of the other in different levels. All the room was full of bodies: adults and children, from the entrance to the South wall. We counted more or less 100 corpses, but perhaps there are more of them; because it was impossible for us to go in this chamber.

The bandage of the mummies is completely regular around the body and the head and feet, an example of the complex system of typical diamond design of the Roman Period. Also some

of these mummies have cartonnages both on the face and on a part of the body with religious iconography: some gods and the image of an offerer and a lion with the head of a man.

In general the mummies were in bad condition. Many bandages and bodies are broken, in pieces or shattered. And, moreover some of the them, that we thought were in good condition, turned to dust when we touched them.

Near the head of the body of a man that was right in the entrance was a pottery bowl with remains of the mummification. This is the only object that we have found in this tomb and we don't know if between or under the mummies there is funerary equipment: canopic jars, faience vessels, shabtis figures, amulets, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues, etc., but we think so. Also, under some mummies, we have seen parts of stone sarcophagi, but we don't know if they are broken or complete (Fig. 6).

When we found this room full of mummies we initially intended to take out the bodies and to put them in a special store to study, rehabilitate and restore both the cartonnages and the mummies, but soon we realized that it was not a good idea and it was inadvisable. The tomb only has a narrow entrance and exit shaft. Additionally, the mummies were in very bad condition and we run the risk of destroying or damaging the mummies.

Finally, we decided to close the room and to prepare a special research project for this important and interesting finding but no there is doubt that this tomb is a hiding place perhaps to protect and to impede the pillage of the bodies and the funerary equipment of the important people of Oxyrhynchus, very common in this period.

Tomb No 20 is located to the North of this area. It has two funerary chambers, but both have been almost completely destroyed. The entrance is from the East and has two rooms. The main room, the biggest, was full of sand and when we cleaned it, we discovered many coptic bodies. In general, they were in very bad condition and did not have any funerary objects. All the bodies had the head to the West and the hands crossed over the body and some of them were in boxes made with wooden narrow strips in very bad condition or wrapped with palm-leaf ribs. The second room of this tomb has totally collapsed.

The second most important place in the Archaeological Site of Oxyrhynchus is the Osireion or temple dedicated to Osiris. In 2000, the Egyptian antiquities police caught a group of grave robbers inside a stone underground structure, approximately 1,5 kilometres from the High Necropolis. One year later and after some preliminary prospecting, the Spanish Mission was able to work in this place.

This structure is a little temple dedicated to Osiris, nowadays completely dismantled, and it is inside a large rectangular Temenos wall, which has more or less 17000m² (Fig. 7).

The entrance of this hypogée has monumental stairs of blocks of stone giving access to a complex of subterranean galleries. In one of these, the main room, we found a recumbent and

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11 The Osireion has been excavated by Maite Mascort with the collaboration of M. Erroux-Morfin, Luz Mangado, J.J. Martínez, M. Saura, I. Valenzuela and N. Gasull.

colossal statue of Osiris with Atef crown some 3,30 m high (fig. 8). This room is more or less 10,70 m long and 2,68 m wide.

To the south of this door lies to another longer gallery or corridor with a series of niches constructed on both sides. It has 56 niches (28 each side) with painted hieratic inscriptions on the lintels showing the date of usage: from Ptolemy VI Philometor (181–145 BC), through Ptolemy VIII Physgon (170–163, 145–131,128–116 BC) until Cleopatra III and Ptolemy X Soter (116–107, 88–80). Each niche is more or less 80 cm high and 60 cm wide.

The inscriptions also mention Osiris Jentamentiu and the name of the Per-Khef temple that we had found in hieroglyphic texts on tombs No 1 and No 14 of the High Necropolis, which proves that it existed at least from the Saite period.

Every year the mysterious rites of the month of Juiak took place in the Oxyrhynchus Osireion. The priests buried in a niche the image of Osiris’s mummy surrounded with a complex funerary equipment, but in this case many of the niches had been looted by the time we arrived.

Fortunately, we found a large number of small objects belonging to this equipment scattered on the floor of the gallery: one sculpture of an Osiris mummy made with seed corn and missing the crown; more than 300 small square boxes of limestone with pyramidal lids and containing mud balls, some of them with demotic inscriptions mentioning the name of the four lioness goddesses, which were situated in the four corners of the niches to protect Osiris from the threat of Set; almost 90 cones with the image of Neith the archer who shoots her arrows to the four cardinal points against the enemies of Osiris; more than 25 small offering tables some of them with a pedestal; 50 small mud sculptures of Osiris to protect the Osiris Khenitamentiu, more than 100 mud cakes or small breads covered with a layer of painted plaster with drawings of fruits; and finally bowls, many amulets and magic-bricks with the image of Udjat.

All of these rituals were already known through the texts and scattered finds made in different parts of Egypt.

However, no underground Osireion had previously been found in the exceptional preservation conditions of Oxyrhynchus, making it unique in Egyptian Archaeology to date.

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13 The study of these hieratic inscriptions was begun by Ph. Collombert and L. Coulon.

14 We don't know if these figures had bandages, masks or other attributes.
Figure 1. Column of Byzantine emperor Focas

Figure 2. Tombs Nos 18–20
Figure 3. Tomb No. 18

Figure 4. Fish Oxyrhynchus. Tomb No. 18
Figure 5. Tomb No. 3

Figure 6. Mummies of Tomb No. 19
Figure 7. Aerial photograph of Temenos wall and Osireion

Figure 8. Recumbent Statue of Osiris