

## A “beautiful burial” at Tuna el-Gebel

# Burial customs and commemorative culture from the Ptolemies to the Romans

After the discovery of a series of mud-brick tombs south of the famous tomb of Ptolemy at Tuna el-Gebel, Sami Gabra published in 1954 a sketch of his idea of life in the necropolis (**fig. 1**)<sup>1</sup>. The reconstruction is based on house-tombs GB 9 and 10<sup>2</sup>, each one consisting of two floors (**fig. 2**). Without going into detail regarding the architecture, we can see a few people: a man approaches from the right carrying two vases, probably filled with liquids, as another man climbs the stairs of GB 9 to reach a columned front veranda where a person with a veil, presumably a woman, leans over a balustrade. In front of the entrance door of the second floor of GB 10 a man sits on a ledge, while an amphora leans against the wall near the entrance to the lower floor. The door of the upper floor is slightly open. Finally, two men, one of them standing, the other one sitting on the ground, linger in front of the eastern wall of GB 10.

Is this reconstruction just a figment of the excavator’s imagination or was there indeed life in the necropolis? And if we accept that people came to visit on a regular basis, who were these people, when did they come and why? In fact, the presence of a certain community coming from the metropolis of Hermopolis can be claimed at least for the actual burials. Gabra’s drawing, however, does not show a mummy being placed in the tomb.

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\* Director of the Hanover Landesmuseum.  
1. GABRA, DRIOTON 1954, pl. 24.  
2. Gabra’s numbering: M 3/SS.

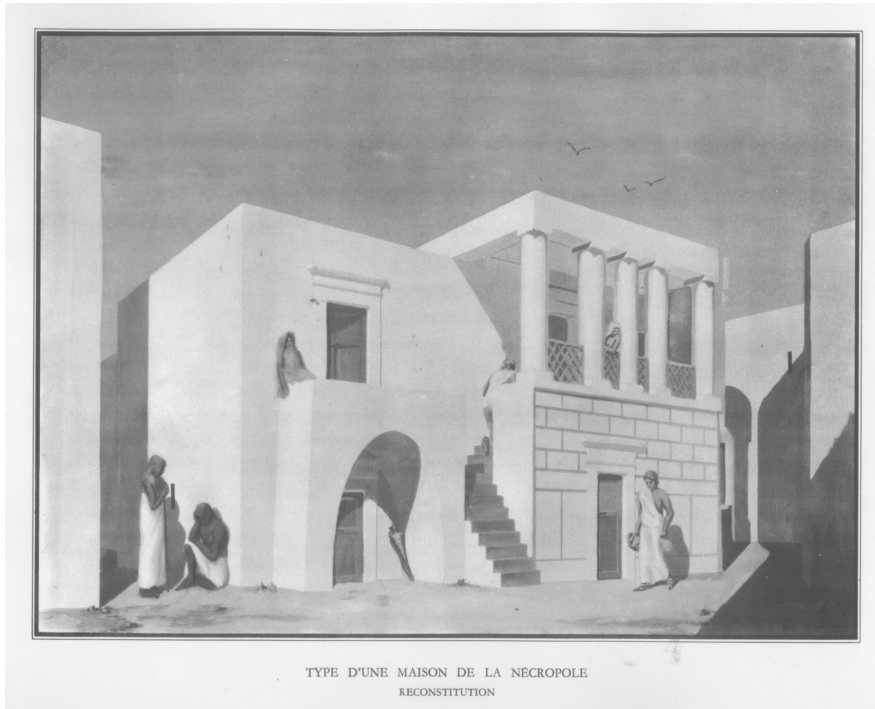


Figure 1: Reconstruction of the house-tombs GB 9 and 10 (GABRA, DRIOTON 1954, pl. 24)

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Figure 2: The house-tombs GB 9 and 10 (1972). Photograph D. Johannes, © German Archaeological Institute Cairo, inv. no. F 9973

In the following pages I will set out in search of clues to the burial customs and the commemorative culture in five stages:

- The preparation of the body
- The funeral procession
- The placement of the body in the tomb
- Rituals in or at the tomb during or after the burial
- Secondary burials.

## The preparation of the body

The excavators Sami Gabra and Alexandre Badawy mention a great number of mummified bodies in their publications<sup>3</sup>. As a matter of fact, there must also have been a house of embalmment located somewhere in the area. Unfortunately, we have no information whether it was situated at Hermopolis or at the necropolis about 10 km west of the town. Considering the lengthy procedure of mummification<sup>4</sup>, it seems on the one hand quite improbable that embalmment took place in the town of the living. On the other hand, as processions with the mummified bodies are attested at least during the Ptolemaic period<sup>5</sup>, it also seems not very likely to search for the house of embalmment at the site itself. Lacking archaeological as well as textual documentation we may suppose that it was placed at the edge of the cultivated land of the Nile Valley.

## The funeral procession

The best-preserved and most famous example of a funeral at Tuna el-Gebel is the depiction of the procession of the dead Petosiris as shown in his temple-like tomb. After having passed the pronaos, we enter a quadrangular hall with a decoration of purely Egyptian style and iconography, except for the lowermost register of the western and eastern wall, which shows the procession of



Figure 3: Funeral procession in the tomb of Petosiris: detail of an offering bearer. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris

3. For the history of the excavation of the necropolis of Petosiris, see LEMBKE 2012, p. 205-207. The practice of incineration cannot, however, be excluded, cf. LEMBKE 2014, p. 90.
4. Herodotus states that the most costly procedure lasted 70 days (Hist. II 88).
5. See below in section "The funeral procession".

offering bearers in a mixed Graeco-Egyptian style and iconography (**fig. 3**)<sup>6</sup>. In fact, these scenes resemble the decoration of the pronaos with its daily-life representations. Regarding style and iconography, the procession of offerings is still part of the world of the living, while the funeral itself (**fig. 4**) and the religious scenes in the upper registers represent the afterworld. Being placed inside the naos, however, the procession was obviously a “rite de passage” linking this world of the priest Petosiris with the other world of Horus Petosiris.

Executed during the lifetime of the tomb owner, the reliefs do not show a procession of offerings as it took place, but an ideal funeral and eternal memorial. Combined with the impressive architecture of the temple-tomb and its rich decoration, they preserve the image of a financially strong man of high priestly status.

Which route did these funeral processions take? Assuming that the house of embalmment was located outside the necropolis at the edge of the cultivated land (see above), the processional way must have started there leading to the west into the desert. Looking at the geomagnetic map (**fig. 5**) we recognise three main roads: the northern one lies directly north of the tombs of Padjkam and Petosiris, while the other two lead into the southern part of the excavated necropolis. None of the three were paved or aligned east to west, but slightly pivoted from southeast to northwest. This shift may find its explanation in the final destination of the first road to the north: the sacred precinct with two open courts west of the necropolis where during the Roman period a *sakieh* was built<sup>7</sup>. The tombs of Petosiris, Padjkam and others like GB 29<sup>8</sup> copy its shift of approximately eight degrees to north-northeast, a fact that can only be explained by the wish to be part of the processions leading to the sanctuary<sup>9</sup>.

When the necropolis spread from north to south, new wide routes from east to west were planned because the routes from north to south inside the necropolis were rather narrow pathways often closed off by buildings<sup>10</sup>. These new connections between the fertile land and the necropolis followed the direction of the first processional way, being slightly off square as well. The northern way reaches the excavated area between GB 19-21<sup>11</sup> and GB 22-23<sup>12</sup>, the southern one, south of GB 1-5<sup>13</sup> (**fig. 6**).

Shortly before the northern way ends, an interesting building was reconstructed by Sami Gabra (GB 22). In one of his books he describes it very briefly, “Du temple 9, nous n’avons retrouvé que des restes insignifiants dont il n’y a rien à dire.”<sup>14</sup>. Looking at the reconstruction, however, this monument does not seem to be a tomb building like the others (**fig. 7**). Built on a high podium with a staircase, the open structure is more an aedicule than a temple-tomb. A photo of the time of its

6. LEFÈBVRE 1923, pl. XXXV-XXXVI and XLVI-XLVII.

7. BADAWY 1956.

8. Gabra’s numbering: M 21/SE.

9. The desire to take part in the processions can also be observed in the case of the Asasif tombs in Western Thebes. Their entrances are orientated towards the processional way leading to the temple of Hatshepsut: EIGNER 1984, fig. 67.

10. An example is the narrow pathway between GB 29 (Gabra’s numbering: M 21/SE) and GB 26-27 (Gabra’s numbering: M 9/SE): GABRA *et al.* 1941, pl. II.

11. Gabra’s numbering: M 11/SS.

12. Gabra’s numbering: T 9/SE.

13. Gabra’s numbering: M 13/SS and M 12/SS.

14. PERDRIZET 1941, p. 64.

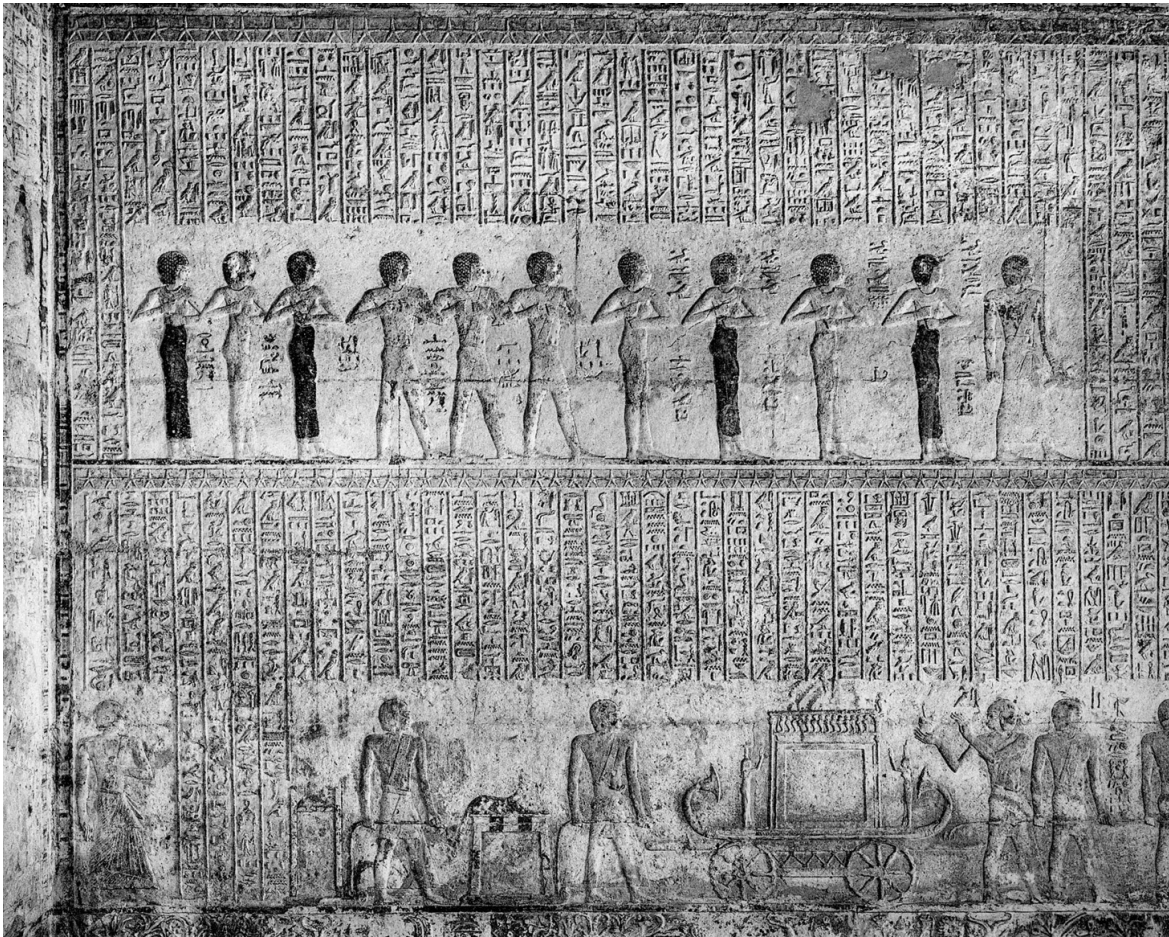


Figure 4: Funeral procession in the tomb of Petosiris: the catafalque of Petosiris (from LEFEBVRE 1923, pl. XXX)

excavation shows us its original appearance with doors and a small room<sup>15</sup>. While the deceased were probably buried within the podium, the aedicule on top may have been used to expose the mummies before being laid in their tombs.

Two graffiti in tomb-houses illustrate that this practise was common in Tuna el-Gebel. In GB 45<sup>16</sup> the drawing has almost vanished, but it was described by P. Perdrizet as “Entre l’épigramme de gauche et la porte, le scribe avait représenté sommairement un édifice funéraire à triple emmarchement, de plan apparemment carré, avec une porte occupant presque toute la façade et avec un toit en forme de pyramidion.”<sup>17</sup> The other graffiti in GB 1<sup>18</sup> shows a similar building, in this case also with a mummy inside (fig. 8): “...à droite, dans un petit édifice *in antis* à fronton triangulaire, la momie nimbée d’un mort osiriaque, portant deux palmes dans ses mains

15. WILKENING-AUMANN 2015, p. 128 fig. 11.

16. Gabra’s numbering: M 1/CP.

17. PERDRIZET 1941, p. 68.

18. Gabra’s numbering: M 13/SS.

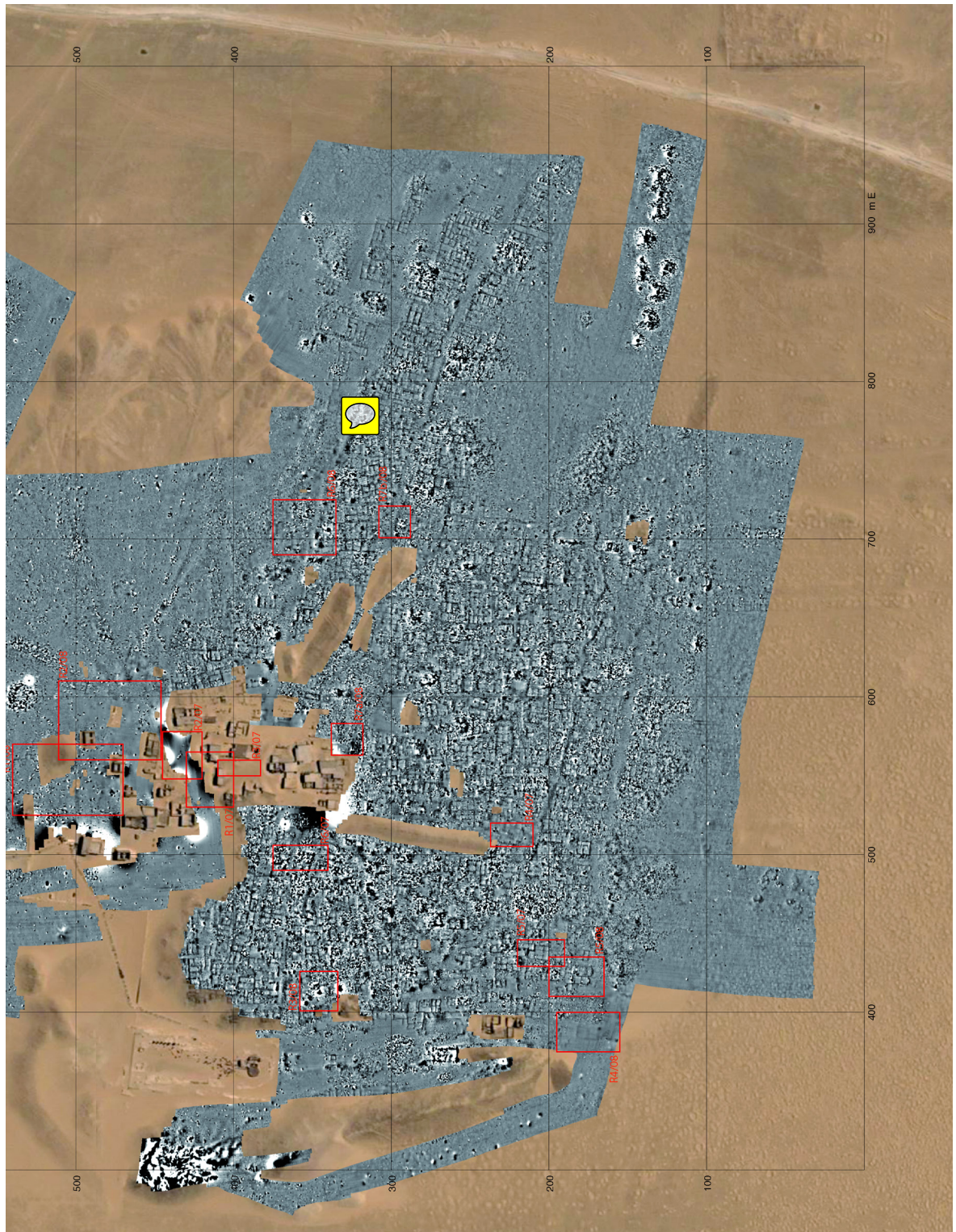


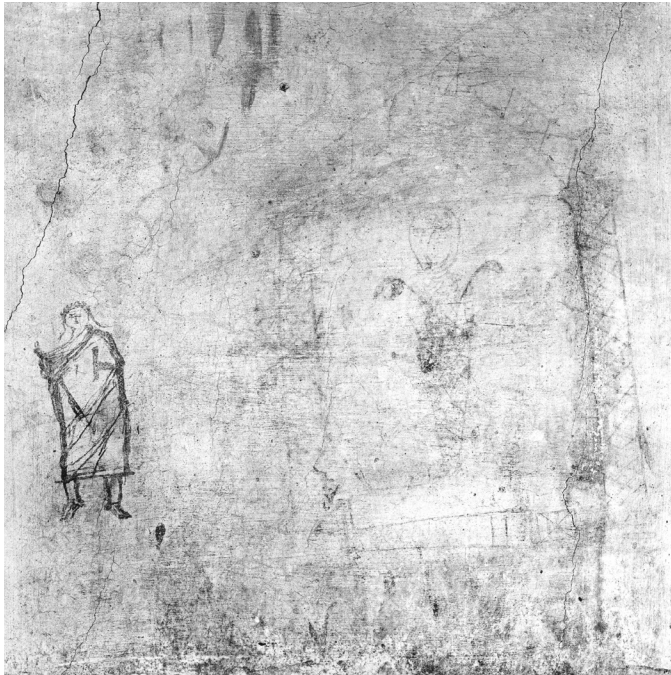
Figure 5: Geomagnetic map of the Petosiris necropolis. Kiel University, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 6: Map of the Petosiris necropolis with the numbering of the tombs. Cottbus University, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



**Figure 7:** Tomb GB 22 (T 9/SE) seen from GB 12 (M 5/SS) in 1972. Photograph D. Johannes, © German Archaeological Institute Cairo, inv. no. F 9989



**Figure 8:** Graffito in tomb GB 1: temple-like building with a statue of Osiris or a mummy inside. Photograph D. Johannes, © German Archaeological Institute Cairo, inv. no. F 10009



raménées sur la poitrine."<sup>19</sup> These drawings dating from the 2nd or 3rd century AD attest a building comparable to an Osireion, probably serving to expose the mummy in the necropolis.

Another argument for GB 22 being such an installation is a second building of the same size and structure at the southern road leading into the necropolis, between GB 1 and GB 2 P. Perdrizet describes a house that no longer exists<sup>20</sup>. Of special interest is the reference to this house regarding the graffito in GB 45<sup>21</sup>. Although the building itself was demolished, it seems to have been of the same size and function as GB 22 along the northern way; both may have served as aedicules for displaying mummies at the end of the procession.

## The placement of the body in the tomb

In Tuna el-Gebel we observe different forms of burials:

- deep shafts, some of them with underground galleries;
- pits in the ground;
- tomb enclosures inside house- or temple-tombs;
- mummies openly displayed on mud-brick or wooden *klinai*;
- single tomb monuments;
- tomb pillars<sup>22</sup>.

Along with this wide variety of inhumation burials we must reckon also on urns for cremation burials<sup>23</sup>. As the most common type is inhumation, however, we will focus in the following section on the placement of the bodies after the procession has arrived at the tomb.

The first tombs of the necropolis (e.g. Petosiris, Padjkam, GB 29<sup>24</sup>, GB 44<sup>25</sup>) had shafts up to 8 m deep. When emptied by the excavators, these shafts lead into underground galleries where limestone sarcophagi were placed (e.g. Petosiris, Padjkam). In GB 44, however, several sarcophagi still stand *in situ* inside the second room (fig. 9)<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, adjoining spaces of the entrance room may also have served for burials (fig. 10), however, these installations most probably hosted later burials of the Roman period, while during the Ptolemaic period the bodies were hidden and protected by placing them deep into the ground.

What were the tomb offerings like in this period? Unfortunately, the documentation of Gabra's excavation was never published in detail, and looting in the area had already disturbed many contexts before scientific investigations even started. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish the grave goods offered during the burials from the material left during services at the tomb afterwards

19. PERDRIZET 1941, p. 91.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 96-97 M 15/SS.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 68: "La nécropole de Touna nous a conservé un grand tombeau de ce type, ...".

22. See LEMBKE 2014, p. 90-91.

23. See *ibid.*, p. 90.

24. Gabra's numbering: M 21/SE.

25. Gabra's numbering: T 2/CP.

26. Further sarcophagi of the Roman period were found in the tomb of Padjkam: GABRA 1932, p. 72. His shaft was also deepened up to 10 m, most likely in Roman times, see GABRA *et al.* 1941, p. 14.

or even from goods of later secondary burials in the same tomb<sup>27</sup>. However, the inventories of Sami Gabra do allow us to make some suggestions concerning the different phases of the necropolis.

During the Ptolemaic period ushabtis were common in Tuna el-Gebel, and some have been found more or less *in situ* in the shafts<sup>28</sup>. Amulets and other protective symbols, like djed pillars, have also been located<sup>29</sup>. One of the few detailed descriptions in Gabra's inventory gives us a clue regarding the position of the many scarabs found in the necropolis: while most of them were scattered around, three were found "dans le puits de Padykam sur des momies placés à côté du sarcophage de Padykam"<sup>30</sup>. A unique piece is the golden mask from the shaft of Padjkam that is held in Mallawi Museum (**fig. 11**)<sup>31</sup>. Many offering slabs of limestone belong to the finds, but according to the documentation not one of them was still *in situ*<sup>32</sup>.

In later stone tombs like GB 48<sup>33</sup> or the early mud-brick tomb GB 42<sup>34</sup> the bodies were laid in pits directly beneath the floor and then closed by stone slabs.

In GB 42 the mummies remained *in situ* in open pits after Gabra's excavation (**fig. 13**). Only recently have looters damaged them. Two objects were found in this tomb according to Gabra's inventory: a "statuette de femme assise, mettant le doigt dans la bouche"<sup>35</sup>, most probably a figurine of the god Harpocrates, and a "petite fiole à long col"<sup>36</sup>. Both of them belong to the Roman period and are certainly later than the first burials. They may either belong to secondary burials or to a ritual, like the sacrifice of oil or perfume, which we will discuss later.

The situation of GB 48, one of the first tombs excavated by Sami Gabra (**fig. 14**)<sup>37</sup>, is even more complicated. He dated the stone building to the 1st century BC according to its level above the tomb of Petosiris and its lower level compared to the tomb-houses of the 2nd century AD. The lily capitals support this hypothesis<sup>38</sup>. The entrance to the building was closed by a mud-brick wall and was therefore certainly reused in the Roman period. A block with an inscription found near the eastern wall of the building and mentioning one Ptolemaios, an orator from Alexandria, must be connected with this secondary use<sup>39</sup>. The four pits in the floor from the first period only contained badly mummified bodies without grave goods. If we assume that they were not plundered in antiquity or after, this is an interesting argument for similar burials of the late Ptolemaic period.

27. J. Helmbold-Doyé comes to the same conclusion after studying the material from Honroth's excavation: HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 57.
28. For example, three ushabtis of a Dwi-Ka found during the 1933-1934 season ("Numéro de fouilles 130-131").
29. For example, in the tomb shaft of a Dysi-Hor with an ushabti (no. 134) and a djed pillar made of faience (no. 135). A mummy mask of a woman (no. 274) was also found in the same shaft. Two necklaces with different amulets (no. 1497-1498) came from the shaft of Padjkam.
30. Nos. 398-400: faience, length 4-4.5 cm.
31. No. 1030 (January 20, 1938): "feuille en or battu représentant grossièrement les traits d'une figure humaine. Puits de Padjkam".
32. The most beautiful among them is no. 949 (limestone, inventoried on March 21, 1935 = Mallawi Mus. 273) (**fig. 12**).
33. Gabra's numbering: T 1/CP.
34. Gabra's numbering: M 18/CP.
35. No. 281: fired clay, 14,5 x 9 cm.
36. No. 282: glass, h. 5 cm.
37. GABRA 1932, p. 58-63.
38. LEMBKE 2012, p. 210.
39. BERNAND 1999, p. 123 no. 34, dating the inscription to the 2nd century AD; in this publication Bernand does not indicate the provenance of the block nor its whereabouts.

Moreover, the objects found inside the rooms were not really satisfying. After the great effort of removing the sand, the excavator stated in disillusion, "En effet, nous n'avons pas tardé à nous apercevoir de la triste réalité en entrant dans les chambres. Nous avons trouvé le sol jonché de corps jetés pêle-mêle et, naturellement, très peu objets intéressants (...)"<sup>40</sup>. The most interesting objects were a plaster bust of Serapis and a badly damaged statuette of Isis, also made of plaster. In the debris they found a small vessel with the Greek inscription ONH<sup>41</sup>, a necklace with small wooden figurines of women enclosing a phallus in their centre<sup>42</sup>, and finally a necklace with roughly cut alabaster beads. All of these objects seem to be grave goods placed on or near the mummy during the burial. As they are of Roman date, they belong to the reuse phase of the tomb, i.e. to the corpses on the floor.

In the tomb-houses of the Roman period the burials were usually placed behind stone enclosures (e.g. GB 15<sup>43</sup>), behind recess walls built of mud brick and imitating *klinai* (e.g. GB 8 or GB 10<sup>44</sup>), on *klinai* built of mud brick (e.g. GB 45 or Gabra's M 10, today destroyed<sup>45</sup>) (fig. 15) or lastly on wooden *klinai* (e.g. GB 12 and 13<sup>46</sup>). Rarely the bodies were buried in sarcophagi made of stone (see fig. 9) or in wooden coffins<sup>47</sup>. While the bodies of the late Ptolemaic period were only badly mummified and without ornaments, the burials of the Roman period were generally covered with plaster and had beautiful mummy masks. In all these cases, however, no grave goods have been given to the mummy apart from some jewellery<sup>48</sup> or a coin for the ferryman Charon<sup>49</sup>. Only the poorer ones, like the secondary burials in GB 48 (see above), got cheap necklaces, small vessels and figurines made of terracotta or plaster instead of the individualised portraits of the middle and upper classes<sup>50</sup>.

## Rituals in or at the tomb during or after the burial

What happened after the burial? How often did people come to the tombs of their ancestors and what did they do there? Although it is difficult to find an answer after such a long period of reuse, plundering and excavation with limited documentation, the permanent installations as well as the material inventory give us valuable clues.

40. GABRA 1932, p. 60.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 60 fig. 3. According to GABRA 1932, p. 61 the letters may be part of the name Onesimos.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 60 fig. 3.

43. Gabra's numbering: T 5/SS; see LEMBKE, WILKENING-AUMANN 2012, p. 172-188.

44. Gabra's numbering: M 2/SS and M 3/SS; see LEMBKE 2012, p. 215-216.

45. For GB 45 (Gabra's numbering: M 1/CP), see GABRA 1932, p. 66-68, fig. 6; for M 10, see LEMBKE 2007, p. 31, fig. 6.

46. Gabra's numbering: M 5/SE, see LEMBKE 2012, p. 215, fig. 13.9.

47. Most of them decomposed: for still existing examples, see FLOSSMANN, SCHÜTZE 2010.

48. For example, the ring of the deceased Isidora: GABRA 1932, p. 68. B. Borg has already stated the fact that no grave goods were found with burials covered with plaster and with mummy masks: BORG 1998, p. 31.

49. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 57.

50. The pebbles with Late Ptolemaic demotic inscriptions found around the head of a burial east of the temple-tomb of Padjkam are unique: MINAS-NERPEL 2015, p. 253-259.



Figure 9: GB 44, second room: Ptolemaic shaft and Roman sarcophagi. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 11: Mallawi Museum inv. 124: golden mask from the shaft of Padjkam. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 10: GB 44, first room: adjoining spaces that probably served for burials. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 12: Mallawi Museum, inv. 273: offering plate. Photograph J. Helmbold-Doyé, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 13: GB 42: mummy left *in situ* in an open pit, photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 15: Gabra's M 10 (destroyed): mummy laid openly on a *kline* built of mud brick. © photograph archive Sami Gabra



Figure 14: Late Ptolemaic tomb GB 48. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris

Permanent installations in front of the tombs are altars, fireplaces, benches or other seating arrangements. Material objects belonging to rituals are cooking vessels of different kinds, drinking cups, small flasks (*unguentaria*), incense burners and oil lamps.

## Altars

The altars are continuous elements of the tomb architecture at Tuna el-Gebel starting from the temple-tomb of Petosiris<sup>51</sup> (fig. 16) throughout the Ptolemaic period up to the Roman tomb-houses of the 2nd and 3rd century AD, e.g. GB 45<sup>52</sup> or GB 6<sup>53</sup>. A fine and newly documented example is GB 51, probably an early Ptolemaic stone building whose altar stood originally at the end of a *dromos*. At the time of reuse it must have already been covered with sand, and therefore a new altar was erected in front of the entrance to the tomb<sup>54</sup>. Even in Roman times altars were placed near the doors of the houses (fig. 17), though in many cases either there was none or it is not preserved.

Still, we may state that offerings were brought to the deceased by their ancestors at the time of the burial or after. What kind of offerings were these? Given that scorch marks have not been detected on the stone altars or on the altars built of mud-brick and covered with plaster<sup>55</sup>, the offerings were not burnt but simply placed there<sup>56</sup>.

## Fire-places

Another common feature in front of Roman tomb-houses were fireplaces. Sami Gabra described one of them at a house next to GB 48 that was later demolished: “Sous la loge de l’escalier, nous avons trouvé un groupe de poteries rouges et cerclées. Quelques-unes ont la forme de vases-étriers avec deux anses et un bec; leur panse est souvent couverte d’un vernis rouge ou de lignes marron imitant le raisin sur treille. L’un de ces vases porte le nom de ΚΟΙΠΗ, tracé à l’encre rouge<sup>57</sup>. Certains sont encore noircis par la cendre noire qui couvre leur surface; d’autres ressemblent, par les filets circulaires qui les couvrent, aux vases crétois.”<sup>58</sup> Finally, Gabra drew the conclusion: “L’étage supérieur semble avoir été réservé à la famille et aux amis qui devaient y séjourner pendant les fêtes des morts, comme font les Égyptiens de nos jours.”<sup>59</sup>

In fact, many of these meeting places where fire was used existed in Tuna el-Gebel. In some cases, like the facade of GB 4<sup>60</sup>, only the black discoloration near the entrance of the tomb gives us a clue, but in others, like GB 35<sup>61</sup> (fig. 18) or GB 7<sup>62</sup>, cooking vessels were found still *in situ*, i.e. below a staircase as described by Gabra.

51. SOUKIASSIAN 1983, p. 318, 321 fig. 1.

52. Gabra’s numbering: M 1/CP.

53. Gabra’s numbering: M 22/SS.

54. PRELL 2015a, p. 187, 205-207.

55. The secondary altar had scorch marks inside the construction that may have resulted from offerings before the construction (PRELL 2015b, p. 206-207 fig. 27).

56. For the high altar in front of the tomb of Petosiris: SOUKIASSIAN 1983, p. 318.

57. Κοιπή is the name of a man, probably the vessel belonged to a Kopres. I owe this information to S. Pfeiffer.

58. GABRA 1932, p. 63-65, fig. 5.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

60. Gabra’s numbering: M 12/SS.

61. Gabra’s numbering: M 4/SE.

62. Gabra’s numbering: M 22/SS.



**Figure 16:** Monumental altar in front of the temple-tomb of Petosiris. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



**Figure 17:** Altar in front of the house-tomb GB 45. Photograph K. Lembke, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



**Figure 18:** GB 34. Fireplace below the staircase to the second floor with a bronze cauldron still *in situ*. Photograph M. Sabottka (1987), © Forschungsstelle griechisch-römisches Ägypten Trier



**Figure 19:** GB 61. View of the temple-tomb with a bench next to the entrance. Photograph D. Johannes (1972), © German Archaeological Institute Cairo, inv. No. F 9957

## Benches

That people gathered at the tombs is also documented by benches or other seating arrangements. Fine examples are GB 61<sup>63</sup>, where a bench is placed in the front hall of the Roman temple-tomb (**fig. 19**), or the house-tomb GB 6<sup>64</sup> with an open enclosure in front of the tomb on the second floor, here also combined with an altar (**fig. 20**).

63. Gabra's numbering: T 12/SE.

64. Gabra's numbering: M 6/SS.





Figure 20: GB 17. View of the terrace in front of GB 16 with seating and an altar. Photograph D. Johannes (1972), © German Archaeological Institute Cairo, inv. no. F 9992

## Elements from rituals

In addition to permanent installations, many objects have been found that were certainly not grave goods, but elements from rituals. Among these are numerous vessels of different size, but all of them simple cooking ware with limited decoration. While cleaning the entrance of GB 7<sup>65</sup> we documented a fireplace with vessels still *in situ* under the staircase to the second floor. The same situation was described by B.H. Krause, who worked in the necropolis from the late 1970s

65. Gabra's numbering: M 22/SS.

to the early 1990s. Among his photos there is one showing the fireplace of GB 35 with a bronze cauldron still in place (**fig. 18**)<sup>66</sup>.

Already, during the first excavation by W. Honroth many shards of cooking ware were documented, among them pots, jugs, plates, and amphorae<sup>67</sup>. Obviously, they were used for transporting or storing food and for meals during visits to the tomb.

Another large group consists of glasses or glass fragments. Most of them are small flasks, but there are also parts of tableware like carafes or drinking vessels. While the tableware was certainly used for drinking at the tomb, the flasks probably contained oil or perfumes for sacrifices.

Less common are pots, cups, plates or amphorae of faience whose shards were left in the tombs by the excavators<sup>68</sup>. Like the tableware consisting of clay or glass, most of them served for the meals in honour of the ancestors, but the small plates may rather have been used for offerings to the deceased. The faience amphorae could be interpreted as urns<sup>69</sup>, but their use as containers of wine or other kinds of food is more reasonable.

Another sacrifice for the deceased is documented by small incense burners made of clay<sup>70</sup>. Thirteen burners were stored by former excavators in tomb-houses at the site without any noted provenance, some in the form of simple cups, but most of them in the form of miniature horned altars (**fig. 21**)<sup>71</sup>.

Lastly, many oil lamps have been found in the tombs. They functioned primarily as sources of light in the tomb-houses where they were found, but they may also have played a role in rituals or processions (**fig. 22**)<sup>72</sup>.

## Secondary burials

The reuse of tombs is a common feature in the Petosiris necropolis. Starting with the famous tomb of Petosiris itself, its front hall was divided into three small rooms during the 1st century AD at the latest, according to the objects found near the burials<sup>73</sup>. Other early Ptolemaic tombs, like that of Padjkam and GB 51, were also reused in the Roman period<sup>74</sup>. The same phenomenon can be observed in buildings from the late Ptolemaic period, like GB 48<sup>75</sup>.

66. Gabra's numbering: M 4/SE. "Unter dem Treppenbau, mit Öffnung nach O, hohe und breite Rundbogen-Nische, die als Feuerstätte gedient hat. Am Nischenboden zum Raum hin abgeschrägte Ziegelaufmauerung mit zwei stark verrußten Aufstellöffnungen für Gefäße: Oberer Teil eines stark korrodierten Bronzeimers am Ort gefunden; wohl auch Mühlstein" (unpublished record, Forschungszentrum Griechisch-Römisches Ägypten, Trier University).

67. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 24-99, esp. p. 58-87.

68. J. Helmbold-Doyé is preparing the publication of this material.

69. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 56.

70. For this group, see SOUKIASSIAN 1983, p. 323-326.

71. They will be published by J. Helmbold-Doyé.

72. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 56-57.

73. LEMBKE 2015.

74. PRELL 2015a (GB 51) and PRELL 2015b (Padjkam). For the reuse of the tomb of Djed-Thoth-*iu-ef-ankh*: LEMBKE 2014, p. 91 with pl. 9.

75. Gabra's numbering: T 1/CP; see above section 3.



Figure 21: Horned altars *en miniature*. Photograph J. Helmbold-Doyé, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris



Figure 22: Oil lamps. Photograph J. Helmbold-Doyé, © Project Tuna el-Gebel / necropolis of Petosiris

Also, in the mud-brick tomb-houses several layers of burials have been found. In one house-tomb W. Honroth excavated 19 corpses in 1913<sup>76</sup>. While some of them were buried in decorated wooden sarcophagi or had a plaster covering, others were badly mummified without any traces of decoration or grave goods. Obviously, these burials were later additions and testify to a reuse of the mud-brick tombs. Furthermore, they attest a certain decline of the necropolis: while the first tombs of the Ptolemaic Period were built for priests of high rank, during the Roman period Tuna el-Gebel became the burial site of lay people from Hermopolis belonging to the upper and middle classes. In late antiquity, finally, the tombs were reused by poor people with little knowledge of mummification. Nonetheless, Christian burials cannot be detected and it seems that they were located elsewhere, probably north of the site<sup>77</sup>.

There are a number of factors that make it difficult to reconstruct funeral rituals at Tuna el-Gebel. Over many centuries the tombs were used and reused; illicit digs are attested since the 19th century at the latest; the first scientific excavation by W. Honroth stopped after only ten days, and later excavations were not documented in detail. Furthermore, Sami Gabra was most delighted by the architecture and the decoration of the tombs, but quite disillusioned by the objects placed in or near the tombs. Indeed, we are a long way away from Tutankhamun with regard to the quantity and quality of the grave goods. Simple kitchenware made of clay is by far the largest group of objects, followed by glass vessels and faience objects.

In combination with the architectural features discussed above, however, it seems very probable that people gathered at the tombs after the funerals and perhaps also every year to celebrate the birthday or the day of death of their ancestors. Meals were cooked on fireplaces in front of the tombs, and amphorae and cups were used to store liquids or as drinking vessels. Walls against sand drifts that were built in front of many tombs, e.g. GB 14 or GB 4<sup>78</sup>, allowed entry to the ground floors even after the second floor was built. This would indicate continual rituals at the tombs. According to J. Helmbold-Doyé<sup>79</sup>, the latest objects date to the 4th or even 5th century AD, but there are no indications of Christianisation so far. Therefore, we may conclude that the Egyptian tradition was very strong at Tuna el-Gebel.

One may argue that the objects found in the tombs were grave goods for the deceased rather than tableware for the offspring<sup>80</sup>. In this case, however, neither the fireplaces nor the seating arrangements make sense. Obviously, the cooking ware was stored inside the tomb-houses for the next meeting. Probably also some of the food was given to the deceased<sup>81</sup>. Therefore, many pots or shards of cooking ware were found inside the tombs instead of outside. A ritual inside the tomb is not very probable because the smell must have been intolerable, as this inscription

76. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 34-35.

77. On December 18, 1936, Gabra documented a Coptic limestone inscription found north of the Petosiris necropolis (Gabra inventory no. 926: "trouvé à 'Margou' N. T. Petosiris").

78. Gabra's numbering: T 4/SS and M 12/SS.

79. See her catalogue of objects found during Honroth's excavation: HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 58-87.

80. HELMBOLD-DOYÉ 2015, p. 55-57.

81. Cf. Lucian (*Luct.* 21), who attests that the mummies were guests at meals (σύνδειπνον καὶ συμπότιον) of the ancestors.

attests: "Wanderer – do not pass me in silence, me, the son of Epimachos! Stay – the odour of cedar oil shall not make you sad. Remain and listen a bit to the good smelling deceased."<sup>82</sup>

Coming back to our initial question, we may ask again if Sami Gabra's reconstruction is accurate. It seems quite improbable that individuals were hanging around in the necropolis as the excavator imagined. However, there was certainly life in the area when families came to celebrate with the deceased. Gathering together, as well as eating and drinking at the tombs was still common when Christianity had already spread into the Nile Valley. Guards must have looked after the place as well, either for security or to clean it of sand. Furthermore, in the 3rd century AD a military camp was situated nearby, and a soldier from the camel troops left a graffito in GB 1<sup>83</sup>. Like the oases and other areas on the fringe of the desert, Tuna el-Gebel was certainly part of the line of defences built by the Roman emperors from the 2nd century AD against the incursions of nomads. Destruction, however, was not caused by these latter, but only by modern inhabitants and their illegal excavations. Still, they were not able to cover all traces of the tombs' original builders, occupants and visitors and one must wonder what future excavations might reveal.

82. BERNAND 1999, p. 160-162 no. 71 (translation by the author).

83. PERDRIZET 1941, p. 91 pl. XLIII, 1.

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