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Re-excavating Gheyta's Roman-period cemetery

Some preliminary results on the recontextualisation of excavated artefacts

Ben van den Bercken

Introduction

In 2013 the Allard Pierson organised *The Petrie Perspective*, a project linked to the larger international project *Artefacts of Excavation: British Excavations in Egypt 1880-1980*, coordinated by University College London and Oxford University.¹ For the duration of the *Petrie Perspective* project, Willem van Haarlem worked on retracing 'Petrie objects' in the Allard Pierson to their moment of excavation. His work provided information on the historiography of objects excavated by the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF), Egyptian Research Account (ERA) and British School of Archaeology in Egypt (BSAE).

This short contribution aims to start a recontextualisation of the 'artefacts of excavation' that Van Haarlem identified, as well as trace other objects from the same site. The site concerned in this contribution is the Roman cemetery of Gheyta in the eastern Nile Delta, which was excavated by the BSAE and ERA in 1905. As a tribute to and continuation of the work initiated by Willem van Haarlem this seemed a suitable contribution to this publication.

Recontextualising excavated artefacts

The results of the *Artefacts of Excavation* project clearly illustrated the migratory life of artefacts from British excavations in Egypt from 1880 to 1980, even after their initial distribution by the EEF, ERA and BSAE.² The results underlined the importance of documentation, as the objects might lose their original context at any next step in their historiography. Thanks to the project more detailed information about specific objects

1 See <http://egyptartefacts.griffith.ox.ac.uk/>.

2 See the below example of the Gheyta objects that went to Von Bissing.

(re-)surfaced. A next step is to try and reconnect specific artefacts to the places where they were excavated and to virtually reunite them with the rest of the excavation material.³

The Egyptian collection of the Allard Pierson originated largely from the collection of the former Museum Scheurleer in The Hague. The banker Constant Willem Lunsingh Scheurleer (1881-1941) subscribed to the BSAE and EEF excavations and received several shipments between 1921 and 1927.⁴ His collection also contained objects that Scheurleer acquired from Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing (1873-1956), who in his turn acquired them from the BSAE, ERA and EEF between 1902 and 1912. This latter group included objects from the BSAE and ERA excavation at Gheyta.

Gheyta/Tell Yehud

The cemetery at Gheyta (also Ghita) was excavated by the Revd John Garrow Duncan in the winter of 1905, while Petrie and other members of the team worked at Tell Yehudiya.⁵ Duncan and his team operated from the nearby city of Bilbeis and excavated the Gheyta cemetery that was located near the ruins of Tell Yehud, a little east of the Ismailiyeh Canal. In four weeks' time they excavated an unknown number of graves on five different locations at the cemetery. These graves were dated from the first to the fourth century AD, based on the finds and grave types. The location of the cemetery has since become uncertain, as agricultural activity in the area has expanded even further.⁶

One is tempted to see the uncultivated area without construction south-west of Ezbet Abd el-Malak Saad as the site, fitting with Duncan's description that the ruins were already surrounded by agricultural lands. On the other hand, this location does not fit the description of 'about six miles from Belbeys'.⁷ It is possible that the cemetery is now beneath the agricultural fields. Petrie did not spend much time on discussing Duncan's results in his introduction of the 1906 publication of his team's work. He merely states that 'the cemetery at Gheyta has shown how Syrian influence was coming into Egypt in the later centuries of Roman occupation.'⁸ Duncan's interpretation of the name Gheyta as related to the Rhaetians, a people with a Levantine connection,⁹ and the alabaster boxes for ointment¹⁰ were used as arguments.

Reconstruction of Grave 71

Duncan and his team excavated a number of graves of different types.¹¹ Most of these had been plundered, which resulted in damage to the human remains and removal of grave goods which were often located near the head of the deceased.¹² Grave 71 was found intact. It belonged to the first type described by Duncan: a hole 'cut in the hard black soil to a depth of 7 or 8 feet.' On the bottom of the hole was 'a narrow slit wide enough to admit the body on its back, the rest of the width of the excavated hole being used as ledges to

3 E.g. the work of Franzmeier 2017, 3.

4 Van Haarlem 2016a, 9-10 and Van Haarlem 2016b.

5 Petrie 1906, I.

6 Duncan refers to this process already, Petrie 1906, 55.

7 Petrie 1906, 55.

8 Petrie 1906, 2-3.

9 Tóth 2008, 214-215.

10 Petrie 1906, 58.

11 Petrie 1906, 55-57.

12 Petrie 1906, 61.

Description	Material	Duncan No.	Current location	Inventory number
amphora	pottery	3	unknown	?
amphora	pottery	4	unknown	?
ointment box/jar/vase	alabaster	25	Manchester	3389
ointment box/jar/vase	alabaster	27	Manchester	3384
ointment box/jar/vase	alabaster	30	unknown	?
ointment box/jar/vase	alabaster	31	Manchester	3388
ointment box/jar/vase	alabaster	none	unknown	?
scarab	glazed steatite	59	Manchester	3420
scarab	glazed steatite	60	Manchester	3416
scarab	glazed steatite	61	Manchester	3417
scarab	glazed steatite	62	Manchester	3422
scarab	glazed steatite	63	Manchester	3419
scarab	dark stone	64	Manchester	3414
scarab	glazed steatite	65	Manchester	3421
scarab	glazed steatite	66	Manchester	3423
scarab	glazed steatite	67	Manchester	3413
scarab	glazed steatite	68	Manchester	3415
scarab	glazed steatite	69	Manchester	3418
spoon	bronze	91	Manchester	3387.a-d
spoon	bronze	92	Manchester	3387.a-d
cup	ivory	146	unknown	?
cup	ivory	147	unknown	?
cup	ivory	150	unknown	?
cup	ivory	154	unknown	?
pin	ivory?	158	unknown	?
ivory beads (bracelet)	ivory	161	Manchester?	3370.c?
fragments?	ivory?	163	unknown	?
bracelet(?) of beads	onyx	165	Manchester	3371
bead(s)	crystal(?)	170	Manchester	3371
rings (6x)	bronze	?	Edinburgh	A.1906.443.64; 64A; 64B; 64C; 64D; 66
shell for grinding kohl	shell	?	unknown	?
cylinder with 2 eyes	silver	none	Amsterdam	APM07026
cylinder with 2 eyes	silver	none	Manchester	3385
cylinder with 2 eyes	silver	none	Manchester	3386.a
cylinder with 2 eyes	silver	none	Manchester	3386.b
string of rough beads	limestone, carnelian, quartz	unknown	Manchester	3372

Fig. 1 Table of the finds from Gheyta Grave 71 that were traced in museum collections. The whereabouts of several objects are still unknown. Some may not have been preserved, for example the ivory cups, which were in a poor state of preservation when found by Duncan. In the table 'Manchester' refers to the Manchester Museum, 'Amsterdam' to the Allard Pierson and 'Edinburgh' to the National Museums Scotland.

support the stone slabs or bricks placed over the corpse after burial.¹³ Duncan does not explicitly specify, but interprets the buried person as a female.¹⁴ Finds from the grave included ivory cups, alabaster boxes for ointment, bronze spoons, beads, a cosmetic shell, pharaonic scarabs, silver cylinder pendants and, near the surface of the grave's filling, two inscribed amphora fragments. These finds were dispersed over several museums and the Von Bissing collection in 1905-1906, and some have changed hands since. Until now, only several objects kept at the Manchester Museum and one object from the Allard Pierson were attributed to Grave 71. With the help of the EEF/ERA/BSAE distribution lists, online museum databases and the valuable help of museum curators a large part of the objects mentioned by Duncan as having come from Grave 71 has now been traced (fig. 1).¹⁵ This is a first step in the recontextualisation process.

Some notes on artefacts from Gheyta Grave 71

Analysis of the finds from Grave 71 and other graves is under way. Some of the main questions are how local the grave goods were and whether Duncan's dating of the graves can be refined on the basis of parallels from elsewhere. Some of the grave goods are particularly interesting.

During excavation nine 'alabaster boxes for ointment' were found. Of these cosmetic boxes or *pyxides*, five were found in Grave 71 (fig. 1). This could be an indication of the relative wealth or preferences of its occupant, but also of the bad state of preservation of other graves at the site (fig. 2). Presently, no exact parallels for these boxes are known from other Roman period cemeteries in the Delta.¹⁶ Alabaster ointment jars of various types are well known in pharaonic Egypt;¹⁷ in the Byzantine period Alexandrian workshops produced ivory *pyxides* of great quality.¹⁸ The shape and decoration patterns of the Gheyta boxes recall earlier pottery *pyxides* from the Late Helladic (fourteenth-thirteenth century BC).¹⁹ No Egyptian parallels for this type of box have been found yet. Were the Gheyta boxes unique and perhaps made locally? Or are they products of 'Syrian influence', as Petrie and Duncan stated? Research into these questions is ongoing.

That the person buried in Grave 71 had a relation with objects from the past is clear from the series of pharaonic scarabs that was found near the right wrist. These date from the 13th to the 19th dynasty and must have been collected and made into a contemporary bracelet.²⁰ Although mentioned in one sentence by Duncan, this is in fact an interesting and yet little-investigated phenomenon, and a fresh dimension to the

13 Petrie 1906, 55.

14 Petrie 1906, 61-62.

15 I would especially like to thank Campbell Price (Manchester Museum), Daniel Potter (National Museums Scotland), Tony Jonges and Gerald Jurriaans-Helle (both Allard Pierson) for their help in tracing the objects. Manchester Museum accession number 3414 was published in Boschloos 2012, 8 and 15.

16 E.g. at Minshat Abu Omar (Kroeper 1988, 12); Qesna (Rowland 2008, 70); Kafr Hassan Dawood (Lovell 1997, 36-37); Tell el-Maskhuta (Holladay 1982, 37-43); and Tell Belim (Spencer 2002, 40-42).

17 E.g. Von Bissing 1904, Plate IX.

18 Rodziewicz, 2003, 47-70.

19 Fourteenth-thirteenth century BC, e.g. Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession numbers 74.51.772 and 74.51.767) and British Museum (e.g. accession number 1897,0401.1280). The shape also resembles New Kingdom kohl jars (e.g. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden inventory number AAL 100).

20 These scarabs are now in the Manchester Museum, accession numbers 3413-3423.



Fig. 2 One of the alabaster boxes from Grave 71. Image Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, accession number 3384.

Artefacts of Excavation.²¹ Some of the scarabs were already two thousand years old at that time. The phenomenon of reuse of scarabs has been addressed by Othmar Keel, who differentiates between *Erbstücke* and *Findlinge*.²² The difference in dates of the scarabs from Grave 71 seems to point to (accidental) collecting and reuse, which does not mean that the ensemble might not have functioned as an heirloom at any stage between the 19th dynasty and Roman period.²³ Duncan refers to other graves at Gheyta, where older scarabs were exclusively found in graves of women and children. Comparison might provide further insights.

In the collection of the Allard Pierson Van Haarlem identified three Gheyta objects: a gold and glass earring (APM07023), a cylindrical silver pendant (APM07026) and a small glass bottle (APM07697). Only the cylindrical pendant came from Grave 71; it originally belonged to a set of four (fig. 3). The exact find location in the grave has not been recorded, but these four elements probably were parts of one piece of jewellery, although it cannot be excluded that they functioned as individual pendants, possibly with small stones set into them. Similar silver and gold links are known from pendants, necklaces and bracelets, often as ends.²⁴ Several beads, including a set of onyx interpreted

21 Research on reuse in ancient Egypt often focuses on coffins, tombs and monuments, where reuse involves practical, economic and political motivations, e.g. Arbuckle MacLeod/Cooney 2019, Creasman 2013 and Brand 2010. The (re-)use of non-monumental objects from earlier times remains an interesting field of research to be developed further.

22 Keel 1995, 262-263.

23 For references to reused scarabs in Roman burials, see Keel 1995, 263.

24 For parallels, see Marshall 1911, nos. 2273, 2736, 2736*, 2737, 2813, 2814 and 2964. Several date from the second-third centuries AD.

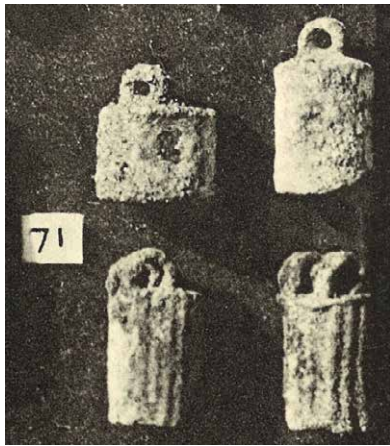


Fig. 3 The four silver pendants from Grave 71 after excavation. After Petrie 1906, Plate XL.



Fig. 4 Onyx and crystal beads necklace from Grave 71. Image Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, accession number 3371.

by Duncan as a bracelet (fig. 4) and a set of ivory beads, were found in Grave 71. Possibly one of these sets and the badly preserved silver pendants were once parts of the same piece of jewellery.

Concluding

This contribution is but a small next step in mapping, describing and analysing the Roman-period cemetery at Gheyta. Research into the Gheyta objects in the Allard Pierson and elsewhere is being continued and will contribute to a corpus of grave goods that shows interesting local variations in burial practices and objects. In the end it will help us to better understand the people of these sites outside the regional and national centres of Roman Egypt.

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