

## Introduction

The famous mummy portraits, along with other finds, were the result of twelve seasons of work by the Egyptian mission in the now-expanding desert on the northeastern edge of the Fayoum Oasis where ancient Philadelphia is located. The work at the archaeological excavation combined forensic analysis and archaeological sciences to reconstruct the story of the lost community that lived in this unique village between the third century B.C. and third century C.E. It also attempted to re-contextualize numerous other finds that were gathered by antiquity dealers during the nineteenth century.

Even though the Ptolemies were not the first foreign rulers to arrive in Egypt, it is surprising to learn that none of the earlier foreign rulers, who were in evidence as early as the 22<sup>nd</sup> dynasty, altered the culture or the unquestioning beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, particularly with regard to their conception of the afterlife and rituals.

From the earliest Ptolemaic period onward, the royal palace at Alexandria, the new capital, was heavily influenced by Egyptian culture. Ptolemaic kings and queens introduced themselves in the same way as local Egyptian gods and goddesses. Their own culture was not entirely eradicated, though. The cultures of the ancient Egyptians and those of Hellenistic monarchs were uniquely combined. In effect, they were a coin with two faces: one representing the civilization of ancient Egypt and the other the influence of ancient Greece. During the Roman era, when a new culture from ancient Rome was introduced to the community, this effect became more pronounced, as evidenced by numerous artifacts and monuments from that era.

The main burial chamber entrance of the Kom el-Shoqafa tomb in Alexandria is an excellent example of how different cultures were blended to produce a hybrid new art and culture. The blend between Egyptian culture and beliefs and Greek culture extended even during the Roman period, at the very core of the new capital Alexandria.

The figure of the tomb owner displays this new hybrid art, as does the entrance, which resembles an ancient Egyptian temple gate with integrated elements from Greek mythology. Here, we can see a medusa, a cobra snake dressed in a Greek style and wearing a double crown.<sup>2</sup> Below we can see male and female figure standing in the manner of an ancient Egyptian statue. The heads of each of these statues were obviously inspired by Hellenistic sculpture, but the body proportions of the figures are still within the range of Egyptian statue dimensions. All these components were found in the catacomb, a Greek and Roman-style tomb. In many respects, these were the

sources that demonstrated the new culture and art that were imitated by architects and artists from Alexandria to all of the Hellenized cities and villages in Egypt, regardless of the quality of the reliefs and sculpture in this and many other examples. One outstanding illustration of this would be the new village of Philadelphia, established by Ptolemy II philadelphus at Fayoum.

The village known as Ancient Philadelphia was founded as part of Ptolemy II's land reclamation initiative and may have roots in Ptolemy I's time. The large village to the northeast of the Fayoum Oasis, which is now known as Kharabet Girza or Kom el Kharba el Kebir, was founded almost entirely on new land, in a strategically important location at the eastern entrance of Fayoum, approximately 9 km east of Girza at Giza, known in ancient records as Kerke, where a port for Memphis was located<sup>3</sup>.

The significance of this community was shaped by three factors: the land reclamation project, the village's position, and the foreign settlers known as the Klerouchoi (κληροθχοι). It flourished from the third B.C.E to the fourth century C.E. When the canal was neglected and there was insufficient water for the cultivated lands, the agriculture field declined and eventually the village was abandoned, turning into ruins.

The village reached its acme between the end of the second century BC and the second century AD. This was observed over the twelve seasons of excavations we conducted at the site beginning in 2015. One of the most crucial questions, though, was whether or not we could demonstrate that this village was the actual location where the well-known mummy portraits, known as Er- Rubbayât mummy portraits, were originally discovered.

Theodor Graf of Vienna was one of the numerous treasure hunters and antiquity dealers who contributed these outstanding portraits to the market in the second half of the 1800s. Archaeological context was missing even for the portraits from the excavation of W.F. Petrie, resulting in a lack of knowledge regarding the funeral customs and the tombs in which these mummies with their exquisite portraits were deposited.

The majority of the texts from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods were written in Greek, which suggests that most

<sup>2</sup> For the new double style or hybrid art style see O'Brien, Louise. (2020). *Reconstructing Hybridity: A Study in Graeco-Roman Funerary Art*.

<sup>3</sup> Using the port at Kerke (Girza) was attested in many sources, see for example the papyrus found at Tebtunis – Fayoum number p.tebt.3.1.823 = HGV P.Tebt. 3 .1 823 = Trismegistos 5399 = berkeley. apis.36, that attested using the harbor at Kerke or Kerki to ship from Memphis to Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy IV see also sailing from Kerke in: papyrus p.lond.7.2067 = HGV P.Lond. 7 2067 = Trismegistos 1628, the port may have been near a small village south of Giza known nowadays as Rikka.

people in these towns and villages spoke or used Greek language. However, more recent studies indicate that the foreign immigrants were in the minority compared to native Egyptians. Several ethnic groups arrived in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period, and some of them settled in these newly established villages.<sup>4</sup> However, the textual evidence informs us that Philadelphia served as a melting pot for individuals from various ethnic backgrounds. This resulted in a diversity of building styles and materials that capture the essence and impact of these multicultural societies.

Since 2015,<sup>5</sup> excavation at the Ancient Philadelphia Necropolis has allowed us to make progress on some of these aforementioned research questions. As said, the primary goal of the study was to shed light on the controversy surrounding the original whereabouts of the enormous mummy portrait collection thought to be the portrait known as the Er-Rubbayât Portraits.<sup>6</sup> Theodor Graf gathered the majority of these images before 1870. It is interesting to examine whether it would be possible to place these images in a new context or to find a cemetery where they were initially discovered. Additionally, because of the cemetery's distinct segmentation, a clear sequence of use stretching from the early third century B.C.E to the late fourth century C.E. could be identified. In fact, we could document the different facets of burial rituals and customs in a multicultural society, in a place that was home to a community of people from different backgrounds with diverse cultural and religious beliefs and cults.

As excavation seasons progress, the question of how much of the architecture of Ancient Philadelphia, and specifically the tombs and funeral landscape, might be a miniature version of Ancient Alexandria, will be addressed. Methodical excavation and cross-comparison of this Alexandrian funeral architecture will help us gain a better understanding of how the funeral architecture of this era in Egypt developed. This is because the number of archaeological sites that remain today in Alexandria represents only a very small percentage of the entire ancient city and capital of Egypt during this period.

The basic framework of funeral customs was undoubtedly shaped by long-standing practices, such as mummification and inhumation; however, a significant change in the way the corpus was presented at the end of the process occurred during this time, as opposed to the customary information regarding the processes of embalming and mummification. The fundamental idea of a secure afterlife with all the

necessary arrangements became the foundation of funeral traditions and the enormous industry that supports them.

Additionally, the mummy's attire, which includes its mummy mask or portrait, as well as its painted or stucco gilded shroud, depicting an ancient Egyptian afterlife belief, indicates two things: first, the continuation and connection of the same Egyptian funeral customs; second, the investment made in the mummy's wrapping over the tomb decoration.

The mummy preparation and decoration in many cases replaced the elaborately decorated tomb walls. During the late Ptolemaic and early Roman periods, thin wooden sheets were used. These sheets were painted using either the encaustic painting technique (by mixing bees wax with pigments), or tempera painting, which used pigment and natural binding elements like gum-based glue or animal glue. The main evolution in this case is not the representation of the deceased's face, as this was known as early as Egyptian history, but rather the realistic impression of these paintings, using new techniques to create depth of field in the painting by using the contrast between dark and light tones of colors and various angles in order to create realistic, three-dimensional and full-of-life paintings.

When comparing the exterior appearance of the mummy as well as the modifications of grave goods between the Ptolemaic period and various Roman cemeteries, there was less bodily treatment. Among them are the cemeteries at Um el Rakhm on the western part of the north coast,<sup>7</sup> Marina el Alamein,<sup>8</sup> the Roman cemetery at Quesna Monofya in the delta,<sup>9</sup> the cemetery at Western Thebes,<sup>10</sup> and the cemetery at Douch-Kharga Oasis.<sup>11</sup>

The Egyptian mission worked in a variety of locations at the site, from the east (the oldest occupation phase) to the west (close to the settlement and considered as the latest occupation phase). Through this study, we were able to follow the use of the burial landscape during the course of the village's existence in several eras. Although the Roman cemetery in the old Philadelphia necropolis is the main subject of this book, the work done there also allowed us to more carefully and scientifically record the context in which fresh mummy portraits were discovered.

<sup>4</sup> B. Gehad, "A Report on a Mid-Ptolemaic Graveyard with Gable-roof Coffins from Ancient Philadelphia, Basem Gehad," BIFAO 124, 2024, Pp. 223–248.

<sup>5</sup> My research on the site started in 2011 during my PhD, and continued on site assessment and reviewing all published materials through a post doc at IFAO in 2015 when the project proposal was submitted to the SCA.

<sup>6</sup> B. Gehad, L.H. Corcoran, M. Ibrahim, A. Hammad., M. Samah, A. Abdo Abd Allah, O. Fekry, "Newly Discovered Mummy Portraits from the Necropolis of Ancient Philadelphia – Fayoum," BIFAO 122, 2022, Pp. 245–264.

<sup>7</sup> Recent excavations in 2023-2024 of the supreme council of antiquities has revealed rock cut catacombs with loculi near by the new kingdom temple at the site of Um el Rakhm.

<sup>8</sup> W.A.Daszewski, Mummy portraits from Northern Egypt: The Necropolis in Marina el Alamein, in: Portraits and Masks: burial customs in Roman Egypt, edited by M.L. Bribrier, British museum press, 1997, Pp:59-65.

<sup>9</sup> Rowland, Joanne & Zakrzewski, Sonia. (2008). Quesna: The Ptolemaic and Roman cemetery. *Egyptian Archaeology*. 32. 15-17.

<sup>10</sup> Ashton, Sally-Ann. (2007). Riggs (C.) The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt. *Art, Identity and Funerary Religion*. Pp. xxiv + 334, ills, maps, colour pls. *Classical Review*. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Dunand, J.L. Heim, N. Henein Douch. *La nécropole de Douch : exploration archéologique. Monographie des tombes 73 à 92 : structures sociales, économiques, religieuses de l'Égypte romaine*

This volume discusses twelve tombs, along with a graveyard and a family open burial court constructed of mudbricks in addition to unique remains of a painted mausoleum. The tombs were excavated between seasons six and eleven, and their dating, architecture, and pottery will all be discussed. Additionally, various objects, including mummy portraits, will be presented in relation to their context. The discovery of these portraits from ancient Philadelphia not only helps to explain this context, but also assists us in re-dating the portraits and resolving dating issues that many previous scholars addressed, as this volume will explain.

In addition, these finds shed new light on the manufacturing technique that was previously believed to be limited to tempera painting portraits found in Philadelphia, or so-called Er-Rubbayât. The question of whether some of these portraits or even the portrait painting was known even earlier than the Roman period could be discussed, because some of these tombs, which are located in the Roman portion of the necropolis, may have been used by the same family whose first generation lived during the late Ptolemaic period. This could also be linked to the information from the Zenon archive regarding the encaustic painters who worked in Philadelphia during the early Ptolemaic period.

