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A glimpse into the Knossian mortuary landscape: The Roman tombs at the Venizeleio Hospital, from the 2014 and 2015 excavation seasons

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of the rescue excavations conducted within the area of the Venizeleio Hospital (north and northeast of the old, main hospital building), during the years 2014 and 2015, focusing on the Roman tombs dated from the second half of the 1st c. BC to the 3rd c. AD. It presents their architectural types and orientation, the main burial practices and the grave offerings. Characteristic cases of tombs and burials are also described, as well as distinctive grave offerings and other finds associated with the identity of the dead.

KEYWORDS: Knossos, Roman cemetery, tombs, funerary practices, grave goods, slave

ROMAN KNOSSOS, CITY AND CEMETERIES

Knossos, the one and only city in Crete which became a Roman colony (*Colonia Julia Nobilis Cnossus*) seems to have been amongst the most prosperous Cretan cities during the Roman period (Hood and Smyth 1981, 22; Sanders 1982, 14).

The precise limits of the city are not known, since excavations have been conducted only in a small part of it. Topographically, the Knossos urban area is situated in an area basically north of the Minoan palace: the limits are defined to the north by the original position of the stream by the Venizeleio Hospital (before its diversion), to the south by the Vlychia ravine, to the east by the Kairatos river and to the west by the hill of Monastiriaki Kephala (Hood and Smyth 1981, 22; Sanders 1982, 152 (8/4); Paton 1994, 146; Ιωαννίδου – Καρέτσου 2008, 41).

The civic center of the town seems to have covered the area just south of the *Venizeleio Hospital*, where are situated the Roman civil basilica (Sanders 1982, 67-69, fig. 25), a theatre (Hood 1981, no. 110), public baths, and residential complexes including the Villa Dionysos (Hayes 1983; Paton 1998) and the structures above the Unexplored Mansion (Sackett *et al.* 1992).

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In addition, parts of buildings of a sacred character, scattered parts of mosaics, as well as parts of statuettes have all been recognized in the same broad area (Hood 1981, 23).

Parts of Roman roads have been located at different points in the civic center, but also in the wider area as far south as the Roman bridge over the Vlychia, while in the Bendevi area of modern greater Heraklion, inscriptions refer to the possible existence of a main road in the area, connecting Roman Knossos to the port.¹

Continuing the theme of the scattered Roman archaeological remains in the valley of Knossos, it is worth mentioning the presence of cult places² (such as the sanctuary of Demeter on Lower Gypsadhes), as well as infrastructure works such as the monumental aqueduct,³ parts of which have been identified here and there to the south.⁴

More information is also available on the cemeteries that surround and define partially the limits of the city (Hood and Smyth 1981, 24-26, fig. 6; Sweetman and Grigoropoulos 2010, fig. 2; Whitelaw 2013, fig. 5.1C).

According to the archaeological research so far conducted, the most extensive cemetery of Roman Knossos seems to have been in the area of the Venizeleio Hospital, as well as to its north and northeast, on the site of the former University of Crete, and extending to the outskirts of Agios Ioannis and the area of Ampelokipi (Catling 1978-1979, 43-44; Βασιλάκης 1988; Γραμματικιάκη 1991, and 1999, 128-129; Βασιλάκης 2004, 701-702; Μπάνου 2004, 882-83; Αναγνωστάκη 2010, 15-16).

Large cemeteries have also been located southwest of the city, on the flanks of the hills of Monastiriaki Kephala and Bairia (Carington Smith 1982; Wardle 1972; Wardle and Wardle 2004), as well as further to the south, in the area of Spilia (Λεμπέση 1975, 342; Hood and Smyth 1981, no. 361; Catling 1983-1984, 61).⁵

THE VENIZELEIO HOSPITAL SITE. THE ROMAN PHASE OF THE CEMETERY HISTORY OF THE EXCAVATION

The location of the Venizeleio Hospital site is particularly important as it constitutes a key part of the Knossos Northern Cemetery (Figs. 1-2). The Roman tombs excavated there in the past decades have been characterized by their diversity. They are made up mostly of simple pit-graves dug in the soil or cut into the marly limestone-kouskouras (the natural terrain of the area), also and in particular by tile-covered graves, including vaulted versions of curved tiles, box-like built cists, funerary mausoleums of monumental construction, at least one marble

¹ For parts of the Roman road system in the Knossos area, see typically Αλεξίου 1975, 341; Paton 1994, 146; Warren 1994, 191-192; Ιωαννίδου-Καρέτσου 2008, 73; Sweetman and Grigoropoulos 2010, 348-350, 352; Bowsky 2012, 326-333.

² See Sweetman and Grigoropoulos 2010, 356-357 with bibliography.

³ See typically, Hood and Smyth 1981, 23-24; Paton 1994, 149, 152.

⁴ Important information about the city and the surrounding area has been obtained in the recent survey under the Knossos Urban Landscape Project, see for example Trainor in the minutes of this conference.

⁵ The basic type of tomb found in these areas is a rectangular chamber, excavated into the kouskouras bedrock, and equipped with a dromos, arcosolia (arched recesses), and beds (platforms) for the deceased.

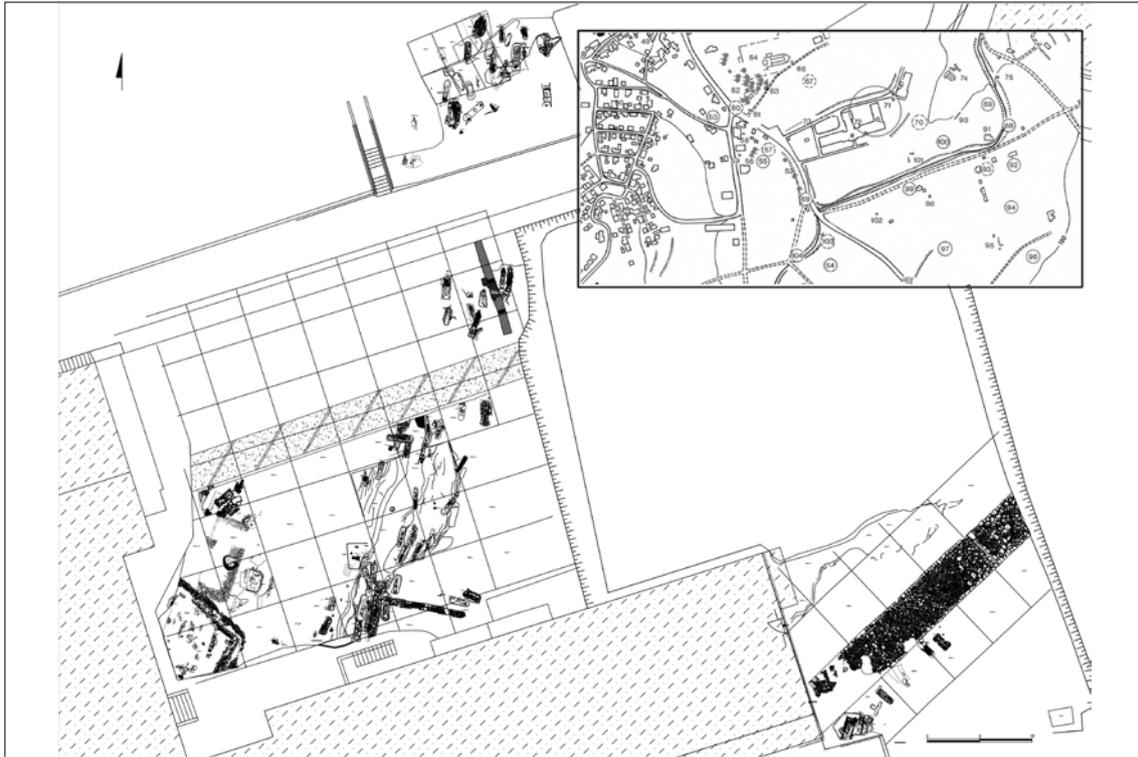


Fig. 1. Plan of the recent excavation at the Venizeleio Hospital: in the upper right corner is the broader topography of the area (from Hood and Smyth 1981).

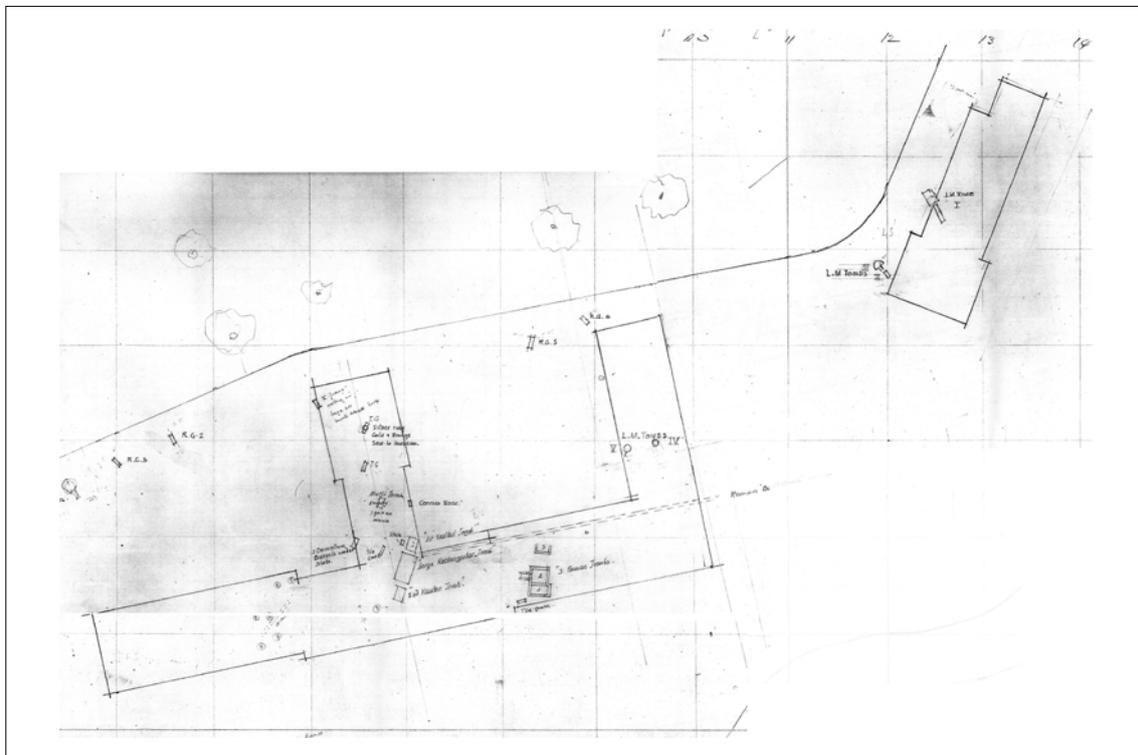


Fig. 2. Plan of the early excavation at Venizeleio Hospital, conducted by the British School at Athens (Piet de Jong excavations) in 1951 and 1952 (BSA archive, KNO 2202).

sarcophagus, pithos-burials, as well as cremations (Cook 1952, 107-108, and 1953, 126; Πλάτων 1951, 447, and 1952, 477-78; Gallet de Santaire 1953, 233, 236; Γραμματικάκη 1996 and 1997; Grammatikaki 2004). Special mention should be made of the monumental mausoleums that imitate the architecture of the comparable monuments in Italy, as well as of the Latin inscription found in one of them; elements that attest to the Italian colonists who populated the city (Grammatikaki 2004).

The very recent rescue excavations, conducted in 2014 and 2015⁶ in the area where the New Wings of the Hospital are to be constructed, provides further evidence for this Roman cemetery (Fig. 1). One hundred thirty six graves have come to light. They follow the contours of the hilly terrain here, in some parts in multiple layers, and are mainly oriented N-S and NE-SW. Of these, only a small cluster dates back to Hellenistic times (Πουριάκη *et al.*, in press), with the majority being ascribed to the Roman era (second half of 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD): the chronology is deduced from the coins⁷ and the artefacts found within the graves.

In this article we give a preliminary report on the Roman tombs, presenting both the broad characteristics and the particularities of both tombs and grave-goods, commenting on the customary practices.

Besides the above burial structures and remains, but clearly included in the topography of the cemetery, is part of a large stone-paved Roman road⁸ (visible over 26 m and 4.30m wide) that was revealed in the SE part of the excavation (Fig. 1).

THE TOMBS

Among the 136 graves revealed, there are 61 simple pits dug into the soil, 11 tombs cut in the natural kouskouras bed-rock (Fig. 3a), two built tombs (Figs. 6 and 7) and 59 tile-covered of two types: 30 with the tiles placed horizontally (Fig. 3b) and 29 with the tiles forming a vaulted effect (Fig. 3c). Additionally three jar-burials (*enchytrismoι*) have been found (Fig. 3e). It is interesting to note that during the excavation no cinerary urns or sign of cremations were revealed,⁹ but only inhumations.

As far as the covering of the graves goes, in a few cases flat stone plaques are used (Fig. 3d), while in other graves vessels or fragments of them cover the whole or a part of the burial. In adult graves, this was done mainly to cover the face of the deceased: in tomb 28, the lower part of an amphora and a frying pan were used (Fig. 4). Additionally, in grave 7 one of the skeletons had its face and the pelvis area covered with pieces of an amphora (Fig. 14d). In the graves

⁶ This was a rescue excavation campaign undertaken during the construction of the new wings at the Venizeleio-Pananeio Hospital, under the aegis of the "Crete and Aegean islands" NSRF 2007-2013.

⁷ For the coins, see Σιδηρόπουλος in press.

⁸ Parts of the same road had been discovered during earlier excavations eastwards and on the same axis and also in other areas of the Venizeleio complex (Catling *et al.* 1982, 60-62, 64, fig. 2; Γραμματικάκη 1996, 627, 629, and 1999, 135-136).

⁹ During the excavations of 1951-1952, however, cremations were revealed, as is deduced from the plan on which is noted "cremation burials under slab" (fig. 2). For a lead cinerary urn excavated in the 1990s, see Γραμματικάκη 1996, 629-630.



Fig. 3. Various types of excavated graves and burials: a. cist grave cut into the kouskouras; b. tile-covered grave; c. tile-covering forming a vault; d. cist grave with flat stones, e. jar-burial.

containing minors, the whole body is covered, as with the child in tomb 131, where pieces of three different vessels (an amphora, cooking pot and a frying pan) are employed (Fig. 5).

In the tile graves, normally two tiles or two pairs of them are used to cover the whole burial. In some cases, tiles are used only for the upper part, while in child burials just a pair of tiles is used to shape the 'vault'. Worth noting is the use in some cases of simple stones for marking the tile-covered graves (Fig. 3c).

Tomb 136 (Fig. 6) found in the southeastern part of the excavation stands out as it belongs to a particular, comparatively rare grave type. It consists of three stone-built, rectangular compartments with their internal walls plastered. There is no evidence for how this was covered, since the tile graves constructed above have destroyed a great part of the whole. The tomb contained a burial in the central compartment, while in all three the raked up remains of interments and various grave gifts were revealed in successive layers. The dating of the grave goods ranges from the end of the 1st to the early 3rd century AD,¹⁰ but the construction of the tomb could probably be earlier due to its architectural type and its different orientation from the other Roman graves.

¹⁰ Apart from the coins, there are intact lamps that define the chronological framework; one of the so-called "Cretan type", one that presents a gladiator and one with rayed decoration set in concentric circles, see Παπαδοπούλου 1989-90, 97-102; Catling and Catling 1992, 265-266, 282 and 300, pl. 238.



Fig. 4. Grave 28: the amphora and the frying pan used for covering the face.

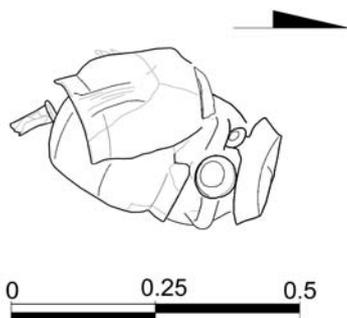
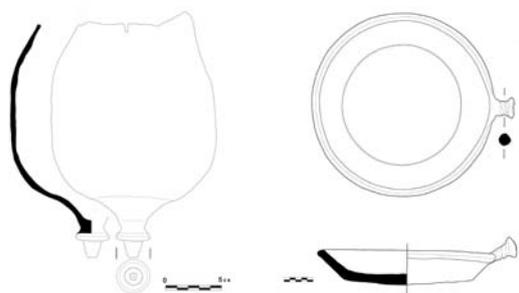


Fig. 5. Grave 131: the amphora, kettle and frying pan used for covering the body.

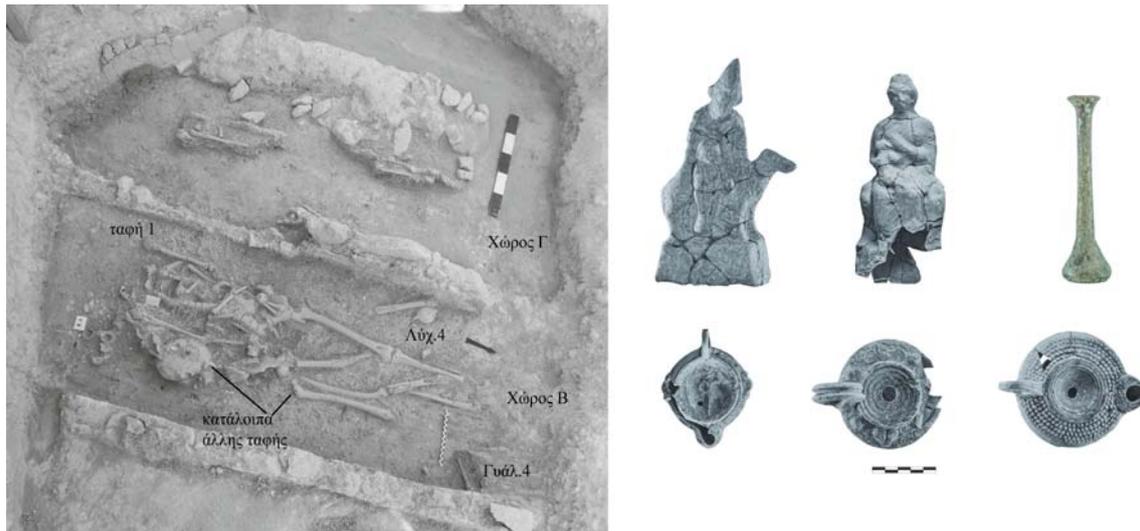


Fig. 6. Grave 136: with characteristic grave goods found within.

Tomb 37 is somewhat monumental in character (Fig. 7). It consists of a rectangular cist made of bricks and a series of worked stones. Its floor is the natural bedrock of the area. The tomb is surrounded by laid material (plaster and stones) upon which to the west lies a series of large dressed blocks from some structure. The tomb must have been sealed with a sarcophagus lid of stone, parts of which were found inside the cist.

The anthropomorphic *stèle* (Fig. 8), collected from the eastern part of the excavation, is a grave marker. Similar burial *stelae* come from various sites in the Mediterranean. They probably depicted the dead person and were initially placed in niches of burial monuments. The few absolutely-dated examples range from the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, no. 47, 95, 104; Samellas 2002, 132, fig. 3; Rife *et al.* 2007, 162, fig. 14).

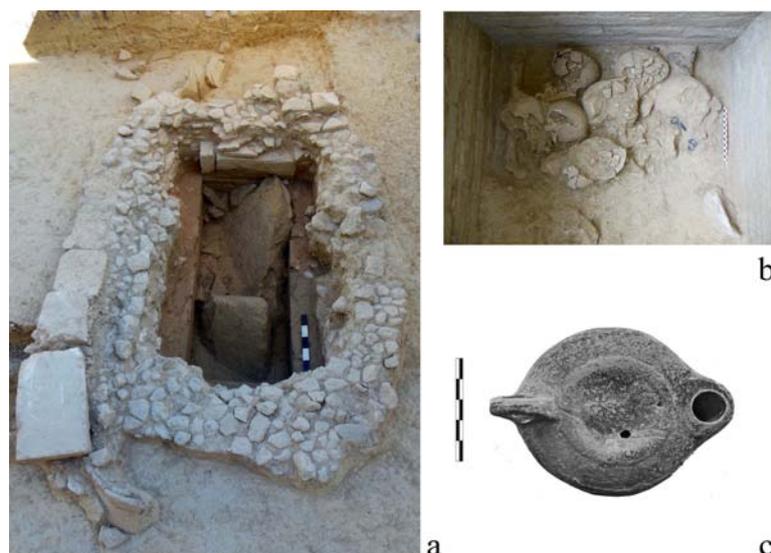


Fig. 7. a. Grave 37; b. detail from the southern part, with the concentration of crania; c. clay lamp.



Fig. 8. The anthropomorphic *stèle*.

It is also worth mentioning here that the anthropomorphic *stèle* of the same type found during the previous excavations in the northern part of the Venizeleio (Kourou and Grammatikaki 1998) was recently re-dated to the 1st-2nd centuries AD (Κουρσούμης 2011).

It is probable that the ellipsoidal five-layered construction, of stones with plaster, which was revealed above and off centre of the tiled tomb 3, has to do with marking the grave (Fig. 9). The same function could be also assigned to the pile of stone found above a jar-burial (Fig. 3e).

BURIAL PRACTICES

The dead lie primarily in a supine position. The upper limbs are found in various postures: along the sides of the body, in the pubic area, folded or crossed over the chest, while the legs are mainly extended. However there are some exceptions. In tomb 82 the deceased was found flat in a prone position, with the left hand at the side and the right in front of and covered by the trunk (Fig. 10). In tomb 69 the skeleton was revealed in a flexed position, lying on its right side (Fig. 11a); in tomb 101 the deceased had their hands raised to the head and the lower limbs were bent to the right (Fig. 12a), while in tomb 103 the lower limbs were raised, with the knees bent (Fig. 12b).

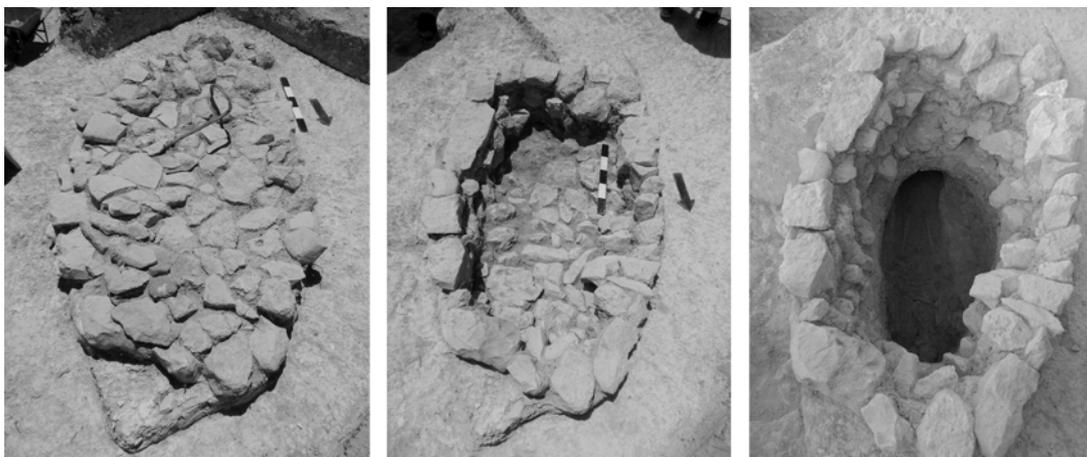


Fig. 9. The ellipsoidal construction of stones with plaster, above and off centre of the tomb 31.



Fig. 10. Grave 82: the body in prone position, and the cup.

It is not easy to interpret these particular body poses. They could be related to the space available (as with tomb 103; Fig.12b) or the post-burial conditions. They could even be attributed to ideological reasons. The latter cannot always be easily determined, since our knowledge of the laying-out process is limited. Recent research, for example, on prone burials has revealed

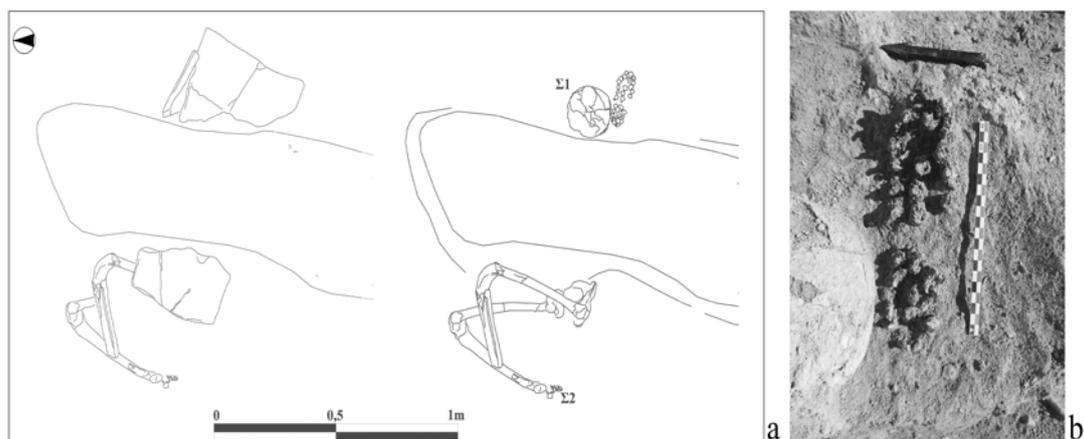


Fig. 11. Grave 69: a. the tile-covering and the body in a flexed position;
b. the hobnails of a sole, found *in situ*.

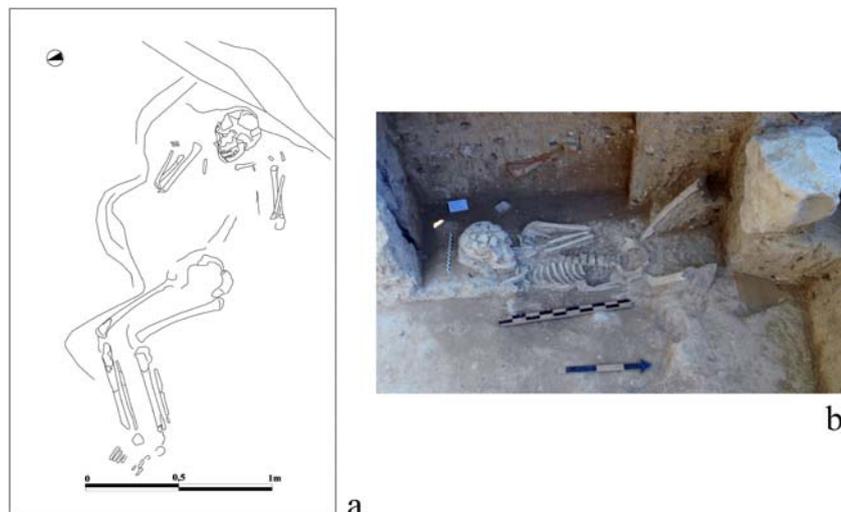


Fig. 12. Atypical postures of the body: a. Grave 101; b. Grave 103.

that the placing of the corpse is associated with apotropaic practices. By burial in this way, both the returning of the dead and the possibility of their taking revenge are prevented (Rossi 2011).

Regarding the use of coffins or biers, it cannot be determined how common a practice this was. On the one hand, the number of iron nails found in the tombs is severely limited (nails were found in only 12 tombs; in which a mere five yielded more than just one). On the other hand, during the excavation of tomb 68 a layer of greyish-brown soil came to light under the skeleton (1.635×0.30 m and with a maximum thickness of 0.025 m), which probably marks what remained of the wooden bier (Fig. 13).

The graves were mainly used for a single burial. In grave 3, however, two burials, perhaps in close succession and with but a thin soil layer in between, were placed in opposite orientations (Fig. 14a-b). Despite the fact that such multiple burials are difficult to date within themselves, it seems the case that most examples found with bodies overlapping each another are those of simultaneous interments, as, for example, with tomb 7 (Fig. 14c-d). It is probable that these graves reflect family burials.

In cases of grave re-use, the bones of the older burials are either pushed aside or collected on one side of the tomb. Sometimes this also happens with the grave goods that accompanied the previous interment. In other cases the bones may be placed a short distance outside the grave.

The tile-covered grave 39 presents an unusual case: upon the first interment was found other skeletal remains placed in an orderly arrangement (Fig. 15a). In grave 130, the bones of a minor were found in a *pithamphora* (Fig. 15b). The vessel had been placed on its side, fixed in position with small stones and closed by a reversed lid. The small number of bones associated and their disordered disposal reveal that it is not a jar-burial, but a secondary burial. The greenish coloration of the soil in the jaw area probably indicates the existence of a copper coin in the initial burial.

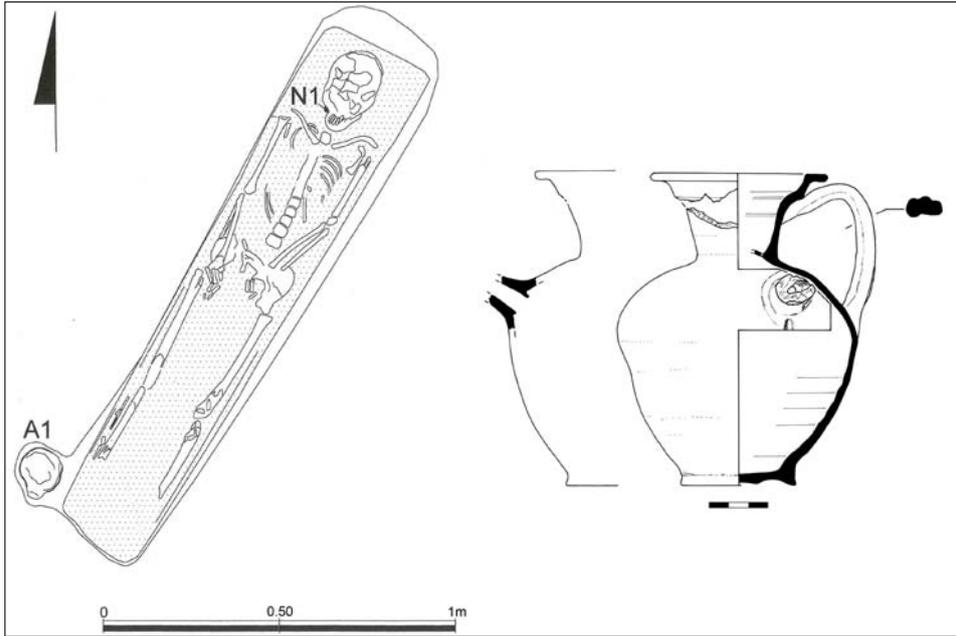


Fig. 13. Grave 68: body lying upon a layer of greyish-brown soil, and the pitcher with a strainer.

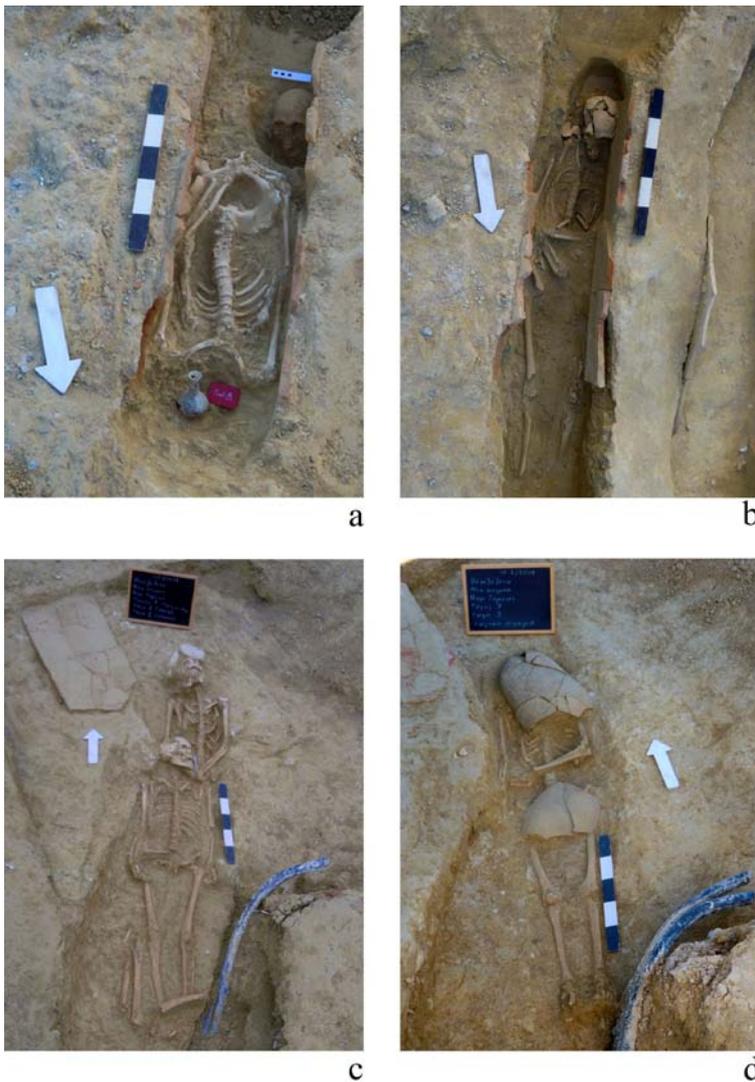


Fig. 14. a-b. Grave 3; c-d. Grave 7.



Fig. 15. a. Grave 39 with the bones of the secondary burial; b. Grave 130 with the *pithamphora* and the lid.



No burial was found *in situ* in tomb 37 (Fig. 7). However, at least 13 skulls were revealed deposited in the southern part of the grave, the rest of which was filled with layers of bones. The tomb seems to have functioned as an ossuary, at least in its final phase in the 3rd century AD, based on the coin evidence.

THE GRAVE GOODS IN THEIR CONTEXT

About half of the tombs (69 out of 136) were furnished at least with one item. Frequently found are bronze coins (in 46 tombs), *unguentaria* of glass and clay (in 27 and nine tombs respectively), bone objects (pins and needles, in 10 graves), metal items (rings, mirrors, pins, part of a bronze chain, in nine graves), clay lamps (revealed in six graves), clay vessels (in six graves) and terracotta figurines (one grave). Although they were found outside the graves, a clay miniature mask (Fig. 16d) and a bronze, hexagonal amulet (Fig. 16e) must have been grave goods as well.



Fig. 16. Funerary artefacts: a. glass vessel, b. eggs, c. silver pin, d. clay mask, e. bronze amulet.

Just outside a grave, and in situ, a wooden box was excavated, of which nothing is preserved other than the four hinges and a few nails in the sides, all of which are made of iron.¹¹

Thus, it may be argued that the coins, in coexistence with glass *unguentaria*, constitute a common feature of the grave goods.

The deposition of the above-mentioned objects with the body can either carry symbolic dimensions or be related to the ritual of burial, and of course certain artefacts may be personal possessions of the deceased too. It is a far from easy task to distinguish between these roles in every case. One does not necessarily exclude the other. Additionally, objects of everyday life or personal belongings could be imbued with another meaning in a funerary rite and in the context of the grave. The bronze coins, found mainly inside the mouth, constitute Charon's fee, but they could also assume an apotropaic function against the spirits of the underworld (Ceci 2005; Rossi 2014, 147). The *unguentaria*, deposited around either the head or the feet of the deceased, are associated with the burial ritual, that is with the anointing of the body with unguents or aromatic substances held within.

Although we can assume that some of the vessels were used in the burial ritual, it is not always easy to clarify their context or to be precise about the details and deeds involved in the ritual ceremony. The glass vessel from tomb 127 (with a spherical body and a spout on its upper part, and a high convex neck; Fig.16a) could probably be connected with libation practices (Αντωνάρας 2009, 202-203). The two bowls found together with two clay *unguentaria* on the feet of the skeleton in grave 34 (Fig. 17) could be linked to libations as well. It is likely that the ritual also demanded the breaking of the vessels as they were found in pieces, a short distance apart. On the other hand, it is difficult to clarify the motivation behind the deposition of a cup

¹¹ For wooden chests in the Knossos tombs, see Wardle and Wardle 2004, 477-479.



Fig. 17. Grave 34: concentration of two bowls and two *unguentaria* in the feet area.



at the head of the prone burial 82 (Fig. 10) or of the pitcher with a strainer in grave 68 (Fig. 13).¹² The uncertainty concerning the exact function of the latter (Rotroff 1997, 180-182, especially 181) augments the difficulties of its interpretation within a funerary context.

Iron rings, bone pins, as well as a silver one (Fig. 16c), could be considered personal adornments. Additionally, the iron hobnails of shoes collected from grave 69 are surely to be characterized as personal belongings. A few were still in position with the right foot, but 31 were found next to the head in such a configuration that it is possible to restore the dimensions of the sole (length 23 cm, maximum width 8 cm; Fig. 11b).¹³ The fact, though, that the shoe was found separated from the foot and also containing the bronze coin could arguably invest the whole with a symbolic meaning.¹⁴

In grave 97 numerous bronze artifacts were revealed (Fig. 18). It is not clear whether the bronze button found in the mouth of the skeleton (Fig. 18c) was substituting for a coin, as Charon's fee. A bronze mirror-disc and a bronze spatula, objects associated with grooming, were also discovered (Fig. 18b). The fact that the mirror was intentionally broken provides a testimony

¹² For similar pitchers in deposits dated to the first half of the 2nd century AD from the city of Knossos, see Sackett 1992, 177, T1, no. 22, pl. 170, and 230 and 231, D1, 11, pl. 173.

¹³ For a similar find, see Χρυσσοστόμου 2013, 287, no. 839, fig. 97, and 511-512.

¹⁴ For the practice of placing coins within the shoes, Ναλμπάντης 2003, 40-41 and 152, grave 27. For the symbolic meaning of shoes in graves, Stirling 2008.

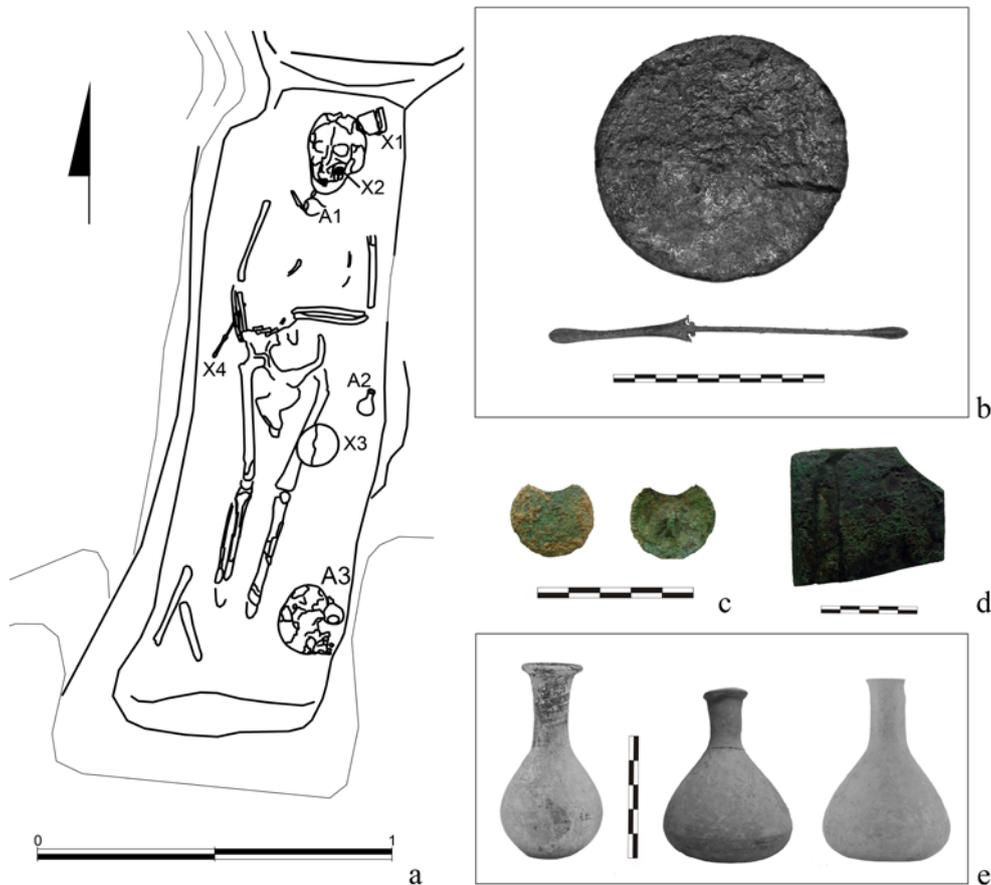


Fig. 18. a. Grave 97; with b. bronze mirror and *spathomele*; c. bronze button; d, rectangular mirror; e. clay *unguentaria*.

for the treatment of personal items during the burial ritual.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning also that a rectangular mirror has come to light from an earlier burial in the same tomb (Fig. 18d).

Singular attention should be paid to the few lamps that have come to light: they must bear some symbolic value, as they do not show apparent traces of use. Also probably symbolic in intent are the two eggs found beside the head in grave 87 (Fig. 16b), although the interpretation of the latter as a food offering cannot be ruled out (Bruneau 1970, 529; Böhr 2009, 46-48). Special meaning could also be assigned to the two terracotta figurines, the only ones found in a burial context, which were deposited as grave offerings in tomb 136 (Fig. 6). The first is a group, representing a grotesque ithyphallic male figure seated on an unidentifiable animal.¹⁶ The second figurine represents a seated female figure nursing an infant. The tradition of female figurines (often burial gifts in children's tombs) dates back to the late 5th century BC and continues for a long time.¹⁷

¹⁵ For intentionally broken mirrors from Agios Nikolaos cemetery in Eastern Crete, see Δαβάρης 1985, 132, 134, 1/5, fig. 4, and 136.

¹⁶ For similar representations of figures seated on various animals that date back to the 3rd century B.C., see Λιλιμπάκη-Ακαμάτη *et al.* 2011, 204; Kim 2012, pl. 5 (nos. 17-23, 28, 30), pl. 6 (31α).

¹⁷ For the types of figurine found in the excavation and their use in tombs of Classical and mainly Hellenistic times, see



Fig. 19. The child burials: a. Grave 123; b. Grave 93.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DEAD OF THE TOMBS

Out of the 136 graves, seven belonged to infants and three to children. Additionally in 15 graves at least one secondary burial has been identified (either a second articulated body or the disassociated bones of an earlier interment). Since the analysis of the skeletal remains is pending, matters connected with the demography, the health status and the relationship between the deceased in the same grave cannot be discussed here. Expressing opinions on the social status of the people buried in the cemetery, based only on the architecture of the tombs and funerary rituals, is at this stage of research a risky business. With the child burials, for example, it seems that there are a few cases that stand out in their grave offerings, such as grave 123, provided with three glass *unguentaria* and three coins (Fig. 19a), or tomb 93, where the apparently totally vanished infant skeleton was accompanied by a vase which could have been used either for filling others with oil or as a feeding bottle (Catling and Catling 1992, 273, L205-6, pls. 233, 255)

(Fig. 19b). It would not be prudent to conclude that these burials belong to wealthy families, since there is no direct connection between these kinds of object (that are not even of precious material) and the wealth and the prestige of the family of the deceased.

On the other hand, grave 81 does provide a tangible testimony for the status of the deceased – namely that they were a slave, since an iron shackle was found on the left foot (Fig. 20). Although similar burial finds are not absent from Greece, and even Crete (Κατάκη 2012, 540), none dates back to Roman times as does that of the Venizeleio. Moreover, the shackle belongs to a relatively rare type, with flattened leaf-shaped ends through which passes a rivet (Thompson 1993, 97, nos. 92 and 1289, figs. 43 and 44).

typically Μαρκουλάκη and Νινιού-Κινδελή 1982, 73, pl. 14b, pl. 17δ-ε. pl. 18γ; Χρυσοστόμου 2013, 487-494, mainly 489-490; Λιλιμπάκη-Ακαμάτη and Ακαμάτης 2014, 213-246; mainly 221-223, note 527, and 232-233. For the use of figurines in Roman graves, typically Μάλαμα and Νταράκης, 2008, 452-453. It is well known that the phenomenon of using matrices for very long periods of time and the reproduction of matrices from old figurative types often make it difficult to date the figurines.



Fig. 20. Grave 81: the skeleton and details of the iron shackle.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that the excavations for the New Wings of the Venizeleio Hospital have not been completed yet, at least some remarks can be made. The recent excavations there have revealed that there was an intensive and continuous use of the area as a burial ground, from the early years of the foundation of the Roman colony until the 3rd century AD.

What needs to be investigated further are the patterns of burial customs in correlation with the analysis of the skeletons and the study of the stratigraphy and the chronology of the burials. The information provided by the funerary artefacts could then be associated with the sex and age of the deceased and a firm chronological pattern will also emerge.

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