EGYPT IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM AD

Perspectives from new fieldwork

edited by

Elisabeth R. O'CONNELL

CONTENTS

IV TEMPLE–CHURCH–MOSQUE

CITY OF THE DEAD:
THE NECROPOLIS OF TUNA EL-GEBEL DURING THE ROMAN PERIOD

Katja LEMBKE

Middle Egypt was the topographical centre of Egypt, but politically it was remote. Throughout most of ancient Egyptian history, with the exception of the reign of pharaoh Akhenaten who transferred the capital to Amarna, this region was eclipsed by the royal capitals of Memphis in Lower Egypt and Thebes in Upper Egypt and, after the conquest of Alexander the Great, by the newly founded city of Alexandria 'ad Aegyptum'. Recent work in the necropolis of Tuna el-Gebel, however, has revealed vivid evidence of a multi-ethnic society living at Hermopolis during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

Chemenu, named Hermopolis by the Greeks, is one of the oldest cities in Egypt. The ancient site, adjacent to the modern village of El-Ashmunein, was founded during the Old Kingdom at the latest. It was the capital of the 15th Upper Egyptian nome and housed the main temple of Thoth, the god of wisdom and creation. Later, Hermopolis was the location of one of the few Greek-style Ptolemaic sanctuaries, the Ptolemaion (**Pl. 1**), which, due to its reuse as a church in Late Antiquity, is still fairly well preserved (Grossmann 2001, 441–43 A. 39).

With the foundation of Antinoupolis by Hadrian in AD 130 Hermopolis lost its central importance in the area, especially economically. The new polis was founded on the east bank of the Nile, at the terminus of the trade route from the Red Sea known as the Via Hadriana, but the old metropolis of Hermopolis, situated on the west bank of the river, remained the religious centre, linking the pharaonic tradition of Thoth with Hermes Trismegistos of the Greeks (Fowden 1986).

This paper focuses on shifts in layout, materials, iconography, language usage and burial practices in the necropolis of Hermopolis that may be interpreted as indicators of 'Romanisation'. Egypt had already experienced many changes during the previous centuries (Moyer 2011), but there was a considerable shift after the Roman conquest in 30 BC. As a result of the encounters between Egyptian, Greek and Roman traditions, the cultural identity of people living in Egypt grew richer and more hybridised. From the 1st century AD, and especially during the 2nd century AD, Egyptian traditions weakened while Roman cultural features grew stronger. This can be illustrated by the invention of mummy portraits at the beginning of the 1st century AD and the cessation of production of Egyptian types of private sculpture after the middle of the same century. Analysis of the funerary culture of this period brings into sharp focus tensions between traditions and processes of adaptation, assimilation and rejection (Riggs 2005).

Tuna el-Gebel

Since 2004, the necropolis of Hermopolis, situated at Tuna el-Gebel approximately 10km west of the town at the edge of the desert (**Pl. 2**), has been the subject of fieldwork directed by the present author. The project was initiated by the Roemer and Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim and continued by the Lower Saxony State Museum, and is funded by the German Research Foundation. The multi-disciplinary team of Classical archaeologists, Egyptologists, architects, geophysicists and conservators aims to address a variety of research questions. It is our purpose not only to reconstruct the necropolis, define its different phases of occupation and analyse the burial customs, but also to interpret the tombs as reflections of the town houses of Hermopolis and as a source of information about life in the Middle Egyptian metropolis during the Roman period.

At the cemetery of Hermopolis we can observe a rare glimpse of an old Egyptian town in the process of Hellenisation. In the city itself, buildings that follow the Egyptian tradition, such as the temple of Thoth or the Ptolemaic Bastion, contrast with the already mentioned Ptolemaion or, later, the Roman Komasterion, which were built in the Classical Graeco-Roman style (Bailey 1991). The same phenomenon of uniting Egyptian and Greek legacies can be observed in the necropolis.

The first buildings at the site were constructed during the Late Period, i.e., cult places of the god Thoth, including a temple and an underground gallery, but

were especially active during the Ptolemaic period (Kessler 2011). The first tombs were only erected around 300 BC (Lembke 2012, 207–10). Built of local shell-limestone and having a temple-like structure, they were named 'temple tombs' by their excavator Sami Gabra (Gabra et al. 1941). The most famous is the tomb of Petosiris, a *lesonis* of the god Thoth (**Pl. 3**; Lefebvre 1923–24). The same is true for another early Ptolemaic period tomb, which belonged to the priest Padjkam and is situated only a few metres east of the tomb of Petosiris (**Fig. 1**; Gabra et al. 1941, 11–37). Both tombs have a short *dromos* leading to a T-shaped building with a wide hall at the front and an almost square main room. The altar in front of the entrance is another new feature of both tombs. These places of worship seem to be a Greek interpretation of Egyptian offering tables. The bodies were laid in underground rooms accessible only by deep shafts. All of these buildings were at least partially decorated with reliefs and painted in vivid colours. When the tomb of Petosiris was published, it was not only the quality of the reliefs and the perfect preservation of the colours that attracted the attention of scholars, but also the unusual combination of Greek and Egyptian iconography in different styles (Nakaten 1986); they were especially surprised to find this mixture at the beginning of the Ptolemaic period. The reliefs suggest a school of artists well versed in the Egyptian representational system, but also influenced by the Greek imagery that was circulating in cosmopolitan environments such as Memphis.

Urbanisation

A geomagnetic survey by the Institute of Geophysics of Kiel University has provided new information about the area (**Fig. 2**). While in the northern sector two broad streets, with several small by-roads, lead from the Nile valley to the sanctuary of Thoth and its underground galleries, the southern sector, the so-called necropolis of Petosiris (**Fig. 3**), is situated south of a processional way leading to a temple with a *saqiya*, a water well of the Roman period, in its courtyard. The survey came to the conclusion that only about 10% of the area has been excavated and that the unexplored area of the necropolis measures about 20ha. It is, therefore, one of the largest Graeco-Roman necropoleis in Egypt known so far. Furthermore, the geomagnetic survey shows, without any excavation, that three broad

streets orientated from east to west lead into the necropolis. Unlike these broad streets leading into the necropolis from the east, the streets orientated from north to south are only narrow pathways, and some of them were later closed by additional buildings.

As a result of several geophysical and architectural surveys, a process of 'urbanisation' (in terms of increasing congestion of tombs) can be observed in the necropolis of Tuna el-Gebel, beginning with the exclusive tombs for priests in the early Ptolemaic period and finishing in a complex building structure in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (**Fig. 4**). The horizontal expansion is interesting, but the vertical development of the necropolis is also extraordinary (**Fig. 5**).

The 'material turn' in Tuna el-Gebel is marked by the change from stone to mud-brick used for the later buildings, obviously a lower-cost alternative. The material and the architectural structure of these buildings provoked the excavator Sami Gabra to call them 'house tombs' (Gabra et al. 1941).

Materials

While the stone tombs had one storey only, the later tombs built of mud-brick had up to four different levels constructed one after the other. The theory of the excavator Sami Gabra, that the so-called temple tombs belonged to the Ptolemaic period, while the tombs built of mud-brick were not earlier than the Roman period (Gabra and Drioton 1954, 13) seems plausible at first. Our investigations, however, have shown that this is only partly true: there are certainly tombs built of stone belonging to the Roman period, and it is also possible that the first mud-brick tombs were built during the reign of the Ptolemies. To give an example, the mud-brick building M 17 was plastered on the exterior, which could not have been done if the neighbouring stone tomb T 10 had been constructed before it (**Fig. 6**). As a result of the new building technique, the congestion of tombs in the cemetery increased and more people were buried there. Instead of stone monuments for a single person of high social rank, the mud-brick buildings offered a cheaper (and faster) alternative, with burial space for multiple individuals. The use of different building materials, therefore, had not only a religious significance, but also a social one. As a consequence, the necropolis developed in a city-like layout from north to south, with the tomb of Petosiris at its core.
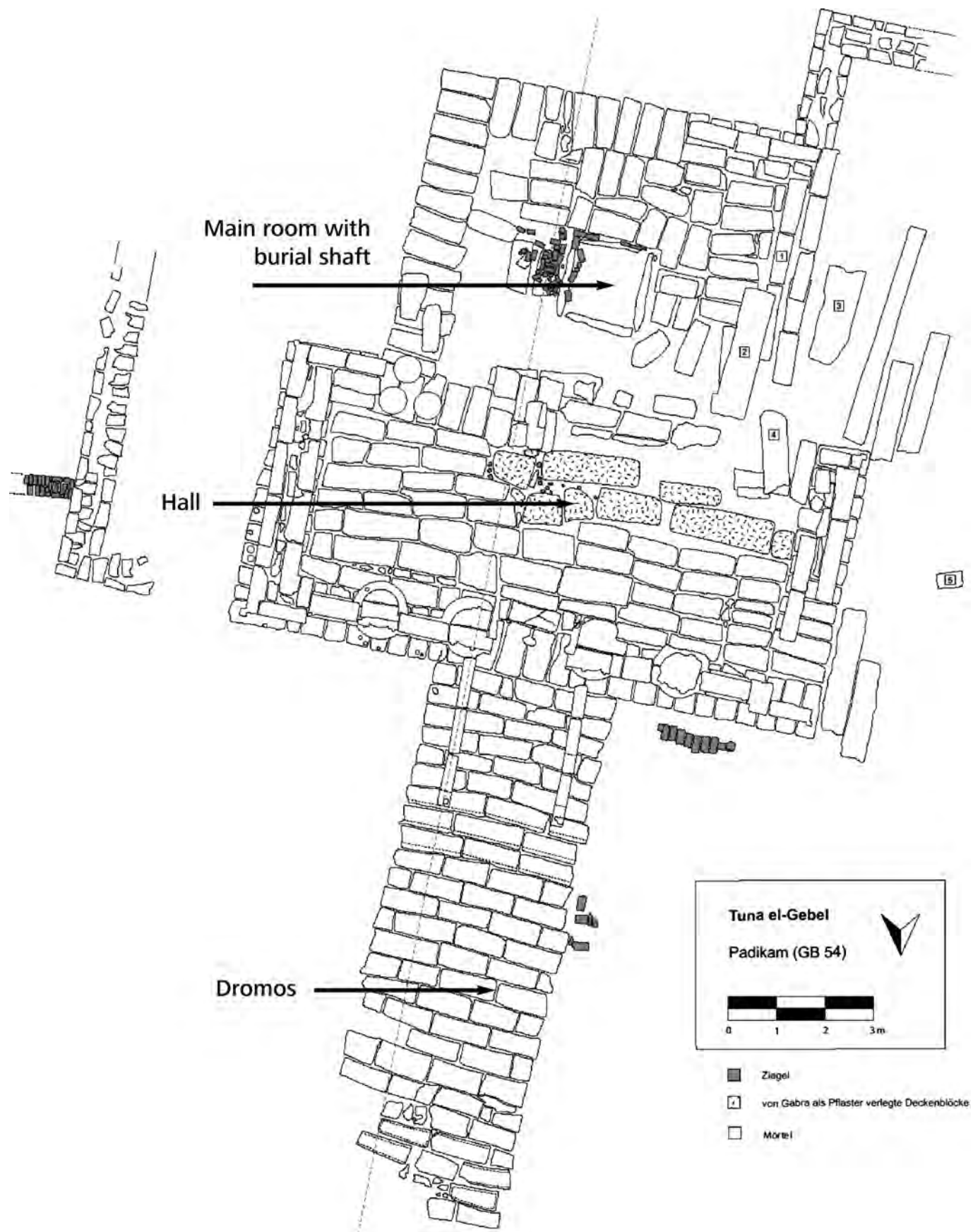
Fig. 1: Tuna el-Gebel. Plan of the 'temple tomb' of Padjkam (Drawing: S. Prell).
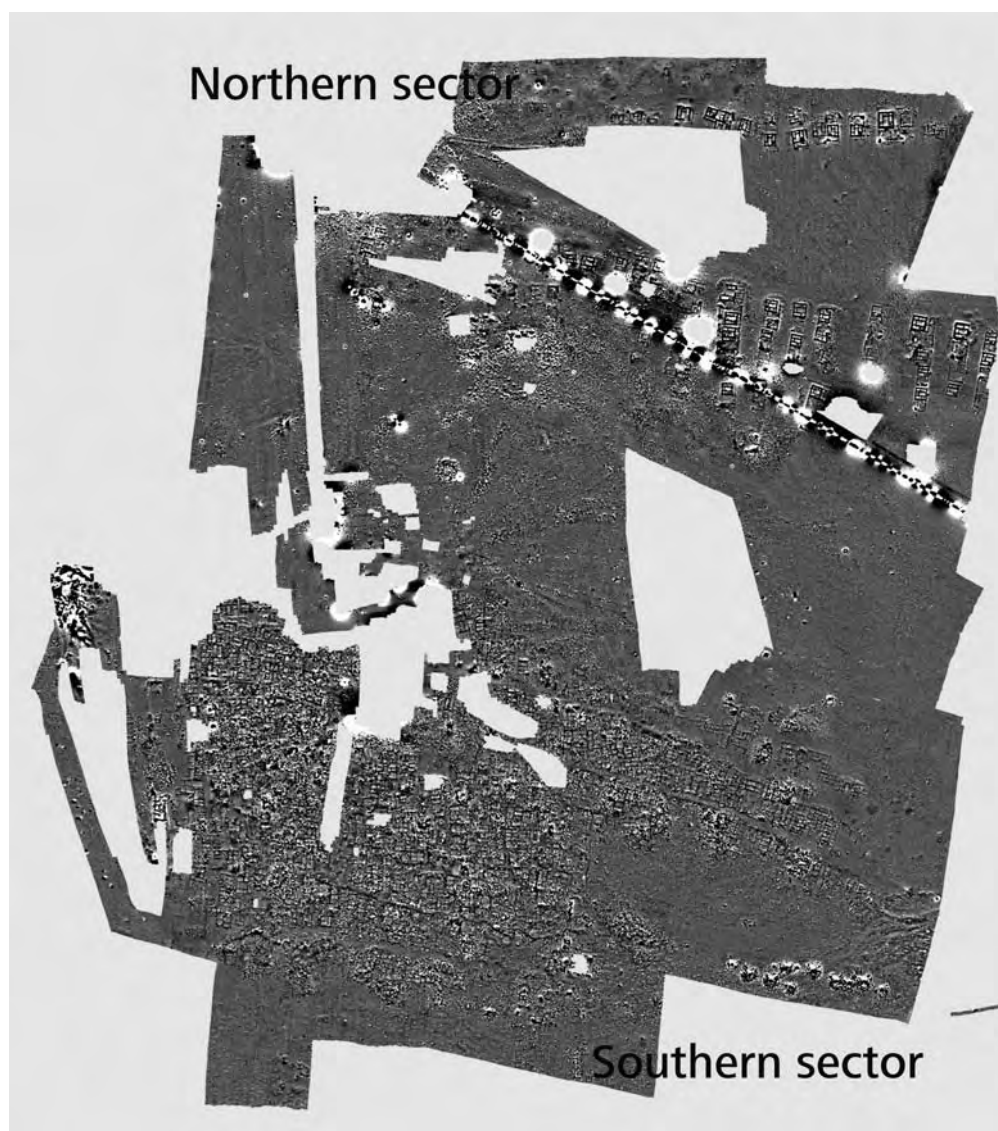
Fig. 2: Tuna el-Gebel. General view of the geomagnetic map of the site
(Courtesy of Kiel University, Institute of Geophysics).

Iconography

The decoration of the tombs shows a development from Egyptian themes to Roman iconography, a process that can be demonstrated in three examples. As we have already seen, in the early Roman period at the latest, mud-brick buildings became more and more numerous in the necropolis, and the interiors as well as the façades of the tombs were plastered and painted. The earliest decorated example known so far is house tomb M 21/SE (Gabra et al. 1941, 39–50, pls 8–17). Its ground plan, with three rooms across a transverse front and a square burial room behind, is strongly related to the early Ptolemaic stone tombs, such as those of Petosiris or Padjkam (**Fig. 7**). Since the transverse hall of the tomb of Petosiris was transformed into three rooms at the end of the Ptolemaic period, it seems possible that the architecture of M 21/SE was based on this model. As in the Ptolemaic buildings, the burials were placed in a deep shaft situated in the middle of the burial chamber. Furthermore, the anteroom and the burial chamber were richly decorated with paintings. Like the transverse hall in the tomb of Petosiris, the anteroom seems to use decoration to communicate between this world and the next, while the scenes of the second room centre on illustrations from the Book of the Dead.

Fig. 3: Tuna el-Gebel. Geomagnetic map of the Petosiris-necropolis (Courtesy of Kiel University, Institute of Geophysics).

As Egyptian painting fell out of fashion, the commissioners of tombs of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD began to favour Classical iconography. The ground floor of M 12/SS, for example, has paintings in a floral design, originally combined with a wine-making and erotic scene that is now lost (**Pl. 4**; Gabra and Drioton 1954, pl. 12), while M 13/SS is richly decorated with stucco and paintings in Roman style (**Pl. 5**; Lembke et al. 2007, 83, fig. 15). The close similarity to architectural ornaments from Hermopolis and the chapel in the temple of Tutu in Dakhleh Oasis fix the date of this decoration at the beginning of the 2nd century.

In the early 2nd century we also find the first painted decoration on the first floors of house tombs, as in M 3/SS (**Pl. 6**). None of the upper storeys bears Egyptian decoration. Instead we find painted orthostats imitating rare and costly materials such as alabaster or porphyry in the first room. These stone imitations certainly reflect the decoration in well-appointed houses at Hermopolis and are related to Roman wall paintings in the northern Mediterranean (**Pl. 7**). The second room has a richly decorated *kline* for the main burial. Furthermore, Classical myths such as the story of Oedipus, the Trojan Horse, the Oresteia or the rape of Persephone are well represented. These depictions of mythological scenes are comparable to painted decoration and mosaics in villas, and suggest the culture of the commissioner of the tomb. The rape of Persephone, however, is especially suited to a funerary context; similar scenes appear not only on Roman sarcophagi, but also in the Kom el-Shuqafa catacomb in Alexandria (Guimier-Sorbets and Seif El-Din 1997). Garlands painted in several house tombs reflect the flowers used during the burial itself and may illustrate, like the *kline,* the eternal *prothesis* of the dead.

Inscriptions

A shift in the use of language from Egyptian to Greek also suggests the process of 'Romanisation' under way at Tuna el-Gebel. Hieroglyphic inscriptions were used only in very few and early house tombs whereas inscriptions in Greek, the lingua franca in Middle Egypt during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, predominated. In addition to language usage, the content of inscriptions can also be argued to contain Graeco-Roman ideas.

Greek inscriptions appear in the house tombs and were also used to decorate tomb pillars, for example, the pillar of a man called Hermokrates who died at the age of thirty-two, before he was able to marry and have children (Bernand 1969, no. 22 pls 40–43; Bernand 1999, 174–76 no. 80 pls 34–36). The text consists mainly of a lamentation by his parents, a theme that
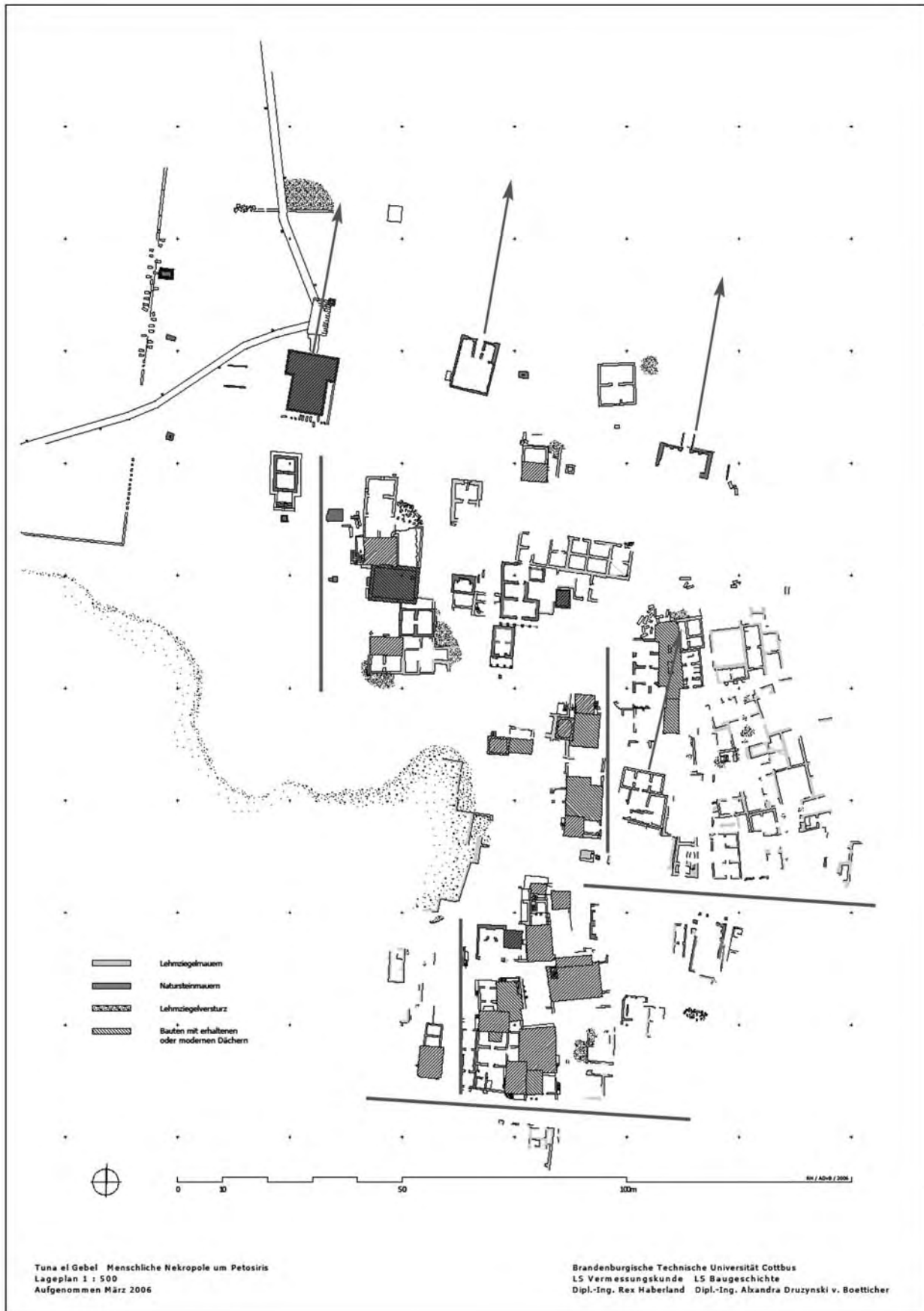
Fig. 4: Tuna el-Gebel. Map of the excavated area of the Petosiris necropolis
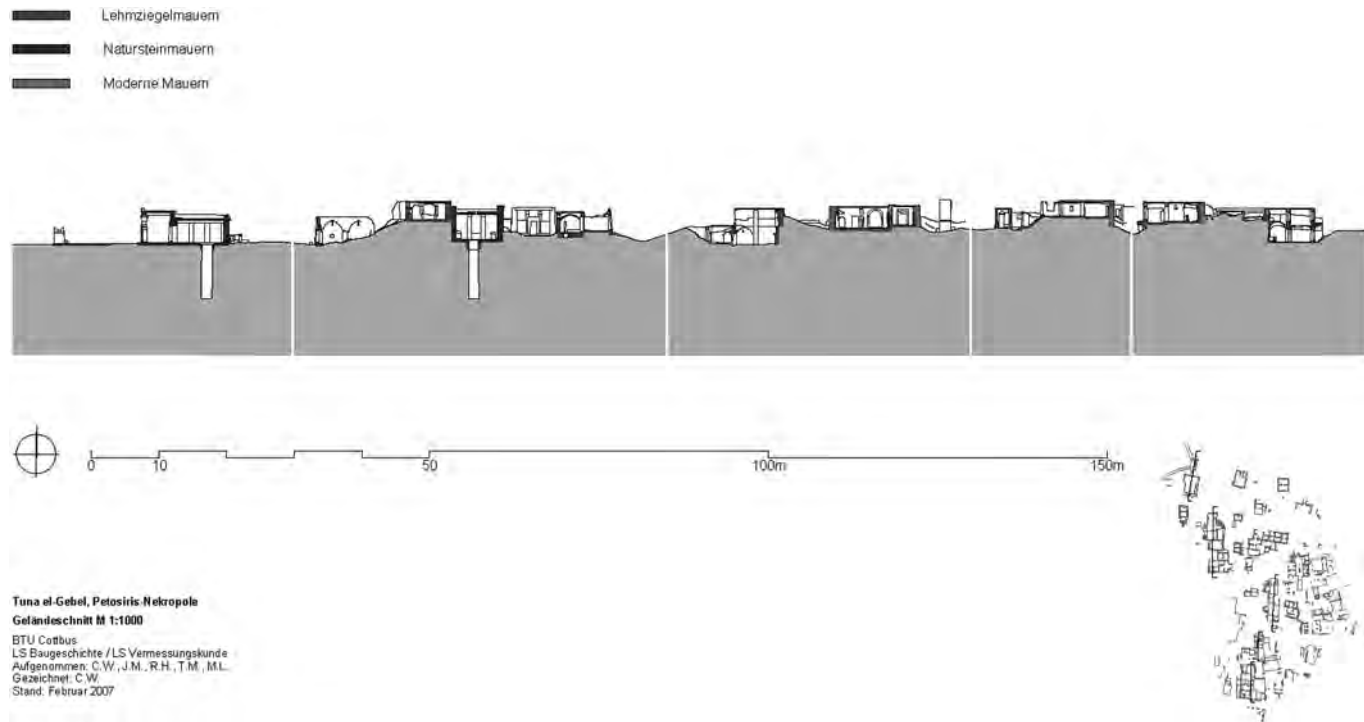(Courtesy of Cottbus University, Institute of Architecture).

Fig. 5: Tuna el-Gebel. Sectional drawing of the excavated area of the Petosiris necropolis
(Courtesy of Cottbus University, Institute of Architecture).

Fig. 6: Tuna el-Gebel. View of the house tomb M 17 and the temple tomb T 10
(Photo: Dieter Johannes, courtesy of Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Cairo).

we observe frequently in other inscriptions at Tuna el-Gebel. Other texts on the same pillar, however, demonstrate a different character and are not formulated in the third person, but in the first person: it is the deceased himself addressing visitors to the tomb. Hermokrates' pillar was placed in a small open court in front of a house tomb that once consisted of two storeys. As there are no traces of a burial either inside or below the pillar, it seems probable that it is a cenotaph and not his actual burial place. Other pillars were either placed along one of the main streets leading from east to west or along the balustrade dividing the temple area from the cemetery. According to the inscriptions, it seems probable that all of the pillars were erected for young men who died before being married.

Another example is the pillar of the son of a certain Epimachos situated in the immediate vicinity of Hermokrates' pillar (Bernand 1969, 377–86, no. 97, pls 43–44; Bernand 1999, 160–62, no. 71, pl. 29). Both were placed directly beside one of the main streets leading into the necropolis and, with their height and colourful appearance, would have caught the attention of passers-by. The text begins with the following words:

> 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 (Bernard 1999, no. 71, lines 1–4).

According to Étienne Bernand, who published two corpora on the inscriptions of Hermopolis and Tuna el-Gebel, these words show a dislike of Egyptian habits such as mummification, since cedar resin was used to preserve the corpses and is, in contrast to this evidence as interpreted by Bernard, usually described as making the dead smell good (Bernand 1999, 161). Is this epigram, therefore, indeed a statement of a Greek family that denies Egyptian traditions? And what was the relationship between mummification, inhumation and cremation at Tuna el-Gebel? Trends in burial practice at the site can be illustrated with three examples.

Burials

The burial in the house tomb M 21, referred to above, was located in a shaft measuring over 8m deep. Although it was originally constructed for one woman only, many fragments of mummy masks found in the shaft demonstrate the continuing use of the tomb until the 2nd century AD or later (**Fig. 7**).
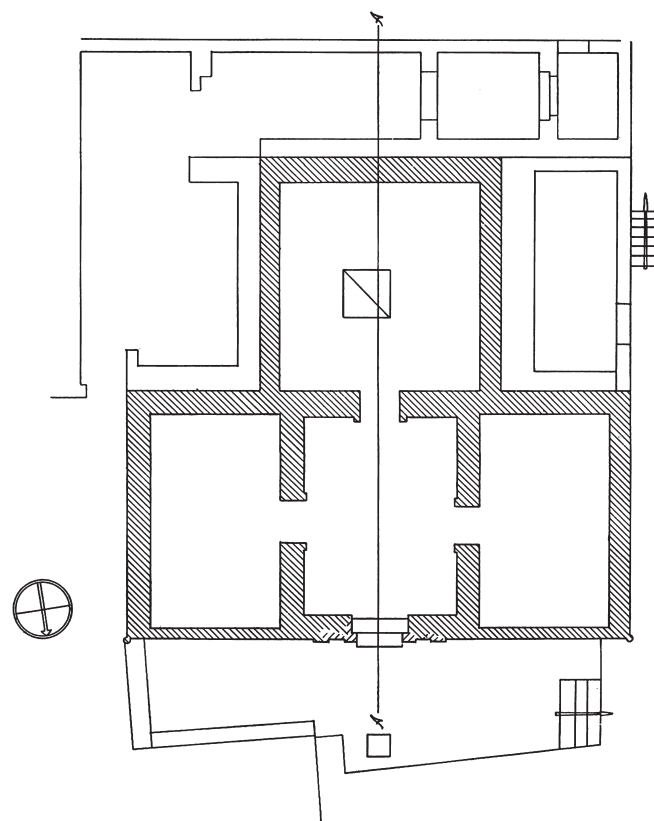

Fig. 7: Tuna el-Gebel. Plan of M 21
(Gabra et al. 1941, pl. 9).

A second example is a stone tomb labelled T 5 by Sami Gabra (Lembke and Wilkening-Aumann 2012). It consists of one room only and its façade was decorated in Graeco-Roman style with columns, kymatia and dentils. Inside, however, a burial enclosure shows reliefs of a procession of Egyptian gods towards Osiris (**Pl. 8**). Surprisingly, the local god Thoth is missing here. The burials were placed either inside this enclosure or in two pits in the floor. Special additions are the niches in the western wall of the chamber, which were originally closed by slabs. Although we have no clear idea of their purpose, it seems possible that they contained urns. Another explanation could be the installation of ushabtis, which were indeed found in another Roman tomb at the site (Kessler and Brose 2008, 79–80). The use of cremation cannot be proven at Tuna el-Gebel, but it was most likely practised, since fragments of pottery are attested that belong to a certain type of cremation urn (Helmbold-Doyé 2010, 138). Nevertheless, examples of cremation in Egypt are quite rare, even in Alexandria (Cartron 2012, 42–43).

The last example for burial practices at Tuna el-Gebel is the house tomb M 3 (discussed previously,

Pl. 7). Although the back wall was heavily restored, the holes for fixing wooden covers over the *kline* like a mattress are still preserved. In this case we may conclude that burials could have been placed inside the recess as well as on the *kline*. Unfortunately there has been only one case in which the excavators have documented a mummy openly exposed on the *kline* (M 10: Lembke 2007, 31, fig. 6).

Conclusion

The development of burial customs in Tuna el-Gebel demonstrates a tendency to protect and conceal the body during Ptolemaic and early Roman times, while later, from the second half of the 1st century to the 3rd century AD, corpses were displayed in an open space for a certain period and buried afterwards. It is against this custom that the son of Epimachos apparently polemicises, and although we have yet to locate his remains, it is quite improbable that he was buried in one of the house tombs. The single tomb pillars that seem to have been reserved for boys and unmarried young men and placed along the main streets of the necropolis may have been cenotaphs only. I have suggested here that the inscription of Epimachos' son is an argument against mummification as it was practised in the house tombs. In an unpublished paper Stefan Pfeiffer argued that it is not only a polemic against Egyptian traditions, but also against Greek customs of that period. According to his argument, the tomb owner, who was not mummified and prohibited mourning at his grave, was reflecting Stoic philosophical concerns and therefore firmly rooted in the intellectual world of the Roman elite. A contemporary inscription in the house tomb of a young woman named Isidora (M 1) stresses the feeling of relief that results from a willing acceptance of fate. The father of the dead girl writes, 'No longer I will bring you offerings with lamentations, daughter, since I realised that you became a goddess'.

Finally, can we answer the question: who was buried in Tuna el-Gebel? Were they Greeks or Romans adapting Egyptian burial customs, or Egyptians in Greek or Roman disguise? The earliest tombs of the late 4th and 3rd centuries BC were exclusively built for high priests of Thoth and are of clear Egyptian origin, but the question is more difficult to answer for the later burials. Nevertheless, according to the inscriptions it seems more probable that most of the dead were Egyptians becoming Roman, rather than the other way

round. The inscriptions reflect the population of the Egyptian metropolis in the change of styles and fashions. With regards to tomb decoration, a change can be observed from Egyptian themes referencing vignettes from the Book of the Dead to Greek iconography depicting scenes from Homeric myths. In the 2nd century AD, at the latest, 'Romanisation' was complete, insofar as Greek language and Greek themes were preferred in the burial complexes.

Another interesting feature is the reuse of early Ptolemaic constructions, starting at the end of the 1st century BC. This tendency suggests a need for more space. Unfortunately, we have very little information about the people subsequently buried in the tombs of Petosiris and Padjkam, which were originally constructed in the early 3rd century BC. Only in the case of Petosiris' elder brother, Djed-Thoth-iu-ef-ankh, does Gabra's unpublished documentation attest a certain Marcus Aurelius Ammonius, a Hermopolitan athlete. A large marble slab with an epitaph in his honour, dating from the beginning of the 3rd century AD, was found in a mud-brick wall of the tomb (**Pl. 9**). This is a unique example at Tuna el-Gebel of the use of a tomb about 500 years after its original construction.

The change of building materials, furthermore, reflects social changes among the people buried at Tuna el-Gebel: while the first tombs were built of stone, decorated with colourful reliefs and thus expensive and exclusive, the tombs of the High Imperial period made it feasible for families belonging to the middle class of Hermopolis to be buried at the edge of the Western Desert.

The change of material had another impact: while the stone tombs resembled small Egyptian temples, the later mud-brick tombs show similarities to houses. The size of the rooms and the height of the multi-storey buildings recall the houses of Hermopolis, and so too does their decoration. Themes from Greek mythology, floral ornaments and imitations of rare and costly stones are elements seen in villas of the Roman empire and give us a sense of the private housing of the wealthy in Middle Egypt, which has not otherwise survived.

Although we have achieved many results in the course of the project over the past six years, there are still questions that remain. Who were the craftsmen who built and decorated the tombs? In which cultural environment were they trained? In terms of a regional case study, how did the foundation of Antinoupolis in AD 130 influence the development of Hermopolis and

how did this affect its necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel? Does the term 'Romanisation' really characterise this specific situation? When and why was the cemetery abandoned? Finally, why is there no evidence of Christian burial?

Although we are on the right track, there is still a long way to go. And we will see if all roads really do lead to Rome … .

Bibliography

Bailey, D. M. 1991. *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* IV: *Hermopolis Magna. Buildings of the Roman period*. London.

Bernand, É. 1969. *Inscriptions métriques de l'Égypte gréco-romaine: Recherches sur la poésie épigrammatique des Grecs en Égypte*. Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Besançon 98. Paris.

——. 1999. *Inscriptions grecques d'Hermoupolis Magna et de sa nécropole*. Bibliothèque d'Étude 123. Cairo.

Cartron, G. 2012. *L'architecture et les pratiques funéraires dans l'Égypte romaine* I. Oxford.

Fowden, G. 1986. *The Egyptian Hermes*. Cambridge.

Gabra, S., É. Drioton, P. Perdrizet and W. G. Waddell. 1941. *Rapport sur les fouilles d'Hermoupolis Ouest (Touna el Gebel)*. Cairo.

Gabra, S. and É. Drioton. 1954. *Peintures à fresques et scènes peintes à Hermoupolis-Ouest (Touna el-Gebel)*. Cairo.

Grossmann, P. 2001. *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*. Leiden; Boston; Cologne.

Guimier-Sorbets, A.-M. and M. Seif El-Din. 1997. Les deux tombes de Perséphone dans la nécropole de Kom el-Chougafa à Alexandrie. *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 121.1: 355–410.

Helmbold-Doyé, J. 2010. Tuna el-Gebel: Fundgruppen, Werkplätze und Öfen. Ein Zwischenbericht. In *Tradition and transformation: Egypt under Roman rule. Proceedings of the International Conference, Hildesheim, Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum, 3–6 July 2008*, K. Lembke, M. Minas-Nerpel and S. Pfeiffer (eds), 133–48. Leiden; Boston.

Kessler, D. 2011. *Die Oberbauten des Ibiotapheion von Tuna el-Gebel: Die Nachgrabungen der Joint Mission der Universitäten Kairo und München 1989–1996*. Haar.

Kessler, D. and P. Brose. 2008. *Ägyptens letzte Pyramide: Das Grab des Seuta(s) in Tuna el-Gebel*. Munich.

Lefebvre, G. 1923–24. *Le Tombeau de Petosiris* I–III. Cairo.

Lembke, K. 2007. Tod und Bestattung im kaiserzeitlichen Ägypten. In *Verborgene Zierde: Spätantike und islamische Textilien aus Ägypten in Halle*, G. Brands and A. Preiss (eds), 24–33. Leipzig.

——. 2012. City of the Dead: Tuna el-Gebel. In *The Oxford handbook of Roman Egypt*, C. Riggs (ed.), 205–22. Oxford.

Lembke, K., J. Helmbold-Doyé, C. Wilkening, A. Druzynski-von Boetticher and C. Schindler. 2007. Vorbericht über den Survey in der Petosiris-Nekropole von Hermopolis/Tuna el-Gebel (Mittelägypten). *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 2007/2: 71–127.

Lembke, K. and Ch. Wilkening-Aumann. 2012. Egyptian in disguise: Ein römisches Tempelgrab in Tuna el-Gebel. *Études et Travaux* 25: 172–88.

Moyer, I. S. 2011. *Egypt and the limits of Hellenism*. Cambridge.

Nakaten, S. 1986. *Untersuchungen zu den Szenen und Inschriften des Petosirisgrabes in Tuna al-Gebel*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Trier University.

Riggs, C. 2005. *The beautiful burial in Roman Egypt*. Oxford.

Pl. 1: Hermopolis. The location of the Ptolemaion, the temple for the ruler cult of Ptolemaios III and his wife Berenike, with the remains of a 5th-century church (Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 2: Tuna el-Gebel. View of the necropolis (Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 3: Tuna el-Gebel. View of the temple tomb of Petosiris
(Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 4: Tuna el-Gebel. Watercolour of destroyed decoration in M 12 (Gabra and Drioton 1954, pl. 12).

Pl. 5: Tuna el-Gebel. Decoration of the house tomb
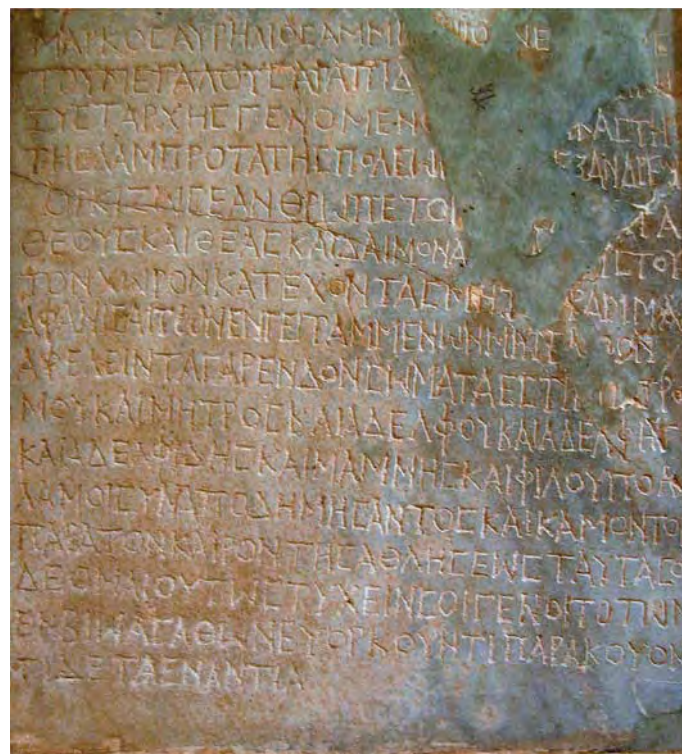M 13/SS (Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 6: Tuna el-Gebel. First room of the house tomb M 3
(Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 7: Tuna el-Gebel. Second room of the house tomb M 3. The back wall depicts the rape of Persephone
(Photo: K. Lembke).

Pl. 8: Tuna el-Gebel. Tomb enclosure in T 5
(Courtesy of Cottbus University, Institute of Surveying).

Pl. 9: Tuna el-Gebel. Marble slab with a tomb inscription of
the Roman Imperial period, originating from the tomb of
Djed-Thoth-iu-ef-ankh (Photo: K. Lembke).