

**Gifts for the afterlife: Evidence of mortuary practices on the necropolis at Marina el-Alamein**

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# GIFTS FOR THE AFTERLIFE: EVIDENCE OF MORTUARY PRACTICES ON THE NECROPOLIS AT MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

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**Abstract:** The paper considers the evidence for mortuary practices in the form of grave accompaniments and grave offerings recorded during excavations of the Graeco-Roman necropolis at Marina el-Alamein. Grave goods accompanying burials are modest and scarce. On the other hand, the evidence for offerings confirms that leaving symbolic food and liquids, as well as incense-burning at the graveside were a regular part of mortuary practices, both during the funeral and during later memorial rites. The prevalence of cooking-related and banqueting facilities underscore the importance of memorial feasts for the local community.

**Keywords:** Marina el-Alamein, Graeco-Roman, burial practices, grave accompaniments, burial offerings

The interpretive value of grave accompaniments cannot be underestimated either from a strictly archaeological perspective (as chronological markers, for example) or because of their importance for the study of a given culture's or community's beliefs and rituals. Mortuary practices, after all, are a material manifestation of ceremonial activities which are society's codified way of expressing sociopolitical hierarchies, as well as cultural and ethnic affiliation. At the same time, it is commonly accepted that items placed in graves may reflect more about the mourners than they do about the deceased. The interpretive challenge is formidable due to the arbitrary nature of the symbolic systems that underlie the choice of artifacts at any given stage of the burial process and care

must be exercised not to formulate, too early, explanations that are too unitary and all-embracing as opposed to the potentially varied and heterogeneous reasons or causes for a practice (Ucko 1969: 262). The interpretive value of grave goods for research on the social significance of burial practices can be exploited even more fully when considered in association with bioarchaeological data on genetic relationships, health status, and activity patterns (Gamble, Walker, Russell 2001: 186ff.).

The present paper, which intends to be part of a bigger study, aims to consider the nature of the grave accompaniments found in the tombs of Marina el-Alamein in Egypt and to explore their potential for a study of the social significance of ancient

burial practices in this Graeco-Roman harbor town on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt.

The site has been under exploration by an archaeological team directed by Prof. Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw since 1987.<sup>1</sup> The archaeological work was interrupted in 2007, but in the twenty seasons or so a substantial part of the effort went into investigating the necropolis of the ancient town. The site was established at some point in the 2nd century BC (possibly even earlier, but the evidence is inconclusive) and was occupied most certainly through the 5th, possibly early 6th century AD. Its heyday, as established by both architectural remains and artifacts, appears to have come in the late 1st and early 2nd century AD, but the beginnings were in place already earlier. The city suffered its share of cataclysmic events and gradual decline, the exact chronology and sequence of which is still under study. Suffice it to say that burials span the period of occupation of the city through the 3rd century AD, after which the apparent abandonment of the tombs could suggest a population shift; indeed, there is ample evidence of squatters making use of the still accessible underground courtyards and chambers, even half-filled with sand, for living purposes already in the 5th century. Equally so, there is ample evidence of penetration of the burials, especially in the case of the hypogea, although it is impossible, for the most part, to put a date on these activities. Some could well have taken place in fairly recent times, during World

War II, when trenches put in by Allied troops disturbed a number of the ancient monuments.

The spatial arrangement of the cemetery will not be discussed here (for a presentation of the necropolis, see e.g. Daszewski 2011, in this volume, with relevant literature), but it is only reasonable that it was well known to the living, who recognized the various discrete areas, socially discrete and perhaps also temporally discrete, a veritable “map” of ancestral relationships and status-related manifestations that characterize any formal burial ground. Generally speaking, the tombs were located to the south of the settlement which hugged a lagoon presumably used as a convenient and secure marina (surprisingly missing from Strabo’s account of this part of the coast). The oldest concentration of tombs comprising the so-called pillar tombs and the first hypogea (TIGH) appears to have spread out to east and west, more or less following the line of the limestone ridge which backs the shore in this region. The rock-cut hypogea made use of the rising bedrock, while the elevation formed a natural backdrop for the more elaborate aboveground entrance facades, all of which faced north, that is, towards the town. The tombs were deployed in two or perhaps three tiers and one can envision the paths that wound among the funerary monuments, frequented by the mourners and those bearing gifts in remembrance of dead relatives.

The number of explored graves and tombs in the Marina el-Alamein necropolis stands at about 50. These include monuments of varied architectural form, from simple amphora burials and pit graves,

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Wiktor A. Daszewski for the opportunity to be part of this team and for his permission and guidance in the present studies.

through aboveground masonry cubic structures and deep underground rock-cut chambers with numerous burial niches, marked by simple stone-encased earth mounds ringed with upright stones, to a variety of architectural features, such as Marina's landmark pillars and naoi with statues, to ornamental kiosks and mausolea encompassing banquet halls and the entire infrastructure necessary for regular holding of ritual memorial feasts (kitchen areas, latrine, cistern, and even steps leading to the roof). To date, 17 hypogea have been explored, six of these having aboveground mausolea of different size and complication. Nine of the tombs can be assigned to the built-box category with markers in the form of pillars or related forms, the rest being constituted by more or less single-occupant graves of various types. Of greater interest is the number of "places" in these structures or rather the number of burials (individual and collective) that were made in these tombs. Not all the burials explored over the years could be studied anthropologically (and not all of those explored were sufficiently well preserved for meaningful anthropological examination); even so, the population of the dead can be estimated at close to 400 (for an anthropological assessment, see e.g. Kaczmarek 2011).

The burials were mostly inhumations (only a handful of cremations were recorded); both skeletal and mummified forms of burial were found. A fortuitously well preserved mummy portrait (cf. Daszewski 1993; 1997; 1998) established beyond doubt that this practice, well known from other parts of Egypt, was also fairly common in Marina. Both regular bandaged mummies and Hawarastyle plaster cartonnages (cf. Daszewski

2002: 75–78 and Figs 2, 3) have also been evidenced. A small share of burials were made in coffins, mostly simple wooden boxes, but also plain lead caskets and at least one cylindrical terracotta container (cf. Zych 2003; Daszewski 2002: 51–56, Figs 5, 10). Wooden biers also seem to have been in use. But the actual percentage of these wooden features must have been impacted by circumstances of preservation, not very favorable in the humid climate of Marina (sometimes iron and bronze nails are the only trace).

Turning now to the grave goods found with the individual burials [*Fig. 1*], the first thing that should be said is that for the most part there were no grave accompaniments to speak of. Only approximately 60 individual burials were furnished with any kind of item, whether just one or more. Furthermore, the different categories of finds are almost entirely disjunctive. The following is a list of item categories recorded in the explored burials [*Fig. 2*]:

- glass containers (unguentaria and bottles) (25)
- ceramic containers (unguentaria and bottles) (13);
- other ceramic and glass products (small jug, small bowl, glass beaker) (3);
- terracotta oil lamps (17);
- golden leaf-shaped plaques (23);
- effigies (gypsum mortar female figurines and faience amulet depicting Aphrodite) (3);
- miscellanea: glass mixing rod, balls of gypsum mortar (from four loculi in two tombs), bronze hook, limestone chips (game pieces?).

It should be noted, at this point, that the figures above could be biased as there is no means of knowing what was taken from the plundered burials.

The unguentaria and bottles, of clay and glass, contained oils and fragrance, both of which were intended for purification purposes. The rule was for one such container to be placed with a burial, either by the head or by the hands, occasionally by the feet. In the earlier period (possibly early 1st century AD) there could be three or four together, of both glass and ceramics. In four cases of two glass unguentaria accompanying a single burial, the containers were identical. Altogether 16 burials were furnished with this item, occurring both in the hypogeum tombs and in the masonry-box structures.

Other ceramic vessels (and perhaps the single glass beaker) presumably contained food and drink. Only singular examples were noted and only in the hypogeum tombs. They were placed by the heads, that

is, at the edge of the burial niches cut into the chamber walls.

Terracotta oil lamps were found with 12 burials, but never more than one per burial and seldom with more than one burial in a hypogeum or box tomb. One exception was the main loculus in the western chamber of hypogeum tomb T13, a chamber and tomb which were generally exceptional in terms of the number and nature of the grave accompaniments, including all of the effigies, part of the mortar balls and the glass mixing rod (for a broader discussion, see Zych 2010). The lamps were placed either by the head or by the hands. They showed no evidence of burning, although it would be assumed that their purpose was to light the way in the afterlife. Large and rather impressive devices were the rule in these cases, not



*Fig. 1. Burials in a loculus*  
(Photo W.A. Daszewski)



*Fig. 2. Objects found with burials: (from top left) terracotta oil lamp, faience amulet of Aphrodite; golden leaf-shaped plaque; two gypsum mortar female figurines; gypsum mortar balls; selection of clay and glass unguentaria and bottles; glass beaker  
(Drawing T. Witczak, photos W.A. Daszewski, W. Jerke, I. Zych)*

the ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill sort of lamps. These lamps, which include a Cretan ivy-leaf lamp (not common in Egypt) and Knidos lamp with nozzle volutes terminating in horse's heads, were chiefly of 1st/early 2nd century AD (cf. Zych 2004).

A guiding and protective role, assuming the present author's interpretation is correct (see Zych 2010; Majcherek, Zych 2011: *passim*), was played also by gold plaques, shaped like leaves with stamped midrib. It is possible that they reflect the tradition of Orphic amulets bearing a magic formula helping initiates to navigate the road into afterlife. It is by far the most numerous category found individually with burials, always placed inside the mouth of the deceased, placed against the teeth, often folded in four. Of interest is the fact that 13 of the 23 finds came from hypogeum-mausoleum T6 and could be dated to the first half of the 2nd century AD, while a single plaque was found with a mummy in the western chamber of hypogeum tomb T28, which could be dated generally to the 2nd century AD. The interments furnished with plaques represented both skeletal and mummified burials; they were discovered in altogether five rock-cut hypogea and one pillar tomb.

Mortuary practices also encompass the making of offerings for the dead, during the funeral and at set times later on. It can be noted, without going into the possible schedule of such offerings, that there is some evidence of liquid libations, food-stuffs and incense-burning at the graves. Burnt offerings were made definitely during the funeral, in the niche where the corpse had been laid and/or in the entrance to it. Singular cases of concentrations of charred organic remains have been found next to

burials, in one loculus forming a rectangular outline running along the side walls, as if whatever had been burned was sprinkled intentionally all around. Charred plant remains and a glass bottle with remains of an aromatic substance at the bottom, along with two ceramic unguentaria, were found by the head of a man aged about 50, buried in a lead coffin in hypogeum T1GH, dated to the Early Roman period (end of 1st century BC/early 1st century AD). In this case the offering had been placed inside the coffin. The burial had been robbed: holes ripped in the coffin lid at face and chest level suggested the robbers knew exactly where to look for valuables; the glass and ceramic bottles held no intrinsic value for them.

Offerings were then made again in front of specific burials, either in front of the sealed niche entrances, at the edge of the niches, on the floor of the chamber in front of the niche or on offering tables set up in front of particular niches. In a number of instances where the interior of the chamber had not been much disturbed, the offering tables were in place; in hypogeum tomb T29, which appeared untouched except for some evidence of plundering of the burials in the niches, a portable altar stood on an offering table of stone, furnished with carved lion's paws as supports [*Fig. 4*, center left]. It is very likely that it was how it had been left on the last occasion when it was used. At least four such small stone altars were discovered, all of them in hypogeum tombs. They were carved, the profiling running from plain architectural to the more intricate four-horned examples [*Fig. 3*, top and bottom right], the tops with shallow bowl-like cavities for libations or burned offerings. One was a miniature object made of alabaster. Among the offer-

ing tables there was also one with a relief representation of the food offerings carved in the table top in the Egyptian tradition [Fig. 4, bottom left]. Burnt or libation offerings were also made on altar 'tables' in

the form of flat stones set together on the ground in front of respective graves.

Offerings of food and presumably drink were left in ceramic containers set down on the floor of the chamber or in the sand, at

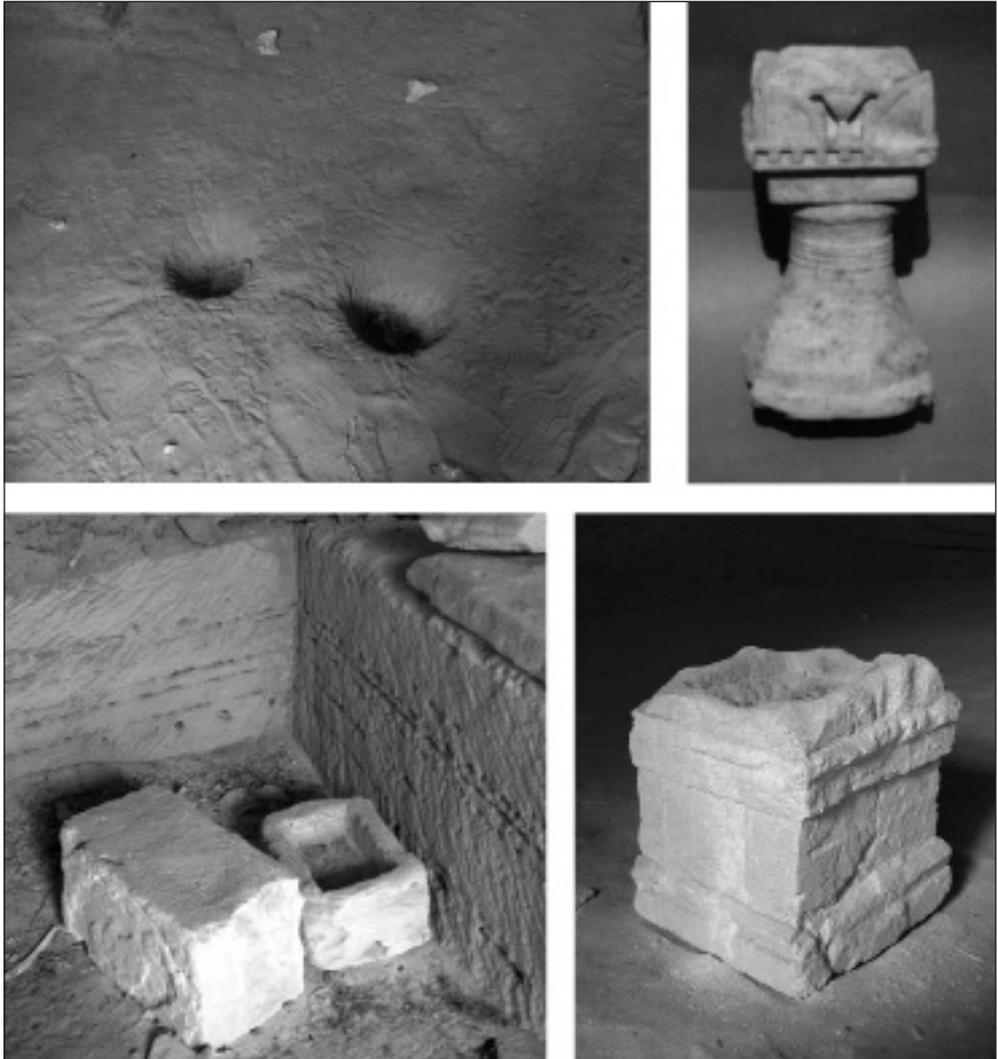


Fig. 3. Offerings in chambers (clockwise from top right): portable stone altar from T16; portable stone altar from T19; stone container from T19; hollows in the chamber floor in T19 (Photos W.A. Daszewski, W. Jerke, I. Zych)

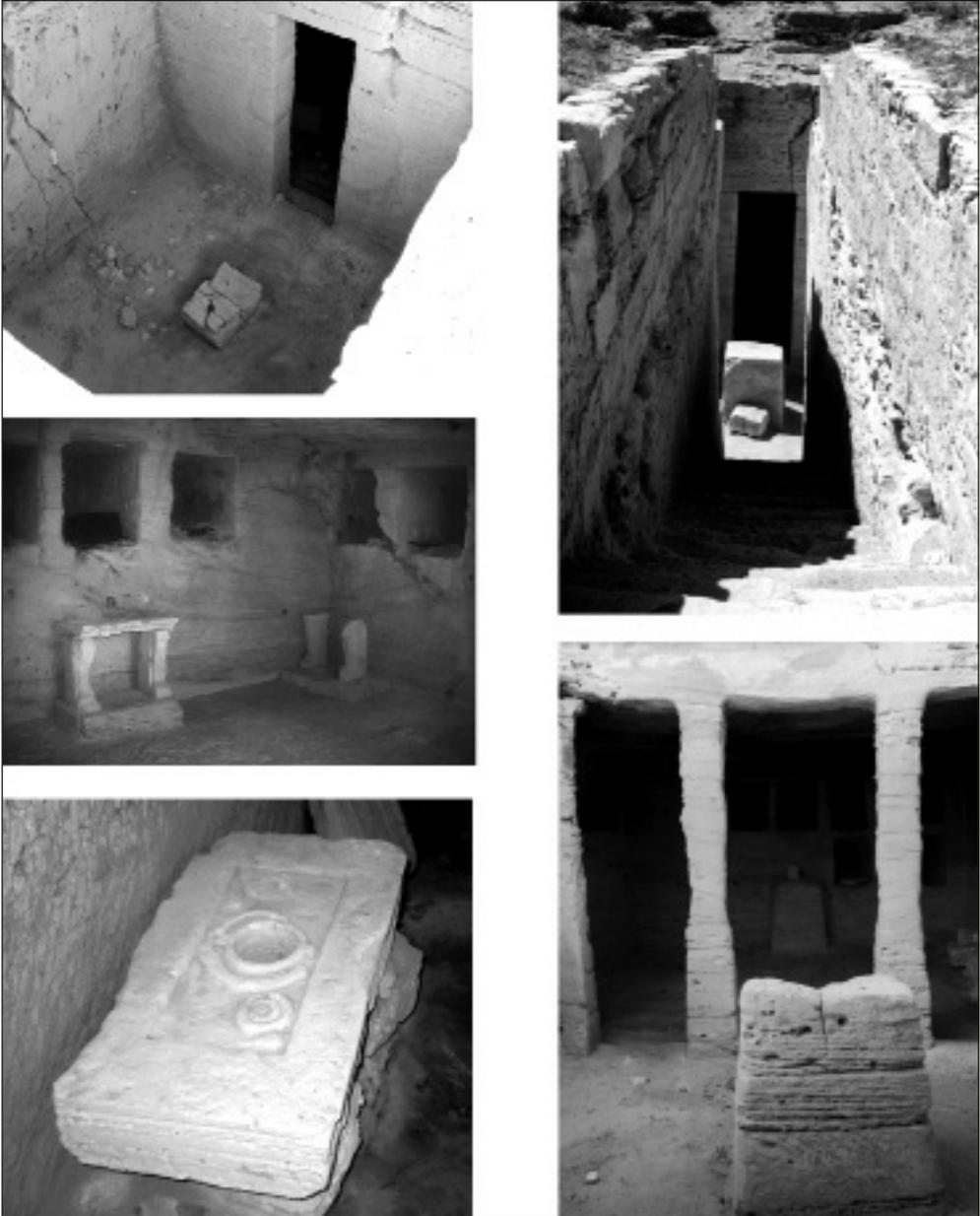


Fig. 4. Altars and altar tables in the courtyards and inside the burial chambers (clockwise from top left): courtyard of T7; courtyard of T6; courtyard of T10 with an altar in the back of the burial chamber; Egyptian-style relief altar table from T1GH; tabletops on lion's legs in front of selected loculi (Photos W.A. Daszewski, I. Zych)

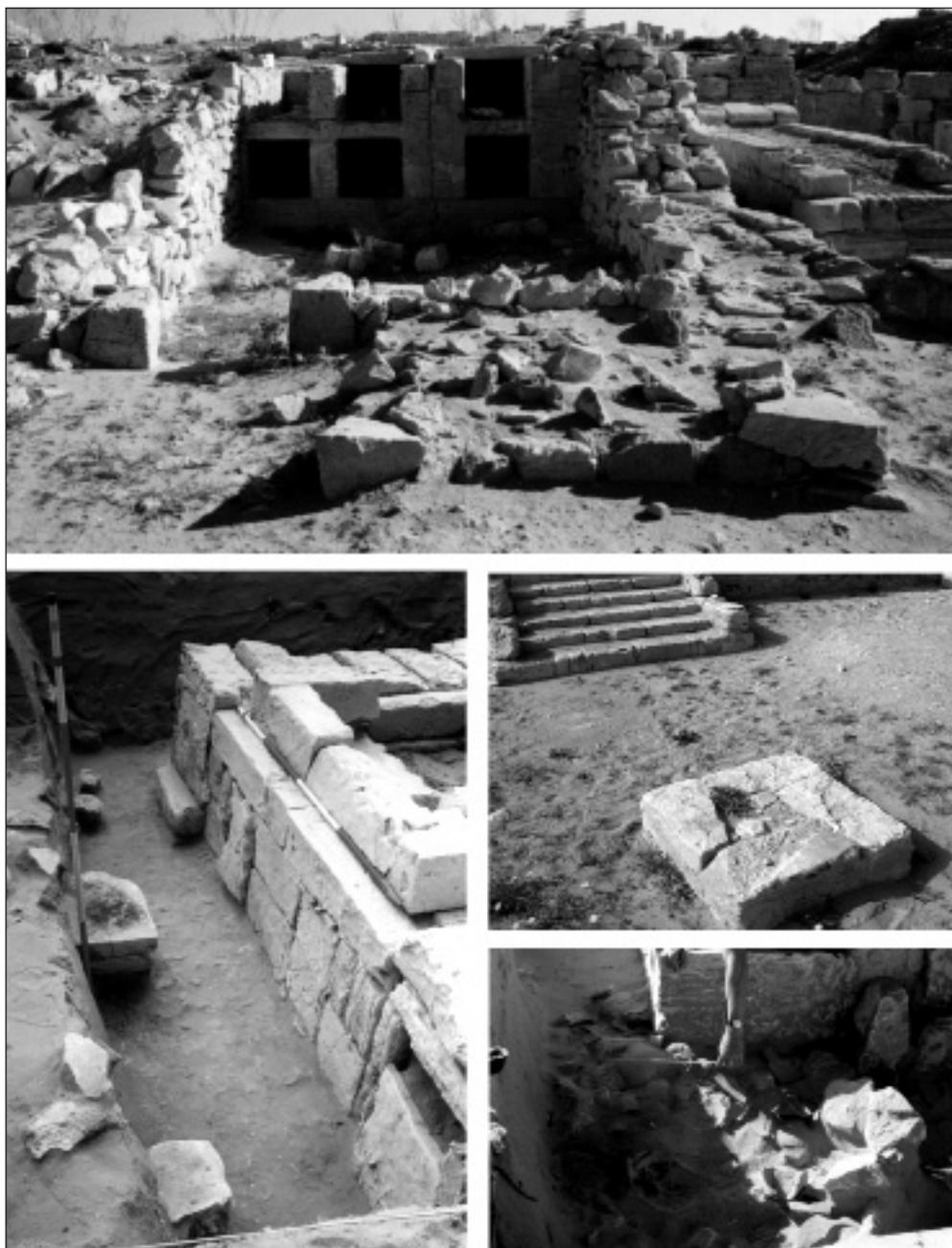
least in two of the hypogea, T18 and T28 (however, since not all of the chambers were cleared completely, this figure may again be biased.) Of particular interest is a pottery set including a cooking pot, which had been placed in the sand just under the lintel of the entrance to the western chamber of tomb T28, apparently as an offering to the dead buried in the chamber at a time when the entrance was already filled with sand practically to the top.

The repertoire of ceramic vessels [Fig. 6] found in tombs may be considered in terms of the possible content. Ceramic unguentaria and bottles have already been discussed and it should be underscored that they are practically absent from the repertoire of vessels found outside an individual burial context. Tableware, both plain and luxury, is a predominant category, comprising at least 13 bowls of various kind (including Cypriot Sigillata form P22), four jugs (Cypriot Sigillata), four kraters (Cypriot Sigillata form P40), eight two-handled cups identified as the *paretti sottili* type and seven plates, the wares including Eastern Sigillata A, Cypriot Sigillata stamped, and faience. Matching the tableware in abundance are examples of cooking ware: pots and casseroles with lids (at least seven), a frying pan, a bread mold. Amphorae are intrinsically connected with both categories, serving as containers. Naturally, there is no way to determine what they contained when they were brought to the tomb; they could equally well have been reused to store water. An occasional mortar and pounder complement this category functionally. A whole Cretan amphora was found leaning against the wall of the courtyard in tomb T29. Another complete amphora lying on the floor of the courtyard near the entrance to the

chamber of tomb T18 appeared to have been filled with snail shells. In a corner of this courtyard stood a cooking pot and a casserole which contained two fist-sized lumps of silty substance, contrasting from the surrounding sand matrix. The lumps were not examined by laboratory methods, hence it can only be suggested that they represented some organic foodstuff left at the tomb. On the whole, however, the overall volume of ceramic finds from particular underground chambers and courtyards is not overwhelming. Either the chambers were periodically cleared (for instance, for an upcoming burial), in which case what we find are the remains of the last offering event, or else the scope and frequency of offerings made inside the chamber itself was greatly limited.

Stone containers, rectangular and round, were found in two hypogean tombs [Fig. 3, bottom left]. These thick-walled objects resemble a box with growing flowers seen on a mosaic from Piazza Armerina. Perhaps their purpose here was similar, although one has to wonder whether the dimness of the chambers was an appropriate environment for green plants.

Offerings could also be made collectively on altars in a number of places: in the chambers of the underground tombs, in the courtyards of the hypogea and in front of tombs. The altars in the chambers, like those in the courtyards, were cut out in bedrock or constructed of stone blocks, sometimes with a slab serving as a table top [Fig. 4]. The altars in front of tombs were constructed of stones. In one case, in front of T6, the altar was a small square structure; the one in front of T11 was fairly big and low, almost like a hearth [Fig. 5, top and center right]. It bore evidence of extensive burning. Altars in front of box



*Fig. 5. Altars in front of entrances to tombs (clockwise from top): T11, T6, T27, T25  
(Photos W.A. Daszewski, I. Zych)*

tombs were no more than a few flat stones put together; the traces of burning on their surface leaves no doubt that they were used for making offerings. Interestingly, in a number of cases it was possible to trace a continuity of the offering tradition. Flat altar stones were set up on the same spot as the original altar in the courtyard but on higher levels as the sand filled the shaft. In front of T25, the next set of altars appeared about half a meter higher up than the origi-

nal set and slightly displaced horizontally [Fig. 5, bottom left]. A similar continuity but on a higher level was noted in front of the entrances to the loculi in tomb T30. The abundance of pottery, including amphora toes with burnt offerings, in front of the southern loculus of box tomb T27 deserves note [Fig. 5, bottom right].

Water seems to have played an important role in the mortuary practices connected with memorial services in the



Fig. 6. Selection of pottery found inside tombs  
(Photos W.A. Daszewski, W. Jerke)

tomb. In two of the biggest hypogea, sources of water were assured: a well in the courtyard of T6 and a cistern in the mausoleum of T21. In some of the hypogea there were conical depressions in the floor, presumably to hold amphorae with wine and/or water [Fig. 3, bottom left], presumably for the same purpose.

Last but not least, the burial ground in Marina el-Alamein has provided ample evidence of the importance of memorial feasts held at the tombs. Six of the hypogea were furnished with aboveground structures providing appropriate furniture in the form of banquet couches and a number of underground chambers were also furnished with similar “bench” installations. Two of thus equipped hypogea, T6 and T21, both in the uppermost tier

of the necropolis, were quite elaborate, the aboveground structure taking on the form of small buildings with elaborate porticoed facades, a central banquet hall and rooms on either side used for domestic services. T6 even had a latrine, while T21 was equipped with a cistern and steps to the roof. The banquet beds were masonry-made with profiled decoration of architectural form and a headrest rising at the far end [Fig. 7]. They were of substantial size, capable of accommodating at least a dozen participants. It has been suggested by the excavator (Daszewski 1997) that ancestral mummies could have been presented on these benches.

To conclude, a preliminary review of the evidence of grave accompaniments from the necropolis at Marina el-Alamein



*Fig. 7. Reception room with benches in the aboveground mausoleum of T16  
(Photo I. Zych)*

reveals a duality that may seem inherently contradictory without further study. On one hand there is considerable effort apparent in reflecting wealth-based status in the form of large underground hypogea, which must have been quite costly to make. Several show unfinished elements, indicating that they were a work in progress even when the population using them was no more. One also wonders about the traditions and personal preferences that determined choice of the type of tomb (naturally considered from a chronological perspective). On the other hand, the grave goods accompanying burials are hardly extensive, although in terms of their quality they could be found match-

ing the architectural substance. Observation of the different stages and places where offerings were made confirms that leaving symbolic food and liquids, as well as incense-burning at the graveside were a regular part of mortuary practices, both during the funeral and during later memorial rites. In this sense the population of Marina followed the Graeco-Roman traditions present throughout Egypt. The prevalence of cooking-related and banqueting facilities underscore the importance that memorial feasts must have had for the community, providing an archaeological record of what is so abundantly and repetitiously depicted on Roman funerary stelae from Kom Abu Billou.

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