

A Boy's Gravestone from Middle Egypt

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Abstract: The paper deals with an unpublished gravestone (Inv. No. 644, the SCA el-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine/Storeroom) of a boy standing to front inside a richly-decorated niche. He is dressed in a simple long-sleeved tunic with a big round neckline. Clutched in his left hand is a bunch of grapes, whereas the object in his right hand could be a floral garland. Nothing is known about the owner, date, and provenance of this stele. An analytical study of the relief carving style and the architectural form of the niche has demonstrated that the gravestone should be attributed to Oxyrhynchus, and dated towards the end of the 3rd or the early 4th century AD. It is also proposed that the funerary relief was of a boy of high social standing, a member of the elite living in Roman Egypt at this time.

Keywords: Oxyrhynchus - bunch of grapes - carved niche – modillion - Roman art.

شاهد قبر لصبي من مصر الوسطي

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المخلص: تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة فنية وأثرية لشاهد قبر محفوظ بالمخزن المتحفى بالأشمونيين، يصور صبي يقف بداخل مقصورة منحوتة، يرتدي رداء بفتحة رقبة واسعة وأكمام طويلة، يمسك في يسراه بعنقود عنب، وفي اليد اليمنى شيء غير واضح (ربما ورود). الجسد ممثل بشكل جيد، وإن كانت الرأس كبيرة مقارنة بحجم الجسم. أكتشفت هذه القطعة الفنية بمحض الصدفة، دون معرفة بموقع اكتشافها والمكان الذي نُحتت فيه، أو الحالة الاجتماعية للشخصية المصورة. الدراسة التحليلية لملاحح الوجه، الملابس، الوقفة، والواجهة المعمارية للمشكاة المحيطة بالصبي، تؤكد بما لا يدع مجالاً للشك أن الشاهد يمثل صبي ينتمي لأحد الأسر الرومانية الثرية التي عاشت في مصر في نهاية القرن الثالث الميلادي وبداية القرن الرابع الميلادي.

الكلمات الدالة: أوكسيرينخوس - عنقود العنب - مشكاة منحوتة - زخارف الموديليون - الفن الروماني.

- **Collection:** El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine/Storeroom (Inv.No.644).
- **Provenance:** Oxyrhynchus (el-Behnasa).¹
- **Material:** Limestone.
- **Measurements:** H.0.52 m; W.0.37 m; Th.0.20–0.21 m.
- **Condition:** Lower part of the gravestone is broken off. The facial features of the figure are damaged. The decoration of the top of the niche and the capitals of the flanking columns have also suffered some damage.

INTRODUCTION:

Among the unpublished artifacts from the El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine/Storeroom is a limestone gravestone of a boy (Inv. No. 644). Nothing is known about the deceased or the date and provenance of this piece. An analytical study of the imagery and iconography of this piece has helped to date the gravestone and to determine its provenance and the status of the boy for whom it was made.

DESCRIPTION:

The stele is carved in a limestone slab, 0.37 m wide and 0.20–0.21 m thick. Its preserved length is 0.52 m, but it was originally longer, presumably rectangular in shape. The arched top is also a secondary cut. The figure is carved in high relief, giving the impression of being sculpted in the round, inside a decorated *aedicule* that takes the shape of an arched apse with an entablature above it. The stele is broken off just below the figure's knees. (**Fig. 1**)



Fig. 1: Gravestone of a boy. Limestone, H.0. 52 m; W.0.37 m; Th. 0.20–0.21 m. El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine/Storeroom (Inv. no. 644) (by the Author)

¹ For more on Oxyrhynchus (el-Behnasa), see: Margaret, Bunson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt. Revised Edition*, (New York: Facts On File, 2002), 292; Youssri, Abdelwahed, *Egyptian Cultural Identity in the Architecture of Roman Egypt (30 BC–AD 325)*, (Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2015), 23.

The figure on the gravestone is that of a standing boy in frontal pose, the head turned slightly to the right. He is dressed in a simple long-sleeved tunic with a big round neckline. The carving of the garment folds is shallow, straight over the shoulders and arms, V-shaped on the chest. The lines of the body are clearly executed under the folds of the dress and the navel is also to be seen under the fabric. The right arm hangs straight down but is not pressed to the body. The object held in the right hand may be a floral garland. The left arm is bent at the elbow, the hand clutching bunch of grapes. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Detail of the objects held in the figure's hands: a bunch of grapes in the left, a possible floral garland in the right (by the Author)

The boy's head is relatively big, set on a smooth neck. The face is round, the cheeks apparently fleshy, the nose straight and short, although partly damaged. The mouth is small above a flat chin. The eyes are almond-shaped, plain, without indication of iris or pupils, the eyebrows are arched but without indicating the hair. The forehead is plain, without any wrinkles. The ears are well-carved and symmetrical. The hair is executed as straight locks pulled back smoothly and gathered in a big knot at the back of the head. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Detail of the gravestone: hair pulled back in straight locks into a knot at the back of the head (by the Author)

The niche is richly decorated. Flanking the figure of the boy are two engaged columns carrying capitals of a type that cannot be identified due to the damage to these parts of the stele. The interconnected triangular holes in the flat block above the capitals, one on the façade and the other on the inner side, could have been used to hang garlands. Similar holes are found on two similar funerary stelai from el-Behnasa, now in the Alexandria Graeco-Roman Museum (see below). The engaged columns carry an arched entablature distinguished by two kinds of modillions: narrow flat-grooved and square hollow ones.¹ Unlike the ordinary elaborated Roman modillion,² these particular forms are a distinctive feature of Alexandrian architectural decoration,³ found only in Alexandria or on sites influenced by Alexandrian motifs.⁴ (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. Detail of the gravestone: the apsed niche with entablature decorated with distinctive Alexandrian modillions (by the Author)

¹ For more on modillion decoration see: Cyril. M, Harris, *Dictionary of Architecture and Construction*, 4th edition, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 639.

² Patrizio, Pensabene, “Lastre de chiusura di loculi con naiskoi egizi e stele funerarie con Ritreatto del Museo di Alessandria (Tavv. X-XIII)”, in *Alessandria e il mondo ellenistico-romano: studi in onore di Achille Adriani*, eds. Bonacasa, N., & A. Di Vita, (Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1983), 108, figs.3,8,9; Judith, McKenzie, “Alexandria and the Origins of Baroque Architecture”, in *Alexandria and Alexandrianism: Papers Delivered at a Symposium Organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Centre for the History of Art and the Humanities*, April 22-25, 1993, ed. Hamma, K., (Malibu: Getty Museum, 1996), 116, fig.13-14; Judith, Mckenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 B.C. to AD 700*, (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2007), 83, fig.117.

³ Achille, Adriani, *Annuaire du Musée Gréco-Romain (1933-34-1934-35), La Nécropole de Moustafa Pacha*, (Alexandrie: Whitehead Morris, 1936), 161-163, fig.89.1; Grzegorz, Majcherek, “Crumbs from the table-archaeological remains of Hellenistic Alexandria”, in *Hellenistic Alexandria: Celebrating 24 Centuries*. Papers presented at the conference held on December 13–15, 2017 at the Acropolis Museum, Athens, ed. Christos S.Zerefos & Marianna V.Vardinoyannis, (Oxford: Archeopress, 2018), 78, fig.8; Paola, Davoli, “Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, Archaeology of”, in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Smith, C., (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2020), 4889.

⁴ Thelma. K., Thomas, *Late Antique Egyptian Funerary Sculpture: Images for This World and the Next*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42.

ANALYTICAL STUDY:

The tunic, especially with the navel clearly shown beneath the fabric, was worn by girls and boys alike.¹ Moreover, the bunch of grapes is a funerary symbol usually carried by both girls and boys in Roman funerary art.² However, the facial features are clearly that of an adolescent boy. Furthermore, the figure is shown without any ornaments or jewelry that are conceived as intrinsic features of female representations.³ A similar gravestone kept in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden (F1972/8.1) (**Fig. 5**) depicts a standing figure that is evidently a boy, with the same hairstyle, carved as straight locks pulled back and gathered in a big knot at the back of the head, and the same kind of long-sleeved tunic. The Leiden gravestone comes from Oxyrhynchus and is dated to the 3rd–4th century AD.⁴ It is worth noting that both boys' and girls' mortality was high in Roman Egypt.⁵



Fig. 5: Stele of a boy from Oxyrhynchus. Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Inv. No. F1972/8.1 (after Thomas 2000: 24, fig. 73)

¹ Aly, Abdalla, *Graeco-Roman Funerary Stelae from Upper Egypt*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), 114; Alexander.V., Kruglov, “Late Antique Sculpture in Egypt: Originals and Forgeries”, *AJA* 114/2, (2010), 1-9; Clare, Rowan, “Theoretical approaches to Roman imagery and iconography”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Imagery and Iconography*, eds. Cline, Lea .K. & Nathan.T. Elkins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 38-39. Fig.2.6.

² Helen, Whitehouse, “Roman in Life, Egyptian in Death: the Painted Tomb of Petosiris in the Dakhleh Oasis”, in *Life on the fringe. Living in the southern Egyptian deserts during the Roman and early-Byzantine periods*. Proceedings of a Colloquium Held on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Netherlands Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo, 9-12 December 1996, ed. Olaf. E. Kaper, (Leiden, 1998), 253-270; Anna, Sadursk, & Adnan, Bounni, *Les Sculptures Funéraires de Palmyre*, (Roma: G. Bretschneider, 1994), 62, fig.9 (cat.81).68, fig.16 (cat.94).

³ Courtney A., Ward, “Ornamenta Muliebria: Jewellery and Identity in the Roman Period”, in *Dress in Mediterranean Antiquity: Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians*, eds. Alicia J.Batten and Kelly Olson, (London- New York: T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 98-100.

⁴ Klaus, Parlasca, “Der Übergang von der spätrömischen zur Frühkoptischen Kunst im Lichte der Grabreliefs von Oxyrhynchos”, in *Enchoria* 8, ed. Erich Luddeckens & Heniz-Josef Thissen, (1978) 118, Taf.39; Thomas, *Late Antique Egyptian*, 24,fig.73.

⁵ Bruce, Frier, “Roman life Expectancy: Ulpian’s Evidence”, in *HSCPh* 86, ed. Wendell Clausen, (1982), 213-251; Bruce, Frier, “Roman Life Expectancy: The Pannonian Evidence”, in *Phoenix* 37/4, (1983),328-344; Roger S., Bagnall, *Egypt in late Antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993),182-185.

Oxyrhynchus has yielded several other examples of boy's gravestones, such as the one discovered by W.M.F. Petrie in tomb no. 42. It represents a boy standing inside a carved niche, dressed in a simple tunic with straight folds. The head is also relatively big as in the discussed stele, and the hairstyle is also composed of straight strands of hair gathered in a big knot at the back of the head. The stele is dated to the 3rd–4th century AD.¹

The most unique feature of this gravestone are the two holes in the sides of the niche. The two stelae with a similar embellishment from the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria were attributed by Breccia to Oxyrhynchus. The first (**Fig. 6**) depicts a standing male figure with the same richly-carved niche similar to the stele here discussed. The two triangular holes are cut in the spandrel and there is an extra big hole behind the head, probably used for a floral garland hung around the neck. This stele is dated to the 3rd-to-4th century AD.²



Fig. 6. Funerary stele of a man from the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria (after Schmidt 2003: Kat. Nr. 165. Inv. Nr. 23553, p. 146, Breccia 1933: 61, pl. XXXIX-139).

¹ Flinders, Petrie, *Tombs of the courtiers and Oxyrhynchus*, (London: BSAE - Bernard Quaritch, 1925), 16-17, plate. XLV-10; Lindsay, Morehouse, *Recontextualizing the Boy with Grapes Stelae of Roman Egypt: Authenticity, Connectivity, and Memory*, (PhD diss, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities, Amsterdam School for Heritage and Memory Studies, 2024), 73, fig.2.28.

² Evaristo A., Breccia, *Le Musée Gréco-Romain (1925-1931)*, (Bergamo: Instituto Italiano d'Art Grafische, 1932), 61, pl. XXXIX-139; Stefan, Schmidt, *Grabreliefs im Griechische-Römische Museum von Alexandria*, ADAIK 17, (Berlin: Achet Verlag, 2003), 149, Kat.Nr.165.

The second example (**Fig. 7**) is a square niche with pyramidal top, inside which there is the carved depiction of a man dressed in a simple tunic and himation of the arm-sling type. Triangular holes can be seen at the top of the stele and are presumed to be there for inserting a floral garland.¹



Fig. 7: Funerary stele of a man, preserving triangular holes in the pyramidal top, Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria (after Schmidt 2003: Kat. Nr. 167. Inv. Nr. 23375, p.150)

The last example is a funerary stele from Oxyrhynchus, now kept in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden (F1980/1.9). The standing figure of a man is depicted in a richly-elaborated niche (**Fig. 8**). The big hole behind the man's neck would have been used for inserting a floral garland to be hung around the neck of the

¹ Evaristo A., Breccia, *Le Musée Gréco-Romain (1931-1932)*, (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Art Grafische, 1933), 41, pl.XXVII-83; Schmidt, *Grabreliefs im Griechische-Römische*, 150, Kat.Nr.167.

deceased during funeral ceremonies. The stele is dated to the 3rd–early 4th century AD.¹

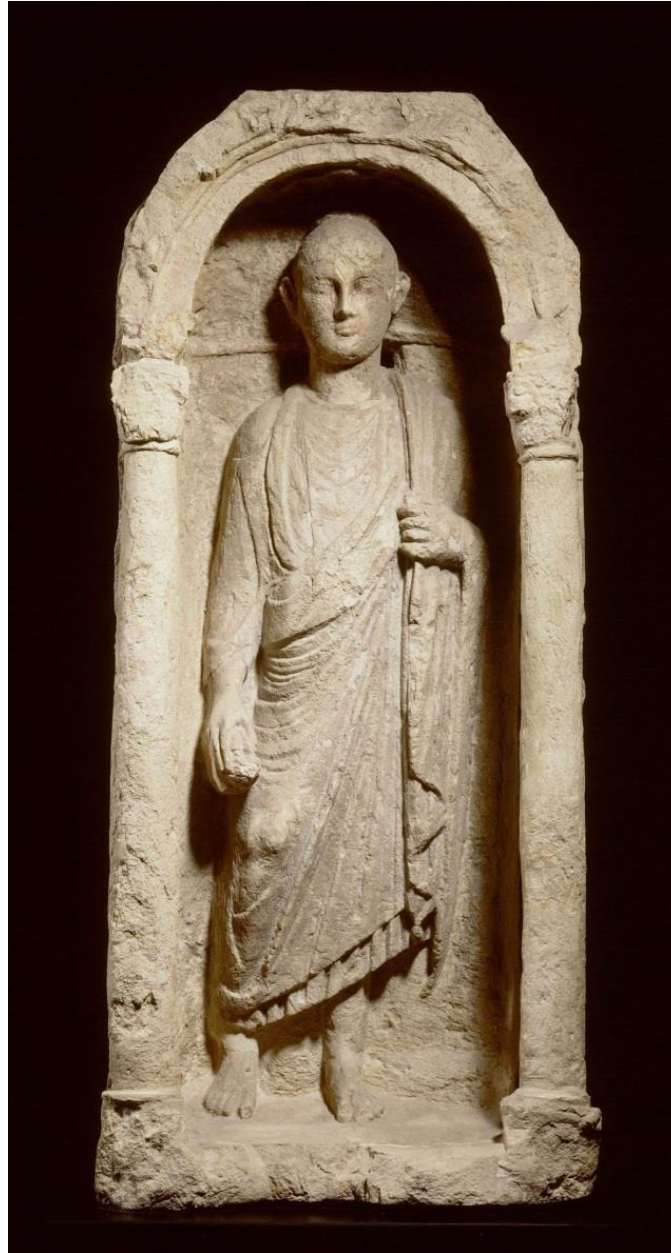


Fig. 8. Stele of a man from Oxyrhynchus. Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Inv. No. F1980/9.1 (after Schneider 1998: 160–161, fig. 248)

The steles presented here (**Figs 5–8**) have a hole/s used to insert a floral garland which would have been used in the funerary rites. The location of the holes and their number varies from one stele to another; two examples have a big hole behind the neck of the figure (**Figs 5, 8**), another two have holes on the top of the stele (**Figs 6, 7**), and the stele here examined has the holes engraved on the flat blocks above the capitals. It is thus reasonable to suggest that the location of the holes depended largely on the sculptor's idea.

¹ Hans D., Schneider, *Life and death under the Pharaohs, Egyptian Art from the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, The Netherlands*, (Perth: Western Australia Museum, 1998), 160-161, fig.248.

DATING:

The date of this funerary stele can be determined based on an analysis of the pose of the figure, the garment, and the architectural form of the niche compared to parallel examples of gravestones. Several steles are similar to the one under discussion. Those mentioned in this study are attributed to Oxyrhynchus and are dated to the 3rd–4th century AD. It is reasonable thus to assume that our stele was also one of the funerary reliefs from Oxyrhynchus and can be assigned to a period at the end of the 3rd century CE or in the early 4th.

CONCLUSION:

The anonymous gravestone from the el-Ashmunein storeroom is an example of Roman art in Egypt of the turn of the 3rd century AD, showing the influence of classical Roman art. An analytical study of its artistic and architectural aspects has made it possible to assign it to Oxyrhynchus in Middle Egypt, an important Roman site. It was made most probably for a young boy of high social standing from the wealthy elite that inhabited the region at this time.

This stele, attributed it to the type of standing Boy with Grapes, which belongs to the (Boy with Grapes group), in its two variations seated and standing. Recently, Morehouse presented a comprehensive study of the type.

Such gravestone carved in limestone illustrates the process of the Egyptian art in the Roman period. Moreover, cloths, and frontal pose, indicate the classical trends dominating Egyptian art during the Roman period, and the transformation towards Coptic art in Christian Egypt.

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