

Ειδική Ενότητα

Special Section

FUNERARY ART IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:
THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLEIS OF ALEXANDRIA

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Cremation

From Greece to Egypt

Hussein Abd El-Aziz

University of Alexandria

memphites@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8990-8776

ABSTRACT

Cremation was employed in Greece since the Neolithic period in the 7th millennium BCE. The corpse was placed on a pyre composed of crossed beams of wood approximately fitting the size of the dead. Although pyres were completely consumed with fire, Greek pottery provided images representing them during the Classical period. Homer, as the earliest literary source, described the process. Experimental Archaeology replicated the process and presented a better understanding in relation to the suitable amount of wood logs used, intensity of fire and the nature of the ashes.

When Alexander the Great began his conquests, the Greeks, whether soldiers or immigrants brought this custom with them as a non-indigenous practice to Egypt, where the funerary practices used were different, as preserving the body of the dead was a necessary measure in the afterlife. Cremation was attested by the presence of certain types of hydriae known as Hadra vases, which were almost exclusively employed as cinerary urns. They indicated that cremation was practiced for about a century until the beginning of the 2nd century BCE.

This paper surveys some aspects related to cremation in Greece and Egypt.

Cremation as a mortuary practice had been observed in various contexts of Greek Prehistory from the Early Neolithic period (7th millennium BCE.). Both types of cremation, primary and secondary, had been applied (Kontonikolas 2018, 1–3, 67–9, fig. 3.7).

In primary cremation, a pyre was constructed in a pit and after burning, the pit was filled up with earth covering the bones in situ. The pit measured approximately 1 by 2 meters and its depth was approximately 1 meter. A layer of straw was possibly littered under the pyre to render it more combustible. Sometimes the pyre pits were provided with ventilation holes to achieve the optimal burning process. In the secondary cremation, the pyre was constructed on the ground and after burning the ashes were collected and preserved in a cinerary urn and kept in the grave (Robinson 1942, 152–53). It was preferable to set up the pyre outdoors. Generally, the ancient Greek sources do not offer sufficient knowledge about the technicalities of cremation (Noy 2000, 190).

The activities surrounding the cremation of the corpse, though hardly apprehended and seldom documented in textual and tangible records, are significant constituents of cremation practices. These activities vary greatly in different cultural contexts, and may include different participants and viewers, whether immediate members of the family or other groups of the public (Kontonikolas 2018, 29).

Cremation practices vary widely across different social, indigenous, and spiritual contexts, reflecting a complex background. This diversity needs to be considered in relation to factors such as sex, age, culture and



Fig. 1. Golden Larnax of Philip II, Vergina, ca. 336 BCE. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Image_larnax_of_philip.jpg

social status. In some instances, the ashes were entirely gathered, and in other instances, only some of them were collected. Furthermore, grave goods may be burnt with the corpse or placed with it after the cremation ceremony (Kontonikolas 2018, 30).

The earliest and most well-known and frequently referenced instance of cremation in ancient Greek textual sources is the funeral of Patroclus in the 23rd Book of *The Iliad* (23.1–261). The narrative begins with Achilles instructing the Myrmidons to drive their horses around Patroclus' corpse thrice. Then he placed his hands on Patroclus' corpse, vowing to avenge his death by feeding Hector's corpse to dogs and slaughtering twelve noble Trojans at his funeral. After a magnificent banquet, Achilles fell asleep and he saw Patroclus' ghost urging him to hasten the process of cremation and ensure their bones are placed in the same urn. The next morning, Agamemnon commanded the soldiers to fetch wood logs from Mount Ida for the funeral pyre. The Myrmidons cut locks of their hair and placed them on Patroclus' corpse. Achilles cut a long lock and placed it in Patroclus' hands. A meal was prepared and a large pyre was erected. Patroclus' corpse was laid on top of the pyre and he was covered by the fat of sacrificed animals. Various animals, including two of Patroclus' dogs, four horses and twelve young Trojan captives, were sacrificed and piled around him on the pyre along with honey and oil jars.

When Achilles failed to set fire on the pyre, he prayed to the gods for a favorable wind, which they provided, allowing the pyre to burn until the next morning. Then the fire was extinguished with wine. Achilles and his men carefully collected Patroclus' bones, wrapped in fat and covered with linen cloth, and they placed them in a golden urn. Then, a circle was drawn around the pyre and a mound was set up over it. Achilles then announced the start of funeral games, which included chariot racing, wrestling, boxing, archery, and a footrace, with prizes such as cauldrons, tripods, horses, mules, oxen and female slaves.

For Hector (*Iliad* 24.707–804.), the Trojans spent nine days gathering large piles of logs, and on the tenth day they placed Hector's body on top of the pyre and set it aflame. The following morning, a large crowd assembled to extinguish the embers with red wine. Hector's brothers and comrades picked up his white bones, covered them with a purple cloth, placed them in a golden urn, and buried the urn in a grave. Afterwards, they heaped big stones and set up mound on it. Then, they returned for a funeral feast at Priam's palace.

Such elaborate funerary rituals, including the collection of cremated remains in a cloth and their burial in a Golden container, incorporated various traditions suitable for the royal burial of Philip II (fig. 1). The 4th century BCE. Tomb II at Vergina featured a burial reminiscent of Homeric descriptions, complete with two golden urns containing ashes wrapped in a purple cloth adorned with flowers (Fig. 1; see Kontonikolas 2018, 42).



Fig. 2. Representation of the pyre of Patroclus with grave goods. Apulian red figure volute Krater from Canosa. Painter of Darius, ca. 330 BCE. Naples Archeological Museum. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_funeral_of_Patroklos_Roscher3NP_0863_cropped_and_colorized.png

Regardless of cost, personal choice, religious belief or social status, cremation can practically meet different needs, such as easiness of transportation of the ashes in a vessel for burial, and preventing the corpse from being exhumed, desecrated or abused. Some people also prefer to be consumed by fire rather than by maggots or dogs, as Achilles said of Hector's body, "*I will not give Hector, son of Priam, to fire to prey on, but to dogs*" (*Iliad* 23.182–184).

Generally, cremation was more expensive than modest forms of inhumation and less expensive than lavish forms of inhumation in which sarcophagi were used (Robinson 1942, 149). It was always less common than inhumation.

The general structure of the cremation process has continued in essence over time, though there must have been variations. These variations must have been affected across different times and places by cultural, ethnic and religious factors, taking into consideration aspects such as gender, age and social status.

Though pyres were completely consumed with fire, and consequently we do not have tangible remnants of any, Greek pottery provided us with images representing pyres during the Classical period (Fig. 2). The pyre was constructed from superimposed intersected rows of dry wood logs. Fuel could be added to keep the pyre aflame until the body was totally turned into ashes. The use of pyre is still employed in modern times in South-East Asia (Fig. 3).

Constructing a funeral pyre required significant skill and a professional pyre builder. The Romans had an official in charge of pyres. To maintain the function of the pyre, it was necessary to overheat the structure to ensure the perfect process of cremation. Despite professional construction, pyres were unpredictable and could malfunction. Pliny the Elder (*The Natural History* 7. 52. 173; 53.186) recounts the cases of two men, in different



Fig. 3. Cremation pyre on the bank of Bagamati River, Nepal. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e8/Bagamati_cremation.jpg

contexts: one woke up on the blazing pyre, apparently he had slipped into a diabetic coma, and another was thrown off the pyre by the intensity of flames. Plutarch (*Tiberius and Caius Gracchus* 13.4–5) describes an instance when the corpse of a victim of poisoning burst open and smothered the pyre. Sometimes, in cases of emergency, the pyre was erected hastily using available wooden beams, such as when Pompey was killed on the coast of Egypt; his associates gathered pieces of a broken boat to erect his pyre (Noy 2000, 190).

The logs of wood used in the construction of the pyre are supposed to be of local available wood. Apart from the account of *The Iliad* (23.110–123) that Agamemnon sent soldiers to fetch logs from Mount Ida for the pyre of Patroclus, this idea is impractical, because the logs should be at hand to meet the requirements of the cremation instantly at any time. In my opinion, the availability of dry wood logs is indispensable, for the process of cutting the wood may take a long time and arduous work and the trees could be at a distance, while the deceased might be putrefied and decomposed awaiting cremation. Accordingly, storage of dry wood logs had to be accessible, as is the case in present India (Cenzon-Salvayre 2018, 132, fig. 29).

The amount of wood needed for a funeral pyre can vary, based on several factors, including the size of body and the type of wood used; Heracles mentioned oak for his pyre (Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1194–1195), and the desired intensity of the fire. Generally, it takes a substantial amount of wood to ensure complete cremation. It typically requires around 300–400 kg. of wood to fully cremate a human body. The size of the pyre could be large enough to accommodate larger number of corpses. The pyre of Patroclus accommodated 4 horses, two dogs and 12 Trojan captives, in addition to the weapons of Patroclus and Hector (*Iliad*, 23.165–178).

When Alexander had the pyre of Hephaestion established, he ordered a part of the walls of Babylon to be demolished, and the bricks were employed in building a huge platform, over which a massive pyre of seven tiers was erected. It was decorated with various gilt figures, warriors, archers, prows, animals, hunting scenes, centaur fights and lions devouring bulls (Diodorus 17. 115.1–5). It was constructed at the cost of 10000 talents or more (Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri*, 7, 14.8).

Various grave goods often accompanied the deceased on the pyre. They included weapons, jewelry, pottery, personal items and food and drinks.



Fig. 4. Cinerary urn decorated with geometric designs from the Athenian agora, ca. middle of the 9th century BCE. Keramikos Museum. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geometric_Cremation_urn_Athens_Agora_Museum.jpg

When we think about the content of the cinerary urns, we may have in mind the film scenes in which the content of vases is pulverized. As a matter of fact, in modern times, a certain machine called cremulator is used to grind and pulverize the bones. This was not the case in ancient traditions. We expect that the process of combustion cracks and distorts the bones (Musgrave et al. 1984, 61), but it cannot fragment the bones to such tiny pieces to be consistent with the size of the urn and to be arranged properly, for some pieces may reach 20 centimeters in length or more; hence the bones collected after cremation might be hammered so that the urns can contain them easily (Musgrave 1990, 285). Nevertheless, the common tendency over the causes of fragmentation of bones considers them as a result of raking and collapse of the wood logs of the pyre, in addition to the intensive heat and quenching of the embers with cold water or wine.

The ashes of Philip II may offer a different example (Musgrave et al. 1984, pl. II; 1990, 77–8). The king should have a magnificent and well-built pyre, which was given full care and attention; accordingly the expected result would be perfect with no malfunction. Nevertheless, the ashes contain large chunks of bones, especially the shin, femur, pelvis, mandible and cranial bones with limited bone fragmentation. These bones could not be contained by any cinerary urn, but they fit into a chest, because it has a wide horizontal space. Otherwise, the bones should be hammered and fragmented to small pieces to fit effortlessly into normal urns.

The bone colors could be black, brown or white based on the oxygen exposure, the duration and intensity of fire. It takes from 7 to 8 hours and the temperature should reach at least 700° Celsius to achieve the right function and ensure the proper cremation to have white fragments of bones (Iserson 1994, 262–63; Noy 2000, 186–87; Kontonikolas 2018, 112). As a matter of fact, cremation experiments give diverse estimates with a limited margin of difference owing to diverse factors such as the magnitude of the pyre, the size of the body, the nature of the wood logs or the weather conditions whether cold, hot, humid or dry.

The weight of the ashes ranges from 1 to 4 kg., according to the stature and condition of the dead. In some cases the weight is less than kilogram, because only parts representing each organ are selected (Kontonikolas 2018, 114).

There was no particular type of pottery vessels that was used for cinerary urns, but different types were used such as jugs, amphorae and hydriae etc. (Fig. 4). Bases of bowls, plaster stoppers and caps were used as covers. Additionally, these urns were occasionally covered with drinking cups placed upside down. Sometimes other materials were used for cinerary urns, such as bronze, silver and gold. The cinerary urns are supposed to serve

as a new symbolic skin or body for the dead. In many instances, urns may have firstly served domestic purposes or were of types generally found in daily life. Moreover, other materials were sometimes used to hold ashes. For example, the remains were wrapped in cloth or leather instead of being placed in an urn (Kontonikolas 2018, 22–3).

In Egypt, during his excavations at Gurob, Flinders Petrie was intrigued by a large number of imports, particularly Mycenaean pottery, and several unusual features, including groups of burnt objects. He proposed that these might indicate Greek cremation practices (Kelder 2022, 7). However, this theory has been recently challenged (Gasperini 2018), suggesting that Petrie's burnt objects are more likely the remnants of looted graves possibly from the dynastic Third Intermediate Period, with burning probably being a rough method used by plunderers to extract metals. Despite the doubts about a Mycenaean cremation tradition at Gurob, the findings at the site are indicative of commercial relationships with prehistoric Greece (Kelder 2022, 7).

Though limited, Greek presence in Egypt is attested sometime before the advent of Alexander the Great. In the 7th century BCE., there were Greek communities at Memphis and Naukratis. Greek merchants founded the city of Naukratis and settled there. King Psamaticus I relied on Greek and Anatolian mercenaries, so he established them in two fortresses in Maria, Daphne and some other areas (Villing 2022, 15). The Saite fort at Tell Qedwa, which housed Egyptian troops and Greek mercenaries, has yielded extramural cremation burials (Mumford 2010, 346). Consequently, the practice of cremation, though rare and exceptional, was employed by Greek mercenaries in Egypt before the Macedonian conquest.

After the advent of Alexander the Great, Egypt was open for the Greeks to settle in. The early Ptolemies attracted mercenaries, especially Macedonians and Greeks, and were keen to settle them perpetually, granting them agricultural lands that would be inherited by their children if they remained in the army. They also encouraged merchants and immigrants to come to Egypt. Hence, the Macedonians and Greeks spread throughout Egypt, especially in the metropoleis of the nomes. Logically, they brought with them cremation custom among other traditions they practiced in their homelands (Rostovtzeff 1941, 284–87).

The discovery of cinerary hydriae known as Hadra vases represented a clear evidence of cremation practice in Egypt. Regrettably, the origins of most Hadra vases, as well as the conditions under which they were discovered, remain unidentified. Most of them were found in Alexandria and some were found outside of Egypt. Although the remains of pyres were not noticed by the excavators, some of them were discovered in the Gabbari tombs recently. Unfortunately, there are no comprehensive and in-depth studies of cremation in Egypt, although this is bound to be achieved in the CEAlex edition of “*Necropolis 3*”, which is currently in preparation.

The Hadra vases are the predominant form of cremation urns not only in Egypt, but also in some other parts of the Hellenistic world. They were found in different areas like Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus, mainland Greece, South Russia, Turkey, South Italy and Cyrene. They were used from the beginning of the 3rd to the beginning of the 2nd centuries BCE. (Cook, 1966, 7, note 3). However, other forms of cinerary urns were discovered (Cook 1966, 33, pl. XVII).

There are two main types of Hadra vases, defined by the way they are decorated; the first is decorated with a brownish, dark brown or black motifs on a clay colored ground, among which there are some dozens of inscribed ones (Fig. 5). The principal provenance of production is believed to be Crete (Callaghan 1980, 34). They feature simple motifs, including geometric patterns, various plant foliage, fauna elements as well as mythical creatures.

The second type is covered with a thin white coating with polychrome decorations, which disappear easily (Guimier-Sorbets and Morizot 2005, 146). It is believed that a minor portion of this type is of a local fabric because of its coarse texture, while the major part is imported from Crete (Ballet 1998, 196); for more than a hundred vases, which have a fine texture, are discovered in Rhodes. The polychrome decorations included still life motifs such as box, sword, mirror or shield etc. (Fig. 6). The designs on them may define the gender of the dead like a shield for man and a mirror for woman (Cook 1966, 11). In addition, some other limited types of vases were used as cinerary urns besides the Hadra vases.



Fig. 5. Clay colored ground Hadra vase inscribed with the name of an ambassador and the date of his death 213 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245557>



Fig. 6. White ground Hadra vase with the depiction of a shield decorated with the head of the Gorgon Medusa from the 3rd century BCE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245582>

Two scholars of the CE Alex, have conducted large scale osteoarchaeological studies on Hadra vases found in the Gabbari hypogea. They have proved that the stratigraphic arrangement of the bones follows the anatomical order of the body, starting from the feet bones and ending with the cranial bones. This arrangement might be explained as an effort to reassemble the body in a new form (Grevin and Bailet 2001, 294). It is noteworthy that the arrangement of the bones of Philip II followed the anatomical order (Andronikos, 1984, 232). In one urn the bones were sprinkled with red color, symbolizing a connection with the chthonic gods, and in another, remains of a textile were found (Grevin and Bailet 2001, 52).

At Elhaddad site (Alexandria, eastern necropolis), two cinerary urns were found side by side in a recess: one contained the cremated bones in anatomical order and the other contained the burnt ashes of soft tissues mixed with charcoal and other intrusive materials.¹ In Tuna el-Gebel (the necropolis of Hermopolis Magna), a Hadra vase was found inside another cylindrical alabaster vessel possibly for protection (Lembke et al. 2022, 218–23, figs. 17–23).

Research on Hadra vases as Greek artifacts has suggested that cremation in Alexandria was a practice introduced by Greeks, rather than a native custom. However, considering the origins of the city's founders, it is more logical to consider Macedonia specifically for precedents in cremation practices rather than Greece as a whole. Both men and women were cremated. The grave goods for cremations were not considerably dissimilar to those for inhumations, with comparable types of objects found in both (Borowik 2020, 56).

Cremation was not based on family traditions, for members of the same family practiced both customs of inhumation and cremation as evident in varied graves. It was not confined to the Greeks; for instance, there is a Hadra vase with a Punic inscription, and another has the ashes of a Galatian woman. It was practiced by various groups, as evidenced by inscriptions on several vases pertaining to foreign officials and ambassadors who died in Alexandria and mercenary soldiers (Borowik 2020, 56–7). These inscriptions may be useful in providing some information about the ancient Alexandrian society, such as the nationalities of the dead, their titles, or the date of burial. Some of them also bear the signatures of some artists, potters, or those responsible for the burial process.

1. This information is extracted from a talk with the osteoarchaeologist Ayah Salem with her consent.

The cost of the urn and the funerary pyre indicated a certain socio-economic status, requiring a level of wealth to afford it. Given that the elite were of Greco-Macedonian origin, it was plausible for some of the people of Alexandria and other cities to practice this custom.

The Egyptians kept corpses preserved by means of mummification to meet the requirements of the afterlife. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that cremation was practiced by the immigrants, while mummification may have been carried out by both, since many Greeks eventually adopted this practice over time (Landvatter, 2013, 212). In the Roman period, mummification grew more prevalent, while cremation became a marginal practice and it was not as relatively widespread as it had been during the Ptolemaic era (Guimer-Sorbets and Morizot 2005, 139).

The decline in cremation might indicate a relationship with the Greek immigration, which appears to have intensively diminished at the end of the third century BCE (Landvatter 2013, 108; Borowik 2020, 57–8). The lack of immigrant manpower drove Ptolemy IV to recruit 20000 Egyptians, for the first time, to fight in Raphia battle (Polybius, *Histories*, 5, 65. 9; 107. 1-3).

Although ancient customs were difficult to eradicate from societies, cremation rapidly declined, likely because it was neither deeply rooted nor widely established in Egypt. Its practice was mostly confined to some affluent residents of Alexandria and the provincial capitals. Over time, these elites integrated into society and adopted other widely practiced options, such as inhumation or mummification.

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