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# Tomb Robberies at the End of the New Kingdom

*The Gurob Burnt Groups Reinterpreted*

VALENTINA GASPERINI

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## Conclusions

While the lack of proper and detailed excavation records will always prevent definitive conclusions, a review of the various types of available evidence, considered here together for the first time, can support a new interpretation of these assemblages. The analysis of the available documents and, in particular, the study of the materials from these contexts provides enough information to shed new light on the possible origin, nature, and function of the burnt groups.

### THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BURNT GROUPS AND THEIR DATE OF DEPOSITION

The finds from these assemblages clearly show a wide chronological range, from the 18th dynasty to the end of the New Kingdom, with the occurrence of a small percentage of materials datable into the 21st dynasty.

Specifically, the first deposit, the 'burnt group of Amenhotep III', presents materials which can be dated to the 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 12, 13, 18–20, 30), to the transition between the 18th and the 19th dynasties (Cat. nos. 6–7, 11, 21, 26, 29), to the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 2, 5, 8, 22–24, 27–28, 31), to the 19th and 20th dynasties (Cat. nos. 3, 9, 10, 15–17), and to the 20th and 21st dynasties (Cat. no. 4). An Egyptian imitation of a Levantine cooking ware type, whose chronology spans the Iron Age I–IIA Early (Cat. no. 1), corresponding in Egyptian chronology to the 20th–22nd dynasties, should also be listed.

The second deposit, the 'burnt group of Tutankhamon', yielded materials datable to the 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 41–45, 49, 50, 57, 60), to the transition between the 18th and 19th dynasties (Cat. nos. 40, 51, 58, 64–69), and to the 19th and 20th dynasties (Cat. nos. 46–48, 52, 55–56, 61–63).

The third deposit, the first 'burnt group of Ramesses II', preserves materials datable to the late 18th and 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 86, 91, 102), to the 19th

dynasty (Cat. nos. 81, 83–85), and to the 19th–20th dynasties (Cat. nos. 77–78, 80, 82, 87–90, 92–100, 103–105).

The fourth deposit, the second ‘burnt group’ of Ramesses II, preserves materials which can be dated to the 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 128, 134, 135), to the transition between the 18th and the 19th dynasties (Cat. nos. 126, 138, 140), to the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 122–123, 130–133, 136–137), and to the 19th and 20th dynasties (Cat. nos. 121, 124, 125, 127), while Cat. no. 129 spans the late 18th to the 20th dynasty.

The materials from the fifth deposit, the ‘burnt group of Sety II’, cover the 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 157, 161, 162, 200), the transition between the 18th and 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 21, 143, 164–165, 167), the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 144–150, 152, 158–160, 168–170, 174, 176, 177, 188, 192, 199), and the 19th and 20th dynasties Cat. nos. 151, 153, 154–156, 171, 182–187, 189, 190–191, 193–196, 198).

The sixth deposit, ‘burnt group 3’, characterized by a smaller number of finds, shows a chronological distribution covering the end of the 18th and the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 212–214), the 19th and 20th dynasty (Cat. nos. 211, 216–218), and the 20th and 21st dynasty (Cat. no. 215).

The seventh deposit, ‘burnt group 7’, preserves materials of the late 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 236–237, 242), the transition between the late 18th and the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 235, 238, 239), the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 230, 232–233), and items covering both the 19th and the 20th dynasty (Cat. nos. 231, 234).

The eighth and last deposit, ‘burnt group X’, is problematic. The materials now preserved at the Petrie Museum are not traceable in the documentation provided by Petrie. These items are not published in the final report, and it has not been possible to find any reference to them in his diaries, notebooks, and journals. The only reference related to their potential origin as a ‘burnt group’ is provided by Thomas (1981, pp. 44–5, nos. 174–181). If these items originally belonged to a ‘burnt group’ named ‘X’ by the excavators, the deposit shows an intriguing peculiarity in terms of chronological patterns. The majority of its materials can be dated to the 18th dynasty (Cat. nos. 248–249), to the late 18th–19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 244, 246–247), and to the 19th dynasty (Cat. nos. 245, 250), showing a perfect alignment with the rest of the assemblages. However, the discovery of a Cypriote White Painted V *oenochoe* (Cat. no. 251) dated to the late CA I (750–600 BC)–early CA II (600–475 BC), late 22nd–early 26th dynasty in Egyptian chronology, represents a striking exception. This find does not fit with the chronology of the rest of the so-called burnt groups nor, more generally, with the urban development of Gurob, which was probably abandoned during the 21st dynasty and reused as funerary and settlement area only from the Ptolemaic period (see discussion of the materials from ‘burnt group X’). If Cat. no. 251 really belongs to the eighth deposit, or ‘burnt group X’, it dates the deposition

of the entire assemblage between the Third Intermediate Period and the early Late Period.

A few Cypriote sherds, belonging to Black-on-Red I (III) Ware, were excavated at the nearby site of Lahun, in 12th dynasty burials reused during the 22nd–24th dynasties (Swedish Cyprus Expedition IV.2, p. 240; Petrie et al. 1923, p. 38, pl. LXVII.56, pl. LV A.36, pl. L and pp. 31 and 37; on this point see also Aston 1996, p. 84). Storage jars imported from the Levant and belonging to Sagona Type 2 or 7b, spanning the 9th to 6th century BC, were also excavated at Lahun (Aston 1996, p. 85, see also fig. 234a,b). The finding of these few materials suggests that the Lahun-Gurob area may have been somehow still involved with interregional trade well after the end of the New Kingdom. Additionally, the discovery in other burials at Lahun of Egyptian pottery clearly inspired by CA I–II Cypriote models (see jug UC19206: Petrie, 1890, pl. XXIV.20–23; and for the Cypriot parallels see Laffineur–Vandenabeele 1990, p. 65, n. 144 and Nys–Åström 2004, p. 81, n. 919) may strengthen the idea that the Eastern Fayum was still familiar with the movement of interregional goods during the Third Intermediate Period and early Late Period. On a more general level, the Lahun materials suggest clearly that the site was still used for burials during the Third Intermediate Period and the early Late Period and, consequently, that at least funerary activities were still carried out in that area, approximately 3 km from Gurob. Despite the lack of archaeological proof, with the exception of **Cat. no. 251**, it is possible to formulate the hypothesis that part of the Gurob necropolis may have been reused during the same period of time.

Focusing again on the burnt groups, the analysis of the items excavated from the other seven assemblages shows that they were probably deposited in the harem palace area sometime during the early Third Intermediate Period. The presence, in all the examined assemblages, of finds showing at least a late Ramesside chronology represents a *terminus post quem* to date their deposition. With the exception of **Cat. no. 251**, the latest material excavated from these deposits is **Cat. no. 1**, which indicates a chronology into the Iron Age IIA Early (22nd dynasty).

The vast majority of the items excavated from these assemblages can be dated to the Ramesside period, while a lower proportion has a late 18th dynasty chronology. The same chronology is reflected by the imported pottery, which is mainly characterized by Mycenaean and Levantine trade goods. Mycenaean imports are represented by LH IIIA2 stirrup jars as well as one *askos*, and by LH IIIB1 stirrup jars, in Egyptian chronology respectively late 18th dynasty (LH IIIA2) and early Ramesside period (LH IIIB1). Levantine imports have a LBII–EIA chronology, corresponding to the late 19th–20th dynasty, and are mainly represented by pilgrim flasks, three-handled small piriform jars, and imitations of Mycenaean stirrup jars.

Assuming that Petrie was accurate in his description of these assemblages, the deposits seem to be closely consistent in their character, in all instances being pits, filled with various deliberately burnt items, which were covered by a layer of sherds, at least as suggested by the description provided by Petrie in the only occasion he was present during the discovery of one of these assemblages (see 'Introduction'). The consistency of their outlines suggests that they were the result of similar activities. They were probably produced by the same causes and, with the exception of 'burnt group X', deposited during a firm chronological horizon.

### THE FUNERARY NATURE OF THE BURNT GROUPS

The materials discovered in the deposits appear to be consistent with finds usually excavated in funerary assemblages (on this point, see also Bell 1991, pp. 137–42; Oren 1973, p. 143). An important hint about their original function and usage can be traced in the pottery. While it is extremely difficult to distinguish between ceramics used in daily life and ceramics used as offerings for the after-life, as the same types occur in both domestic and funerary contexts (on this point see also Seiler 1995; Rose 2003, pp. 207–8), some of the vessels excavated from these assemblages can best be interpreted as grave goods. Thus some ceramics (Cat. nos. 3, 79, 81, 121, 160–167, 169, 244–245) are clearly smaller or 'miniature' versions of containers usually manufactured in larger sizes. The tendency of reproducing miniature versions of larger containers as funerary offerings is well attested, not only in other funerary contexts from Gurob (see for example tomb 045, Manchester Museum 2140, 2142, 2143, 2138, 2139, and 2141: Gasperini in preparation) but also at other sites, such as, for example, the South Tombs Cemetery at Amarna (Rose–Gasperini 2014, p. 24; Rose–Gasperini 2015, pp. 32–3) and the New Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara (see, for example, B. G. Aston 2012, p. 158, fig. VII.11). The same may be applicable to some of the stone vessels excavated from these assemblages (Cat. nos. 14, 129, 198, 239), which are clearly smaller replicas of larger vessels. Miniature replicas of larger stone vessels types are attested, for example, from the tomb of Tutankhamon (Baines 1993, pl. 14, nos. 34–35 and 18). Their manufacture may be explained by their symbolic rather than functional role in funerary contexts.

Furthermore, some of the stone vessels have a clear funerary association in their own right. Cat. no. 56, a calcite plate carved in the shape of a fish, provides a good example. The plate represents a *Tilapia Nilotica*, a fish symbolically connected to the idea of fertility and rebirth, and highly appreciated in funerary contexts (see also Bell 1991, pp. 66–7; Wallert 1966, pp. 273–94;

see also Brewer–Friedman 1989, pp. 77–81; see Roehrig 2005, p. 177). A parallel is provided, for example, by a very similar plate excavated at Gurob from another funerary assemblage, tomb 70 (Loat 1904, pl. IV, n. 33).

Faience (*Cat. nos. 18–24, 26–30, 60–65, 132–138, 199*) played a major role in the manufacture of votive and funerary offering vessels up to the beginning of the Hellenistic period, when it began to be used more frequently as tableware (Caubet–Pierrat–Bonnefois 2005, pp. 72–3). Until the Ptolemaic period, faience vessels, and, in particular, faience bowls were connected with Hathoric cults (Roehrig 2005, p. 176; see also Pinch 1993, pp. 308–15). The blue-green colour of the faience was associated with a specific aspect of Hathor, also defined as the Lady of Turquoise. Hathor was also worshipped as mistress of the West, with clear funerary connotations (Brovarski et al. 1982, p. 141; see also Roehrig 2005, p. 177). The connection between Hathoric cults and the use of faience vessels is well attested in particular in the bowls decorated with cows: a good example is *Cat. no. 18*. These faience bowls may have been used in connection with the offering of milk as nourishment for the deceased and representing, symbolically, the milk of the sacred Hathor cow (Pinch 1993, pp. 314–15). Faience bowls and, more generally, faience vessels found in funerary contexts are also often associated with the idea of rebirth (Roehrig 2005, p. 176). Additionally, the occurrence of lotus flower decoration on some of the faience vessels excavated from the burnt groups (*Cat. nos. 21–22, 24, 60, 63, 133–134, 136, 199*) strengthens the probable funerary connection. Finally, the two faience cucumber vessels (*Cat. nos. 64 and 26*), possibly ‘funerary simulacra of glass originals’ (Bell 1991, pp. 63–4), can be easily interpreted as grave goods. The closest New Kingdom parallel for the Gurob ‘cucumber vessels’ was excavated from a funerary assemblage at Sedment (Tomb 2010: Franzmeier 2017, p. 1573, n. 2010/GFa/001; see also Brovarski et al. 1982, p. 115, n. 102).

Metal situla *Cat. no. 107* has potentially even stronger funerary implications, strictly related to rituals performed for the deceased. These ceremonial vessels were in fact used for libations in two different contexts: temples and private tombs (Radwan 1983, pp. 148–52). A provenience from a temple context for *Cat. no. 107* cannot be excluded; however, as the other materials from the burnt groups assemblages appear to indicate a strong funerary connection, the usage of this situla in mortuary cults appears to be convincing. More specifically, situlae are both found in tombs and depicted in funeral processions and offering scenes: situlae appear to have been used during the funeral processions both for the aspersion of milk and in the offering of drink to the deceased (Lichtheim 1947, p. 172).

Some of the jewellery excavated from these deposits also indicate the primary funerary usage of these materials. A heart amulet (*Cat. no. 142*) is one of the most popular apotropaic offerings found in burials (Ferreira de Sousa 2007, p. 713). Penannular earrings *Cat. no. 73* (and, in particular, the earrings

shown on the two lower rows and characterized by a diameter of 1.2 cm) may have been associated with a funerary function. While their clefts are too narrow to allow these earrings to be worn, a symbolic function as token jewellery to be deposited with the deceased has been proposed (Brovarski et al. 1982, p. 228, n. 290).

Three game pieces (**Cat. no. 208**) probably belonged originally to a *Senet* game board (see Brovarski et al. 1982, p. 268, n. 372). Commonly included since the first dynasty (Piccione 1990, p. 369) among tomb *regalia* of all social classes, the game of *Senet* assumed specific ritual and religious meanings related to the protection and resurrection of the deceased. It was first mentioned in the Book of the Dead during the reign of Amenhotep III (Brovarski et al. 1982, pp. 263–4; for more in general on the *Senet* game and its funerary connection and significance see: Kendall 1978; Pusch 1979; Piccione 1990; Piccione 2007). *Senet* boards and game pieces are therefore often found in New Kingdom funerary assemblages (see Brovarski et al. 1982, p. 263; see also, for example, the *Senet* board game found in TT 8, the tomb of Kha: Russo 2012, pp. 13–19).

Finally, a few organic materials found in these deposits hint at the funerary nature of the burnt groups: one sycamore fig (**Cat. no. 229**) and two sea-shells (**Cat. no. 210**). Sycamore figs are well attested among food offerings in funerary assemblages since the Predynastic period (Gale et al. 2000, p. 340; for more in general on the sycamore fig tree in Egypt see Brewer et al. 1994, pp. 52–4). Additionally the sycamore tree was strictly connected both with Hathoric and Osirian cults (Brewer et al. 1994, p. 53). The use of sea-shells as funerary offerings is attested both in the tomb of Lady Maket, where a Red Sea sea-shell was found (Ashmolean Museum AN1890.824) and in tomb 1262 at Mayana (Sterba et al. 2009, p. 1739).

#### THE BURNT GROUPS AND THEIR ELITE AND SUB-ELITE CONNECTIONS

The finding of tools such as scalpels or ‘*couteau-nécrotomes*’ (**Cat. nos. 32, 108, 201, 221–223**), needles (**Cat. nos. 112, 224**), and tweezers (**Cat. nos. 110–111**) strengthens the interpretation of the burnt groups as funerary assemblages, and sheds light on the social status of the owners of these burials. These instruments find precise parallels among tools used during the mummification process (see Janot 2000). Very likely connected with embalming kits (Janot 2000, p. 269, fig. 8; see also p. 139, fig. 39), these tools probably belonged to high-status individuals whose bodies went through the mummification process, and were consequently interred with elite burials. The presence of mummification equipment is in fact well attested in elite



and sub-elite New Kingdom funerary assemblages, even if the full and complete embalming process was not universally applied in all high-status burials (Smith 1992, p. 199).

While the interpretation of these instruments as surgical tools used in daily life is more problematic, their use for household purposes cannot be excluded (see Nunn 1996, p. 164 and discussions *supra*). Nevertheless, these tools fit also with elite and sub-elite funerary offerings.

While discussing the finds from the ‘burnt group of Amenhotep III’, Petrie (1891, p. 17) noted: ‘The two bronze tools (15, 19) [referring to *Cat. nos.* 32–33] are constantly found in these buried groups; almost always the two, and never any duplicates. Dots are here put around the cutting edges. Whether they were used for feeding, for attending to the person, or possibly in the process of embalming, we cannot yet determine. In one case (XVIII, 3) [referring to the second ‘burnt group of Ramesses II’] they were tied together, with a needle, by thread bound round them.’

This reference to three of these tools tied together is particularly telling, as it underlines the association existing between the three instruments, two scalpels and one needle, essential, respectively, to incise and sew, basic phases of the embalming process. Another metal tool, probably identifiable as an embalming or surgical instrument, was found at Gurob. Drawn in Petrie’s plate (1891, XIX.29) and possibly identifiable with UC7819 (Thomas 1981, p. 59, n. 379, pl. 16), this instrument is perfectly compatible with a similar item from the embalming kit discovered in the tomb of Anch-Hor (Janot 2000, p. 117, fig. 29, n. 568). The Petrie Museum, furthermore, preserves other metal equipment which may be recognizable as instruments belonging to embalming kits. UC7793IV, a retractor, finds a parallel in Janot 2000, p. 117, fig. 29.566, while UC7799, characterized by a distinctive hook at one end, is interpreted as a pincer for brain extraction (see Janot 2000, p. 117, fig. 29.565). As suggested by this equipment, and as logically arguable given the complex social organization of the Gurob settlement, embalming procedures were carried out at the site and were applied to elite and sub-elite individuals (on the application of mummification procedures to elite and sub-elite individuals, as well as on the different embalming processes based on social status see Smith 1992, p. 199).

Assuming that these assemblages were originally related to elite or sub-elite burials, the discovery of three horse-bits (*Cat. no.* 225) may suggest the presence of chariot equipment in some of these funerary assemblages. Chariots are in fact well attested in elite tombs (see for example the chariot discovered in the tomb of Kenamun: Littauer–Crouwel 1985, pp. 105–8; Guidotti 2002; Herslund 2013, p. 125; Betrò 2014; the chariot from the burial of Yuya and Tuya: Davies 1907, pp. 35–6; pls. I and XXXII; and the royal chariots from the tombs of Amenhotep II: Daressy 1902; Thutmose IV: Carter–Newberry 1904, pp. 24–38; and Tutankhamon: Littauer–Crouwel 1985), and

their distribution in the Egyptian elite society is proven independently from warfare and booty (Herslund 2013, pp. 125–7).

If, as it seems more than probable, these assemblages originally belonged to burials of elite or sub-elite individuals, the final questions are whether these contexts can be interpreted as primary or secondary depositions, why they are located in the harem palace area, and why these materials were burnt. Assuming that the deposition of the burnt groups happened sometimes in the early Third Intermediate Period, as discussed above, these pits were probably dug in the harem-palace area after the abandonment of the structure.

### THE BURNT GROUPS AND THE ‘GREAT TOMB-ROBBERY PAPYRI’

As is well known from the Great Tomb-Robbery Papyri (Peet 1930; and, more recently, Cooney 2014, pp. 17–28), large scale robberies of the royal and private elite tombs were carried out in the Theban West bank in the late New Kingdom (Cooney 2014, p. 17; see also Reeves 1990, p. 274, tav. 12; Taylor 1992). According to the evidence provided by the papyri, the robberies of the tombs followed different procedures or ‘protocols’.

Papyrus Abbott (BM 10221: Peet 1930, p. 39) p. 4, lines 1–4 states: ‘The tombs and chambers in which rest the blessed ones of old, the citizenesses and citizens on the West of Thebes. It was found that the thieves had violated them all, dragging their owners from their inner coffins and their outer coffins so that they were left on the desert, and stealing their funerary outfit which had been given to them together with the gold and the silver and the fittings which were in their inner coffins.’

In another passage of Papyrus Leopold-Amherst (Peet 1930, p. 49; on this papyrus see also Capart et al. 1936) p. 2, lines 8–9, thieves declare that ‘We found the royal wife just likewise and we appropriated all that we found on her too. We set fire to their inner coffins. We stole their outfit which we found with them, consisting of objects of gold, silver and bronze and divided them up among ourselves’.

In Papyrus BM 10054 (Peet 1930, p. 60) vso. p. 1, lines 8–9, a thief declares: ‘We broke open the tombs of the West of No and brought away their inner coffins which were in them. We stripped off their gold and their silver which was on them and we stole it between myself and my confederates’.

P. BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 1–12 may give another hint regarding how some of these robberies were carried out. Lines 1–7, relating to the robbery of the tomb of Thanufer, third prophet of Amon, one of the thieves says: ‘And we opened it and we brought his coffin outside, and we took his mummy and we threw it in a corner of his tomb. And we took his coffin to this boat with the

rest to the island of Imenemipet. And we set fire to them in the night. And we made away with the gold which we found on them' (Cooney 2014, p. 17; Peet 1930, pp. 60–1). The same papyrus, however, also describes another procedure (lines 8–10): 'We opened it [referring to another grave] and brought out an inner coffin from it, and up to its neck was covered with gold. We stripped it with a chisel of copper. We took it and we set fire to it there in the tomb.'

Different procedures were therefore used in the robberies: in some instances (BM 10221: p. 4, lines 1–4), thieves looted the tombs, dragged the deceased bodies out from the burial chambers, completely despoiled them and left the human remains in the desert. In other cases (BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 8–10 and, possibly, BM 10054 lines 8–9) the thieves used to spoil the loot inside the burial chambers and set fire to the precious grave goods, probably to completely remove metals (see below) in the tomb itself. But, as clearly stated in P. BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 1–7, tomb robberies may have also involved the theft of the coffin and of other grave goods (see also BM 10054 vso. p. 1, lines 8–9), moving these items outside the tomb, after having got rid of the mummy, and, finally, burning these objects outside the tomb, probably in a hidden and quiet place, during the night.

It is likely that thieves set fire to the coffin and grave goods to completely and effectively collect all the gold and other precious metals, as well as to get rid of evidence, after having stripped the precious metals from the coffins (Cooney 2014, pp. 17–18). One detail is particularly important in the description provided by P. BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 1–7: thieves did not carry the deceased body outside the tombs but they left it *in loco*. In another case, when dragged out from the burial chambers, deceased bodies were left behind in the desert (BM 10221: p. 4, lines 1–4). Clearly, thieves did not need to burn the mummies in order to collect the precious objects (such as amulets or jewels) traditionally worn by the deceased. On the contrary, it was more effective to simply strip off the bandages or break the mummy to reach the ornaments. Once collected the precious amulets and/or jewels, the mummies were left behind simply because they were no longer valuable for the robbers and they probably represented a useless load to transport. Information on the robbery of two mummies are provided by thieves in Papyrus Leopold-Amherst (Capart et al. 1936, p. 117, 2–15): 'We collected the gold we found on the noble mummy of this god, together with (that on) his amulets and jewels which were on his neck and (that on) the coffins in which he was resting, and we found the royal wife just likewise and we appropriated all that we found on her too. We set fire to their inner coffins.' Assuming that the burnt groups were the final result of large-scale robberies in the Gurob necropolis, the lack of bones or any kind of human remains in these assemblages can be explained by the fact that the deceased bodies were not taken with the rest of the grave goods but they were simply left in their original locations or somewhere outside their tombs. Secondly, as clearly stated in P. BM 10054, coffins and

other grave goods were set on fire not exclusively in the proximity of the burial chambers but also in different locations: in the Theban case on an island, ‘the island of Imenemipet’, the whereabouts of which are not known (Cooney 2014, p. 18). It is also worth noting that the name of the same island occurs also in other Tomb-Robbery Papyri (P. BM 10052, p. 10; Cooney 2014, p. 18; see also Strudwick 2013, p. 343), suggesting that the same place was used more than once to facilitate the final spoliation of the loot.

The burning and burying of looted grave goods in the harem palace area can be explained by the abandoned nature of the royal building although it was probably still standing. When Petrie first visited the site, he produced the following description of the settlement: ‘the houses have never been rebuilt, but stand on the desert sand, just filled up, with the upper parts of the wall fallen in’ (Petrie Journal, 2–8 December 1888). When Borchartd (1911, p. 3) briefly worked at the site in 1905, he declared that the harem palace walls still reached a height of 1.20 m. The condition of the site at the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century was very good. Consequently there are no reasons to doubt that the royal building and other structures would still have been standing a few decades after their abandon. Assuming that looting procedures similar to the Theban ones as described by P. BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 1–7, were carried out at the Gurob necropolis, it is likely that, after having robbed the tombs, thieves carried out the final spoliation of the items in relatively hidden and secure places, such as the abandoned palace and nearby structures. Archaeological evidence of looting carried out at the end of the New Kingdom in the Theban West Bank were recently found at TT 233 (Ockinga 2007). In this case traces of a fire, as well as ashes and burned funerary equipment, were found to the western side of the tomb pylon. This hidden location was probably chosen in order to keep robbers safe from view, and to hide the fire from people in the valley below (Ockinga 2007, p. 146 and fig. 9.32).

The presence of burning on the items excavated from the Gurob deposits is self-evident. Fire was probably used to remove all the precious metals inlaid in coffins and furniture (on the use of fire as an essential part of the robbery procedure see Cooney 2014, pp. 17–18; Strudwick 2013, p. 341; and for an archaeological account from recent excavations in Dra Abu al Naga see TT 233: Ockinga 2007, p. 146). It is worth noting, for example, the presence of a chair leg, shaped in the form of a lion’s leg, from the ‘burnt group of Amenhotep III’ (Cat. no. 39) which appears to be completely stripped and burnt. Copper-alloy inlays present in ‘burnt group 3’ (Cat. no. 228) probably originally belonged to a coffin or furniture, possibly imitating golden foil, and they may be explained as another attempt at collecting precious-looking metals.

The presence of ceramic and stone vessels in the supposed robbers’ pits can be explained by two factors. First, as already suggested by Cooney (2014, p. 24), ointments, balsams, and medicines, originally kept in these containers

and quite valuable, were probably no longer usable after having been buried for a long period, and consequently they would not have been appealing to thieves. Nonetheless, the preserved fatty substances and organic materials could have been cooked down for paints or varnishing and therefore recycled for the production of other relatively precious provisions (on the different use of oils and fats in Ancient Egypt see Serpico–White 2000). The theft of oils and similar precious substances, along with other valuable items, is attested from elite and royal burials, at least, in three cases: the robberies of the tomb of Yuya and Tuya, Meherpra and Tutankhamon (Strudwick 2013, p. 339; see also Reeves 1990, p. 275, on this point see also Smith 1992, p. 194). Additionally, many of the objects robbed from elite and sub-elite Theban burials were subsequently reused to create funerary objects for the contemporary market of grave goods (Cooney 2014, p. 18). It is therefore likely that the thieves robbed all the available materials from the elite and sub-elite burials, processed them, and left behind only what was no longer recyclable or ‘sellable’. Quite clearly old-fashioned pottery was unrecyclable for the contemporary market of funerary goods, and therefore left along with the other materials which would have not produced any profit, once the fatty and organic substances had been collected and processed. Many of the vessels excavated from the burnt groups are intact, and some clearly show that they were broken *in situ*, showing that they were broken during the depositional process in the harem palace area. The condition of preservation of vessels in funerary contexts is usually better than in domestic ones, and this can be considered as an additional indicator of their original funerary context.

Finally, the layer of sherds, which originally sealed these contexts (Petrie 1891, p. 16), may have been deliberately added to stop the fire, cover the robbed materials, and get rid of all the evidence of looting. Scattered and broken sherds were probably very easy to find in the harem palace area and they were the ideal materials to seal the robber pits.

#### GUROB AND THE ‘GREAT TOMB-ROBBERY PAPYRI’

The last literary mentions of the settlement of *Mr-Wr* (Gurob) are provided by the Great Tomb-Robbery Papyri. As already discussed (discussion on ‘burnt group X’) at least ten citizens from *Mr-Wr* were involved in the trials for the Theban robberies during the reign of Ramesses IX (Papyrus BM 10053, p. 1, lines: 10, 15; p. 2, lines 12, 13; p. 3, lines 6, 10; p. 4, line 11; p. 5, lines 2, 5; p. 8, line 1) and at least another one was implicated in a similar suit during the reign of Ramesses XI (BM 10052, 5.1 and 5.12).

All the people from Gurob involved in both trials, are described as ‘merchants’. Peet (1930, p. 110, n. 7.1.10) himself noticed: ‘MrWr must be the well

known ancient Egyptian name for Lake Moeris, used for the Fayyum in general. It is curious that nearly all the merchants in this list come from there.' When Peet wrote this note, in 1930, *Mr-Wr* was yet to be identified with the site of Gurob (Gardiner–Bell 1943). These details suggest two points. First, people from Gurob were familiar with the tomb robbery practices used in the Theban West bank and they were involved in these activities over more than one generation: at least from the reign of Ramesses IX to the reign of Ramesses XI. Secondly, as they are defined as 'merchants', it is likely that they may have been connected to the black market in funerary antiquities, flourishing at the end of the New Kingdom, and based on the trade of materials stolen from looted burials reused to create new funerary objects (Cooney 2014, p. 18). At an educated guess, it is possible to suggest that the trading network of stolen grave goods may have reached a large scale at the end of the 20th dynasty–beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, involving several areas of the Egyptian territory. This may have stimulated even more looting activities in peripheral regions of the country, including the Gurob burnt groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

Following this detailed review of the evidence provided by the burnt groups, the interpretation proposed is that they are secondary depositions, probably made up of mixed materials, collected and looted from elite and sub-elite burials. It is likely that the main target of the robberies may have been necropolis W at Gurob (fig. 2), composed of 'large shaft tombs and mastabas' (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, pp. 2–3; on this point see also Bell 1991, p. 143), and identified as the elite and sub-elite funerary area of the settlement. Necropolis W received interments particularly during the Ramesside period (see Brunton and Engelbach 1927, pls. XXVI.6, XXVIII. 474, XXIX.6, XXX.37, XXXI.5): the highest proportion of materials excavated from the burnt groups reflects a 19th and 20th dynasty chronology. One of the tombs located in necropolis W, grave 473, may offer archaeological proof of looting activities in that specific cemetery area. Tomb 473 is described as belonging to 'large tombs near point W' (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 15). The grave goods from tomb 473 have a chronology of the late 18th to the 20th dynasty, as suggested by the presence of a Levantine *amphoriskos* datable to the Early Iron Age (Brussels E5789/8: Gasperini in preparation; see also Brunton–Engelbach 1927, pl. XXVII). The materials from tomb 473 therefore show a continued use of the burial, throughout the Ramesside period. The grave goods discovered from this assemblage 'showed signs of burning, both sculptures and beads being calcined' (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 15). As already stressed, sometimes tomb robbers removed metals from the funerary equipment in the

burial chamber itself, setting fire to the grave goods inside or next to the tombs (see *supra*: P. BM 10054 rto. p. 1, lines 8–10 and, possibly, BM 10054 lines 8–9, as well as the evidence from TT 233: Ockinga 2007, p. 146 and fig. 9.32). It is therefore plausible that the heavy traces of burning on the materials from tomb 473 may have been the result of looting activity (on this point see also Bell 1991, p. 217, n. 259). Based on the 20th dynasty dating of the most recent material deposited in this context (Brussels E5789/8), it is likely that the burning of the funerary materials in the burial chamber derived from robberies after the 20th dynasty, in other words after the deposition of the last interment/s and funerary equipment. Other funerary contexts from necropolis W clearly show traces of looting, as suggested by the excavators of that portion of the Gurob cemetery, Brunton and Engelbach (1927). Specifically, it is worth quoting some passages from the final report provided by these scholars. The first is related to the description of tomb 6, point W: ‘The tomb had been thoroughly robbed in ancient times, and all the objects were found in the filling’ (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 9); the second describes tomb 34, point W: ‘Like all these large tombs, it had been completely robbed, and the objects shown in the group were mostly found in the antechamber’ (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 10), while the third refers to tomb 36, point W: ‘it forms one of the series mentioned in section 2 which had been completely gutted by illicit diggers’ (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 11). Additionally, section 2 (Brunton–Engelbach 1927, p. 1) states: ‘here there has been an appalling amount of illicit diggings.’ Evidently, not all these illicit diggings can be related to ancient robbers’ activities and probably Brunton and Engelbach also came across some relatively modern looting. Nonetheless, these details leave open the possibility that large-scale robbery was carried out in the Gurob area during ancient times. The materials from tomb 473 are currently kept at the Royal Museums in Brussels. Only four items are currently available: a *tazza*, a saucer, a miniature jar (all made from calcite), and a pottery *amphoriskos*, probably imported from the Levant (respectively E5789/6, E5789/7, E5789/5, and E5789/8: Gasperini in preparation). These four items show traces of burning which are consistent with those shown on the vast majority of the material from the burnt groups.

All these observations support the interpretation of the burnt groups as the final result of the robberies of the elite and sub-elite necropolis of Gurob. These deposits contain all the materials which, once processed, would have not produced any profit for the thieves, and were consequently abandoned and buried in order to get rid of the evidence of looting. It is plausible that robbers left and hid all the materials in the same place in which they carried out the final processing (such as the removing of metals and cooking down of organic substance) of the funerary loot. The presence of metal items, representing the 12 per cent of the total finds, and, in particular, the discovery of 29 copper-alloy instruments (among which some tiny objects such as five needles, one

retractor, two tweezers, and three fragments of horse-bits) and two metal vessels on a total of 244 items recorded from all these assemblages is explainable assuming these metal items were accidentally left behind by thieves. Robbers were probably operating in hurry and under pressure as, if discovered, their punishment would have been the death penalty. Additionally, at TT 233 even a few traces of gold, the most valued metal for thieves, were found mixed with ashes and the rest of the charred burial equipment (Ockinga 2007, p. 146), clearly suggesting that robbers lacked time and, consequently, extra care in the processing of the funerary loots.

However, some aspects of the robbery activities remain unexplained. For example, the lack of shabtis from the Gurob deposits is a question which needs to be addressed. Among the discarded materials looted from TT 233 were at least eight shabtis in the robber's pit (Ockinga 2007, fig. 9.34), suggesting very clearly that this funerary equipment was not attractive for thieves (on this point see also Taylor 1992, p. 190) and was consequently left behind. While the reuse of shabis during the Third Intermediate Period can be only partly detected in some rare cases, the most famous being the recycling of one of the Ramesses II shabtis (Aston 1991; Taylor 1992, p. 198), it is not possible to exclude completely some sort of reuse for these funerary materials (see for example Whelan 2012, p. 68). In particular, shabtis made from wood may have been more easily recycled for the production of similar items or other kind of funerary statuettes. Shabtis made from wood are well attested in Gurob (see Brunton–Engelbach 1927), see also Janes 2012, pp. 23–4; pp. 31–2; 36–7 as well as from other Ramesside funerary contexts: see for example Raven 1991, pl. 38.31; Janes 2016, pp. 23–4; 41–2; 45–9; 51–5; 64–101; 117; 131–4; 152–9; 172), another possible explanation for their absence among the burnt groups material could be due to their destruction once in contact with fire. The lacking of faience shabtis is more difficult to explain (see below). Shabtis were not a universally distributed funerary equipment, although elite and sub-elite individuals had a greater tendency of having at least some of these specimens in their burials. However, the absence of shabtis in high-status New Kingdom burials is attested, as suggested by several elite Theban burials which were not equipped with these items (for a complete discussion on shabtis, their distribution, and presence in elite and sub-elite funerary assemblages, as well as the required number of specimens in early New Kingdom tombs see Smith 1992, pp. 199–200). Another possible explanation for the absence of shabtis may be due to the fact that these materials were usually kept in highly recognizable boxes specifically manufactured for accommodating this funerary equipment. It is plausible that expert tomb thieves would have been able to recognize these containers and, consequently, leave them behind in the grave (I would like to thank J. Taylor, British Museum, for drawing my attention to this possible aspect of tomb robberies procedures).



The absence of coffin remains from the burnt groups is clearly problematic as well (on the use of coffins in elite and sub-elite burials see Smith 1992, pp. 197–8). It is however more easily explicable from two points. Coffins may have been either reused (as demonstrated by Cooney 2014, p. 26 with previous bibliography) or destroyed in the attempt to obtain valuable inlays. The excavation of the burnt groups was carried out by Hughes-Hughes, a classicist without any training in Egyptology. It is plausible that he simply ignored or did not recognize burnt remains of wooden coffins and simply left behind unappealing materials. Petrie, in fact, clearly states that the pits were full of ash and charcoal, suggesting that flammable materials were originally present, perhaps in significant amounts, in these pits.

The stratigraphy of the harem palace is now irremediably lost, and the burnt groups were not properly recorded, so that scholars can only try to interpret the available data collected more than one hundred years ago. For example, when Borchardt visited the site in 1905, he found the famous head of Queen Tye in a rectangular pit next to a wall of the palace. The supposed deposit is described as composed by alternate layers of coals and ‘Antike’ Borchardt (1911, p. 3). It remains an open question whether the burnt layers were the result of a fire in the palace (see also Bell 1991, pp. 171–7) or possibly evidence for the presence of other burnt groups. Petrie stated that ‘many’ burnt groups were excavated in the harem palace area, but the only available assemblages are the eight discussed in this study, perhaps implying that more burnt assemblages were identified at the site. It is consequently possible that part of the material is simply missing therefore resulting in an incomplete data set. Perhaps the ‘missing’ funerary materials, such as faience shabtis, may simply have been deposited in other robbers’ pits.

The last point which needs to be addressed is the presence of open shapes, such as pottery bowls (5 items), pottery dishes (12 items); faience bowls (10 items); stone hemispherical bowl (3 items), stone saucers (2 items), and stone *tazze* (3 items). While closed shapes were possibly stolen in order to process their contents, the same explanation is clearly inconsistent with open forms. However, it is possible that thieves collected all the available materials in the rush of clearing the tombs and then they simply discarded the open shapes as having no value. The recycling of these materials for the market of funerary goods is unlikely for stone and faience vessels, which date to the 18th–19th dynasty (see Catalogue). The reuse of these items, clearly old-fashioned in the early Third Intermediate Period, does not seem plausible.

The looting of Necropolis W at Gurob may have reached a large scale during the early Third Intermediate Period, a phase characterized by political instability, economic crisis, and consequently lack of resources. The well-known robberies of the Theban Necropolis were perpetrated and supported by high-ranking officials (Cooney 2014, p. 26 with previous bibliography), and it is possible that elite members of the Egyptian society were involved in the

robberies perpetrated also in more peripheral and liminal areas of Egypt, such as Gurob, contributing to a progressive escalation in thefts all over the Country. In the Gurob case, the abandoned palace accommodated part of the final spoliation of the loot but it is not possible to detect, with the available data, to what scale.

Based on the re-evaluation of the available materials from these deposits, the Gurob burnt groups are therefore non-closed contexts, deposited sometime during the early Third Intermediate Period and composed of varied items, probably originally belonging to a number of burials and consequently totally mixed in terms of chronology. It is very likely, in fact, that each deposit contains material looted from more than one grave, as is also suggested by the wide chronological range of the finds. Subsequently, the imported pottery, including the Mycenaean material, is not reliable to define any transition between the LH IIIA2 and LH IIIB1. Mycenaean ceramics excavated from middle/late 18th–19th dynasty Egyptian assemblages were in fact widely used in the past, and even in more recent years, to determine the transitional date between LH IIIA2 and LH IIIB1, based on the Egyptian chronology (for a summary on this debate see Aston 2011, pp. 1–2; see also Furumark 1941, p. 114; Wace 1957, pp. 220–3; Hankey 1973, pp. 131–2; Hankey–Warren 1974, p. 148; Warren–Hankey 1989, p. 150; Bell 1991; Cline 1994, p. 7). Also the Gurob burnt groups, and in particular the Tutankhamon one (see Bell 1991), were investigated to detect the precise date range which marked the end of the LH IIIA2 and the beginning of the LH IIIB1. However, the secondary depositional nature of the burnt groups, which probably resulted from the mixing of materials originally belonging to different funerary assemblages, makes them completely unreliable and unusable in this debate.

These burnt groups may represent a unique archaeological record of large scale looting and robbery activities which complement the literary evidence provided by the Great Tomb-Robbery Papyri.