

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE SCA EXCAVATION AT TELL EL-YAHUDIA SEASON 2010–2011

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Abstract: *The following preliminary report provides a brief overview of the SCA excavations in the years 2010–2011 at the smaller (or northern) tell of Tell el-Yahudia. Remains of two houses of the Graeco-Roman suburb were discovered, one of which contained a private bath. In the so-called “Second rock-cut cemetery” (known since the 1980s), some additional tombs were discovered. In the Hyksos and Late Period cemetery in the Gezira, 48 tombs from the Middle Kingdom, the Hyksos Period, the New Kingdom and the Late Period were cleared. 12 poor tombs (most of them for children) were discovered at a small excavation site in the south of the tell. Small finds from the cemeteries consisted mainly of pottery (including Tell el-Yahudia ware), Fayence amulets and sealings and several metal objects, as well as a few Ptolemaic coins.*

Keywords: *SCA-excavation, Tell el-Yahudiya, Graeco-Roman suburb, Rock-cut cemetery, Gezira-cemetery, Hyksos, Late Period*

I. Introduction

Tell el-Yahudia (ancient Egyptian *Nay-ta-hut*; Greek Leontopolis) is situated about 2 km to the southeast of Shibin El-Kanater and 19 km to the north of Heliopolis.

The site, a high tell on the edge of the desert, is owned by the SCA. It is divided into two parts by the road of Shibin el-Kanater to Abu-Za’bel. The first part – the southern one – is called the great tell (El Tell el-Kebir), as it contains the Hyksos camp, the remains of the palace of Ramesses III and the temple of Onias. The second one extends to the northeast of the great tell; it is known as the small tell (El Tell el-Soghier), of which the most important features are the rock cut tombs from the

Late Period and the Greco-Roman period in its southern part, and the Hyksos, New Kingdom and Late Period cemeteries in its northern part.¹

The excavation of the SCA at Tell el-Yahudia in 2010–2011 concentrated on three excavation sites at the small tell (El Tell el-Soghier), two of them in the southern part of the tell, while the third was situated far to the northeast, at the edge of the cultivation. (fig. 1)

II. Excavation in the southern part of the small tell (site 1)

II-1. The Greco-Roman Suburb

Work first started in the southern part of the small tell as a continuation of the excavation carried out in this area in 2008, which led to the discovery of rock-cut tombs beside scattered mud brick walls of the Greco-Roman suburb.

The surface in this part of the tell is undulating and consists of heaps of pottery from the robbed tombs and parts of pottery coffins, in addition to modern rubbish.

The upper layer is completely destroyed due to illicit digging and the work of the sabakhine for more than a hundred years, which has completely removed the Greco-Roman suburb in this part. Scattered mud brick walls representing the foundations of the houses are the only preserved parts of this suburb.²

During the excavations parts of two houses were uncovered. At the first one the walls were coated with plaster colored in white and red; in the debris of this house we also found small parts of plaster with yellow, black and blue colors, indicating floral and geometric decoration on the walls.

¹ For the history of the site see SHAW I./NICHOLSON P., *The British Museum dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press 2002, 308; BAINES, J./MALEK, J., *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 1980, 174; HOLLADAY J.S., Tell el Yahudiyya, in: REDFORD, D.B. (ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, edited by, Oxford 2001, 527f; PETRIE,

W.M.F., *Hyksos and Israelite cities*, London 1906, 1ff; GARDINER, A.H., *Ancient Egyptian onomastica*, Oxford 1947, vol. 2, 146f.

² See GRIFFITH, F.LI., *The antiquities of Tell el-Yahudiyeh*, EEF Mem.7, London 1890, 38, 51.



A



B



C

Fig. 2 A-First stratum in the Greco-Roman suburb showing parts of the houses and the private bath
B-C details of the bath showing the basin and details of the floor

the big houses in the Roman suburb, which were documented in 1887 by Griffith,³ contained a private bath.

The second house is situated to the east of this bath. This house, made of mud bricks, is only partly preserved as well. We uncovered the north-

³ Ibid, 51.

western part of the house, which consists of a large square room, 5 m × 4.90 m in size. In the middle of the room a rectangular hearth measuring 48 cm × 38 cm was discovered; it was lined with mud bricks. The walls of the house stretch further to the south and the east, but they are badly destroyed.

The size of the walls indicates that it was a large, possibly multi-storied house. The northern wall is 110 cm thick and the western wall 70 cm, while the inner walls are 60 cm. It was observed that the walls of the house extend over the rock-cut tombs, indicating a later date for the houses.

II.-2 The second rock-cut cemetery

In 1887 Naville and Griffith discovered the rock-cut cemetery of Tell el-Yahudia about 3 km to the east of the camp, on the edge of the desert.⁴ More of those tombs were discovered by Adam in 1951–1952, mainly in the so-called middle cemetery.⁵

In 1980 another rock-cut cemetery was discovered in the southern part of the small tell. It is about 50 m to the north of the Hyksos camp and the mound of Onias. I identified it as the second rock-cut cemetery to differentiate between this cemetery and the older one at the edge of the desert.

Since the discovery of this cemetery several excavation seasons have been carried out at this site, which led to the discovery of more than 50 tombs.

During this season, more noteworthy rock-cut tombs were discovered here:

Tomb YRC1/2010 (Yahudia rock-cut tomb) (fig. 3A) This is one of the few rock-cut tombs at Tell el-Yahudia that was discovered almost intact. It was entered from the south and three steps led to the entrance, which was found closed with mud bricks. This entrance led to one room in the north.

The tomb was excavated from the top surface because the rock at this part was very fragile. Inside the room many skeletons and parts of human bones were uncovered. They did not follow a specific orientation. A burial inside a pottery coffin was uncovered in the southwestern corner

of the tomb; the coffin was made from the lower part of a big amphora with a length of 90 cm. Animal bones, mainly of sheep, were discovered at different levels in the tomb, representing meat offerings. The discovery of two complete situlae inside the tomb helps to date it to the Saite period.

Tomb YRC2/2010 represents the second type of tombs at the site. It is situated 9 m to the east of the first tomb. It is a vertical shaft cut into the bed-rock; this shaft presumably led to openings for burials on each side. The shaft is 170 cm × 140 cm in size at the top and after 30 cm is reduced to 115 cm × 70 cm. It seems that this edge was used to support a stone slab to close the shaft after the burial. The shaft was excavated up to 2.50 m to the level of the ground water; no openings appeared at this level. Earlier excavations uncovered similar tombs with one or two openings, one on each side.

Tomb YRC3/2010 is located to the southeast of tomb YRC2/2010 (fig. 3 B–C). It is one of the well-preserved tombs in this cemetery. Its entrance is at the north, with five steps leading to the doorway (70 cm high), which opened into a long rectangular hall. Its floor is about 50 cm below the entrance, with a step behind the entrance leading into the hall. The southern wall of this hall contains three loculi. One of them was found closed with a limestone slab. Inside this loculus a skeleton was discovered which was in a very bad state of preservation; no offerings were found with the burial. It seems that this burial was secondary, since we found a heap of human bones and three limestone slabs in front of the doorway, which might have belonged to the three original burials in the tomb before it was robbed.

III. Hyksos and Late Period cemetery (site 2)

One of the major goals of this season was to excavate the Hyksos and Late Period cemetery in the *gezira* at the far northeast of the small tell.⁶ This site is situated at the edge of the cultivation, to the east of the railway line that cuts through the small tell. The excavation revealed 48 tombs, consisting of mud brick tombs, mud brick tombs with colored wooden coffins, burials in the *gezira* sand (“pit

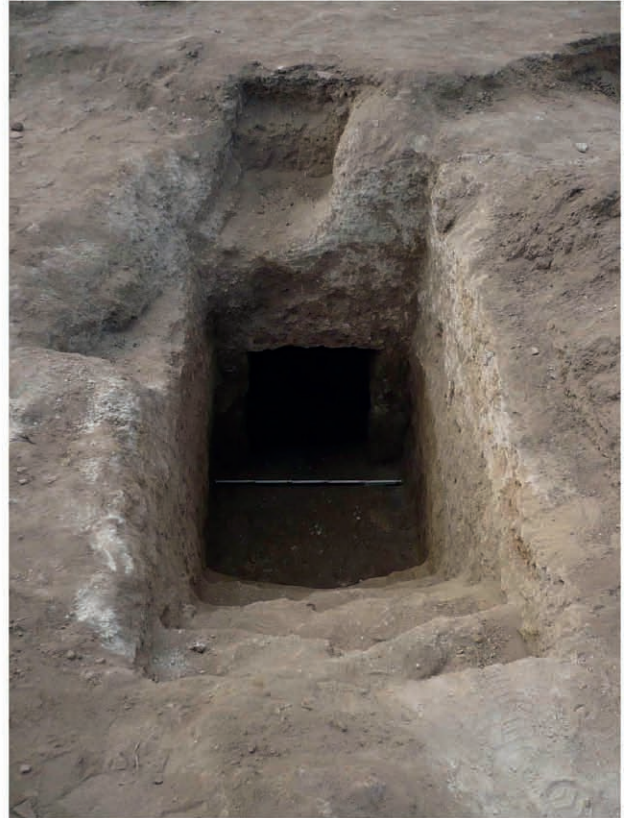
⁴ NAVILLE, É., *The mound of the Jew and the city of Onias*, EEF Mem. 7, London 1890, 13; GRIFFITH, F.LI., *The antiquities of Tell el-Yahudiyeh*, EEF Mem. 7, London 1890, 51–52.

⁵ ADAM, Sh., Recent Discoveries in the Eastern Delta (Dec. 1950–May 1955), *ASAE* 55 (1958), 304–305, 312–313.

⁶ For the earlier excavation at the *gezira* see GRIFFITH, F.LI., *The antiquities of Tell el-Yahudiyeh*, EEF Mem.7, London 1890, 40; PETRIE, W.M.F., *Hyksos and Israelite cities*, London 1906, 10.



A



B



C

Fig. 3 Rock-cut tombs in the second cemetery discovered in 2010
A-Tomb YRC 1/2010 photo looking south
B-Tomb YRC 3/2010 from outside photo looking south
C-Tomb YRC 3/2010 from inside showing three loculi

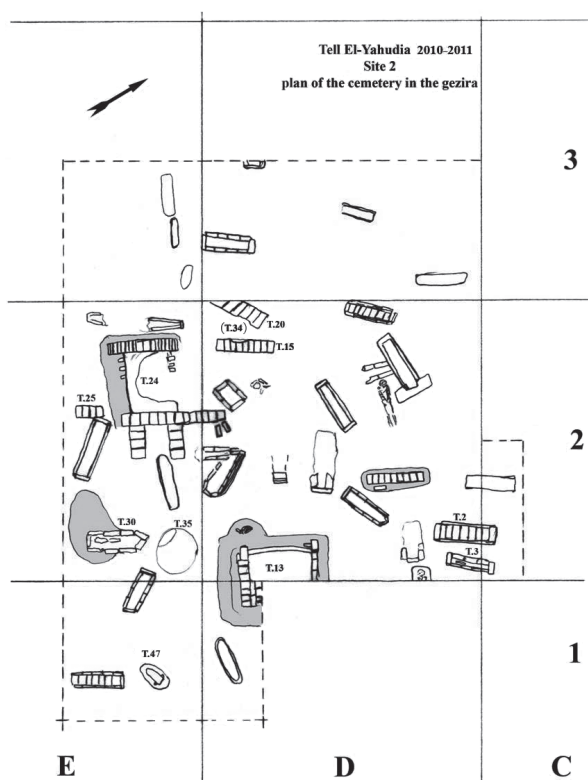


Fig. 4 Plan of the cemetery in the *gezira*

tombs”) and burials in amphorae. They date from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period. There were also donkey burials, which were discovered attached to the Hyksos tombs as well as in separate pits.

The plan of the excavation site introduced here (fig. 4) is the first plan to be published of the cemetery in the *gezira* at Tell el-Yahudia so far. This plan shows a high density of graves in the cemetery and reflects the continuous usage from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period. The most important tombs that were discovered this season are arranged according to their serial numbers.

Tomb YG2/2010, (Yahudia *gezira* tomb), New Kingdom (fig. 5A–D). This is a mud brick tomb with a size of 200 cm × 60 cm. The sides of the tomb are built of bricks laid on edge, while the roof is flat and made of mud brick tiles. It is oriented in a north-south direction, with the head situated in the south. After removing the roof, we discovered that the bricks had protected a wooden anthropoid coffin, which was now completely eroded. We were able to trace the color of the wig and the face of the person; the face is brown-red,

while the wig is colored with alternating stripes of yellow and blue on a white background. Offerings were found outside the tomb on the eastern side and include a plate and a tall jar made of local fabric.

Tomb YG13/2010, Hyksos period (fig. 6). It is near the surface and is therefore badly destroyed by the roots of the nearby tree. It was found robbed and destroyed in ancient times. The tomb is made of mud bricks and is situated in a pit cut into the *gezira* sand. It was only partly excavated, since part of it is lying under the eastern profile of the excavation field. No burial was found inside of this tomb. The tomb has a length of 285 cm, while the pit is 420 cm long. A donkey burial was discovered attached to the tomb on its southwestern side. The skeleton was destroyed in ancient times and only the skull and the neck of the animal are preserved.

Tomb YG15/2010, Middle Kingdom (fig. 7 A–D). This is a mud brick tomb with a length of 177 cm, oriented in a north-south direction. After removing the roof, a white anthropoid coffin with articulated shoulders was exposed, which was 173 cm long, 29 cm wide at the head and 20 cm wide at the feet. The coffin was eroded but we were able to trace the color of the outer surface and the details of the face on the mud. Traces of red, yellow and black were found on the chest. Inside the coffin the 150 cm long body was found lying on its back with the head to the south and the face to the east. The type of the coffin and the relative chronology between this tomb and tombs YG20/2010 and YG34/2010 confirm its dating to the Middle Kingdom.

Tomb YG20/2010 is a mud brick tomb with a flat roof (215 cm × 75 cm, inside length 177 cm × 40 cm, 33 cm deep). It is situated to the northwest of tomb YG15/2010 and is oriented in a northeast-southwest direction. The body was found on its back, with the head in the north. To the east of the head a cylindrical Tell el-Yahudia juglet with combed decoration was discovered, which allows us to date this tomb to the late Hyksos period.⁷

Tomb YG24/2010, Hyksos period (fig. 8 A–B). This is one of the biggest tombs that was discovered this season, 400 cm × 270 cm in size, with a vaulted roof and oriented in an east-west direction. The roof was broken and the tomb was found

⁷ BIETAK, M., Egypt and Canaan During the Middle Bronze Age, *BASOR* 281, (1991) fig. 12; *id.*, *Avaris the capital of the Hyksos*, British Museum Press, 1996, fig. 46.



A



B



C



D

Fig. 5 A-D Tomb YG 2/2010



A



B

Fig. 6 A-B Tomb YG 13/2010 with donkey burial in front of the tomb

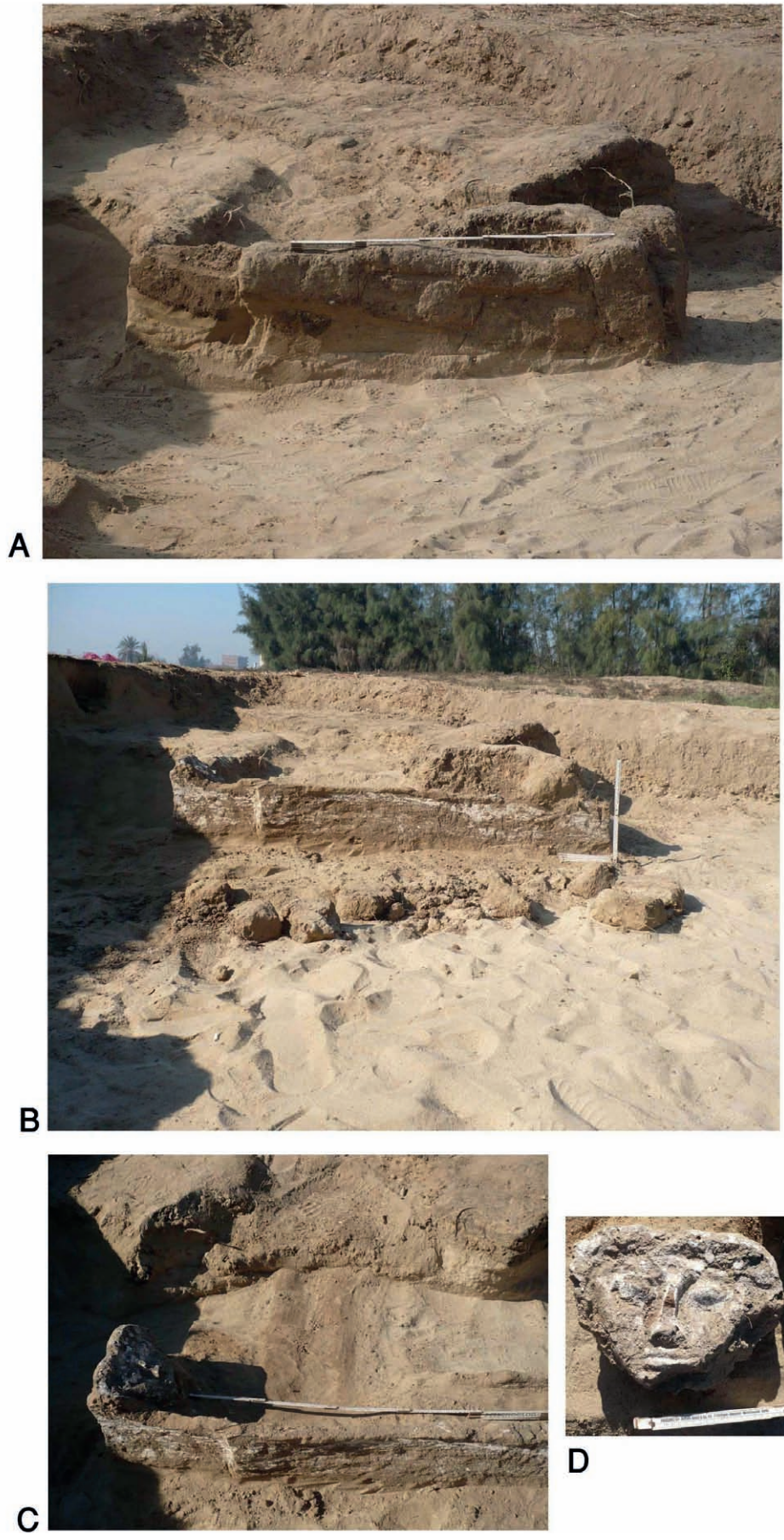


Fig. 7 A-D Tomb YG15/2010 before and after excavation with detail of the sarcophagus



A



B

Fig. 8 TOMB YG24/2010
A-Looking west
B-Looking north



A



B



C



D



E

Fig. 9 A-E Tomb YG 30/2010 with details of the colored coffin

robbed in ancient times. In the debris of the tomb pottery sherds from different periods were discovered. On the outside the tomb was decorated with projecting bricks.⁸ Two rows of bricks to the east of the tomb indicate a shaft.

Tomb YG25/2010 is a small tomb of a child, made of mud bricks (65 cm × 40 cm) and oriented in a south-north direction with the head to the south. Noteworthy here is the fact that the child was buried on its belly with the face facing the ground.

Tomb YG30/2010, Hyksos period (fig. 9 A–E). This is a mud brick tomb (224 cm × 68 cm), built into a 260 cm × 165 cm large pit. After removing the roof, it was found that these bricks protected a colored wooden sarcophagus (195 cm × 51 cm). The sarcophagus is rectangular and outlined with red on all four sides. It is decorated with alternating vertical stripes of red, yellow and blue. Inside the body of an old man was discovered, lying on his back with the head to the south and his hands crossed on the pelvic area. To the south of the tomb two donkey burials were discovered, of which one was young, as well as a disturbed third one to the west of the tomb.

Tomb YG34/2010, Hyksos period. This is a pit tomb cut into the *gezira* sand (185 cm × 75 cm). Inside the burial of a young man (113 cm tall) was discovered. He was lying on his back with the head to the west and the hands on his sides. Next to his knees a faience seal with the representation of a lion attacking an ibex was discovered. (Fig. 12A)

Tomb YG47/2010, Late Period (fig. 10A). This is a burial of a child inside an amphora of torpedo type (length 56 cm, neck diameter 29 cm). No offerings were found with the burial.

IV. Small excavation south of the tell (site 3)

This was the third excavation site in 2010–2011. It is situated about 200 m to the south of the Hyksos and Late Period cemetery excavated this year, at the southern edge of the small tell to the east of the railway line. We had to explore this part of the tell after we were informed by our guards that there was illicit digging at this part. An L-shaped trench was made, 5 m wide × 10 m long from the north to the south. 12 burials were discovered at this site.

They are very poor, and most of them were for children.

The bed rock appeared about 70 cm beneath the surface in the highest part of the site, and it is clear that this part of the *gezira* was not suitable for digging or building brick tombs so it was used by poor people.

Tomb YG2 1/2010. This is the tomb of a child (50 cm × 35 cm), built of four bricks, protecting the burial of a neonate. The bones were very fragile. (Fig. 10 B-C)

Tomb YG2 5/2010. Pit burial (60 cm × 30 cm) of a child oriented in a west-east direction, with the head to the west. Two glass beads were discovered next to the right arm.

Tomb YG2 12/2010. This is a mud brick tomb (176 cm long × 67 cm wide), oriented in a west-east direction. The body (164 cm) was lying on its back in an extended position with the hands on the pelvic area.

V. Small finds

The small finds discovered this year came from the debris, the domestic buildings as well as the tombs. They are made of different materials, including pottery, faience, metal and glass.

The pottery discovered this season (Fig. 11) includes two ring stands of local material, a black Tell el-Yahudia cylindrical juglet with a combed decoration of the late Hyksos period as well as two jars and plates from the New Kingdom which stem from the cemetery in the *gezira*. Two situlae dating to the 26th dynasty and an oil lamp of the early Ptolemaic period, besides many stamped amphora handles, came from the Greco-Roman suburb and the rock-cut tombs. The metal objects included coins of the Ptolemaic period, a modern coin of the Ottoman period, iron nails and a small bronze amulet in the shape of a cobra with sun disk.

A seal of faience with the representation of a lion attacking an ibex, three *wadjet* eyes of faience, two glass beads and a small amulet of a cat also stem from the Hyksos and Late Period cemetery. (Fig. 12)

In summary, the excavation of the SCA at Tell el-Yahudia season 2010–2011 led to the discovery of more rock-cut tombs and parts of houses of the Greco-Roman period in the small tell, and the dis-

⁸ For similar tombs from Tell el-Yahudia and a discussion about the shape see AIMAN ASHMAWY A., Tell el-Yahudia: New information from unpublished excavations, *E&L* 20 (2010), 38.

covery of several tombs and graves in the northern part of the small tell that date from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period. Some of the tombs

had donkey burials attached to them. It also allowed us to draw the first plan of the cemetery at the *gezira*.



A



B



C

Fig. 10 A-Tomb YG 47/2010 burial inside amphora
B-C Tomb YG2 1/2010 before and after excavation

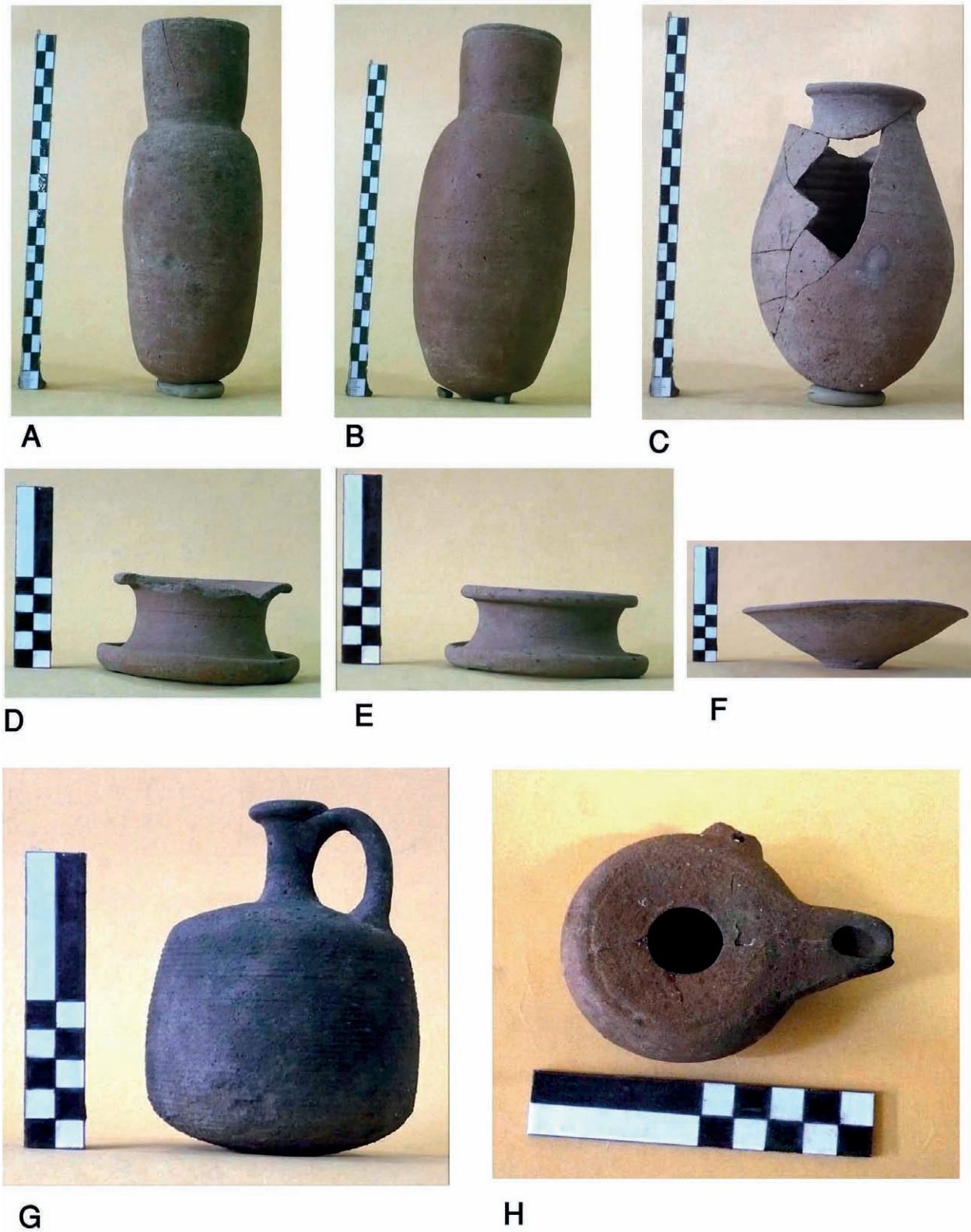


Fig. 11 A-H Pottery discovered during the excavation



A



B



C



D



E



F



G

Fig. 12 Small finds discovered during the excavation