

A NEW SECTOR OF VIA XVII NECROPOLIS IN BRACARA AUGUSTA: THE HIGH EMPIRE PHASE

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ABSTRACT

Between 2008 and 2009 a preventive excavation supervised by the Unit of Archaeology of the University of Minho was conducted in an area with approximately 5000 square meters allowing the identification of a wide sector of the Via XVII necropolis, which is one of the five roman necropolises known to have existed in *Bracara Augusta*. The findings enabled us to define a typological framework related with incinerations, to understand the internal organization of the necropolis and recover the ritual marks of the funerary practices between the first century BC and the second century AD.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper synthetizes the study results of a sector of Via XVII necropolis, one of the five roman necropolises known to have existed in Braga. It was identified between 2008 and 2009 in a preventive excavation conducted in a wide urban area located in the eastern part of the current city of Braga².

The necropolis is known since the 1950s due to the occasional findings of tombs and funerary inscriptions³. In the 1980s two preventive archaeological interventions were conducted, and we identified two discontinuous areas of the same necropolis: one area related with incineration practices dating back to the High Empire period and a second area referring to tombs from the fifth century⁴. However, it were the works conducted between 2008 and 2009 that contributed towards a better understanding of the use of this necropolis enabling us to obtain chronological data related with different typologies of tombs. The present paper will only focus in the High Empire occupation of the necropolis.

CREMATION TOMBS

The several types of cremation tombs identified contributed towards the elaboration of a typological framework regarding the funerary structures under study.

The type one includes three subtypes referring to all structures lacking funerary urns where only a filling of charcoals, ashes and cremated bones was deposited in a trench with funerary offerings. We highlight the type 1C (Fig. 1) that corresponds to a rectangular trench where a wood box with around 0,80x0,30 meters has been deposited. Inside it was placed the cremation remains together with a small ceramic pot, a Loeschcke 1A lamp of italic production (Augustan-Tiberius), adornment objects and three amulets of Egyptian faience⁵. In type 2 we have aggregated all the trench graves with depths between 0,20 and 0,80 meters and with U, V or rectangular sections, where the urn is sealed by a filling of ashes and charcoals resulting from the cremation. Funerary offerings including lamps and *unguentariae* have been identified in all the five subtypes⁶. The third type refers to a single and unusual stone funerary urn similar to some known examples found in the city of Uxama (Fig. 1). The urn with a height of 0,64 meters was placed in a deep trench (1,06 meters). Its content included osteological remains, one glass *unguentaria*

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² Fontes *et al.*, 2009; Fontes *et al.*, 2010; Martins *et al.*, 2009.

³ Tranoy, Le Roux, 1989-90.

⁴ Martins, Delgado, 1989-90.

⁵ Martins *et al.*, 2009: 176; Morais *et al.*, 2013: 316.

⁶ Braga, 2010: 55.

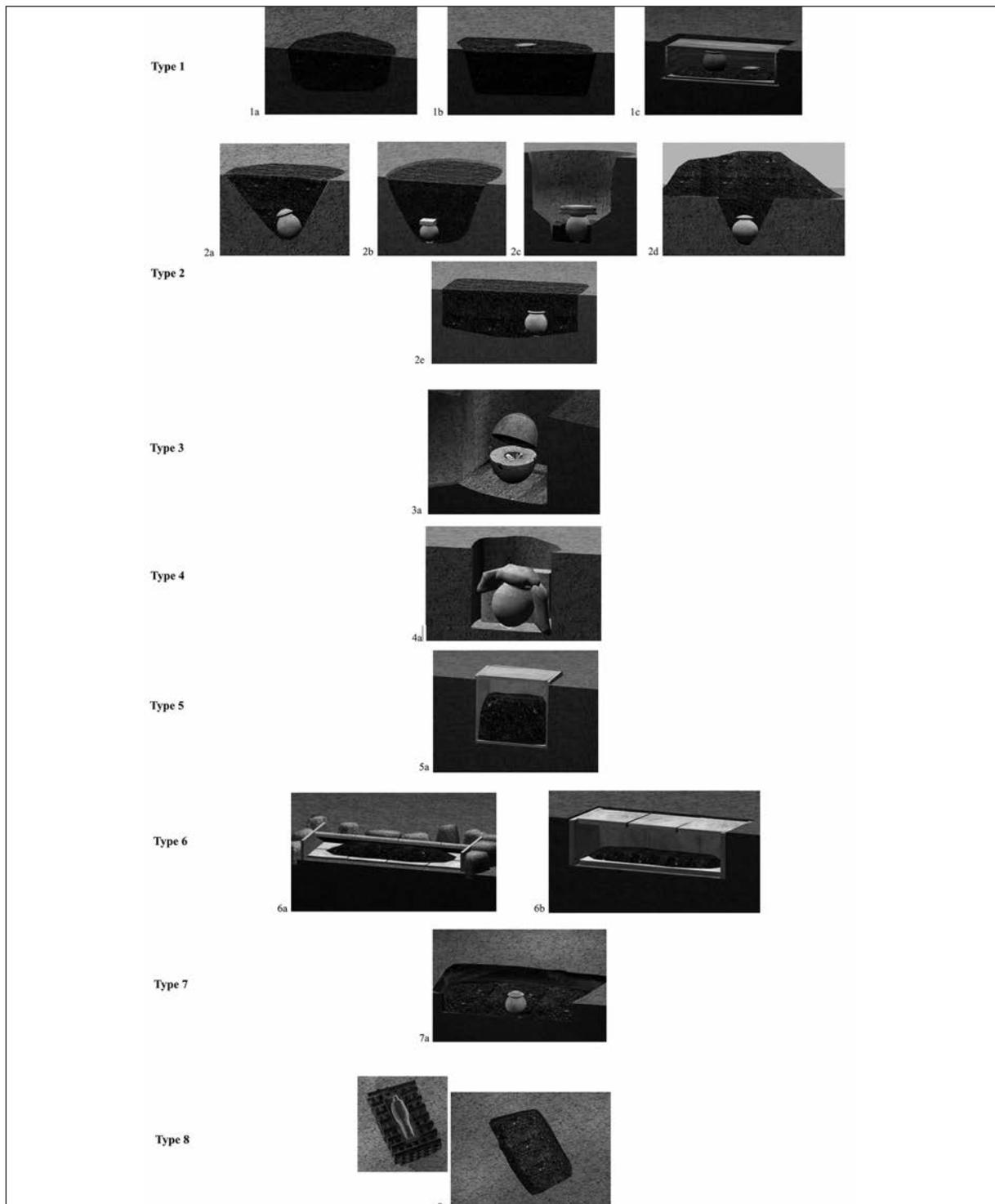


Fig. 1. Typology of the incineration graves (Braga, 2010).

and one coin dated from the last decade of the first century BC⁷. The fourth type is represented by trench tombs with urns, and were surrounded by poorly structured constructions (Fig. 1) made of granitic

splinters already known to the Peninsular context, resembling a “cist type” structure⁸. The fifth type refers to quadrangular tombs, with the walls and basement of bricks, where the cremation remains was

⁷ Braga, 2010: 87; Morais *et al*, 2013: 318-320.

⁸ Braga, 2010: 56.

mixed with the votive offerings. The type 6 includes all the tombs with a rectangular shape built with common construction material with a length ranging between 2,40 and 1,56 meters, filled with ashes and burnt bone fragments. The covering could be done with horizontal bricks or with bricks arranged in a gabled roof. The 7th type is represented by the *busta* (Fig. 1), which refers to structures that were simultaneously cremation and burial sites⁹. The last type is the *ustrinae* referring to the site where the funeral pyre was erected. They were easily acknowledged by the red remains on the soil resulting from the heat. They present diverse morphologies and rectangular sections¹⁰.

OTHER FUNERARY STRUCTURES

Other identified remains account for a funerary stele amortized in the fillings destined to the construction of Via XVII. Others pieces have been found *in situ* and were placed along the Via, functioning either as landmarks indicating the onset of the funerary space, perpetuating the memory of the deceased, or as elements that have allowed to monumentalize the funerary site. We only highlight the stele EE1 denouncing the kinship between different individuals of indigenous origin, acknowledged from the following inscription: CATVRO/ CAMALI/ MEDITIA/ MEDAMI/ MEDAMVS/ CATVRONIS/ CVLAECIEN (sis)/ H(ic).S(iti).S(unt)¹¹.

With regards to *mausolea*, three structures have been identified in this part of the necropolis and they were aligned with the northern part of Via XVII. Due to the fact that these constructions were still destroyed during Roman times, in order to relocate the trajectory of the Via up north, we do not have any evidence related with the original architectonic solutions for their coverage¹².

Funeral enclosures have also been identified showing a great homogeneity in their construction techniques¹³.

A complex structure with a trapezoidal plan was also uncovered. It measures 14 meters wide by 8,5 meters width. Inside, it had 12 rectangular structures covered with *opus signinum*, with widths ranging between 0,90 and 1 meter, lengths between 2 and 2,10 meters and heights between 0,40 and 0,70 meters. We

have not been able to fully understand the overall functionality of the building. However, we admit its funerary function associated with burial practices, ritual or voting functions¹⁴. (Fig. 2)

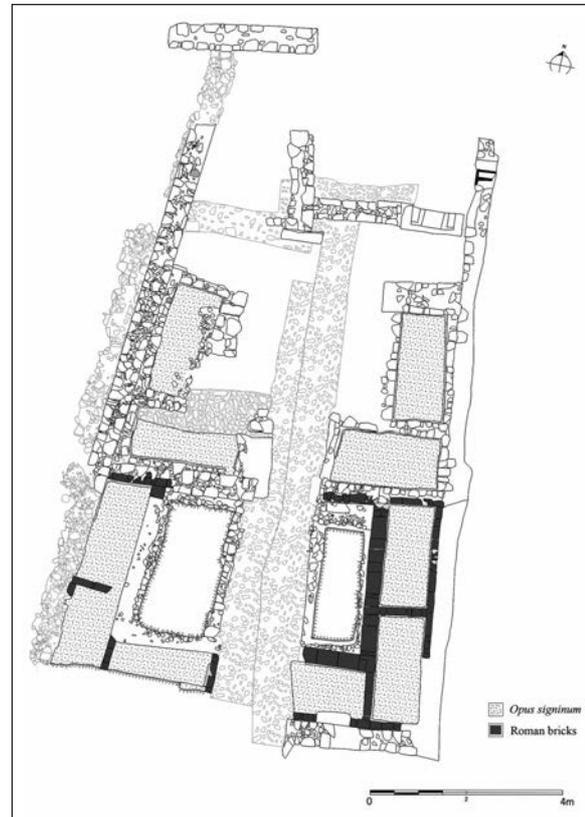


Fig. 2. Trapezoidal funerary enclosure, with the *opus signinum* boxes lined inside (©UAUM).

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

The Via XVII emerged as a defining element of the space organization of the necropolis, with the latter being developed around the boundaries of this particular trajectory. In fact, the cremation tombs, the *mausolea*, the funerary enclosures and the steles were settled along the Roman road and have been relocated as the via fluctuates in its layout. The third phase (last decade of the first century BC and the first decade of the first century AD) signals the beginning of the use for this area of the necropolis. Although the tombs were mostly concentrated in the northern part of the Via XVII they kept a relatively close proximity to the road, with the *ustrinae* being located in a most backward area¹⁵. In first half of the first century AD

⁹ Braga, 2010: 56-57.

¹⁰ Braga, 2010: 58.

¹¹ Braga, 2010: 50.

¹² Braga, 2010: 65.

¹³ Braga, 2010: 66.

¹⁴ Braga, 2010: 67-68.

¹⁵ Braga, 2010: 95.

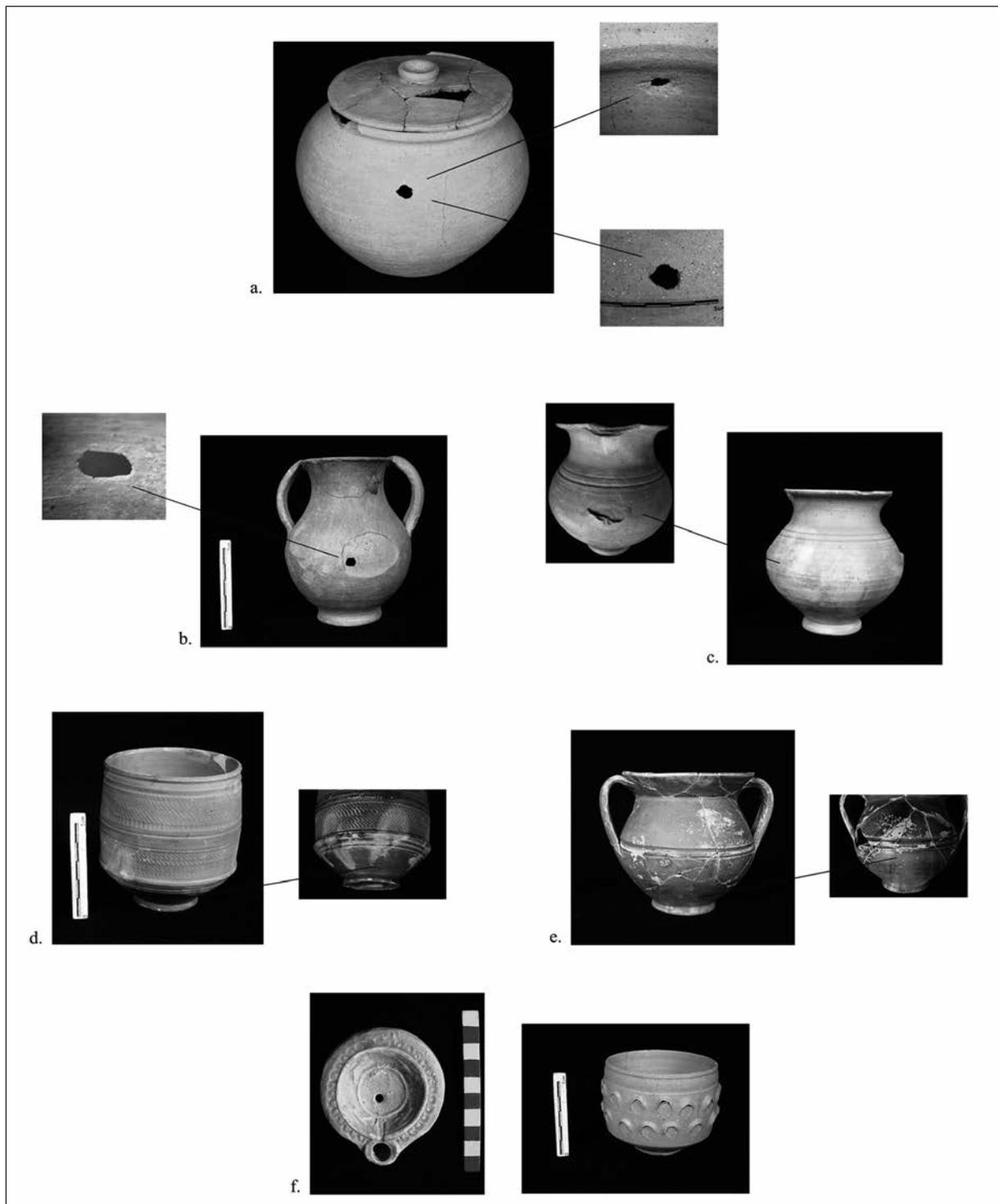


Fig. 3. Ritual marks in the funerary furniture (Braga, 2010).

(Phase IV), the cremation structures keeps concentrated in the northern part of the roman road, and the space appropriation attempts, emerged with funerary buildings appearing around it¹⁶. The fifth

phase (second half of the first century AD) is known for the increase in the number of the tombs. Two new *mausolea* were built alongside annexed funerary enclosures located in the northern part of the roman road. In the southeast area emerged the already referred trapezoidal construction alongside with the

¹⁶ Braga, 2010: 96.

first stele recovered *in situ*¹⁷. Finally, during the second century (Phase VI) a smaller number of new tombs were registered, a new *mausoleum* was built and reconstruction works of precedent buildings occurred¹⁸.

FUNERARY FURNITURE

The cinerary urns had a central place in the cremation ritual. The most common example refers to ceramic pots with S shapes, but small jars or jugs and pieces of Roman common pottery were also used. Exceptional cases are one glass urn and another one in granite sealed with iron clamps.

Some of the recovered items, together with some objects referring to funerary furniture, point out towards a practice based upon the intentional opening of the tombs, which may be intimately related not only with the idea of releasing the spirit of the deceased, but also with libation practices (Fig. 3 a, b). Another indication is the intentional obliteration of one or more parts of the urns suggesting the end of its useful life (Fig. 3 c). The group of studied pieces included several items, such as cups, glasses and jars, some of them used throughout the cremation process, not being part of the grave goods that escorts the dead (Fig. 3 d, e). In contrast, there were items not presenting any type of use marks, cracks or deformations, referring to items placed nearby the deceased in a time after the cremation process (Fig. 3 f).

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¹⁷ Braga, 2010: 97.

¹⁸ Braga, 2010: 99.