

HIJRA LEADEN URN INSCRIPTIONS

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A salvage excavation in a Roman - Byzantine cave tomb at Hijra, *ca.* 10km south-west of ‘Ammān, has brought to light two leaden urns containing cremated human remains. One urn was spherical, similar to two found in 2001 in the Umm as-Summāq al-Janūbī cave tomb 5km away. The second had a gable-house form with ornamentations and two Greek inscriptions engraved on the outer surfaces. The significance of this find is indicated by the facts that: (1) it was a leaden urn, a material seldom used in Roman cremation burials; (2) until the recent 2001 and 2006 discoveries, human cremation burials – regionally documented from the 13th-8th centuries BC and particularly from the Roman 1st century BC to 2nd/ 3rd century AD – had hardly been reported from Jordan (for details on cremation burials and their regional distribution see Abu Shmeis and Nabulsi 2009: 513-514; Timm *et al.* 2011: 175-176); (3) funerary inscriptions are primarily attested on Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine tombstones, and inside or outside burial chambers as *nefesh* or epitaphs, but seldom on ossaria; (4) inscriptions on leaden plates were only known from ‘*defixiones*’ texts, e.g. in Syria (Jordan 2001: 13, 25-27; Hollmann 2011: 158, 163), while leaden ornamented coffins were well documented from this region (e.g. Avi-Yonah 1930).

The Leaden Urn

The urn, registered as Hijra-Urn4, was found at the front of the arched Loculus 7, one of ten *arcosolia* occupied by inhumation burials in the collapsed Hijra cave tomb. It was made from a single lead sheet, *ca.* 2mm thick, folded into the form of a 325x158x200mm gable-house. The front and back sides of the lid were decorated with engraved floral motifs, depicting olive

branches or palm leaves and a pomegranate (**Fig. 1a**). One of the triangular sides had an engraved four-line Greek inscription (Urn4-T1). The ‘box’ part of the urn revealed a second, three-line Greek inscription (Urn4-T2) engraved on the narrow side opposite the first inscription (**Fig. 1**). The urn was filled with fragments of burned human bones that smelled smoky and perfumed, evidently after being embalmed in scented oils, traces of which were found in the urn alongside charcoal and a few plaster fragments. Despite their condition, the bones were evidently from a single male individual with an estimated age at death of 50-60 years.

The Inscriptions

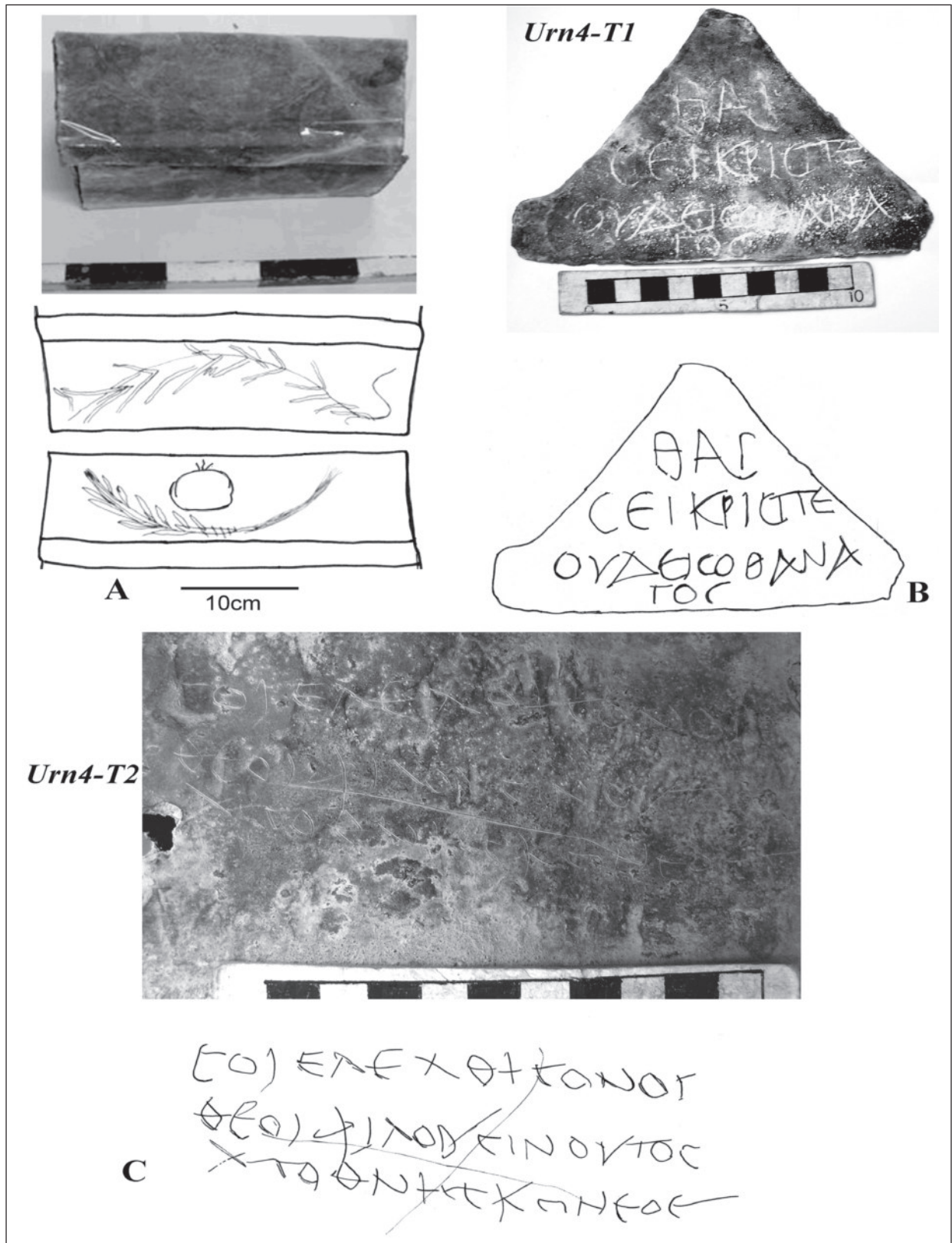
Urn4-T1 Inscription

The text was engraved with a sharp instrument and covered the triangular lid’s side (13.5x15.8cm). The letters of this four-line inscription decrease in size from about 15mm in the first line to less than 8mm in the fourth and lowest line (**Fig. 1b**). The text reads:

ΘΑΡ	Θάρ
CEIKPICIE	σει Κρίσπε
OYΔEICΘΘANA	ούδεις <ἀ>θάνα
TOC	τος

This can be translated as: “*Courage Krispos, nobody is immortal*”.

The formula “Θάρσει... ούδεις ἀθάνατος” is well documented – with some variation – on many tombstones from different burial sites in Jordan, dating to between the 1st and early 4th centuries AD (e.g. Mittmann 1970; Gatier 1986, 1998; Maimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005). Regionally,



1. Hijra-Urn4 and its inscriptions: (a) the urn and lid decoration; (b) Urn4-T1 inscription and (c) Urn4-T2 inscription (note different cm scales).

the cited name Krispos (in the vocative), like the Latin Crispus, is attested in the male as well as the female form Krispina (Mittmann 1970: 166; Strubbe and Bakker 1999: 632, 635).

The Unrn4-T2 Inscription

This three-line text covers most of the 12.3x15.8cm urn's side. It is a longer text than that of Urn4-T1, but with generally smaller engraved letters (6-8mm). Some letters appear to be deformed, *viz.* alpha (α), epsilon (ε), eta (η), theta (θ), iota (ι), lambda (λ), nu (ν) and the greatly variable omicron (ο). These variations are possibly related to the nature of the material upon which the inscription was applied (lead). Two diagonal lines across the inscription are irrelevant later 'scratches' (**Fig. 1c**). The inscription reads:

COIEΛEXΘHONOI	σοὶ ἐλέχθη ὄν οἱ
ΘΕΟΙΦΙΛΟΥCΙΝΟΥΤΟC	θεοὶ φιλοῦσιν, οὗτος
ΑΠΟΘΝΗCΚΕΙΝΕΟC	ἀποθνήσκει νέος

This translates can be translated as: “*To you is said, whom the Gods love dies young*”.

The text is a well-known citation from Menander's (342-292 BC) comedy (Jäkel 1964) that was frequently used in Greek and Roman tombstone inscriptions and dedications (e.g. Latimore 1862: 259-260; Vêrilhac 1982: 225-227). However, the Urn4-T2 text differs from the 'normal' citation in having an added “οὗτος” at the end of the second line, a variation that disturbs the metre but has recently also been found on an urn from Philadelphia in Asia Minor (Petzl 2007: 274-275, nr 1912 Z. 10f). To date, no comparable finds are known from Jordan or the wider Near East, with the exception of Turkey as described above. Compared to similar Menander citations reported elsewhere, the Urn4-T2 inscription is probably no later than the 4th century AD. Dating the text more precisely remains difficult.

Discussion

The style of the inscriptions and ornaments found on H̱ijra-Urn4 appears crude and unprofessional. This becomes evident when it is compared with other inscriptions written on

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leaden surfaces found elsewhere, e.g. Antioch (Hollmann 2011: 156, 163). As argued above, both Greek texts were likely inscribed before the 4th century AD. Although the pottery found in the cave tomb dates to between the 1st and 6th centuries AD (Abu Shmeis and Nabulsi 2009), the urn itself and its contents can only be dated to the time before Roman cremation burials were replaced by inhumations in the late 2nd / early 3rd century AD, perhaps as a result of 'oriental' influence (Toynbee 1971: 50; Morris 1992: 31-34). The form of the engraved letters suggests that the Urn4-T2 inscription was applied with a different instrument to that used to apply the decoration on the urn lid and the Urn4-T1 text, and may have been done by a different person. The inscriptions could have been engraved at the same or a different time.

Taken as a whole, the circumstances of the find suggest that the Urn4-T1 inscription was a funerary dedication to Krispos, whose cremated remains were kept in the urn. The Menander citation on the urn includes the attribute “young”. This appears unsuitable for the 50-60 year old deceased. It might have been contemporary with the first inscription, written by the same or another person – using a different instrument – as a 'literary' lamentation regardless of the age of the deceased. Another possibility is that the citation was subsequently applied to the urn as a dedication to an adjacent inhumation burial in the cave tomb. In view of the immense financial and material resources required to carry out a Roman cremation burial, it seems likely that the urn was a subject for secondary use. Therefore, inscription Urn4-T1 is probably contemporary with the leaden urn itself, very likely within the 2nd century AD. The uncertainty about T2 only allows it to be dated to between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD.

There are indications that H̱ijra cave tomb was used as a place of burial and frequented over a long period of time by a single group, possibly from the nearby site of Khirbat H̱ijra located to the north-west (Abu Shmeis and Nabulsi 2009: 517). This is supported by pottery evidence and the observation that the two examined inhumation burials were embalmed after the soft tissues of the deceased had decayed.

Recent discoveries in the greater 'Ammān area (Abu Shmeis and Nabulsi 2010) indicate

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that Roman cremation burials were more frequent in *Provincia Arabia* than previously thought. This practice reflects a strong Hellenistic cultural influence and / or affiliation amongst more affluent local groups. The case of Hījra-Urn4, particularly with its Menander citation, is a demonstration of these cultural influences amongst a local group residing in the heavily Romanised *Philadelphia* region.

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