

Funerary rite and ritual in the province of Scythia Minor. General characteristics.

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Abstract. *The author makes an analysis of the funerary archeology in the province of Scythia Minor, in terms of the typology of the tombs, the position and orientation of the skeletons and the funerary inventory. In order to extract some general characteristics related to the funeral rite and ritual, was compiled a database that includes 1357 tombs from 19 necropolises.*

Rezumat. *Autoarea face o analiză asupra arheologiei funerare din provincia Scythia Minor din punct de vedere al tipologiei mormintelor, poziției și orientării scheletelor și al inventarului funerar. Pentru extragerea unor caracteristici generale legate de rit și ritual funerar a fost alcătuită o bază de date care cuprinde 1357 de morminte provenite din 19 necropole.*

Keywords: *funerary archaeology, tombs, funerary rites, Scythia Minor.*

Introduction

The province of Scythia covers an area of approx. 20,000 km.p, corresponding, for the most part, to the Romanian province of Dobrogea and the Dobrich region of Bulgaria. The boundaries of the province were: to the west and north, the Danube river; to the east, the Black Sea; to the south: the province of Moesia Secunda.

For the period of the 1st century BC-I century AC, the main burial rite among the population of the province of Lower Moesia (future Scythia Minor) was cremation. It first appeared in the cities on the west-Pontic coast and then spread within the province. With the spread of Eastern cults or Christianity there is a change in the funeral rite, the cremation being replaced by inhumation, practiced almost in general in the IV-VII centuries².

Objections against cremation are found in the writings of ancient authors, even before the advent of Christianity. Although the funeral rite of the Greeks was cremation, Herodotus says that according to Eastern beliefs, fire must not be contaminated by corpses, as this is a sacred element³. When he was on his deathbed, Cyrus said to his descendants, "*The body must*

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² CHERA-MĂRGINEANU, LUNGU, 1982, 175-199.

³ HERODOT, III, 6

be returned to the ground as soon as possible, for there is no greater joy than to become one with the ground that bears so much fruit⁴."

An important role in the adoption of inhumation is due to the oriental cults that generalized in the province of Scythia, primarily through very close trade relations with the Near-East but also with the help of auxiliary troops and legions of Rome.

The urban necropolises of Tomis, Callatis, Histria, Tropaeum Traiani or Beroe have a topographical continuity in terms of space dedicated to the dead. Thus, Christian cemeteries developed in the extension of the pagan ones, a phenomenon that led to the perpetuation of some typologies of tombs and funeral rituals in the Christian period, due to the preservation by the first Christians of some practices with pagan roots. For example, clay or glass vessels, coins or ornaments are still deposited as offerings, practice which is gradually disappearing. This custom that can be seen in the case of graves with multiple burials in which the objects appear at the first buried dead, the habit disappearing from the inventory of the latter.

The relation between pagans and Christians is also suggested by the similarity of the objects deposited as part of the funeral ritual. The difference between the graves of Christians and those of pagans can only be noticed in the orientation of the deceased, so the religious attribution for the early period of Christianity is very difficult to achieve, except for those in which clear elements of Christianity appear.

As for the burials, they had to be carried out *extra muros*, a rule stipulated in the Law of the 12 tablets⁵ and reconfirmed by the Senate in 260 BC during the consulship of Duilius⁶. An exception to this law was the deposition of Trajan's urn at the base of the column⁷. Hadrian faces a fine of 40 *aurei* for those who does not respect the law, confiscation of the place where the tomb was located and transfer of the remains *extra urbem*⁸

It is believed that the tombs inside the walls created the risk of fires and poor hygiene. In the case of rural residents, it was forbidden to bury someone at a distance of at most about 20 meters from a building⁹. The last law in which this provision on burial appears is that of Justinian¹⁰. There are some exceptions to this rule, such as the graves of children who enjoyed special treatment.

Until the clasification drawn up by Andrei Soficaru¹¹, there was no unitary typology of the tombs from the province of Scythia Minor, except of those from Tomis, Callatis and Beroe.

⁴ XENOFON, *Cyrus*, VIII, 7, 25.

⁵ CICERO, *De Leg.*, II, 58.

⁶ CUMONT, 1949, 82.

⁷ BODEL, 2014, 177-195.

⁸ DAGRON, 1977, 1-26.

⁹ CICERO, *De Leg.*, II, 61.

¹⁰ DAGRON, 1977, 1-26.

¹¹ SOFICARU, 2007, 297-312.

For 500 tombs excavated between 1959-1964 in Tomis, Vasile Barbu¹² made a first typology of Roman and Roman-Byzantine tombs. The types of tombs for the 4th-6th centuries are as follows: a.) Simple tomb without coffin; b.) Simple tomb in wooden coffin; c.) Tiled tomb; d.) Niche tomb; e.) Brick tomb; f.) Tomb with a single room built of limestone slab; g.) Tomb with two rooms built of limestone slab; h.) Carved tomb from a limestone block; i.) Sarcophagus; j.) Brick tomb with sarcophagus lid; k.) Single-chambered tomb; l.) Single-chambered tomb with vestibule; m.) Two-chambered tomb and vestibule; n.) Arcosolium. As it can be seen, there were 14 types of graves and this generated a very hard classification to work with.

For Beroe, based on the 1139 tombs dated in the sec. II-XII, Aurelian Petre¹³ establishes four types of tombs, each with several subvariants: a.) Tomb in a simple pit; b.) Tomb with tiles; c.) Tomb with stones; d.) Tomb with wooden planks or coffin.

The 367 tombs discovered at Callatis between 1963 and 1975 were grouped by Constantin Preda¹⁴ into seven types. Subsequently, the research which was done in 2000 by Mihai Ionescu, Nicolae Alexandru and Robert Constantin led to the formulation of a typology with 12 types of graves, which does not differ much from the one established in 1980. These are: a.) Stone cist tomb built of blocks of limestone, uncoated; b.) Stone cist tomb made of limestone blocks plastered with mortar; c.) Stone cist tomb made of small limestone blocks; d.) Hypogeum tomb; e.) Simple pit tomb covered with limestone slabs; f.) Tomb in a single pit with limestone blocks on one side; g.) Tomb in *tegulae*; h.) Tomb in the pit, covered with *tegulae* placed two-ridged; i.) Tomb in a simple pit with *tegulae* placed horizontally; j.) Tomb in simple pit; k.) Tomb covered with *tegulae* and slabs of limestone; l.) Tomb surrounded by limestone blocks¹⁵.

Methods

In order to carry out this analytical approach, I used the archaeological reports of funeral discoveries from the Chronicle of Archaeological Research in Romania, specialized studies on necropolises found in Dobrogea, some of the special studies in the field of funerary archeology published abroad, the multitude of articles published in specialized magazines and the results of the archaeological excavations in which I participated.

For the general characteristics of the tombs in the province of Scythia Minor, we analyzed a batch of 1357 tombs distributed in 19 necropolises, as follows: Callatis-580 tombs, Tomis-269 tombs, Beroe-169 tombs, Ibida-153 tombs, Noviodunum- 40 tombs, Histria-35 tombs, Dinogetia-29 tombs, Bizone-21 tombs, Aegyssus-15 tombs, Argamum-10 tombs,

¹² BARBU, 1971, 47-68.

¹³ PETRE, 1987, 5-171.

¹⁴ PREDA, 1980, 32-46.

¹⁵ IONESCU, NICOLAE, RADU, 2002-2003, 225-277.

Nufăru- 8 tombs, Capidava- 7 tombs, Ulmetum- 5 tombs, Carsium- 5 tombs, Enisala- 4 tombs, Halmyris- 3 tombs, Şipote- 2 tombs, Tropaeum Traiani-1 tomb, Pietreni- 1 tomb (Figure 1).

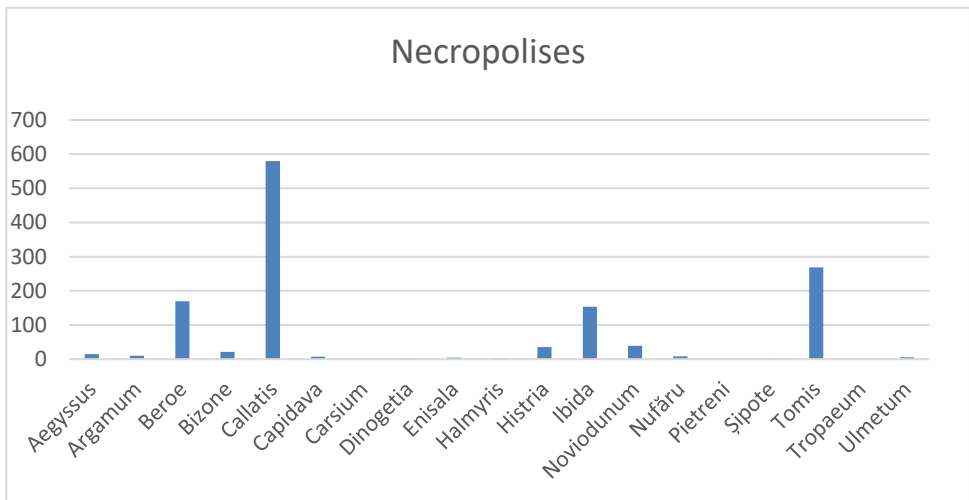


Figure 1. The distribution of the tombs in the necropolises

Results and discussion

Regarding the typology of the tombs, we followed the five types proposed by Andrei Soficaru¹⁶, each with related subtypes. Therefore, the general distribution of the graves, by typologies, was done as follows (Figure 2):

	<i>Simple pit</i>	<i>External arrangements</i>	<i>Internal arrangements</i>	<i>Cists</i>	<i>Family tombs</i>
Total	560	262	242	256	33
Coffin	100	16	9	10	5
Amphora	4				

Figure 2. The number of graves distributed by typologies

¹⁶ SOFICARU, 2007, 297-312.

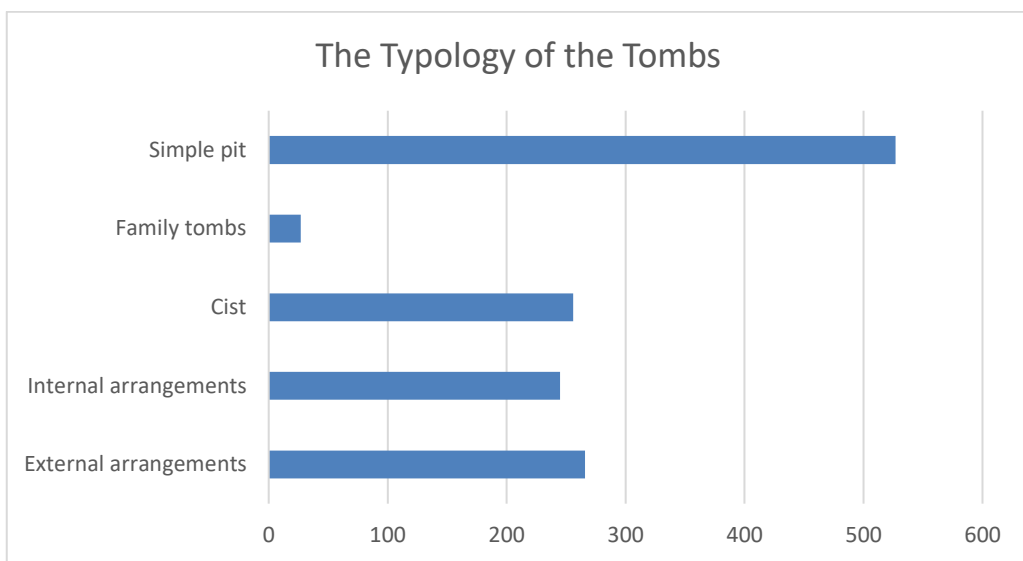


Figure 3. General typology of the tombs.

1. Burial tombs in a simple pit

This category is frequently found in the necropolises of the province, being practiced in Lower Moesia since the beginning of the 1st century AD and throughout the province of Scythia (4th-6th centuries).

In the database we have compiled, this type of funeral complex is found in the case of 560 graves distributed as follows (Figure 4):

<i>Simple pit</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Cof fin</i>	<i>Amphora</i>
Beroe	156	44	
Callatis	127	3	1
Noviodunu m	35	6	
Tomis	58	6	
Ibida	93	30	1
Aegyssuss	15	5	
Dinogetia	29	1	
Histria	20	5	2
Nufăru	8		

Capidava	6		
Argamum	5		
Enisala	3		
Ulmetum	2		
Bizone	2	1	
Șipote	1		

Figure 4. The distribution in the necropolises of the tombs in a simple pit.

Amphora burials were performed exclusively for the burial of deceased children. Because the bones were fragile and could break down very quickly, the skeletons were never found intact.

This practice of burial in ceramic vessels is also found in the Greek period on the northern and western shores of the Black Sea but also in various Roman or Romanized populations of the Roman Empire, such as those from Africa or Dalmatia¹⁷.

In most cases, the shape of the pit is rectangular with rounded corners and the dimensions vary between 1-2.55 m long and 0.50-1.70 m wide.

The most common orientation is W-E followed by E-W, S-N and N-S.

Regarding the position in which the deceased were laid, in addition to the supine position, which is found in most cases, skeletons were also found placed on one side: M. 9 / Str. Church 98 from Nufăru¹⁸, M. 4, M. 23, M. 36 from Noviodunum¹⁹ and M. 16/1959 mound XVI from Histria²⁰, in a crouched position: M. 23 from Ibida²¹ and ventral decubitus: M. 2 / tumulus 8 from Capidava²² and M. 7 / Str. Church 98 from Nufăru²³.

2. Simple pit with external arrangements

This typology includes tombs whose pits have been marked with bricks, tiles, stones, terracotta or ceramic remains, deposited on the sides or at the ends of the pit.

In this group of graves, we have encountered the following situations: 98 graves signaled by one or more stones, 99 graves signaled by one or more tiles, 56 graves signaled by one or more limestone slabs, four tombs marked with one or more bricks, four tombs with fragments of *dolium*, and a tomb marked with a terracotta slab.

¹⁷ SONOC, 2006, 73-113.

¹⁸ DAMIAN et. al. 2007-2008, 305-392.

¹⁹ STĂNICĂ et. al. 2010, 203-222.

²⁰ CONDURACHI, 1957, 9-102.

²¹ IACOB, et. al. 2003, 178.

²² FLORESCU et. al. 1960, 571-581.

²³ DAMIAN et. al. 2007-2008, 305-392.

<i>External arrangements</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coffin</i>
Argamum	4	
Callatis	167	2
Ibida	47	23
Tomis	25	
Histria	16	
Beroe	1	
Enisala	1	
Capidava	1	

Figure 5. The distribution in the necropolises of the tombs with external arrangements.

In terms of skeletal orientation, the most common is W-E, followed by E-W, N-S, S-N.

With the exception of M. 2/2005 from Enisala²⁴, in which the deceased was placed in a crouched position on the right side, in the rest of the graves, where the orientation of the deceased was specified, they were in a supine position.

3. Simple pit with internal arrangements

The interior arrangements include tiles, stones, bricks or ceramic fragments on which the deceased was placed or which were deposited on one of the inner sides of the pit. This type also includes niche tombs, most of which have a funerary chamber blocked at the entrance with tegulae, stone blocks or limestone.

²⁴ STĂNICĂ et. al. 2005-2006, 317 – 330.

<i>Internal arrangements</i>	<i>T otal</i>	<i>Coffin</i>
Tomis	189	38
Callatis	15	1
Beroe	8	1
Histria	13	1
Ulmetum	2	
Ibida	10	3
Şipote	1	
Noviodunum	3	1
Bizone		1

Figure 6. The distribution in the necropolises of the tombs with internal arrangements.

According to Vasile Barbu²⁵, the niche tombs appeared within the evolution of the tombs into a simple pit, the pit originally dug being transformed into an access room to which is added, at one end or on one side, a niche in which the coffin was inserted. The entrance was usually blocked by stone slabs, tegulae, or large bricks. This typology is dated to the 4th-5th centuries.

One of the theories about the origin of this typology is that it has its roots in the eastern area. Due to the sandy soil in the East, it was possible to practice this type of burial, which also led to the appearance of several underground rooms. Most tombs of this type are found in the Tomitan necropolis, where there is also the type of tomb with two niches, arranged on either side of the access room²⁶.

Of the group of graves analyzed, most of them have a niche: 159 graves, 32 graves in which one or more tegulae were discovered on the sides of the pit, 12 graves in which the deceased was placed on one or more tegulae, six tombs with limestone slabs, eight tombs with stones on one side of the pit, five catacomb-type tombs, three tombs with a niche made

²⁵ BARBU, 1977, 203-214.

²⁶ BARBU, 1977, 203-214.

of *tegulae*, two with terracotta fragments on the sides of the pit, two tombs with a bed of stones discovered under the skeleton and a tomb with *tegulae* deposited over the skeleton, with a bed of bricks discovered under the skeleton, and with a skeleton on fragments of *dolium*.

Regarding the orientation of the deceased, most are W-E followed by S-N, N-S, E-W.

With the exception of M. 40 from Noviodunum²⁷, which was placed in a crouched position, the rest of the skeletons were found in a supine position.

4. Cist tombs

The cist was made of blocks of stone or bricks, with a roof made of limestone slabs. In the most common cases they were two on each side, less often three or four, and one at each end. This type of tomb is most common in the necropolis of Callatis, the reason being the proximity to the stone quarries on the shores of Lake Limanu, most of the limestone coming from its steep walls. At Tomis, this type of tombs has been known since the 2nd century, while in Callatis it has been found since the Hellenistic period until the 4th-5th centuries²⁸.

<i>Cist</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coffin</i>
Callatis	237	6
Ibida		2
Argamu m	1	
Pietreni		1
Histria		1
Bizone	18	

Figure 7. The distribution in the necropolises of the cist tombs.

Regarding the orientation of the deceased, most of them were oriented W-E, 32 E-W and 2 N-S.

Apart from M. 98 from Callatis²⁹, which was discovered in a crouched position, the rest of the skeletons were laid down in supine position.

²⁷ STĂNICĂ et. al. 2010, 203-222.

²⁸ BARBU, 1977, 203-214.

²⁹ PREDA, 1980, 88.

Compared to the graves included in the other typologies, after those in the simple pit, cists have a large number of funerary inventory. Out of a total of 260 graves, in 119 inventory items were discovered.

5. Family tombs

Hypogeum tombs fall into this typology. These could consist of a *dromos* and burial chambers built of limestone or brick, or they could be cross-excavated constructions with four burial chambers each. Since they were used for the burial of several generations, the number of skeletons discovered in them ranges between 5 and 40. Also in this typology are included two crypts with martyrs³⁰.

<i>Family tombs</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coffin</i>
Callatis	15	3
Tomis	7	3
Noviodunum	1	
Ulmetum	1	
Halmyris	1	
Ibida		1
Tropaeum Traiani		1
Carsium		5
Niculițel		1

Figure 8. The distribution in the necropolises of the family tombs.

Regarding the funeral inventory, out of the total of 33 graves of this type, in half of them were found objects of inventory. The cause of their small number is the looting of tombs since antiquity.

Conclusions

During the IV-VI centuries there is a diversity among the types of tombs. The rite is only the rite of inhumation, which replaced the cremation since the third century AD.

Both Christian and pagan burials are practiced in the Province of Scythia, observing a topographical continuity of the Christian tombs that developed in the extension of the pagan necropolises.

³⁰ SOFICARU, 297 – 312.

From the end of the 3-rd century AD, migrating populations began to reach in the territory of what would become the province of Scythia, their graves being often discovered among those of the natives. One of the evidences that of the migratories is the practice of artificial deformation of the skull, the first to bring with them this practice being the Sarmatians, then the related population of the Alans but also the Huns. This practice had the role of delimiting social territories by marking ethnicity. Among the graves in which skeletons with deformed skulls were discovered are M. 4/2000 (S13 section 3)³¹ and M. 46 SVI / 2004³² from Callatis, M. 80³³ and M. 60³⁴ from Ibida, B. 16, D 4, A. 80 from Beroe³⁵ and M. 1 / 1949-1952 from Histria³⁶.

Although single-skeletal graves predominate, there are also many multi-skeletal burials with up to 40 skeletons, most of which were found in cysts or in hypogeous-type graves where several family members were buried over time.

The cenotaph graves were divided into typologies according to their arrangement. These can be related to the period of the end of the 4th century when the migration of the Visigoths took place in the Empire. These graves are believed to belong to those who died in a battle that took place outside the province³⁷.

Out of the total number of graves, 12 of them were considered as cenotaph graves: M. 32/2009 from the Tomitan necropolis³⁸, M. 7/2000 (S3 section 1) and M. 7/2000 (S9 section 3) from Callatis³⁹, M 34 and M. 35 from Noviodunum⁴⁰, M. 4 from Ulmetum⁴¹ and M. 10/2009 from Histria⁴².

The most common orientation is W-E: 676 tombs, which leads us to assume that Christian graves predominate, at least, beginning with the end of the 4-th century; followed by: E-W: 283 tombs; N-S: 18 tombs; S-N: eight tombs (Figure 9). For many of the graves the orientation was not specified or could not be determined due to the poor condition of the skeleton.

³¹ IONESCU, NICOLAE, RADU, 2002-2003, 225-277.

³² UNGUREANU, RADU, 2006, 259-278.

³³ IACOB et. al. 2005, 154.

³⁴ Informații inedite.

³⁵ MIRIȚOIU, 2011, 539 – 574.

³⁶ CONDURACHI et. al. 1954, 186-187.

³⁷ LUNGU, CHERA-MĂRGINEANU, 1982, 175-199.

³⁸ BĂJENARU et. al. 2006, 65.

³⁹ IONESCU et. al. , 2002-2003, 225-277.

⁴⁰ STĂNICĂ et. al. 2010, 203-222.

⁴¹ BOBE, TĂNASE et. al., 2005, 251.

⁴² ACHIM, ANGELESCU, et. al, 2010, 28.

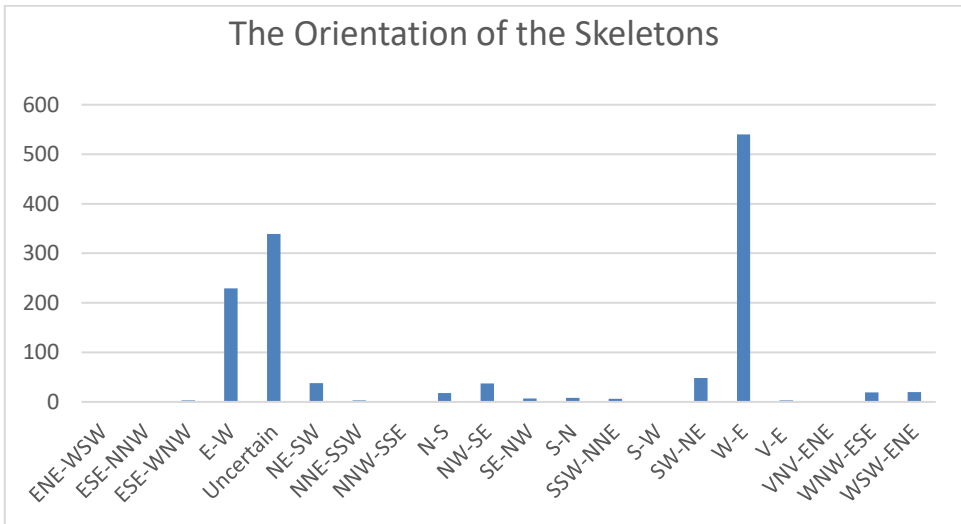


Figure 9. The orientation of the skeletons.

Most graves with funerary inventory fall into the typology of those with a simple pit: 237; followed by cists: 122; tombs with external arrangements: 63; those with internal arrangements: 89 and family ones: 14 (Figure 10).

The acceptance of the Christian religion throughout the Empire had a strong impact on this aspect of the funeral ritual as well, imposing austerity on funeral inventory items. Thus, if clothing accessories or ornaments are still present in some graves, offerings are becoming increasingly rare to the end of the period.

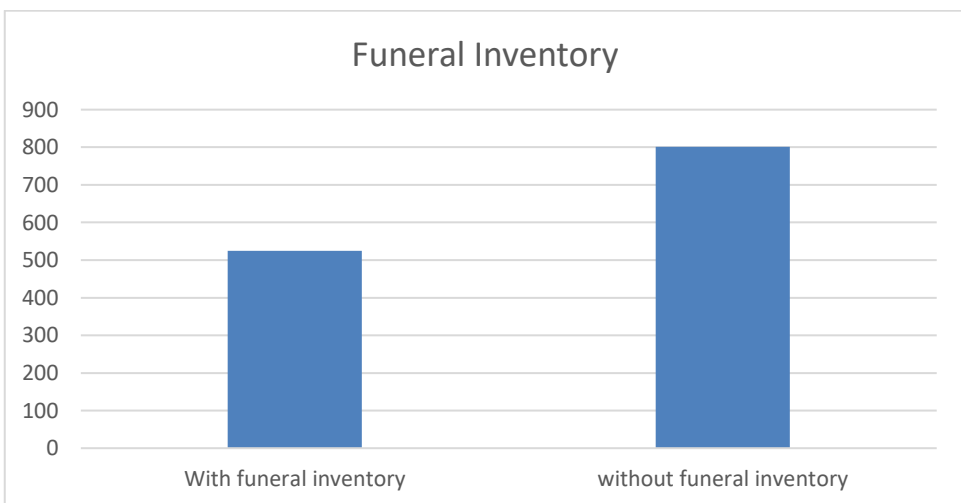


Figure 10. Funeral inventory of the tombs.

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