

New Hypogeal Tomb with a “Phoenician” anthropoid sarcophagi on Tartus, Syrian Coast.

Una nueva tumba hypogeo con sarcófago antroipoide “Fenicio” en Tartus, en la costa de Syria.

BASHAR MUSTAFA.

Universidad de Granada

Email: bbmusta@hotmail.es

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Abstract:

In this paper, we report on a new tomb which was discovered on the coast of Syria, including the objects found within, such as, the sarcophagus and the entire funerary ensemble. The analysis of the construction system, primarily through drawings made in situ by the excavation team is considered one of most effective approaches to understand the techniques involved in this hypogeal tomb found on the Phoenician coast of Syria. A series of chronological data are provided concerning the stylistic features of the tomb, with special mention of past looting. The study concludes with an overall assessment of the tomb and its contents.

Keywords: Syrian, Phoenician, Persian, hypogeal tomb, anthropomorphic sarcophagi.

Regarding Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagi in the eastern Mediterranean region, Syria and Lebanon, studies (which began a century and a half ago) have not provided satisfactory results until today. Unfortunately, eastern Phoenician necropolises have been subjected to constant and methodical clandestine pillaging and many have been destroyed by public works. Furthermore, excavations by archaeologists have often pursued only the accumulation of rich grave goods to raise funds for Western museums, typical of colonial antiquarian activity, in many cases without properly publishing the procedures of their excavations, many digs being conducted with minimal or questionable archaeological methodology.

The archaeological activity in the Middle East shows that, *Saida* (Phoenician Sidon) and

the territory of Arados (Syria) are the prime centers of anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagi. However, the dating and reconstruction of the processes of the development, edification, or dedication of these tombs remains difficult, and thus are considered the main problems related to these graves.

The context of many sarcophagi remains unknown, although the vast majorities appear within a necropolis, so that in some cases it is known that the findings were from tombs with one or several sarcophagi, although some findings are from isolated tombs.

Along the eastern Mediterranean coast, distant sarcophagi started to appear in different centers, but in numbers far below those of the two centers listed above. The new anthropomorphic sarcophagi

gi discovered on the coast of Syria (Haykal 1996: 3; Elayi y Haykal, 1996: 2), allow us to examine and assess these elaborate pieces, assessing stylistic as well as chronological aspects, including the socio-cultural context, which has been much less discussed in other studies and which have treated the anthropomorphic sarcophagi from a stylistic and artistic standpoint, seeking chronological attributions, as in the present study (Buhl, 1987: 7; Frede, 2000: 4; Lembke, 2001: 3).

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

During the construction of the public University, *Tishrin*, in the city of Tartus (Syria) (fig. 1), a *Dromos* type tomb was found. The area in which it was found is called *Gamka Marina*, and it is located 2 Km from the coast, about 500m north of *Al-Bassel Hospital*. The site of Amrit is situated 4 km away from the finding place (fig. 2).

The tomb appeared on September 14, 2009, through the construction work to pave a natural elevation of the land to build the structure of the campus; the entrance is over 6 feet deep, and east

facing, in a huge plain chamber where the sarcophagus was found. The cover of the coffin was semi displaced, as a consequence of looting, and contained the remains of the grave goods and skeletal remains, three alabaster vases, although ostensibly scrambled, and two sheets of gold.

In the area surrounding the hypogeal tomb, two graves were found, dating to the Roman period. Both are simple open pits in the ground, without any structures, which were a short distance from the burial chamber (fig. 3).

The news of the discovery was announced to the scientific community by the Directorate of Antiquities in Tartus, which subsequently assembled a team of specialists responsible for the excavation, contextualization, and documentation of the monument and its archaeological context, as well as the removal of the sarcophagus and its contents. The team organized the delivery of the sarcophagus and its contents to the Museum of Tartus (Syria). For this, the archeological team had to carefully move the chamber cover by removing one by one the stones that formed the dome covering the structure of the mausoleum.

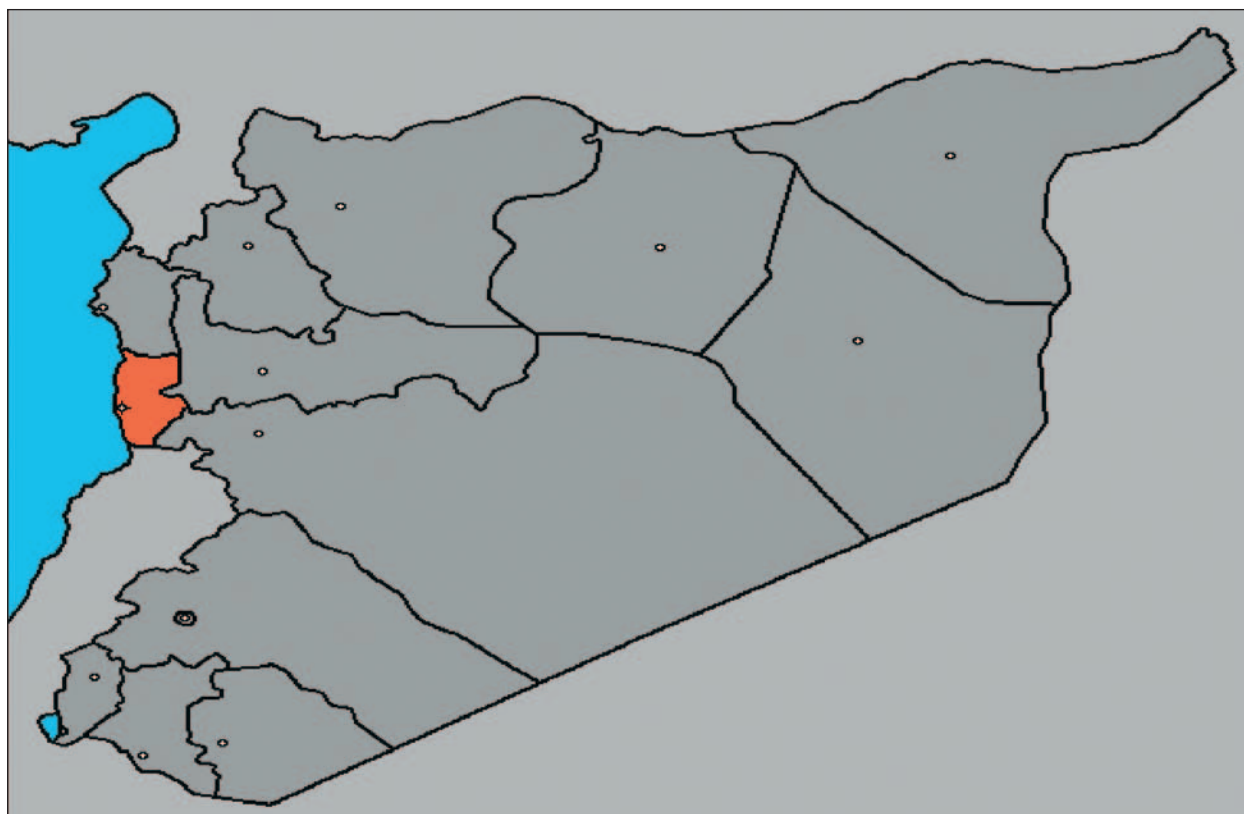


Figure 1. The situation of Tartus (Syria)

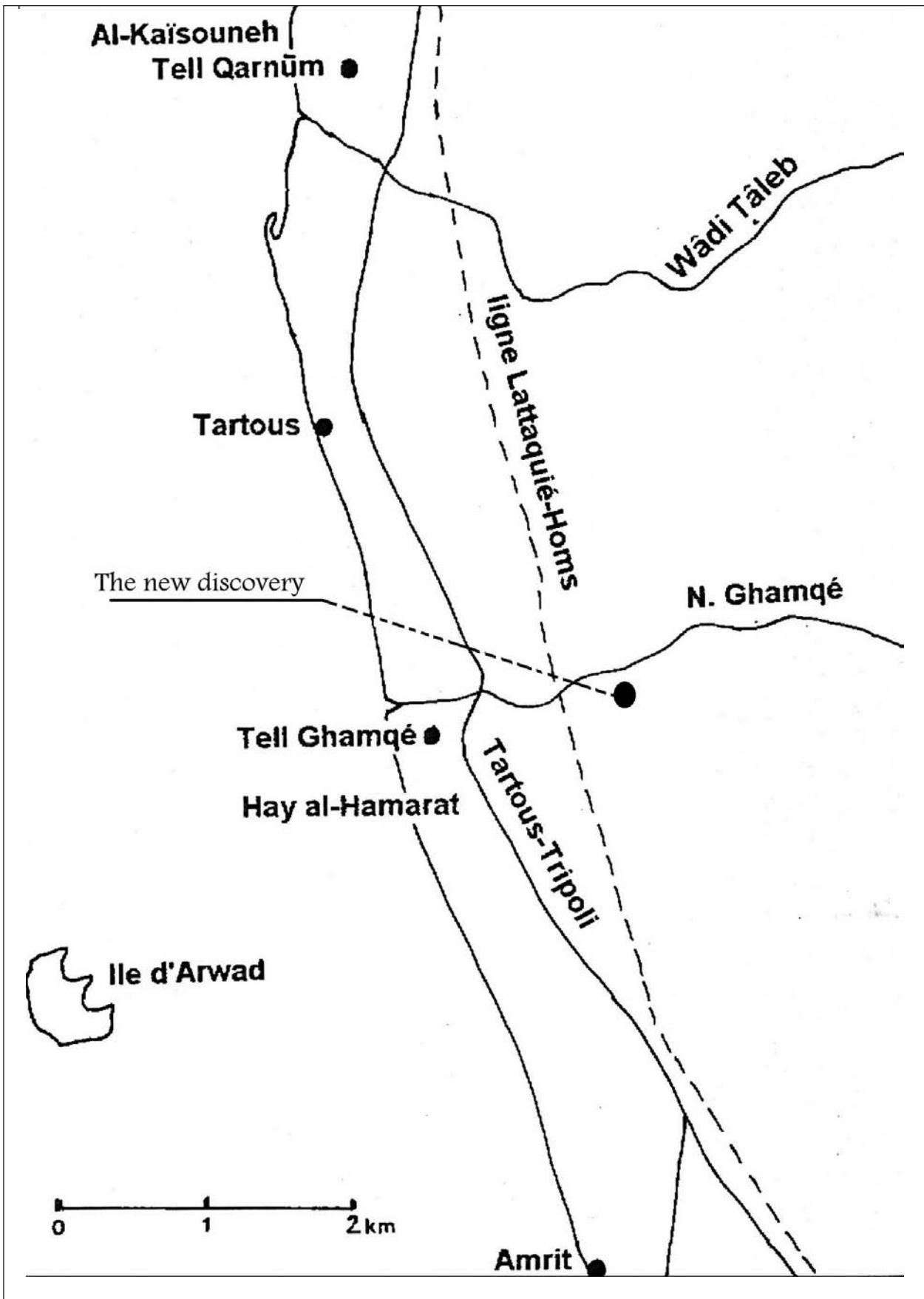


Figure 2. The region of Amrit and the situation of the new discovery.
(J. Elayi et M.R. Haykal, 1996: Fig. 2. P. 147.) Author preparation.

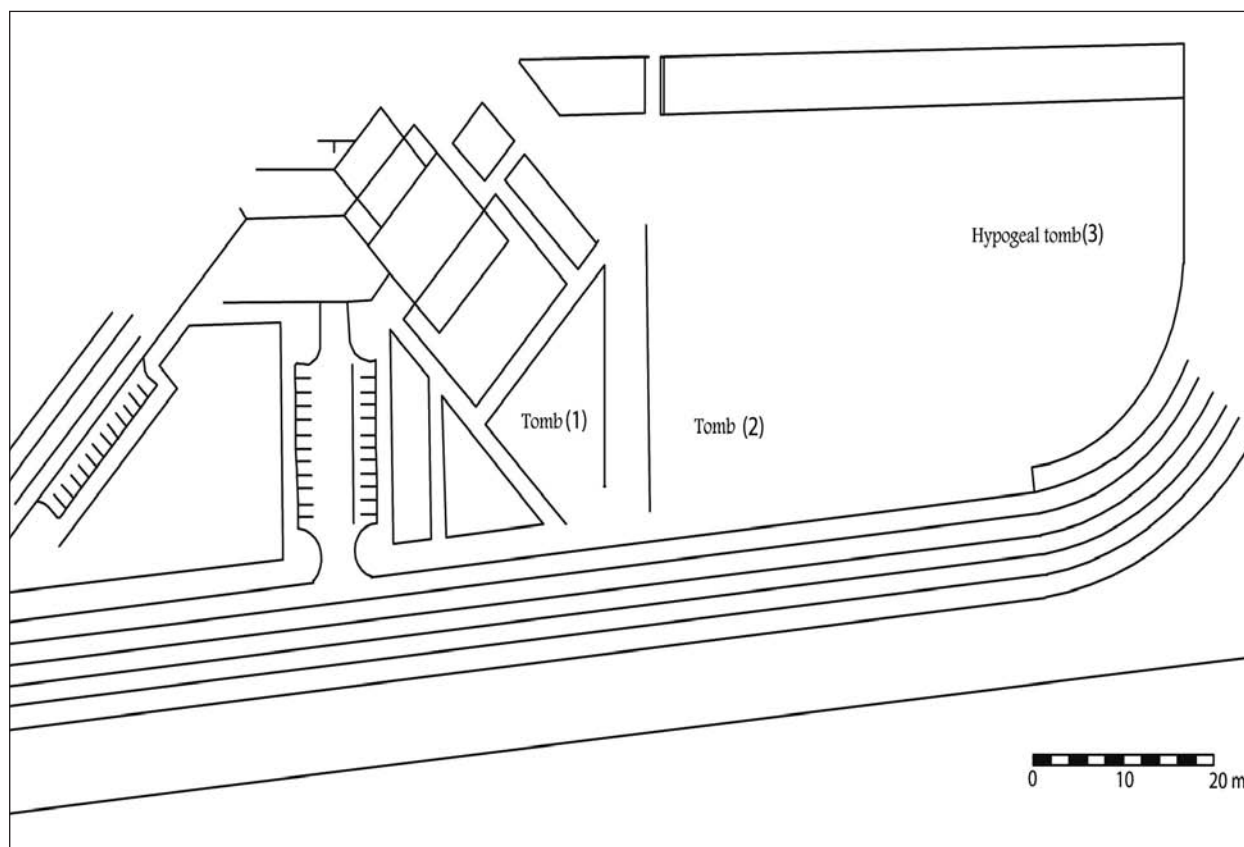


Figure 3. Hypogea tomb and the location of the two Roman tombs. (DGA, Syria, Tartus). Author preparation.

DESCRIPTION

The sarcophagus consists of two separate parts, as is usual in these types of burials: a box and lid (fig. 4), forming the outline of a human body, Phoenician in style. Carved in relief on the lid appears the head of an individual male (fig. 5), with physical traits of a mature age, being bearded and covered with a headdress or turban, giving this coffin extraordinary iconographical interest. No trace of pigment was detected on the head or rest of the body, which was devoid of any sculptural representation, clothing or any other object or symbol.

MATERIAL

The sarcophagus located inside the tomb was made of basalt, as were six of the totals of 32 sarcophagi exhumed in the Amrit area. The raw material used may be of local origin, since quarries of such basaltic rocks, only a few kilometers from the site of the tomb discovery, have been documented as having been used in *Safita* province (Renan, 1864: 45; Buhl, 1983: 200).

The sarcophagus measures 262 cm long, 73 cm wide and 60 cm high. Also, it contained three almost identical perfume jars (*alabastron*), 9 cm high, 3 cm in diameter.

The three vases have the same shape, consisting of a cylindrical body, a flat base, a slightly narrower neck, also cylindrical, and some slender, circular mouth lip formed by a straight, flat, thickened, which achieves the same diameter of the body. Slight differences can be seen between the three cases, especially in length, between 8 cm and 9 cm, and a neck somewhat throttled. The surfaces are well polished, although in some cases have strong calcareous concretions that create a rougher surface (fig. 6).

Also inside the sarcophagus, a skull and some bones were found, plus two sheets of gold, the first having a very peculiar lance late shape resembling an olive leaf. The second, listed as N° 3856 of the holdings of the Museum of Tartus, is a circular, gold-leaf corolla-shaped flower with 16 petals radiating from the center umbo and outlined as a flower in low relief. Along the diameter of the floral corolla, opposite two petals, there are two small holes for fixing the object to another surface (fig. 7. 8).



Figures 4 y 5.
The complete
sarcophagi and details
of the sculpted head.



Figure 6. Alabastron.



Figures 7 y 8. Two sheets of gold.

DISCRIPTION OF THE TOMB

The tomb proved to be hypogeal complex consisting of, chambers, *dromos*, and *loculi*, which remained exposed at ground level. With overall dimensions of 11 m x 12 m, (fig. 9), both the entry shaft, and the entire tomb were carved into the limestone except the southern part of the mausoleum, which was excavated into the natural terrain, formed by a solid stone and earth fill in decomposed limestone; in the latter area, the ground was much less compact, enabling the hole to be enlarged in order to remove the sarcophagus.

The main chamber was covered by a barrel vault, built with blocks.

The tomb consists of a rectangular pit, in which the western entrance was 130 cm wide with lateral notch for a closure slab, the fragmented remains of which were found around the entryway. The first chamber was entered by two carved steps and a *dromos* or short corridor, with inclined walls, just over 100 cm long, ending with a recess in the rock, which served as a step up of about 100 cm from the aerodromes to the floor of the chamber (fig. 10).

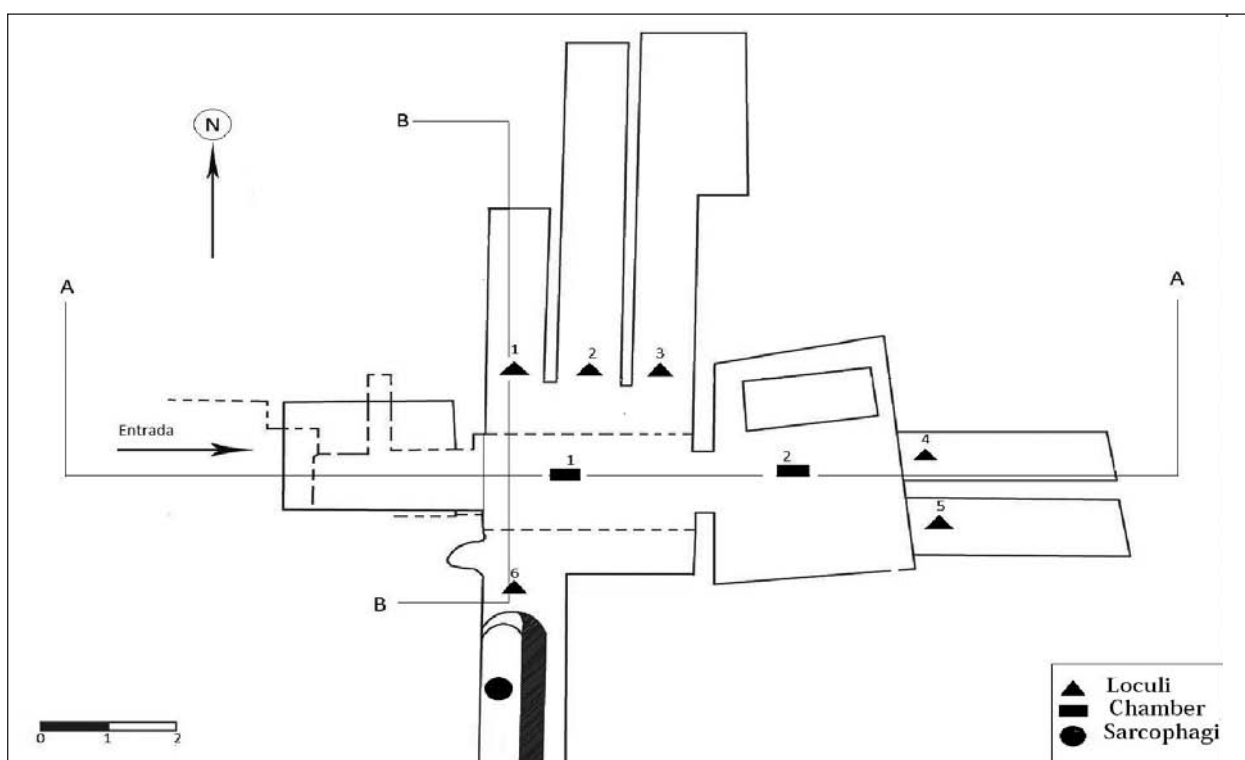


Figure 9. The diagram of the tomb. (DGA, Syria, Tartus). Author preparation.

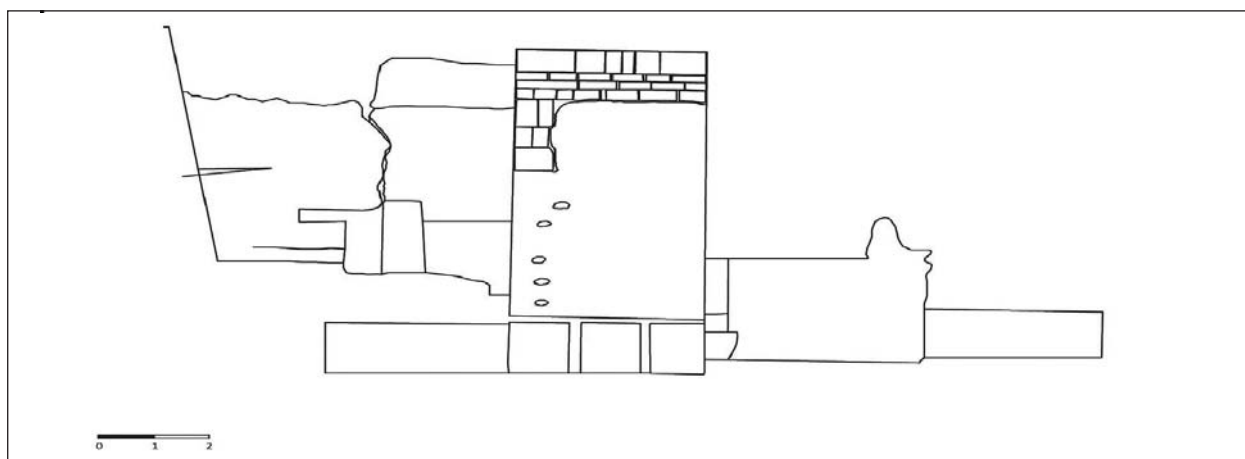


Figure 10. Section A.A of the tomb. (DGA, Syria, Tartus). Author preparation.

Along the north wall of the chamber (1) were three *loculi* (1, 2, 3), perpendicular to the long axis of the tomb, oriented east-west. *Locule* (3), unlike the other cores of the mausoleum, had the shape of the letter **L**. In the southern front of the first chamber, the *loculi* (6) were preceded by a small very shallow recess, occupying the southeastern corner of the chamber containing the sarcophagus, measuring 280 cm x 100 cm, with the roof collapsed, for the lack of stability of the land in this area of the tomb.

In the western wall of the first chamber, another door provided access, by two transverse steps, to chamber (2), the western wall of which opened two *loculi*, (4, 5), each measuring 300 cm x 80 cm. On the north of the second chamber, excavated in the ground, lay a rectangular pit some 200 cm x 100 cm, partly covered by stones and embedded in a step over the pit.

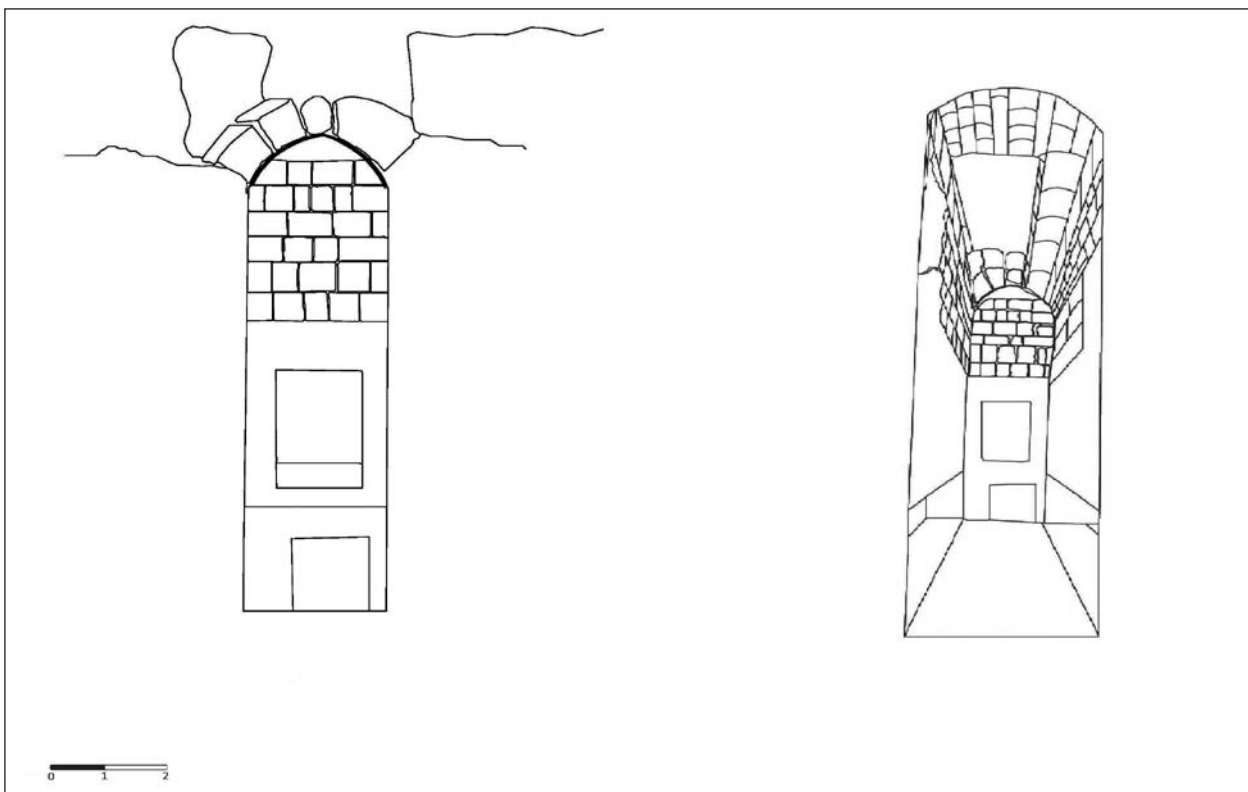
The first chamber was enclosed by a barrel vault, located 6 m aboveground, formed by interlocking blocks. The dome section was semicircular, consisting of blocks having a smaller ashlar serving as keystone. The entire elevation of the dome rose on the camera is excavated in the rock,

completing the last two meters high with ashlars facing ready to rope in some cases interspersed blocks to blight, to get a flat surface for the vault, mixed rows based on a space to fill completing rock-cut areas. In the west of the dome, at the entrance to the first chamber had four or five courses, while in the east the vault rests directly on the excavated rock (fig. 11).

THE IMPORTANCE OF AMRIT NECROPOLIS

In the necropolis at the Amrit site, and so-called isolated tomb, a high number of very large sarcophagi were found. No doubt the Amrit area is the second center in number of such sarcophagi unearthed around the Mediterranean after the findings of the Lebanese city of *Saida* (Phoenician Sidon) (Frede, 2000: 6). The turning point for the revival of Egyptian influence in Phoenician funerary monuments came at the transposition of active or passive anthropoid Phoenician sarcophagi (Elayi y Haykal, 1996).

Remote relationships between the Phoenician colony and Egypt dated prior to 1000 BC, so that



Figures 9. Section B.B, isometric view of the grave. (DGA, Syria, Tartus). Author preparation.

one of the oldest texts on relations between Egypt and the Mediterranean coast dates back to the fourteenth century BC from Ugarit (the prosperous city of northern Syria), which relates Sidon, Tyro, and other cities around the ancient Phoenician area (Martinez, 2007: 78-79).

The idea of depositing the deceased in coffins of this type has its origin in the Near East (Moscati, 1988: 292). The anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagi found were always reserved for the burial for the most outstanding members of society. They are present in the Near East, Central Mediterranean, and Carthage or Spain, but are less abundant in the tombs of the necropolis of the central and western Mediterranean, although some authors consider them unique to the eastern and western Mediterranean (Moscati, 1972: 567).

The Phoenicians apparently took this idea from neighboring Egypt, Dynasty XXVI (Haykal, 1996: 8), where the main tomb was reserved exclusively for the burial of a woman, the wife of Pharaoh *Amsis* (Buhl, 1983: 196). Later, the custom seems to have changed and may have coincided with the production Phoenician tombs and, in fact, Phoenician sarcophagi have been found in Egypt (in *Saqqara*, Tell *el-Maskhoutaite*) (Buhl, 1987: 214).

At the beginning Pharaohs, courtiers, officials, and priests in sarcophagi were exhumed. However, among Phoenicians, only kings, princes, and their families were buried, sometimes in such coffins (Olmo y Aubet, 1986: 48). It has been interpreted that the face carved on the lid of the coffin could represent the image of the deceased. However, this suggestion remains uncertain (Moscati, 1972: 568).

Our sarcophagus contained a skeleton, but the bones have disappeared. Visual analyses suggest that mummification was not practiced prior to placing the deceased in the sarcophagus, and in other cases it has been observed that the burial practice was very different from that practiced in Egypt.

The preparation and deposition of corpses into the sarcophagus, where this has been observed, was generally practiced with other types of burials in

late Iron Age and former Phoenician colonies around the Mediterranean, so it was considered to be second or third degree (Frede, 2002: 33-34).

That is, the inhumation of the body was undertaken with all its organs, and the body was anointed with oil called *Arzz* (from a well-known tree of the Phoenician coast of Syria and Lebanon). Subsequently the entire body was embalmed with a substance called *Natron*, which means "divine" or "pure", and which comes from the NTR of Ancient Egypt, as claimed by some authors who have analyzed this process (Haykal, 1996: 24-25).

DISCUSSION

The vast majority of publications until now agree that, during the late Phoenician period (Iron II), for all findings from the Phoenician coast, the sarcophagi found can be grouped into three stylistic periods: the first of strong Egyptian influence, the second related to Mesopotamian influences, and third of clear Greek influence (Lempke, 1998; Frede, 2002: 217).

The sarcophagus presented here, appears to be a rather unique case, since, according to the stylistic classification, it belongs to the second phase of influences, perhaps with features that come from the same artistic influence as Amrit Temple, called the *magazil* tomb of the necropolis. Both are considered to belong to the 4th century BC (Dunand y Saliby, 1985: 10- 11), during the domination of the Persian Empire, as reflected by stylistic details in both monuments located about four kilometers from the site of the discovery of the tomb studied. These stylistic characteristics indicate that the face represented on the sarcophagus could be that of a person of high social status, perhaps an Assyrian political figure in *Aradian* society at some time during the Persian occupation.

The figure is considered unique in the area (at least according to present data) because the features of the head have never been found in any other Syrian or Lebanese territory. That is, the execution of the beard, the type of headdress, and the representation of the eyes are unique in the iconography of these sarcophagi. The projections are also unusual relief and dimensions of the sar-

cophagus, and the use of a raw material such as basalt, assumed to be local (from Tartus), is rarely found in such graves.

Some researchers believe that the design of this type of beard first appears in northern Syria, perhaps dating to the 10th century BC (Almagro Gorbea y Torres Ortiz, 2010: 31).

In terms of storage conditions and use of the tomb, despite that only a single sarcophagus was found inside, the monument was a mass grave or mausoleum, as is common in these types of burial chambers, which were built to accommodate several members of a social unit. This would include individuals of different ages and sexes, as cores presumably for future burials.

The chambers show a marked variety of sizes and shapes not having been discovered and excavated until now. The content in antiquity was used only once to deposit the coffin, which is exceptional in the archeological record of such monuments. However, it appears that

the tomb was opened during Roman times, as we found that the slab sealing the door had been broken, and the lid that covered the sarcophagus had been moved.

Also an oil lamp with raised dots as ornamentation and with a single hole for a wick was found, undoubtedly from the era of the Roman Republic (fig. 12). The dating of an object inside the tomb implies visitors inside the chamber, who required lighting, and was presumably responsible for the breaking of the slab enclosing the short corridor access of the first chamber, as well as for the moving of the sarcophagus lid. The pillagers did not take the entire funerary ensemble, but left objects of less interest to them, such as the three alabaster ointment containers.

Also, the two pieces of gold probably went unnoticed among the jumble of sarcophagus contents, given the poor lighting during the looting, and the difficult access in part due to the heavy lid of the tomb.



Figure 12. Roman lamp.

SUMMARY

The sarcophagus, despite lacking an anthropological analysis of bone content of the tomb, has been studied for the sculpted representation on the coffin lid. This marks a turning point in the history of anthropoid sarcophagus research in the area of Amrit, as it remains the only one having certain peculiar characteristics suggesting a Persian origin, and it is buried in an isolated grave in the territory of Amrit. This may represent a significant figure in the Phoenician territory off the coast of Syria, coinciding with Persian rule on Syrian coast in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, perhaps reserved for the leaders of that society.

The sarcophagus and tomb, located near the ancient city of Amrit, follows one of the patterns of location of such mausoleums on the Mediterranean coast of southern Syria, reflecting a Phoenician ritual, given that, although certain elements refer to the time of Persian influence, the funerary features indicate Phoenician traditions reserved for the elite.

Also, archaeological materials preserved with the sarcophagus, i.e. the raw material used (gold and alabaster) and design objects are also clearly Phoenician. The new anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagus found in Amrit completes a very large number of sarcophagi in this area of the coast of Syria, reflecting innovative aspects of Phoenician art, incorporating varied influences of anthropoid graves while preserving typically Phoenician traditions.

The new finding of this tomb and sarcophagus highlight the importance of Amrit area in the field of future Phoenician studies and in particular anthropomorphic sarcophagi, as the area where it was found has provided over 25% of all known findings of this type in the Mediterranean (i.e. findings belonging only to Sidon). The number and importance of the tombs and sarcophagi of this area are expected to increase, as the southern coastal area of Syria shares Phoenician archeological richness with its southern neighbor Lebanon, despite the little attention it has so far received from international archaeological research.

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