



New marble sarcophagus from Syrian coast

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ABSTRACT

Two anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagi, located in a necropolis from the territory of the Phoenician site Amrit are discussed in a formal analysis of each and a spatial contextualization of their discoveries from rescue excavation. A comparison with other sarcophagi known in the region with similar characteristics, e.g. raw materials, style, and the representation of gender across the entire Mediterranean basin, is made. The origin and the date of the pieces as well as patterns of suppliers of these funerary containers to the Syrian coast, and the socio-ideological significance of the sarcophagi, is made. These critically involved data offer a substantive contribution to the social history of the Levantine Phoenicians in the earliest periods of their cultural distinctiveness.

KEYWORDS: *Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi, Amrit, necropolis, archaeological analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing number of discoveries of Phoenician sarcophagi in the southern region of Syria on the Mediterranean coast. This area was known in antiquity as the Aradiense territory (Sapin 1980; Elayi 1988; Al Maqdissi 1993, 448; Bader 1997; Al Maqdissi and Benech 2009) (Tartus being¹ today's Syria). The territory of Amrit (Harden 1963; Al Maqdissi, 1993; Belmonte 2003; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003), like its southern neighbor, Phoenician Sidon (Saida today's Lebanon), stands within the archaeological record of the Iron II age or the Persian period (Aubert 2001).

The appearance of most of these unique pieces (Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi) dates back to the eighteenth century (Elayi and Haykal 1996; Frede 2000). They were brought to light by the constant visits and excavations of antiquarians – in this area in particular, and in Middle East in general (Renan 1864; Dunand and Saliby 1956; id., 1961; id., 1985).

Since the date mentioned above, many of the great museums of Western Europe have held them (Hamdy Bey and Reinach 1892), treating them as major pieces of art (Furtwängler 1893; Ferron 1993; Frede 2002; id., 2009). Thus, the focus of their study and assessment has followed stylistic and artistic criteria, based on art history (Lembke 1998; id., 2001).

However, among the numerous sarcophagi unearthed in the area, few have been analysed properly, because the vast majority of the findings are the result of public works. Furthermore, excavations by archaeologists have often pursued only the accumulation of valuable grave goods to raise funds for Western museums. Thus, the recent discoveries will offer a closer look at these funerary objects. We propose a possible change to the context of the analysis and evaluation of these funerary materials – in their formal aspects (contextual and chronological) and their interpretations (including socio-cultural). The large numbers of anthropomorphic sarcophagi unearthed at Arados/Amrit implies their important role in northern Phoenicia.

2. THE FIRST SARCOPHAGUS

2.1. *Archaeological context*

On December 10, 2004, during the process of road improvement linking the neighborhoods around the site of Amrit, a female sarcophagus was discovered. The discovery site is located in an area known as al-Bayada necropolis (Besançon et al 1994, 16; Dixon 2013), which extends over a few square kilometres,

towards the north of the site of Amrit (approx. 2000 m) to the north lies the city of Tartus, and the road connecting Lattakia to Homs is near the necropolis, and Amrit Nahr separates the necropolis from the Acropolis of the Amrit site (Figure 1).

The kind of structure that protected the piece in situ is unknown and no information is available on the material found within the sarcophagus, or the removal process to the Archaeological Museum of the city. However, there are traces of blows to the surface of the piece, suggesting how carelessly it was treated before its exhibition at the museum.

Description: The massive sarcophagus consists of two elements: the box and the lid or cover (Figure 2). On this sarcophagus appears a slightly schematic Figure of a recumbent female Figure. The shape the sarcophagus itself is anthropomorphic, in this case a female (?) adult (Figure 3).

The coffin lid is large, and broken below the neck. A crack extends from left shoulder to the right side, where loops are also damaged, as only two remain, one in the back of the head, and the other below the pedestal. The highlight of the lid and the box is high relief moving both parts, so that the shoulders and the waist are well marked (Figure 4).

Dimensions: l. 88^{3/16} in (2, 24 cm), h. 26^{49/64} in (0,68 cm), w. at the shoulder 31^{57/64} in (0, 81 cm) (Figure 5).

Preservation: Archaeological Museum of Tartus, Syria (AO 3286). The head of the sarcophagus is very well crafted, and finished with great care and attention, but is damaged on the left side. The face of the figure stands out for its symmetrical design, being oval and tapering towards the chin. The face is gently framed by curly hair that almost covers the ears. The hair is arranged in a semicircle, consistently wavy in four rows.

The forehead, medium size, bears good proportions in relation to the rest of the face. The eyes, with heavily marked almond-shaped contours, are wide open and expressive, while the nose is long and slender. The mouth is relatively small and tight-lipped. Finally, the face has a slightly pronounced chin in high relief, accentuating the stiffness of the face. Of note is the absence of any sculptural representation of the rest of the body, clothing or any other object or symbol

¹ Tartus city is known as Antarados.

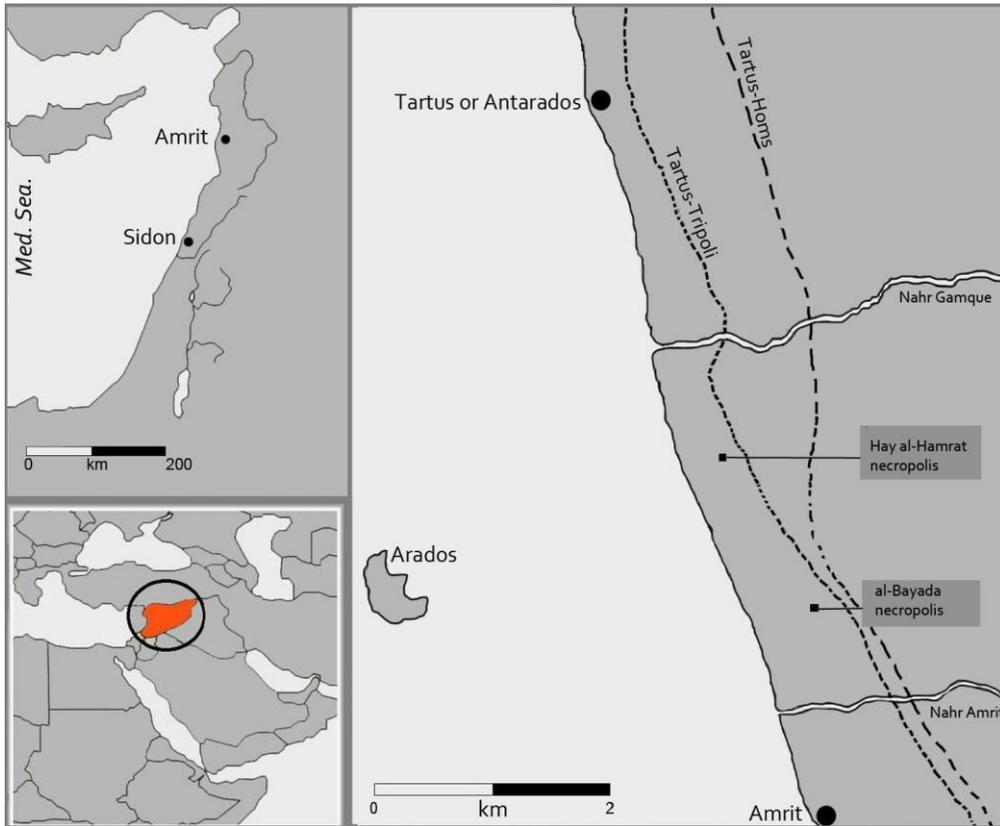


Figure 1. Map of Syrian coast, Amrit territory and location of both necropolis



Figure 2. Side view of the sarcophagi



Figure 3. Details of face



Figure 4. Lateral view of the sarcophagi

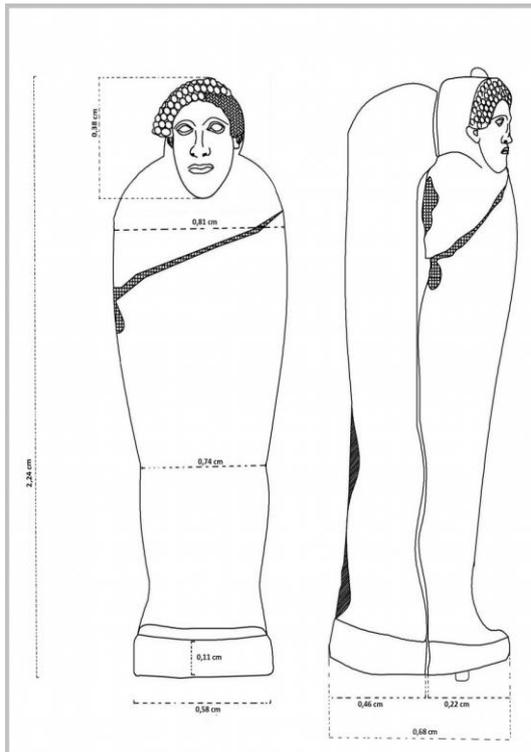


Figure 5. Dimension of the sarcophagi

2.2. Parallel and stylistic study

The female sarcophagus is in general not unusual on the Phoenician coast, in terms of a number of features, such as the form, quality, and expression (Wenger 2003; Hermary and Merents 2014, 374). Several sarcophagi of the same style were found at different sites known to have been under “Phoenician” occupation. Current scholarship assumes that Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagi follow an Egyptian model (Torrey 1919/20, 18; Kukahn 1951, 23; Harden 1963, 112; Buhl 1983, 199; Lembke 1998; Frede 2009; Dixon 2013).

However, the Phoenician workmanship had several influences, including Persian and Greek (Torrey 1919/20, 17; Elayi and Haykal 1996; Frede 2002). The best parallel can be found in the archaeological museum of Tartus (Syria) AO 635 (Figure 6), which displays female sarcophagus, found in the necropolis of Ram az-Zahab (Lembke 1998; Hosh 2009, 121), also in Amrit, in 1989.

The two sarcophagi have much in common regarding the anthropomorphic shape, with similar ears, but the spiral curls in the sarcophagus from al-Bayada “infra” appear to be less streamlined, while on the other coffin the details are more finished, and the shape of the face is more elongated and more detailed. The recently found piece is dated to 470 B.C.E. (Hanna 1994; Lembke 2001).

The same type of hairstyle was recorded in a sarcophagus excavated in Ayaa (Elayi and Haykal

1996), necropolis Saida (Phoenician Sidon) in 1887, this one being deposited in the museum of Istanbul AO 798 (Kukahn 1955; Jidejian 1995: 308) (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Head of the sarcophagi located at Ram az-Zahab (Amrit).



Figure 7. Sarcophagi from Ayaa (Sidon)

The style is also anthropomorphic, and spiral curls appear to be similar, and was dated to 500 B.C.E. (Kukahn 1955; Wenger 2003).

To these, we should add the parallel finding of a female sarcophagus in *Gadir* (Cadiz, Spain), located at Punta de la Vaca, in 1980 (Maestre Abia 2010, 122), which is deposited in the Provincial Archaeological Museum of Cadiz AO 9773 (Blanco Freijero and Corzo Sánchez 1981; Buhl 1991; Almagro-Gorbea *et al* 2010, 378). The circular curls and anthropomorphic form of the two pieces have almost equal definition, and the faces, sculpted with great accuracy, are remarkable in both pieces. The style of the piece from Cadiz was also estimated *ca.* 450 B.C.E. (Almagro Gorbea and Torres Ortiz 2010, 43; Ferrer Albelda 2010).

Although, all studies related to anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagi show this particular type of hairstyle, spiral curls finishing in bosses appear to be sub-archaic in time, while the embossed elements are smaller it may belong to the Late Archaic period (Frede 2002).

All historical dates provided above are based on stylistic parallels with other marbles coffins, indicating the difficulty of assigning an exact chronology to these anthropomorphic sarcophagi.

3. THE SECOND SARCOPHAGUS

3.1. Circumstance of discovery

In April 1999, during construction in Hay al-Hamrat (a heavily populated area of the city of Tartus), a necropolis was unearthed next to the road linking Tartus and Tripoli, (approx. 3000 m) to the north of the Amrit site, with the Gamka Nahr to the north, and Island of Arados directly facing the necropolis (lower left Figure. 1).

A set of tombs were found 5 m underground, some of which housed five sarcophagi, of which only one was anthropomorphic (owing to their partially human form), the other three being rough marble boxes or *teke*. Six square slabs protected the anthropomorphic sarcophagus. Multiple bodies were buried in the five rectangular-shaped sarcophagi, while only a single corpse was buried inside the anthro-

pomorphic sarcophagus. However, we have no further information about the body.

A local resident who witnessed the discovery reported the finding to the Department of Antiquities in Tartus. Immediately, a team of museum staff was formed to carry out the excavation and removal of the piece, which was then turned over to the city museum, where the find was documented.

Description: The female sarcophagus consists of two pieces: the box and the lid or cover made of marble. The sarcophagus is designed such that the box's rim is flat where the cover is to be placed, giving it a good fit and almost perfect closure. Likewise, it has a rectangular top with four loops: one in the back of the head, two on the sides at shoulder height, and the last one in the center of the base. All of these facilitate the handling and placement of the lid on the box. (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Side view of complete sarcophagi

The top bears a single bas-relief, apparently representing the head of a young female. The rest of the top is completely smooth, but arched. The shoulders are well marked to differentiate the area of the head. The other end terminates in a four-sided base, which is prominent and well developed.

The head is the only part of the Figure's body shown in detail. Her body is in mostly good condition, but the surface appears somewhat damaged by the presence of a thin layer of limestone corrosion. A short neck separates the head from the body. She has an oval-shaped face framed by hair, which completely covers the ears. (Figure 9).

The hair has eight lines of undulating waves terminating in concentric semicircles (Figure 10), which cover the forehead with a sharp dividing line in the center of the canvas, reaching the middle of the forehead. The top part of her head has a smooth surface, like that of a veiled woman.

The face has formulaic features, somewhat naturalistic. The eyes and mouth are carefully delineat-

ed, so that the features are well marked. Her smooth, almond-shaped eyes are not very large and have some highlights, such as thick-lined eyelids frame. She has a wide, short, straight nose. Below, a small mouth is carved with her lips closed and slightly tight, with the bottom lip thicker than the upper one. Finally, the chin is rounded and small. It has a low profile, but is well defined. The rest of the body lacks any sculptural representation, such as clothing or any other object or symbol.



Figure 9. Frontal details of female sarcophagi



Figure 10. Back view of the head

3.2. Stylistic study

This juvenile female sarcophagus is not the finished sarcophagus and her hairstyle. These stylistic features are the formal characteristics that many authors have used for dating these objects.

Dimensions: L. 83⁵⁶⁴ in (2, 13 cm), H. 23⁵⁸ in (0, 60 cm), W. at the shoulder 20¹⁵³² in (0, 52 cm). (Figure 11)

Preservation: Archaeological Museum of Tartus, Syria (AO 1921).

The date proposed by Simone Frede is the 5th unique in this area, in terms of the shape of century B.C.E (Frede 2002). However, we believe that it is very difficult to determine time ranges through the analysis of stylistic features alone.

However, if we consider the treatment of the carved character's hair as a new basis for how to represent a particular feature of the figure (age, sex, origin, etc.), this treatment of her hair recalls other pieces from this territory that have the same stylistic peculiarities.

Thus, the sarcophagus AO 791 held at the Istanbul Museum, found, according to the published archaeological records in Syria (Figure 12), has many features in common with the others: the shapes of their tops are smooth, without any sculptural representation, except for the head; they also have four loops, two placed on the shoulders, and two others located on the head and base; the execution of the neck is practically the same. However, most striking are the parallels of the representations of facial features and hair design. The design of the hair is simple and divided in the center of the forehead by a middle strip of hair. The hair consists of soft, ruffling lines, which fall in short strands, completely covering the ears. Other documented pieces from Syria have slight differences in the lengths of hair, some of which continue to the jaw level.

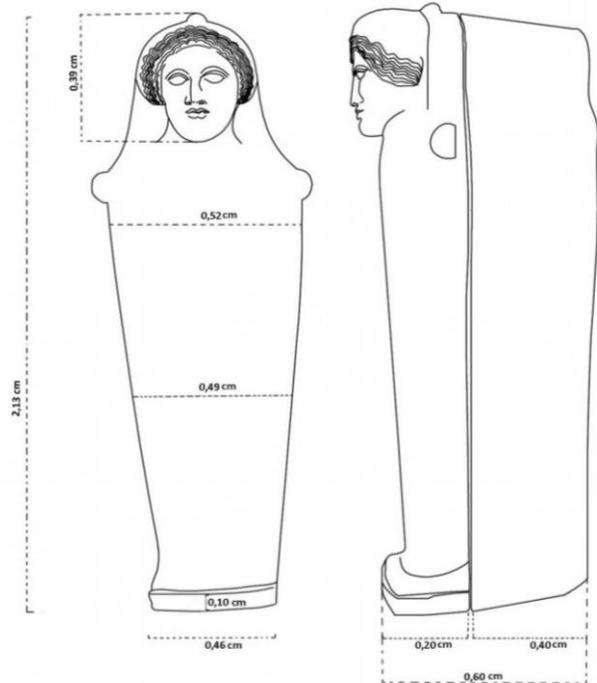


Figure 11. Complete dimension of sarcophagi



Figure 12. Head of female sarcophagi

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The sarcophagus was carved from marble, like most others found in the area (Harden 1963; Lembke 1998; id., 2001; Frede 2009). Throughout the Levantine coast of Phoenicia, there is no trace of marble quarries to provide blocks (Frede 2002; Dixon 2013, 170), so that all the marble must have been imported (Faegersten 2003).

In general, it is believed to have come from the Greek islands, particularly Paros (Wenger 2003; Georgiou 2009). Analyses conducted on a coffin unearthed in Amrit and currently in the Museum of Copenhagen AO 13431 conclude that the marble used was from Paros (Buhl 1974, 88-91). Archaeological analysis of these funerary pieces (commonly known as anthropoid sarcophagi) should be based on the fundamental variables that characterize the objects: the petrographic nature of the raw materials used in their manufacture, and their dimensional

type (basic measurement—length, width, and height). We considered these the most formal, essential, and indispensable elements. These are part of the physical aspects of the coffins, so that they should be considered more significant in establishing measurable and analytical variables. In other words, they are empirical facts relevant for a formal archaeological study. With these, we can proceed to an objective comparison with other sarcophagi, and avoid merely assessing them by artistic or stylistic aspects.

Both female sarcophagi are made of marble. Of all the sarcophagi found near Amrit – so far 30 coffins – 60% are marble². This shows that marble was considered the prime material for manufacturing these coffins. However, as mentioned above, the near absence of any petrographic analysis and the general opinion of specialists indicate that the marble used in the preparation of these sarcophagi, including all those unearthed at Amrit, came from the quarries of Paros Island of the Aegean Cyclades.

There is evidence that Paros marble was semi-prepared for the shape of the lids and boxes of the sarcophagi (which were made separately) (Martelli 1975, 14). Nevertheless, until now, no workmanship has been documented, nor any clue has been found for the process of preparing these massive stones from quarries. In the area where these sarcophagi were used, no evidence has so far been found for possible workmanship or artisans, in either the Phoenician homeland or the surrounding territory.

Assuming that the marble quarries for the blocks were located far away from Phoenicia, the cutting or shaping sites for the raw marble to be used in the sarcophagi would most likely have been very close to the coast. The marble would then be loaded on ships for transport to its destination, presumably somewhere on the Phoenician coast. Later, the marble blocks would be finished at a workshop, presumably very close to the coast. This is because of the large size of the blocks and the difficulties of transporting these massive sarcophagi. Finally, taking into account the destination of these burial containers, we cannot rule out that these sarcophagi were finished by local craftsmen near the places where they were deposited (either in collective mausoleums, in individual graves in cemeteries or isolated graves, where they have been found today). Given the measurements of the marble sarcophagi discovered at Amrit (Fig. 13) (mainly the length, height and width), we find that there are indeed two groups of measurements.

The first size is smaller, less than 2.10 m. The second can be up to 2.20 m. This shows that the mar-

ble sarcophagi found near Amrit came from their original source with certain patterns of pre dimensions, depending on the age and size of the property holder. This means that the formation and extraction of modules varied, indicating that there were two groups of distinct measurements, possibly suggesting that they were produced for either individual households or juvenile males and adult females. We might also ask what role the sarcophagi served, with respect to their function as transformed stones to be used in funeral rites. The sarcophagus, as such, had several roles. Firstly, the representation of a human figure on the top symbolized that the deceased remained alive, even though the sarcophagus contained the corpse. Secondly, it was a container for funerary objects to be buried with the deceased for the afterlife. In our case, we have only the representation of the human figure, while we know nothing about the occupant or the accompanying objects. In social terms, the funerary objects that were to accompany the deceased in some cases assumed symbolic meanings related to the person's religious beliefs. In our case, we only have the representation of the human figure, which allows us to focus only on their biological individuality and social rank. Therefore, an exact chronological dating is not possible. An analysis based on Carbon-14 may be necessary to date the piece.

5. DISCUSSION

In the absence of human remains and objects contained within the sarcophagi, archaeological studies of the materials involved in the funeral rites should be based first on the analysis of materials such as the containers themselves. Therefore, for an appropriate analysis of their chronology and craftsmanship, it is necessary to concentrate on aspects of archaeological interest, such as the raw materials used or the basic measurement of the pieces, and the meaning of it being a singular piece. Using the full measurements of both marble sarcophagi found at the Amrit site, the maximum lengths form two distinct groups, showing a dense clustering within these metric dimensions.

This is possibly due to the existence of the production of stone blocks with similar basic lengths. Their development patterns are quite similar in origin, although with minor variations. This means that there are two different groups of sarcophagi: the smaller between 2.10 and 2.15 m. and the larger between 2.25 and 2.35 meters.

Thus, the treatment of marble blocks, according to the above graph, indicates marks left by the owners or artisans who made them. This is common in other groups of sarcophagus measurements carved from

² According to archaeological record: Seventeen marble sarcophagi have been unearthed at Amrit site.

standardized blocks that supplied the territory of Amrit. Similarly, it bears emphasizing that both of the female sarcophagi found in Amrit lacked fine polishing, in contrast with some other finished pieces, which were all made of marble and finished much more finely.

This suggests that the final quality of both products was the result of local artisans using foreign blocks of stone. The female sarcophagi we have analyzed has the head of a female, carved in bas-relief. This raises the question of why a human being is

depicted. The person depicted on the cover could be an idealized character design from the time of the manufacture of these objects. Alternatively, it could depict a real person represented according to social status, gender, and age. Finally, it could even be an attempt to trace roots. This depiction is taken as evidence of their effort towards realism with a partially human form.

The lid shows no particular traits of an ordinary living being, so it appears that the sculptor decided the characters depicted on each piece.

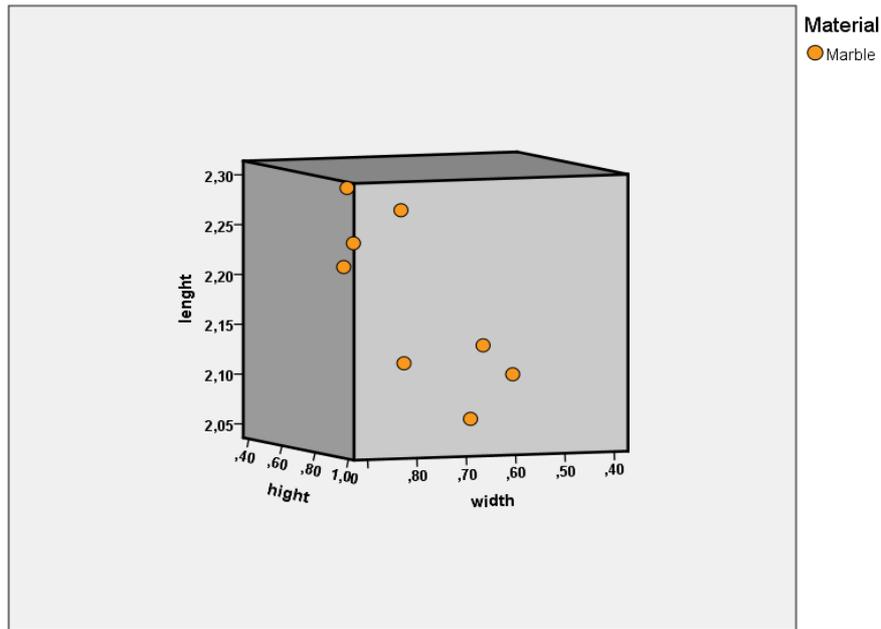


Figure 13. Length, width and high of marble sarcophagi

Thus, the human figure must have been very significant during the time that these sarcophagi were used. Its presence as a visual icon would have been meaningful to the society that used it. Although it is generally considered that the use of anthropomorphic sarcophagi originated in Egypt, this practice in the area of Amrit maintained its traditional patterns, with the use of this style of burial container in particular. That is, elite used well-protected burials for anthropomorphic sarcophagi without direct accessibility or possible symbols to make a distinction from other tombs.

Traditions regarding burial and the afterlife seem to be a distinction. Also, the coffins lacked distinguishing features between Egypt and Phoenician society.

6. CONCLUSION

The number of anthropomorphic sarcophagi found on the Phoenician coast of Syria shed light on the reconstruction of funerary customs of these enig-

matic funerary pieces on Mediterranean coast of Syria. They show many styles for depicting the human figure, indicating a relevant social role during the golden age of sarcophagi use. Although new cases have been found in the area, due to lack of archaeological context or samples for radiocarbon dating, the task of assigning precise chronology remains problematic. Thus, we believe that a reliable assessment of chronological data only through artistic characteristics is not possible. On the other hand, what does seem archaeologically justifiable is that the extraction and confirmation of the blocks in the quarries of origin were treated differently according to age and sex of those who used them.

These memorial monuments must have contributed to a greater distinction and exaltation of certain families within the noble class of the society where they lived and were buried. Also, they may have led to the acceptance of symbolic elements in material culture, indicating a social function and cultural significance. Furthermore, they reflect religious beliefs, which are adopted and interpreted into local repre-

sentation patterns. The new findings in the northern Phoenician site of Amrit show that the city's role during the use of Phoenician anthropomorphic sar-

cophagi was significant. In addition, as excavations continue, new information will be provided by further discoveries of sarcophagi in northern Phoenicia.

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