



Alabastron as a symbol of divine protection

Bashar Mustafa

*University of Damascus, member of interdisciplinary sciences and humanities group
(University of Granada), Francisco Dalmau St. 2, 3B. Postcode 18013 Granada, Spain
(bbmusta@gmail.com)*

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, during the construction of a new campus at the university in Tartous, Syria, a new tomb was discovered. Inside the grave was a sarcophagus with three pieces of alabastron. In this paper we critically discuss the value of this magisterial material and its role in funeral rites. The answer may depend on ritual practice, in which this unique material was used as an aristocratic symbol, and by examining how this remarkable object was used throughout the regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

KEYWORDS: *Syria, Phoenicia, Sarcophagus, Alabaster*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the construction of the public University, *Tishrin*, in the city of Tartous (Syria), workers found a *Dromos* type tomb. The specific area in which it was found is called *Ras Al-Shagry*, which is located two kilometers from the coast, about 500 meters north of *Al-Bassel Hospital*. The site of Amrit is situated four kilometres away.

The tomb was found September 14, 2009, during the construction work to pave a natural elevation of the area and to build a structure on the campus. The entrance to the large, plain chamber where the sarcophagus was found is over six feet deep and faces east (Fig. 1 upper). The cover of the coffin was semi displaced as a consequence of looting. It contained the remains of the grave goods, the skeletal remains, three alabaster vases—ostensibly scrambled—and two sheets of gold.

The news of the finding was sent to the scientific community of the Antiquities in Tartous and a team of specialists was immediately created. They were responsible for the excavation, context, documentation, and removal of the sarcophagus and its contents. All artefacts were transferred to the Museum of Tartous.

2. THE THREE ALABASTRONS

The three vases are of the same shape: a cylindrical body, flat base, a slightly narrower neck, and as lender, circular lip at the mouth formed by a straight, flat, thickened edge, which opens to the same diameter as the body. Slight differences can be seen between the three cases, especially in length—between eight and nine centimeters—and a somewhat throttled neck. The surfaces are well polished, although in some cases strong calcareous concretions have created a rougher surface (Fig. 1 lower).

3. ALABASTER VASE

Alabaster appeared in many places in the ancient Eastern, Central, and Western Mediterranean world, and can be divided into several groups.

The basic group is composed of bulbous shaped vessels, associated with several pot containers, and is characterized by a larger size. Further, their functions varied according to the region. For example, in Egypt alabaster vases were used to store wine or oil (Pellicer 2007: 48). However, in the Iberian Peninsula they were used as funerary urns, perhaps for protection of the deceased in the afterlife. This purpose is considered to be of Egyptian origin, which for various reasons migrated to the Iberian Peninsula (López Castro 2010: 78, 79). These jars of alabaster, as the polls to which they are associated, have been

dated to have originated between the ninth and eighth centuries BC., (López Castro 2010: 78, 79).



Figure 1. Side view of the sarcophagus (upper) and Alabastron (lower)

Another group is more recent, and only represented by *alabastron* of small size, standing about eight to nine centimeters tall, with an estimated date of origin between the sixth and fifth centuries BC, and a distribution that denotes a more local constituency, always associated with funerary rites. The three new pieces of *alabastron*, discovered inside the anthropomorphic sarcophagus at *Ras Al-Shagry* are considered a good example of this second group of *alabastron* shape.

Other examples of *alabastron* of this period were also found within different anthropomorphic sarcophagi in *Ain Hilwah* necropolis Sidon, Lebanon and currently reside in the Archaeological Museum, Beirut (Inv. No. 4379). Furthermore, in Cyprus, another *alabastron* was found in a coffin. It is currently located in the Archaeological Museum of Larnaca (Inv. No. 467), (Doumet 1996: 13, 14, 15; Frede 2000: 27, 55, 86, 139).

It has been suggested that, chronologically and contextually, it coincides with the second phase of production of *alabastron*, playing the role of container shapes and essences, but, begins to appear carved in some anthropomorphic sarcophagi lids, represented in the left hand of the figure carved in some coffins around the Mediterranean Sea. So far, there have been found three examples of sarcophagi showing one of the character's hands, which are always female. Vases very similar to these *alabastron* sarcophagi have also been found elsewhere. (Almagro Gorbea & Torres Ortiz 2010: 44).

The first one is a female sarcophagus discovered in 1980 in Cádiz, Spain (Kukahh 1951), holding in her left hand a piece of *alabastron*. It is currently exhibited at the Archeological Museum of Cádiz (inv. No. 09773/1). Another, the Woman of Palermo sarcophagus, discovered in 1725, is displayed at the Archeological Museum, Palermo (Inv. No. 5630). It also shows in her left hand the same type of *alabastron*. Finally, a fragment of a sarcophagus from the *Maghart Tabloun* necropolis in Sidon, Lebanon, discovered in 1861, is on view at The Archeological Museum of The Louvre (inv. No. 4970). (Almagro Gorbea & Torres Ortiz 2010: 44), In its fragmented condition, it cannot be determined with certainty if it belongs to a male or female character, though some features lead us to believe it to be a female character.

4. MATERIAL

Although the raw material does not change through time, alabaster, depending on the period and the area of transmission, in the first phase was reached to by exchanges and relationships between members of higher social stratum who occupied the main religious and administration posts below the royal family (López Castro, 2010: 80). In the Middle East, Egyptian alabaster vases were found in the palaces of Sidon, Samaria, in Syria in *Minet el Beida*, near Ugarit, and according to Pliny, alabaster also came from the region of Damascus in Syria. There is evidence of the presence of this type of aristocratic material in different parts of Syria (Pellicer 2007: 47-48). It is likely that the three *alabastrons* located inside the *Ras Al-Shagry* sarcophagus could have been produced locally.

5. SOCIAL VALUE

Alabaster was used as a raw material for vessels and sculptures, and has always been considered to be exclusively for use for aristocratic or sacred offerings. It was first used in Egypt during the time of the Pharaohs, where only nobles had access and employed this kind of raw material in funeral rites (Almagro Gorbea 2009: 23). A diversity of alabaster vessels has been found in many royal necropolises in northern Egypt, as in the royal *Tanis* necropolis (López Castro 2010: 80). On the other hand, using *alabastron* inside anthropomorphic Phoenician sar-

cophagi, or their representations on the iconography of their caps, has been interpreted as symbolic or ritual objects, and not as mere products of luxury. Therefore they were used as containers for perfume invoking the life force of the goddess *Astraté/Tanit* (Lopez Rosendo 2005: 671; Almagro Gorbea & Torres Ortiz 2010: 45).

In the Middle East, during the eighth century BC., the consumption of scented oils was attested as a common practice precisely in *Ugarit* (Doumet, 1996: 12). Just as in archaic Egypt, alabaster vessels are considered to have contained scented oils (Lopez Rosendo, 2005: 670, 672), therefore, the main value was allotted to the vase containing the substance (*ibid*: 670, 672), being also significant that the raw material was manufactured with the container. The funeral activities related to the cult of *Astarte* always considered the incorporation of scented oils and incense as part of the rituals (Lopez Rosendo, 2005: 670). Later, the sense of the value of the contents and the container changed, evidenced by only the representation of the *alabastron* in the character's hand carved on the sarcophagus. This representation now assumes the entire meaning of the offering, becoming a symbol that contains a magical force: a sacred invocation as the triumph over death for the royal family (Doumet 1996: 13-14).

What was the reason for depositing three *alabastrons* in one sarcophagus? There may have been different types of scented oils or perfumes involved in the ritual of preparing the corpse for burial in the tomb. This is suggested by the few differences among the three *alabastron*, focusing on the size of them, though all were involved in accompanying the deceased into the afterlife. So far, only one *alabastron* was documented by sarcophagus.

6. CONCLUSION

Alabaster has always been considered a symbol of wealth in antiquity, although its use and the forms of containers have changed according to the periods and cultures. However the use of this unique type of mineral has always been considered a reflection of the importance of the personage attached to these objects, along with the presence of the *alabastron* in the funeral world, as a symbol of hope in the resurrection of the dead.

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