SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 2, No 2, (2016), pp. 1-8

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.44894

THE ANTHROPOID SARCOPHAGI OF AMRIT / ARADOS (SYRIA): A STUDY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Received: 08/11/2015
Accepted: 15/01/2016

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is an analysis of Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagi located in the ancient territory of the Phoenician necropolis site of Amrit (Syria) through exhaustive archaeological contextualization of each sarcophagus. Our goal is to raise awareness of the need to bring scant documentation of findings from previous centuries into a condition more consistent with current historical-archaeological contexts. We begin with findings documented in the nineteenth century and map the evolution of the changing approach of studies related to these enigmatic funerary objects. This will allow us to propose possible reasons for and causes of the treatment of these funerary containers more as artwork than archeologically significant objects. These sarcophagi will also be examined in order to establish their socio-ideological significance.

KEYWORDS: Mediterranean, Protohistoric, Amrit, sarcophagi, contextualization

1. INTRODUCTION

Amrit is a testament to cultural interaction in the ancient Mediterranean coast. The site is located along the north-central eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea in the southern part of the coast of Syria, about seven kilometres to the south of the city of Tartus or Antarados (Fig. 1). The archaeological site occupies an area of six square kilometres, forming a strategic position on the northern coast of "Phoenicia" or Phoiníkē. According to archaeological records, the founding of the site dates back to about the third to second millennium B.C. (Al Maqddissi, 1993, p. 449). As in other sites on the northern coast of present day Syria, in the territory of Amrit, also known as Maratos (Dunand 1953; id., 1955; id., 1956), there are among its wealth of archaeological architectural elements and other material remains (Dunand – Saliby, 1956; id., 1961; id., 1985; Zamora, 2003; Lembke 2004; Prado Martinez 2008, p. 92), a number of funerary containers known as Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi. These are considered of great interest to the historical and archaeological disciplines due to their scarcity; they have only been found in significant numbers on the coast of Syria and Lebanon (Wenger, 2003; Lembke, 2001; Frede, 2002; id., 2009; Mustafa and Abbas, 2015). Indeed, Amrit is only the second site in the Mediterranean basin where high concentrations of anthropomorphic sarcophagi have been found (Haykal, 1996a; Elayi, y Haykal 1996; Hermary, y Mertens 2014, p. 374), and the increasing number of findings of graves throughout the "aradiense" territory containing sarcophagi continues to expand our view of the Phoenician archaeology on the Syrian coast.

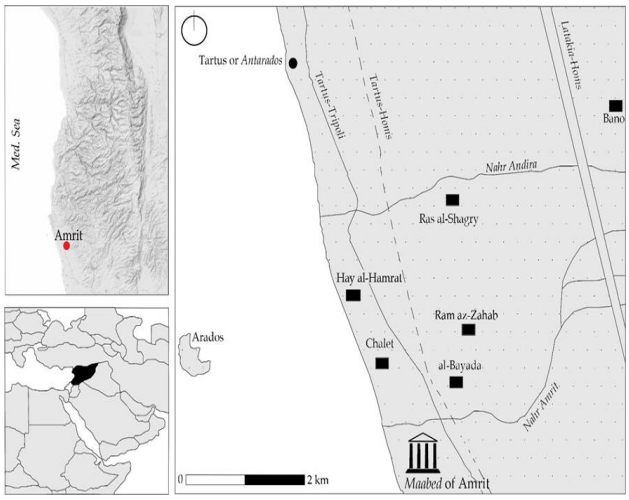

Figure 1. Situation of Syria, distribution of the tombs in am-rit/Arados territory.

The results of studies related to anthropomorphic Phoenician sarcophagi in the eastern Mediterranean region (Syria), which began a century and a half ago, have proven unsatisfactory due to, among other problems, persistent and methodical looting in Amrit. Since the days of antiquity, clandestine excavations, grave robbing, and looting have been carried on by amateurs who often only pursued the accumulation of the rich grave goods (Renan, 1860; Hamdy Bey, y Reinach, 1892). The purpose of this exercise, typical of the colonial antiquarian activity, was primarily to fill Western museums and was done without properly published records of fieldwork. In other words, work was performed under conditions that only allowed the use of minimal modern archaeological methods; methods insufficient for the quality of documentation and information gathering required of archaeological records for this type of rare funerary object.

2. THE ARTISTIC INTEREST OF THE SARCOPHAGI IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES AS THE SOLE SOURCE OF STUDY

Early publications connected with the subject sarcophagi are sourced from the first pieces deposited in Western museums. The prime example of this is the famous Louvre Museum (France) (Yon and Caubet, 1993, p. 62), known for its collection of nine anthropoid sarcophagi, whose very poor contextualization indicates only that they were unearthed in the area between Tartus and Amrit.

We begin our survey with a damaged piece of a sarcophagus documented (Inv. N. 4801), in 1852 by A. Longpérier (1869, p. 34-36), who, in the same year also made note of, without relevant details, a second deteriorated sarcophagus (Kukhan, 1958, p. 459) (Inv. N. 4810). E. Renan (1864), considered a pioneer in the area (Fig. 2), was commissioned to transport two sarcophagi from his famous mission in the French colonies of the Eastern Mediterranean in 1861; only one of which has so much as a record number (Inv. N. 4971). Later, in 1878 another coffin was taken to the Louvre. Unlike many other examples, surprisingly, this one was complete (Inv. N°. 2193). Then in 1882 N. Mitri, made arrangements for the transfer of three more sarcophagi (Inv. N. 1030, 1031, 1119), but as is more often the case, unfortunately all were incomplete. In 1887 another fragmented sarcophagus (Inv. N. 1574), was documented by M. A. Alexandrie. The following year, 1888, another damaged and incomplete piece was documented (Inv. N. 4967), by E. G King and N. A Péretie as being from Amrit (Syria). Curiously, others have

documented the same object as being from the area of Tripoli (Lebanon) (Frede, 2000, p. 92).

In 1953 Copenhagen Museum (Denmark) (Inv. N. 13431) hosted a sarcophagus from the territory of Amrit. There also exist documents in the Museum of Istanbul (Turkey) concerning two sarcophagi. One (Inv. N. 1414), of which was recorded by G. Mendel (1914); the other seems to have been given as a gift (Inv. N. 791), probably during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Three sarcophagi (Lembke, 1998) are stored in Basel Museum (Switzerland) (Inv. N. 249, 250, 295. Finally, in the museum of Hildesheim (Germany) (Inv. N. 1775), and Beirut there are exposed sarcophagi without any contextual archaeological data (Frede, 2000, p. 78).

The findings of sarcophagi in the territory of Arados/Amrit have been increasing over time. However, the process of reconstructing the spatial contextualization, both micro and macro, remains a difficult task today. Furthermore, the context of many anthropomorphic sarcophagi is unknown. We know scarcely more than that they appear within isolated necropolises or mausoleums and tombs. The findings during recent centuries were beneficial in initializing a scientific approach to these memorial pieces, however, archaeological methods today require a much more exacting approach. When found, the contextualization given to these pieces was indicative of previous centuries and does not correspond to even the minimal scientific requirements due them, which has led to the loss of substantial information that would have been of great archaeological interest.

Figure 2. E. Renan photo, ninetieth century. (Martinez 2008, fig. 9)

3. THE DISCOVERY OF THE SARCOPHAGI

Most of the sarcophagi unearthed in the territory of Arados/Amrit, were done so as a consequence of removal of land for construction work, so-called "serendipity findings". Even up to today, no sarcophagi have ever been located through programmed excavation. Of particular note among these serendipity findings is the anthropomorphic marble sarcophagus unearthed in the necropolis of Hay al-Hamrat, a densely populated suburb of Tartus city, which is located in the south lateral of the city, about four kilometres from the site of Amrit, nearly a half kilometre from the coast. The island of Arados is almost directly opposite this neighbourhood. This discovery was made in 1988 as a result of construction work. After a neighbourhood citizen informed the authorities, the first person to approach the site was M. Haykal (1996b, p. 23). The tomb was built using blocks of Ramleh or (sandstone), very carefully covered by long blocks placed on top of each side wall (Lembke, 1998; Frede, 2000). The sarcophagus was removed to Tartus Museum (Inv. N. 632). We have no further information about the process of transferring it to the museum. In the same era a half piece of sarcophagus was documented, but in this case, originating from the harbour of Antarados (Tartus), thanks to a heavy storm that hit the coast of Syria. The discovery, documented by H. Hijazi (1992, p. 97), is currently on display at the Archaeological Museum of Tartus (Inv. N. 266).

Some years later, the finding of four marble sarcophagi was documented in the necropolis of Ram az-Zahab, three anthropomorphic and one pyramidal type or *teke*, without human representation (Hosh, 2009; Dixon, 2013). The sarcophagi were uncovered in 1989 as a result of the construction of a military base near the necropolis, located one kilometres northeast of the polis of Amrit. The road that links Tartus - Homs is just a few meters from the discovery. The structures which protected the sarcophagi were found at a depth of only one-half meter forming five individual graves, four of which contained coffins, while the last one did not (Haykal, 1996b; Hosh 2009).

The head of the excavation at the time was M. Haykal, who was the director of the Archaeological Museum of Tartus and of its Department of Antiquities. He was called the morning of the discovery to carry out the work of extraction and excavation. According to him, there was no material contained within the sarcophagi. However, he also reported that a dozen locals had been gathered to monitor the extraction work because at the time some began to note that the coffins were loaded with precious metal. As a result of this observation the mayor and chief of police came on scene to witness the operation. In the area of discovery, the director of the excavation relates, laying on the surface was an ample number of small statues of a size not exceeding 0.30 meter (Elayi and Haykal, 1996). All sarcophagi documented to have been found in this necropolis are now in the Museum of Tartus (Inv. N. 633, 634, 635).

Another marble sarcophagus was found in the region of Bano, located nearly four kilometres from the metropolis of Amrit. Its excavation in 1996 was

led by R. Haykal. The piece was protected by a simple cist tomb, built with blocks of Ramleh (Dixon, 2013, p. 471), covered by a square block two meters long. The walls protecting the piece, as well as the sarcophagus itself appeared to have been damaged by the effect of infiltrated water (Haykal, 1996b). This sarcophagus was placed in Tartus Museum (Inv. N. 640). No material was recorded as having been in the sarcophagus.

In March 1996 five clay coffins were found inside a hypogeal tomb, called by its discoverers Chalets (Elayi, y Haykal 1996. Each of these coffins held a skeleton (Haykal, 1996b; Dixon 2013). Unfortunately, nothing is known of the interred. The finding was the result of the transfer of land to be used in construction. News of the discovery came from two local citizens in collaboration with the driver of the earth-moving machine that uncovered the tomb. Before an archaeological team, led by M. Haykal, arrived on site, looters took a large ceramic vessel from the tomb, which may have contained precious remains. Police began searching for the perpetrators of the looting and held three persons for questioning. Accordingly, one day later the stolen ceramic vessel was returned and the work of extraction and documentation of the tomb began. Upon opening the tomb, it was left exposed overnight for ventilation because all the coffins were very limp from moisture and might easily be damaged from any movement. The following day, Haykal returned with a pickup truck and formed a layer of soil as a base in the bed of the truck on which to place the five coffins. He was so concerned about the fragile condition of the coffins that he allowed no one but himself to drive the vehicle to the museum. Today, the five coffins are preserved in the museum of Tartus (Inv. N. 645, 646, 647, 648, 649).

In April 1999 during construction work in Hay al-Hamrat (vide supra), a set of tombs was found five meters below ground, one of which housed five sarcophagi. Of these, four were of a pyramidal type; only one was anthropomorphic, with carved human figures. This anthropomorphic sarcophagus was protected by six square slabs of stone. Within the anthropomorphic sarcophagus was a single body which, unfortunately, has disappeared.

A citizen who witnessed the discovery informed the authorities. Immediately afterward, a team of museum staff was formed to carry out the work of the excavation and removal of the piece, which was subsequently placed in the city museum (Inv. N. 1921).

On December 10, 2004, during construction of the extension of the road connecting the neighborhoods around the site of Amrit, a marble sarcophagus was found in an area known as the necropolis of al-Baixada (Besancon, Copeland, Muhesen, y Sanlaville, 1994, p. 169.), which extends over an area of one square kilometer. It is about one-half kilometer north of the site of Amrit and southwest of the city of Tartus. The location of the grave that contained the sarcophagus was in the western boundary of the road linking Lattakia to Homs. The Amrit River separates this acropolis from the acropolis of Amrit. The sarcophagus was discovered during the process of upgrading the road, uncovered by road grading machinery. We have no information concerning how the piece was extracted or handled between its discovery and its placement in the city museum, although the unprofessional process used is attested to by the clear marks left on the sarcophagus by the machinery used for lifting it. The type of funerary structure that contained the piece was unknown at the time of discovery. Neither do we have any data on archaeological material accompanying the finding, nor any other contextual information concerning the piece. Today the sarcophagus is kept in the Archaeological Museum in the city of Tartus (Inv. N. 3286).

On September 14, 2009, a basalt sarcophagus **(Fig. 3)** was discovered by the Directorate General of Antiquities of the city of Tartus (Syria) (Mustafa, 2013, p. 116.). The grave was discovered as a result of the existence of signs of archaeological remains in the area, such as cut stones scattered over a wide area in the location surrounding the discovery. Also found were the remains of old mills and water reservoirs. All of this was from extensive and intensive site preparation prior to the construction of the University of *Tshrin*. Previous to the initiation of building, the land was on the periphery of newly urbanized areas surrounding the city of Tartus, which was primarily agricultural with a concentration of olive groves.

Figure 3. Details of the head of the sarcophagus.

The area of the university is close to the waterfront, about two kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea and about 500 meters north of the Bassl Hospital, in an area known as Ras al-Shagry. The tomb is located a short distance north of the *Andira* river or *nahr*, occupying one of the highest limestone terraces

overlooking the river. The site is located about 700 meters west of the road that runs between Tartus and Safita, and four kilometers to the north of the Amrit site. The work crew found an entrance to the chamber while digging to find bedrock as part of the preparation for the foundation of one of the university buildings. The tomb is large, with a maximum depth of about two meters, its access oriented eastward.

Inside the first chamber are a number of *loculi* oriented in different directions. But, as we noted, only a single anthropomorphic stone sarcophagus was placed there. Unfortunately, it was found open and had been pillaged. It had subsequently been covered by landslides of earth and by stones that had dropped from the ceiling. In the tomb were still part of the grave goods and some skeletal remains (Mustafa, 2015), however they were badly scrambled due to the looting that the grave had suffered.

The news of the discovery was transmitted to the scientific community for the Antiquities of Tartus (Syria). Later, a team of specialists was assigned the responsibility of carrying out the work of archaeological contextualization, excavation, documentation, and extraction of the sarcophagus and its contents. The team removed the sarcophagus and its archaeological material for transfer to the Archaeological Museum of Tartus.

For this, the team had to create a large, funnel-shaped hole about the *loculi* of the sarcophagus and extract it by hydraulic crane (**Fig. 4**).

Figure 4a-b. Extraction process of box; lid of the sarcophagus discovered at Ras al-Shagry (Amrit).

They first extracted the top and then the box because both the door to the tomb and the corridor leading to it were too narrow to extract the object whole. By removing the chamber cover, stone by stone, it was possible to remove the entire box of the sarcophagus. Once work of the extraction was finished and the parts were transferred to the Museum of Tartus, space was prepared in which to place the object in the museum.

4. DISCUSSION

Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the methods and conditions of research and record keeping have affected in a very remarkable way, even to the present day, the study and analysis of these anthropomorphic sarcophagi of the coast of present day Syria. As we have previously mentioned, all excavation activities were by either grave robbers or antiquities aficionados, actuated by accidental findings. The antiquities collectors seem to be only interested in filling the halls of large museums of the previous colonialist countries of Europe or to fill out collections of private antique collectors worldwide. The precise context of very few coffins exist. Even such rudimentary archeological information such as where the object was found, its original appearance, its relationship with other containers (tombs) in the same area, artefacts that may have been found with it, or other archaeological or architectural considerations is non-existent.

When we analyze these archaeological objects we face a very serious problem: They are normally in a very poor state of conservation, with a high percentage missing half the cover containing the representation of the head of the lids. This curiosity begs the question, *why*?

It is very likely that the objects were discovered at some time in the past *in toto*, but the interest of the discoverer at the time was in the object purely as a work of art. This led to fragmentation of the lid so that the portion of interest could be easily transported to the grave robber's destinations. This phenomenon seems to have been very common in the nineteenth century. As demonstration of this, we can highlight some fragmentary sarcophagi located today in the halls of the Louvre (France) (Inv. N. 1574) (**Fig. 5**). This museum is the most prominent example of the late colonial phase in the region controlled by the French. In fact, the presence of many Middle Eastern objects of antiquity in western museums is strong evidence of the "cultural leak" of the coast of Syria.

Given the lack of context, as described above, it is not surprising that the *corpus* of published research articles on Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi is minimal.

Those studies that have been published are incomplete. To compound the issue, all discoveries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were conserved with virtually no associated materials and artefacts, placing serious obstacles in the path toward full understanding of these sarcophagi from an archaeological perspective. Further, many studies of these objects have been undertaken from the perspective of the item as art (Buhl, 1988; Frede, 2000;

Almagro-Gorbea, Lopez Rosando, Mederos Martín, y Torres Ortiz, 2010), an approach we feel wholly inadequate for these enigmatic artefacts.

Figure 5. Sarcophagus of Louvre museum (inv. No. 1574) (Frede, 2000, plate, 93, b)

Nevertheless, with the information we presently possess concerning their material culture and with a suitable approach, and despite their scarcity, we may still propose hypotheses and interpretive archaeological theories of the social and cultural significance of these extraordinary pieces.

What was the practical function of these coffins? The most obvious was as a repository for the body of a deceased person prior to mummification, whether they be male or female, adult or child. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases of extant examples, the cadaver and coffin have become separated over the years and the cadaver has been lost. As well, objects that may have been placed with the body have been stolen or misplaced prior to, during, or after excavation. Indications are that these Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagi were containers of the deceased as an abode for their final voyage, a practice not common before the Phoenician period of the eastern Mediterranean coast. We may note that during the first millennium. B.C., the funerary practice observed in this region was incineration (Aubet, 2013, p. 77), after which the ashes were deposited in jars or urns. We find this even though sarcophagi were beginning to be used to contain the remains of certain individuals of the social elite.

The cover of the anthropomorphic sarcophagus had a function other than simply covering the receptacle itself: It has been considered that the decorated top was a standardized way to represent a type of portrait of the individual who was contained within the coffin (Kukhan, 1951). In this author's opinion there is inadequate evidence to support this hypothesis. Frequently we find a sculpted characterization of human anatomical features, clothing, cultural supplements, and especially a head and facial traits, however there is no evidence that these images are specifically characteristic of the interred.

We may increase our understanding of the significance of these funerary pieces in the Phoenician Mediterranean coast through the interpretation of the empirical evidence: That they have been found in quantity only in the Mediterranean basin is in itself an important piece of information. We may also consider the change of funerary ritual from cremation to inhumation as indicative of a broader change, most likely of Persian or Egyptian origin, in the whole cultural space considered "Phoenicia".

5. CONCLUSION

It is notable how the systematic methodology applied to archaeological contextualization of so-called Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi found in the Mediterranean coast of Syria has been transformed over the centuries. Obviously, political circumstances affected profoundly not only the data related to the archaeological contextualization, but the conservation status of many pieces. However, unusual and often times faulty methodological approaches to the collection and reporting of data were adopted, unsuited for the task, so the credibility of any observations and conclusions from earlier periods must be approached with caution. Poor archeological methods decimated many details that could have been of utmost interest to the scientific community, which leads us to an incomplete picture of these objects.

The absence of archaeological prospection of cemeteries and isolated graves containing sarcophagi in the area of study is surprising. Public improvement works and building seem to be the only way to unearth these exceptional pieces. Because all the findings in recent decades were accidental, the process of extraction, excavation, and contextualization of these funerary objects is sorely lacking in most cases.

It is difficult to interpret the significance of the characters carved on the lid of each sarcophagus. However, it is possible that they could be the iconic representations of figures or cultural images produced at the time, treated as persons belonging to the class of ruling elites. Through interpretation of certain symbolic attributes, we may find in each character an ideological legitimation in their roots or ancestry, real or fictitious, or an invocation of a religious or political myth. Faces are embossed with the idea of a living human presence, but human figures are depicted as lying outside the sarcophagus, emphasizing the role the individual contained in the coffin played in his or her social milieu.

The new findings have come to clarify, if not substantially modify, the first presuppositions about sarcophagi. It is necessary to upgrade the documentation of objects in museums and to better control the process of documentation when new ones are found. Modern archaeology focuses to a much greater extent on the description, analysis, and interpretation of material culture because this not only reflects the socio-political relations of a culture, but also plays a key role in structuring their relationships. Thus we see that archaeological pieces, such as sarcophagi, when seen in context are the embodiment of the death of certain social segments. They might be approached as representations of societal elites or authorities who turned their prestige and authority into power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all members of DGAM of Tartus (Syria), and to Mohamad Haykal for provide me all required information. I have to appreciate Dr. P. Aguayo, for the guidance given as a supervisor, during my PhD study.

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