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FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE FROM AMRĪT (SYRIA). NEW MAUSOLEUM IN ARD AL-BAYADA CEMETERY

Bashar Mustafa

Al-baath University, Faculty of Arts and Humanity, Department of History (Homs).
Syrian-Homs-P.O.Box. 77, Syria
(bbmusta@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and analyzes a hypogeal tomb recently unearthed during rescue excavation at the necropolis of Ard al-Bayada belonging to the ancient city of Amrīt in present-day Syria. Many of the numerous hypogeal tombs that have been documented at this site seem to be related to Phoenician culture. Given the fact of its being hypogeal, as well as its architectural features, this finding has close ties to Roman Imperial culture and presents a significant contribution to the archaeology of the area. There is evidence that several generations used this complex tomb over a long period of time; architectural elements of the mausoleum have been examined to confirm the usage of this burial site during an extended period and confirm its use by ancient tribes of various socio-ethnic variations who held disparate religious beliefs and practiced diverse rites. Based on architectural features of the mausoleum, we can date the origin of the site to the late second to 3rd centuries CE. As such, this discovery contributes to the understanding of the function and character of Roman ideology in this part of southern Syria. This paper will shed light onto the architectural and cultural context of the territory of Arados/Amrīt during the Imperial Roman Empire of the 2nd and early 3rd century CE.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first millennium BCE on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea several Phoenician kingdoms flourished from the north to the south. In this analysis we will highlight the kingdoms of Arwad (Phoenician: Qrn, 'rwd, (refuge), Greek Arados) (Lembke, 2001; Belmonte, 2003; Aubet, 2008; Hamod, 2014: 35). Its location stands three km offshore, just to the west of the Amrīt site. The Phoenician history of the Island is, for the most part, unknown because excavations have only recently begun. However, it remains the considered opinion of many scholars that the area was continuously inhabited from at least the third millennium BCE (Yon and Caubet, 1993: 60; Besancon et al., 1994; Al Maqdissi and Benech, 2009: 209; Al Maqdissi, 1993; 2010). After Alexander the Great had conquered the region of the Syrian coast in 330 BCE, the Phoenician kingdom of Arwad maintained its autonomy owing to the grace of its king Geraštart (Greek Gerostratos) (Elayi and Elayi, 1986: 17). The new leadership managed to maintain its independence under which the regional kings continued to benefit from semi-autonomous administration of this coastal area. This local administration was under the rule and supervision of the kings of Syria and the Seleucids (the successors of Alexander the Macedonian and their representatives in Antioch).

According to some scholars, it is reasonable to posit that the ancient Phoenician cultures endured at least until the Roman conquest of 67 BCE (Rey-Coquais, 1989: 45; Leriche, 1987; Butcher, 2003). Amrīt is a Syrian archaeological site located to the southwest of the Sahl Akkar fertile area. The centre of this region is the present-day city of Tartus. According to many scholars, Amrīt was inhabited since ca 3000 BCE (Renan, 1864: 59; Elayi and Haykal 1996; Maree 2010, 200). The ancient site of Amrīt, or Marathus in ancient Greek, stands as a lasting memory of the once powerful cultures that ruled over a significant portion of the ancient Mediterranean coast (Saliby, 1984: 11; Haykal, 1996; Bader, 1997; Lembke, 2004; Dixon 2013). Unfortunately, the texts narrating the city's history are lost, as are most of those describing the Phoenician cities. However, we find Amrīt mentioned in Egyptian texts along with other ancient cities on the Canaanite coast (Brique-Chatonnet, 1996: 65-67; Belmonte, 2003; Aubet, 2008: 182).

Antiquarians have focused on the settlement since the nineteenth century; that the plains and hills around ancient Amrīt yield invaluable information regarding aristocratic burials in this area dating from ancient times is well known (Savignac, 1937; Harden 1963: 25). The funerary architecture of Amrīt has long been of interest to many travelers and those antiquarians who have been interested in Syrian heritage in general and the Amrīt site in particular (Renan, 1864). Archaeological evidence shows that its impressive monuments, so-called Ma'ābid or temples (Dunand and Saliby, 1955, 9; Akkermans and Schwartz, 2003; Oggiano, 2012, 193; Hamod, 2014: 223-224), date back to the Persian period between the fifth to third centuries BCE (Dunand and Saliby, 1985: 48-55; Hamod, 2014: 228), and its holy place is a model of the Semitic temples.

Numerous hypogeal tombs, very typical in this area of the Syrian coast, have been uncovered but few have been analyzed properly due to the fact (Haykal, 1997; Elayi and Haykal, 1996; Mustafa, 2013: 112), equally fortunate and unfortunate, that they were only discovered as the result of public works developments. Likewise, and purely unfortunately, excavations by archaeologists have often pursued only the accumulation of valuable grave goods to raise funds for Western museums. Thus, our hope is that more recent discoveries will offer a better and more thorough understanding of these burial chambers. We propose formal, in-depth analysis and evaluation of these tombs and their funerary materials, with analysis emphasizing their contextual and chronological aspects (formal) and to also include well-reasoned socio-cultural interpretations of all available data, following e.g. approaches of earlier works regarding tombs (Haddad 2015), Nabatean practices (Mahdi Alzoubi et al 2015) and burials (Cooper et al 2015).

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

During work on the road linking Tartus and Tripoli, a mausoleum was found in the southern suburbs of the modern city of Tartus (ancient Antarados), Syria (Fig.1). The site is in a graveyard, or necropolis, known as Ard al-Bayada (of approximately 12,000 m2), originally named by French scholar P. Sanlaville in 1979 during his first visit to distinguish it from the other parts at Amrīt (Sanlaville et al., 1994: 16). The necropolis lies about one kilometre from the sea, approximately one kilometre north of the main site of the Amrīt acropolis, and two hundred meters from the ancient stadium. The island of Arwad, formerly known as Arados, is situated four kilometres away. Nahr Maratos (Amrīt river) separates Ard al-Bayada necropolis from the Amrīt Ma'ābid.

In the course of bulldozing the old highway, workers stopped the machines after inadvertently digging up five graves. All were simple, rectangular graves presenting no complex structures. They contained bones and only a few funerary objects (un-

published). Later, while the staff was continuing the excavation three meters north of the five graves, a few blocks were found *in situ*. The archaeological staff also located a structure above natural rocks (Fig.2a) that formed a square-shaped basin of 2 x 2 meters, connected by a 0.50 x 0.50 meter hole that led to the discovery of the tomb's entrance, closed by painted red stones.
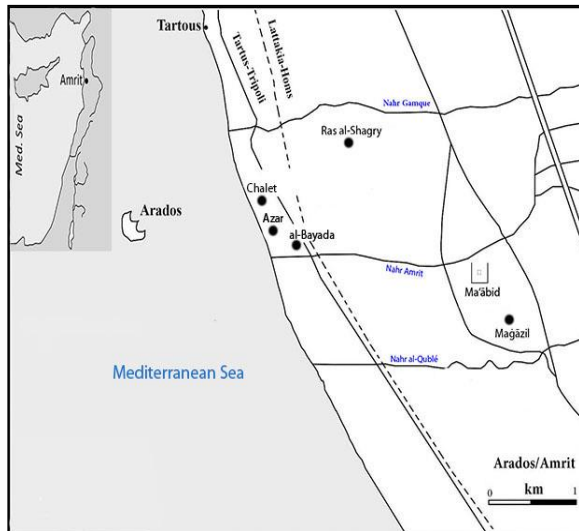

Figure 1. Amrīt site, the location of hypogeal tombs.

This hypogeal tomb was uncovered July 10, 2003. The entrance is buried slightly more than twelve below the surface, facing northeast. The impressive mausoleum suffered damage, possibly from long ago (maybe the damage was from natural causes), though it still contained several object. Inside were three marble sarcophagi, or *teke*, a terra-cotta box, an elaborate and complex mosaic, two marble busts, male and female; ten lamps comprising three typologies, one of which represents the head of a bull; seven gold items; colored beads; eight ionic capitals; two pieces of a column; seven amphora of various sizes; four gold leaves; a gold necklace; a bracelet; two pieces of gold; three bronze coins, extremely damaged; two alabastron; two bronze mirrors; along with many pieces of broken crystal and pottery goods. The covers of the three coffins were semi-displaced, giving evidence of looting. The tomb contains no information regarding who was buried in the sarcophagus. It bears mentioning that all objects documented as having been found inside the tomb are now stored and protected in a secret location; access to them is not allowed at this time.

The news of the discovery was announced to the scientific community by the Directorate of Antiquities in Damascus and its branch, the Department of Tartus, which subsequently assembled a team of specialists responsible for the excavation, analysis of archaeological context, and documentation of the

monument. The team also managed the removal of some of the grave goods and organized the delivery of the various objects to the Museum of Tartus. The tomb was substantially damaged, but it cannot be known at this time how much of the damage was from earthquake and other natural causes and what was the result of looters. Nevertheless, it is an extraordinary find that will shed new light on the history of Amrīt/Arados thanks to the careful report undertaken by the excavation team described in the next section. The authorities decided to convert the mausoleum to a museum by leaving the three marble sarcophagi in situ. At this moment, preservation and restoration of the tomb is a dire necessity in order to preserve it for future study and admiration. This discovery in the land of Amrīt continues to move and surprise us, revealing its unique secrets and treasure

3. DESCRIPTION

The impressive mausoleum lying in a grove area (Fig. 2 b) proved to be a hypogeal complex consisting of a stepped dromos, an atrium, gates, arches, a crypt and loculus. Both of the latter were exposed at ground level. The tomb is rectangular, with dimensions 13.10 m in length and 3.20 m in width. The structure has thirteen loculi (one double) distributed in three heights and a quadrangular annex containing three sarcophagi (Fig. 2c). We do not know whether this annex is contemporaneous with the construction of the tomb or of a later period.

Figure 2 a-d. A - The tomb from outside with the entrance in the middle. B - Steps with the wooden door on the bottom. C - View inside the mausoleum with sarcophagus, columns, and capitals. D - The terracotta box of the sarcophagus in situ.

The tomb is rectangular (Fig. 3 a-b), and its entrance is divided into two parts. The southern section has been excavated, while the northern part,

constructed of rock-cut blocks, has not yet been. The entrance is formed by a nine-step stairway, 2 m wide at the top and narrowing in width as it descends, with a final width of 1.6 m. This stairway leads to the underground tombs. The height of each step is approximately 0.3 m high. At the end of the latest dromos is a large, excavated loculus of 1.6 m x 0.5 m and a terrace.

The doorway is excavated into the rocks and accessible by stairs. There is a small courtyard visible above the south side with dimensions 1.20 m x 1.00 m at a height of 1.00 m. Indications are that all walls were at one time decorated with white and red mosaic, but were found completely fragmented.

The gate is at the end of the steps. It had been closed off with blocks, but these were removed to allow entrance to the mausoleum. Access to the chamber was through a half-point arch supported on two columns with capitals on two repurposed bases of different types. The column shafts are smooth, as are their bases. Two pilasters are attached to the wall. There is a decorative 'fronton' built from ashlars of various sizes and shapes, giving evidence that they were also repurposed from another structure. The upper part of the gate was excavated into the natural rock, while the bottom section was built up of stone.

Descending into the mausoleum, we find the burial chamber (Arcosolium) (Fig.3c). The floor of the main chamber is of skilfully-cut stone and is at a level different from the annex where the sarcophagi are documented to have been. The annex measures 7.6 m long, 3.2 m wide, and 3.6 m high. The roof is excavated into solid rock and slopes towards the west. Along the east wall, there are four carved steps (0, 20 m x 1 m), which probably continued from the outside steps. Just beside this staircase is a rectangular pit excavated into the ground approximately 1 m x 0.50 m that is partially covered by stones. The north wall of the burial chamber holds three loculi (1, 2, 3), which are perpendicular to the long axis of the tomb and oriented east to west. The wall is built of stones and has two niches above it. There is a large room (3.95 m long, 2.50 m wide, 1.60 m high) above the two niches. Directly beside the final loculus we observe a fresco depicting various images, e.g., fish, phoenix (Fig. 4a-c), and a cross engraved just next to the fresco (Fig.4d). The same side of the chamber has four loculi (4, 5, 6, 7), which are cut into the ramleh (sandstone) rock and oriented east to west. Loculi 6 and 7 are smaller than 4 and 5. Four niches are also carved below the last four loculi.

Four loculi have been excavated along the southeast wall of the first chamber (8, 9, 10, 11). In loculus 10 we found an empty, undecorated, rectangular terracotta sarcophagus (Fig.2d). In addition to these

loculi we find four niches cut above them, all oriented north to south. Three more loculi (12, 13, 14) were built on the south-eastern part of the same chamber. Six niches were excavated directly above. Two of them are cylindrically shaped with a small habitation cut over them measuring 4.40 m long, 2.45 m wide, and 1.50 m high.
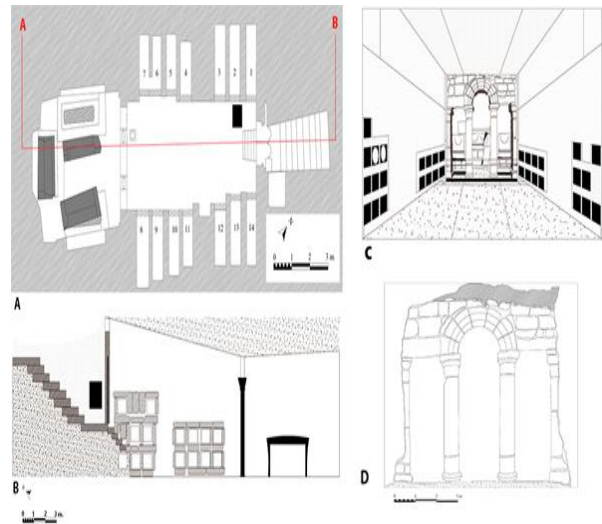

Figure 3 A-D. A, Diagram of the tomb; B. Section A-B of the mausoleum. C, Isometric view of the tomb. At the bottom we find the three sarcophagi. D. Details of the gate inside the tomb.

The western chamber, or 'sanctum,' is 4.5 m long, 4.7 m wide, and 3.9 m high. It is connected to the atrium by a gate similarly-shaped to the gateway of Palmyra (an ancient city in the heart of the Syrian Desert) (Fig. 3d). The gate consists of a pair of arches with suspended intermediate capitals. The shape is supported by two square-shaped columns decorated with frescos and arches. Three lines of well-cut rock have been built above the arch reaching to the ceiling. The ceiling, then, is supported in the middle by two circular pillars in the Greek style. There are also two additional columns excavated into the wall. Three arched entrances comprise the gate (resembling the church altar gate). Those on the right and left measure 2.10 m x 0.70 m. The central entrance is 2.60 m x 0.95 m. Close to the entrances were found two collapsed columns. It is possible that the two busts mentioned previously were placed above them.

Three marble sarcophagi were inside the annex chamber located at the northern, southern, and eastern walls. All three sarcophagi consist of a box with a roof-shaped lid, decorated by carved garlands with bucranium and personifications. Notable are excavations of approximately 0.3 m square cut into each wall at the side of the lid of each sarcophagus for the purpose of facilitating the movement of the lids when required. A rectangular space, approximately

0.7 m x 0.50 m, is excavated over the sarcophagus on the eastern wall.

Figure 4 A-D. A –C. Details of fragmented frescos inside the mausoleum; D. The cross engraved above one loculi.

4. DISCUSSION

Archaeological studies have suggested the accoutrements of material culture, then as today, were frequently employed to differentiate social strata. Of particular use for this purpose were tombs and imported luxury items. The tombs that remain in the Levant coast provide evidence of the development of funerary rituals. This and the social value of the grave goods they contain are today the main variables in our analyses of social diversity (Chapman et al., 1981), in the society of this period. Thus, numerous tombs that have been unearthed here are of great interest for the scientific community. There are numerous examples of funerary architecture within the territory of Amrīt, providing a variety of useful comparative examples for the cemetery at Ard al-Bayada. The region is large, with wide-ranging diversity in the surviving evidence for Phoenician, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman funerary practices. The result of good preservation of rock-cut architecture in an area with historically low population from the sixth century BCE onwards, when these tombs appeared, confirms Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Phoenician influences (Claude and Bonnet, 1992: 59), as well as possible local developments of certain afterlife beliefs.

Initially, when circumstances allow, we attempt to ascertain the period of use of a hypogeal tomb with a C^{14} sample. When this is not possible, i.e., when a mausoleum lacks human or other organic remains, we turn our focus to other tombs documented in the same area and objects contained within them. Considering the hypogeal tombs in the area under discussion, with special emphasis on how they were carefully crafted into the rock with access by dromos or stairs to a burial chamber, we note these are prevalent and well-documented in the territory of Amrīt (Harden, 1963: 106; Prado Martinez, 2008; Mustafa, 2013). Among these, we can highlight the so-called 'tower death,' (a type of large hypogeum tomb marked by above-ground stone monuments) (Fig.5a), and the Magazil's tombs, both of which can reach several meters in height. The common characteristic is that they are both tower tombs, but each has a distinctly different shape. The first is polygonal, the second, pyramidal (Saliby, 1984; Dunand and Saliby, 1985: 10; Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 24-26; Prados Martinez, 2008: 106). Both include underground architecture and can be dated to the sixth and fifth century BCE (Renan, 1864: 68-70; Dunand and Saliby, 1985: 1-2; Oggiano, 2012).

Another tomb we must include is termed 'Chalet.' There are no external architectonic features; it is wholly contained underground (Fig. 5c). The example here held five terracotta sarcophagi (Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 89), R. Haykal (1996: 58), in his first approach to this tomb presented a description and a relative chronology of the entire tomb as belonging to the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The Azar tomb (Fig. 5b) is another example of a hypogeal tomb in the area (Saliby, 1970-1971; Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 35). Based on analysis of ceramic and other objects documented within the tomb, the best estimate of its period of origin is a later stage of the third century CE (Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 36; Haykal 1996: 25; Mustafa, 2014: 144). The latest tomb to be mentioned, that at Ras al-Shagry (Fig. 5d), containing an anthropomorphic sarcophagus of basalt (Mustafa, 2013: 116-117; 2015: 46). According to early analyses of materials recorded in the tomb and judging by its architecture, this example dates back to the Alexandrian period or slightly earlier, ca third century BCE (Mustafa, 2013:121; Mustafa and Abbas, 2015: 51-52).

The tomb at Ard Al-Bayada presented here appears to be a rather unique case in the territory under discussion. Giving practical considering to the material documented inside it, particularly the marble sarcophagus, its age is debatable. Due to stylistic features, e.g., garlands with bucranium, the tomb and materials contained within are thought to have originated in the period of the early second to third centuries CE (Butcher, 2003: 376; Mustafa and Chavet Lozoya, 2016: 218).
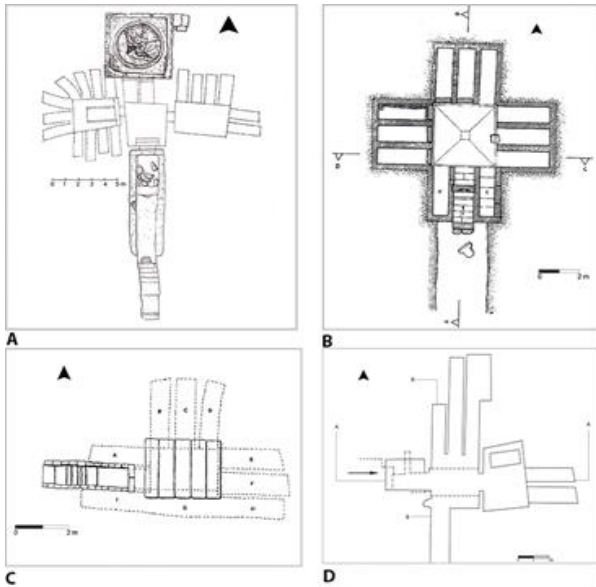
Figure 5 A-C. Diagrams of hypogeal tombs in Amrīt territory. A - Magazil (Haykel, 1996: 48); B - Azar (Elayi and Haykal, 1996, fig. 14). C - Chalet (Haykel, 1996: 72). C - Ras al-Shagry (Mustafa 2013: fig. 9).

If the sarcophagus had been used in this period, those specific features may be clues for solving the mystery of whether the last stage of use might have been from the third century BCE. To ascertain the first use of this complex mausoleum, we delve further into the architecture of the tomb and the materials found within. Thus going through other tombs uncovered at this site may help us in dating the period of use, as all others have been dated to a period prior to the Common Era for the reason that few of them contained Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagi (Butcher, 2003: 376; Mustafa and Chavet Lozoya, 2016: 218), which were typically estimated to be in use from the fifth to fourth centuries BCE. This leads us, then, to focus on the architecture of the tomb itself for an idea of its period of origin and use.

Giving extra emphasis to the architecture and noting its exceedingly high quality, the internal design is typical of the arcosolium, with the annex at a different level and with a well-designed and skilfully-constructed entrance. This brings into question whether this tomb was used prior to its complete state. We could ask further whether all its architectural features were built in the same period. Clearly, the tomb was inhabited since the first chamber was erected, but perhaps the tomb was enlarged at a later time to accommodate an additional burial. The hypogeal tomb as we see it at present is far removed from the original, yet it can provide us with vital clues to help determine the character with which it started. From the burial style as well as from the style of architecture—the loculi and their various sizes, its cylindrical shape, the terracotta box con-

tained within, and the marble sarcophagus—we may suggested this tomb was used by several generations of the family. We may also conjecture the members of the family comprised a relatively high social stratum who occupied the main religious and administrative posts within the region (Hamoud 2014:388). Further, we may safely conjecture that the tomb existed and was used during differing stages of culture in the area and resulting burial practices (Kennedy, 1999: 80). As evidence we may observe the two separate chambers and well-decorated gate opening to a marble sarcophagus. Additionally we note the feature of frescos representing fish, birds, and a possible ancient cross, all symbols of early Christianity in the Levant (Shahîd, 2009).

Based on the architectural features of the mausoleum, we can also theorize that this structure was not originally erected for the purpose of housing a sarcophagus. What evidence do we have that may allow us to determine its original intent? Bearing in mind that in Roman culture, and perhaps even earlier, changing the purpose of the tomb was very common (Bodel, 1999; Baldassarre et al., 1996: 185-191). Therefore, we may confidently propose alternate original purposes of the complex hypogeal through several different periods of use based on its architecture. The Ard al-Bayada tomb originally consisted of a small burial chamber that was later enlarged by an enclosure with a second chamber in the Imperial Period. All material found in the tomb indicates it was used for the practice of inhumation. Dr. Irfan Shahîd, an American scholar at Georgetown University, insists in several publications (1989, 2009), relating the relationship of Rome with the Arabs that the Roman army stationed in the Levant was primarily composed of divisions of local Phoenicians. Thus, the users of this and other such tombs may be ancestors of ancient tribes of this area of Levant. Canaanite/Levantine elements were reinterpreted in many ways, adapting pre-existing architecture and conceptions of space while exploiting local building materials to create a new environment. The types of extant tombs, together with the presence of high-quality monuments, suggest that this funerary environment was the result of the beliefs and traditions of the local social elite. This relatively wealthy class of society in Roman Syria intermixed funeral objects that were part of a Mediterranean or imperial style; the tombs in Syria were hybrid buildings (De Jong, 2007: 25-26), in their outward appearance and represent not the colonizer but the local traditions, the Syrian-provincial manner of burial.

Bearing those facts in mind, what may we conjecture concerning the original purpose of this structure? Firstly, the main burial chamber was raised. We know that Amrīt was an epicentre of Northern

Phoenicia (Elayi and Elayi, 2014; Claude and Bonnet 1992), so this feature suggests use for an elite family belonging to the 'Phoenician' culture. Secondly, the remarkable gate was built for decoration and undoubtedly belonged to a much later stage. A further, not unreasonable assumption is that later the gate was dismantled and an annex was prepared to house the bright marble sarcophagus. We base this on the knowledge that from the third century (Von Hesberg, 1992: 92), onward very few Roman tombs were built.

Obscuring the tombs from general view was obviously intentional, leading us to the question of the purpose of this practice. We may posit one very practical primary factor: the wish to protect the mausoleum from damage and looting. The family tomb was used through several generations and could contain a great quantity of removable valuable objects. Considering the high value of such burial places, access would have been very restricted in ancient times even as at present. Certainly, security of some kind seems an absolute necessity. Further, possibly just as important was the desire to allow the deceased an undisturbed *somnus aeternus*.

5. CONCLUSION

In the ancient world of the Levant coast, rituals connected to burials were often combined with the erecting of a memorial tomb. If we infer religious beliefs from external and internal architecture of the tombs of this region, we may conclude that the users of this tomb at Ard al-Bayada had significant wealth and we can form opinions based on factual material evidence concerning their religious beliefs and the organization of the society in which they lived. The conventions of the funerary imagery provide a retrospective portrait of the deceased interred in these burial places, even when only presenting a selective and idealized view of the commemorated persons as they were viewed at death. We may suggest that the various cemeteries serving the same settlement, particularly those featuring collective tombs, could belong to different aristocratic groups or to segmented families belonging to the original Arados/Amrīt upper-class. The presence of aristocratic groups in Levant settlements throws light on the social structure in this region.

In the absence of chronological data from C14 or other scientific methods, it is difficult to precisely date the tomb. Lacking this, extant material culture must be relied upon. The construction dates of tombs that have been discovered and recorded cannot be determined more definitively than Roman to Late Imperial Roman periods. It is not possible to determine the frequency with which different types of burial occurred at this mausoleum, how many interments were made in the tomb, or the span of time for which the cemetery remained in use. We may, however, conclude that the tomb was inhabited at different times by several generations. This is noticeable in architectural features. The hypogeal tomb as it appears from its architectural design, its sections, and its location was the burial place of a family line who continued to use it for more than three centuries.

In this short study of the tomb at Ard al-Bayada, we can confirm the statements of the scholar I. Shahîd (2009) that the ancient Canaanite/Levantine tribe in the territory of Amrīt continued until the end of the Roman era and the beginning of the next era (Byzantine period) as evidenced by their material culture. The discovery of the funerary monuments, or memorials, in the context of Imperial architecture, opens a new panorama within the framework of the local monument architecture. More, these discoveries extend the horizon of knowledge of the proto-history of the Levant in general and of the Phoenician Arados/Amrīt site in particular. This information provides a greater insight into the interrelations between Mediterranean societies prior to the cultural unification promoted in this area of the Levant. The change we have noticed in material culture, visible since the arrival of the Romans at the Amrīt site, resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in a redirection of local social beliefs with foreign goods. This phenomena played a pivotal role in the development of local ideology. This brief survey of the physical characteristics of the tomb at Ard al-Bayada and the implications they provide us of culture of the society in which it was created and used leaves many aspects unanalyzed or only touched upon tangentially. Numerous issues and questions remain to be answered by scholars in the future.

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