

NEW DISCOVERY IN SYRIAN COAST: THREE GARLAND-SARCOPHAGUS

Un nuevo hallazgo en la costa siria: tres sarcófagos con decoración de ‘tipo guirnalda’

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ABSTRACT: In this article we will describe and analyze three marble sarcophagi that were recently unearthed from a hypogeal tomb; rescue excavations were conducted by the Direction-General of Antiquities (Damascus; Tartus) at *al-Bayada* necropolis, belonging to the ancient city of Amrīt, Syria. The coffins date from the late second to third centuries AD and resemble each other in their iconography. Stylistically, they are all of the “garland” type, decorated with several significant motifs and symbols. They were probably crafted in Asia Minor for a local wealthy family during this region’s occupation by the Roman Empire in its latter period. As such, this discovery contributes to amplify the number of coffins we have and to the understanding of the function and character of Roman iconography and significance in this part of southern Syria, it may allow us to do some reflections and shades light on the Roman funerary landscape. On the other hand that find could contribute to extent the study on the Roman iconography developed at Southern area of Syria.

Besides the information on the production of this type of materials, on having treated itself about a finding in situ, one might derive information about the funeral local rituals. All this will allow us to realize a series of reflections and to be making the funeral landscape and to penetrate into the knowledge of the rituals of burial into this territory, which archaeological interventions are still very scanty.

Key words: Imperial Roman; Amrīt; hypogeal tomb; al-Bayada; burial practice; inhumation.

RESUMEN: En este artículo se describen y analizan tres sarcófagos de mármol que recientemente fueron documentados durante las excavaciones de rescate en un hipogeo; estas intervenciones arqueológicas fueron realizadas por la Dirección General de Antigüedades (Damasco; Tartus) en al-Bayada, necrópolis que pertenece a la ciudad antigua de Amrīt, Siria. Los sarcófagos se pueden datar hacia finales del s. II o a comienzos del s. III d. C. y los tres ejemplares muestran una gran semejanza iconográfica. Estilísticamente pueden ser clasificados como de ‘tipo guirnalda’ por sus característicos motivos y símbolos. Posiblemente fueron elaborados en Asia Menor, por encargo de alguna familia adinerada, durante la etapa de presencia romana en este territorio. Este hallazgo podría contribuir a ampliar el conocimiento, hasta ahora disponible, sobre la iconografía romana desarrollada en esta zona del sur de Siria. Además de los datos sobre la elaboración de este tipo de materiales, al tratarse de un hallazgo *in situ*, podría derivarse información sobre los rituales funerarios locales. Todo ello nos permitirá realizar una serie de reflexiones e ir confeccionando el paisaje funerario y profundizar en el conocimiento de los rituales de enterramiento en este territorio, cuyas intervenciones arqueológicas son aún muy escasas.

Palabras clave: Imperio Romano; Amrīt; hipogeo; al-Bayada; ritual funerario; inhumación.

1. Introduction

Amrīt is an ancient Syrian city located to the southwest of the fertile area (Sahl Akkar). That places the center of this region in the present day city of Tartus or *Antarados* –in the ancient Greek–. According to scholars, *Amrīt* was first inhabited *c.* 3000 BCE (Renan, 1864: 59; Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 13). The site of *Amrīt* or *Marathus* –ancient Greek– stands as a lasting memory of a once powerful culture that ruled

over a significant portion of the ancient Mediterranean coast (Dunand and Saliby, 1956, 1985; Saliby, 1984: 11; Haykal, 1996: 23; Bader, 1997: 218; Akkermans and Schwartz, 2003: 12; Lembke, 2004).

The site figures as one of the most important ‘Phoenician or Canaan city-states’ on the Aradian coast (Hamod, 2014: 35). However, thanks to the archaeological record, we know the name of *Amrīt* appeared on a *cuneiform tablet* from the settlement of *Ugarit* –present day Ras Shamra, Syria– (Kestemont, 1985: 140), on the northern littoral of the Syrian coast. Unfortunately, the texts narrating the city’s history are either lost, as is the case with other documentation describing various Phoenician cities, *or* perhaps never even existed. Nevertheless, we find that *Amrīt* was mentioned in Egyptian texts along with other ancient cities on the Canaanite coast (Brique-Chatonnet, 1996: 65-67). During classical antiquity, this area of the Levant belonged to *Syria Phoenices*. The name of its capital, *Tyre* –Şaydā,-Lebanon (Sartre, 2001: 614)–, was given by Roman authority to Syria after the victory of Septimius Severus (Vivancos, 2005). Unfortunately, we have no records concerning the monarchs of this particular area during the period under discussion.

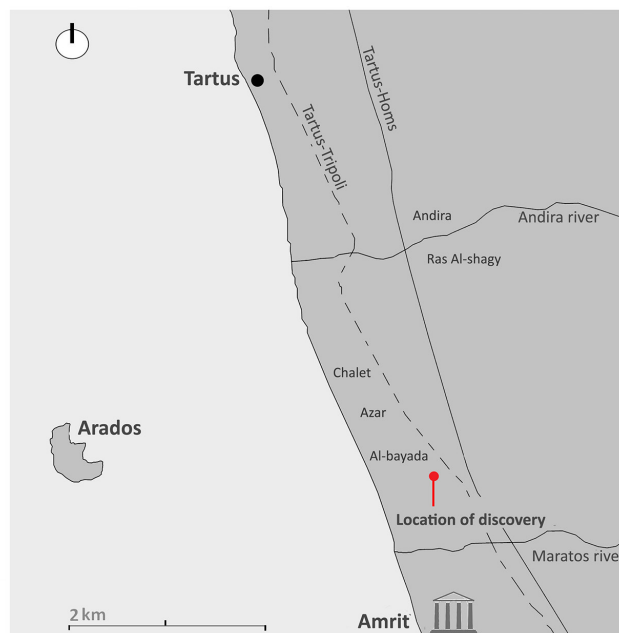
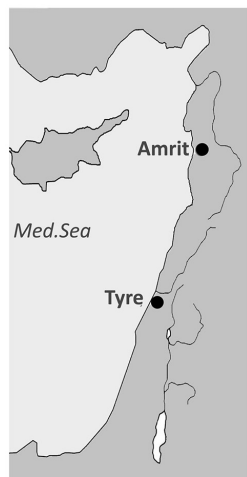


FIG. 1. Syrian coast, location of *Amrit* site and the discovery.

It is well known that the plains and hills around ancient *Amrīt* have yielded invaluable information regarding aristocratic burials in this area during the Archaic and Classical periods (Savignac, 1937; Harden, 1963: 25; Yon and Caubet, 1993; Al Maqdissi, 1993: 483). Further, the funerary architecture of *Amrīt* has long been of great interest to many travelers and antiquarians interested in Syrian heritage in general, and ancient ruins of *Amrīt* in particular. Thus, studies have been conducted in this settlement from the beginning of the nineteenth century (Renan, 1864) and numerous marble sarcophagi have been documented in hypogeal tombs (Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 74; Mustafa, 2013: 112; Hermary and Mertens, 2014: 374), typical of this region.

However, among the numerous tombs with their contents unearthed in the area, few have been analyzed properly since the vast majority of the findings have been the result of chance findings and unsystematic excavations. Furthermore, excavations by archaeologists in past centuries have often pursued only the accumulation of valuable grave goods to raise funds for western museums (Renan, 1864; Hamdy Bey and Reinach, 1892).

The large number of hypogeal tombs discovered at Amrīt implies that this city had an important role on the southern coast of Syria. Following in this tradition, we will present here a remarkable new discovery of three marble sarcophagi from the ancient region of Amrīt and propose a possible change to the context of the analysis and evaluation of these funerary materials in their formal aspects –contextual and chronological– as well as in their socio-cultural interpretation.

2. Circumstances of discovery

During on-going improvement work on the road between Tartus and Tripoli, three marble sarcophagi were unearthed *in situ* inside a huge mausoleum¹ in the southern suburbs of the present-day city of Tartus, Syria. The site is in a cemetery belonging to the *al-Bayada* necropolis (Fig. 1). It lies

about one kilometer from the sea, approximately one kilometer north of the Amrīt *Acropolis* –main site–, and about 200 meters from the ancient stadium. Arwad, or *Arados*, Island is situated just off the coast, about four kilometers away (Rey-Coquais, 1974). Nahr *Maratos* –Amrīt river– separates the *al-Bayada* necropolis from the Amrīt *Ma'ābid*, or temple.

On July 10, 2003, in the course of the bulldozing the land of the old highway to prepare for new construction, workers suddenly stopped when they noticed an unusual formation that turned out to be the entrance to a hypogeal tomb in which was found three marble coffins (Fig. 2). This impressive mausoleum suffered damage at an indeterminate time in the past –possibly several centuries or more–. The covers of the three coffins were semi-displaced as a result of looting. Because of this vandalism, we have no information about the persons buried in the sarcophagi and what other objects may have been contained within them.

The news of the discovery was announced to the scientific community by the office of the Directorate of Antiquities in Damascus and its branch in Tartus, which subsequently assembled a team of specialists who would be responsible for the excavation, contextualization, and documentation of the site and its archaeological environment. Although the sarcophagi were already substantially damaged, either in antiquity or in later periods by looters



FIG. 2. *The sarcophagi (in situ).*

¹ Objects that have been documented inside the tomb: two marble busts, male and female, ten lamps –one shaped as a representation of a head of a bull–, seven items made of gold, colored beads, eight ionic capitals, two pieces of a column, seven amphora of various sizes, four leaves made of

gold, a gold necklace, a bracelet; two pendants of gold; three very damaged bronze coins, two vases, and two bronze mirrors. At this moment all mentioned objects are protected in secret stores. Due to the present circumstances in Syria, no one is able to access them for examination.

or earthquakes, this is an extraordinary find that will shed new light on the history of *Amrīt* during the Roman period, a period still hidden in the dark, awaiting scholarly research. Thanks to the careful excavation techniques of the Directorate of Antiquities and Museum of Syria, the land of *Amrīt* continues to surprise and amaze us by revealing its unique treasures.

3. Dimension and description

—Sarcophagus 1. Fine white marble, box length: 250 cm; width: 150 cm; height: 120 cm; lid height: 50 cm; thickness: 15 cm (Fig. 3).

The sarcophagus consists of a box and a roof-shaped lid, which has *acroteria* on all four corners and pediments (Fig. 3). The surface of the sarcophagus is scratched. Upon discovery, its lid was semi-displaced. The rectangular, well-polished box

has no feet; rather, it was placed on a pedestal. On the long, visible side of the box that faces outward toward viewers are carved garlands with bucranium and personifications: male and female heads possessing physical traits of mature age. The sides not visible to the viewer have been left unworked.

The male head stands out for its symmetrical design. It is oval-shaped and tapers towards the chin. The face is gently framed by curly hair that almost covers the ears. The hair is arranged in a semicircle, with a wavy pattern in four rows. The chest of the male figure is well delineated and covered by a toga.

The female head design is based on formulaic features, but still somewhat naturalistic. The eyes and mouth are carefully carved so that the features are distinct. The face is oval shaped and framed by hair completely covering the ears. The entire chest of the figure is covered by a tunic, giving the coffin extraordinary iconographical interest. In addition,

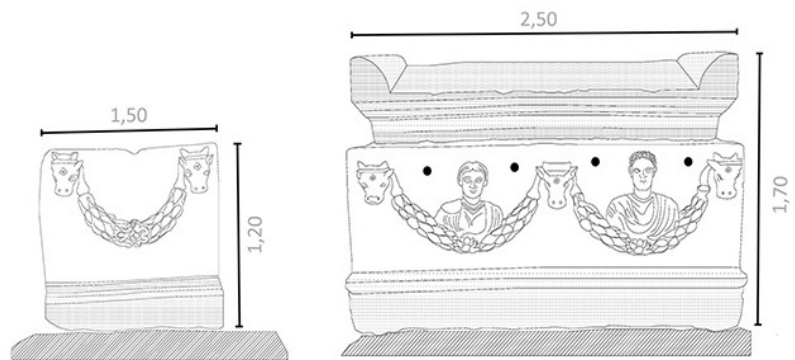


FIG. 3. Photograph of the frontal side and dimensions.

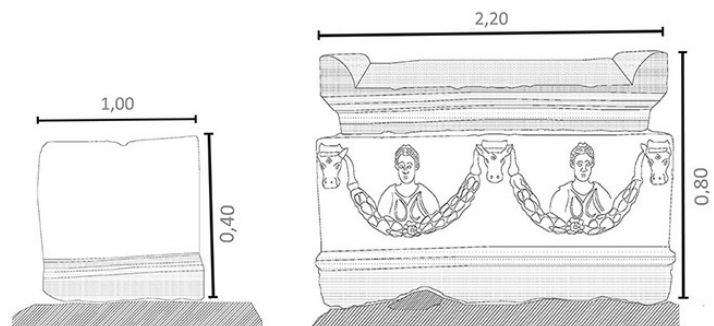


FIG. 4. Photograph and details of the complete dimensions of the second sarcophagus in the bottom.

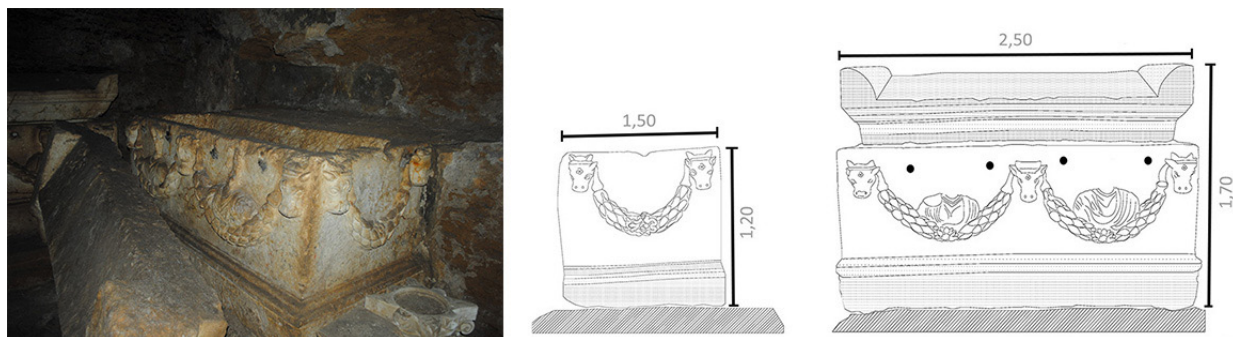


FIG. 5. Photograph of the third sarcophagus and its dimensions.

the head of a bull with two plaits and a flower or “star” in its forehead is crafted between the two human heads and connected to them by a carved chain. The same bull’s head is also found on the end of the box that was open to view. The front of the box shows two more bulls’ heads. No traces of pigmentation were detected. The lid must have been secured with metal clamps, as researchers found remains of metal in the upper part of the box. Of note is the absence of any inscription on the surface of the sarcophagus.

—Sarcophagus 2. Fine white marble, box length: 220 cm; width: 100 cm; height: 40 cm; lid height: 40 cm; thickness: 13 cm (Fig. 4).

The sarcophagus consists of a rectangular box with a roof-shaped lid with four *acroteria* and pediments closely resembling the first example above (Fig. 4), also absent feet. At some time the base was damaged and the coffin was positioned above a platform.

The figure of a woman is represented by a head and chest. While the head is carved with formulaic features, the eyes and mouth are carefully carved, so that the features are well delineated. The face is oval shaped framed by undulating waves of hair terminating in concentric semicircles covering the forehead with a sharp dividing line in the center, reaching the middle of the forehead. The top part of the head has a smooth surface. While the shoulders are well marked to differentiate the area of the head, the chest appears covered by *stola*. Three bull’s heads are crafted between female heads and

are connected to them by a garland resembling the carving in the first example. Also similar to the first example, no traces of pigmentation were detected on the surface and it is postulated that the lid was secured with metal clamps due to the presence of metal in the upper part of the box.

—Sarcophagus 3. Fine white marble, box length: 250 cm; width: 150 cm; height: 120 cm; lid height: 50 cm; thickness: 12 cm (Fig. 5).

This sarcophagus consists of a rectangular box and a roof-shaped lid with four *acroteria angularia* and pediments closely resembling those of the second example above. The coffin was found with the lid completely removed from the box, as can be seen in (Fig. 5). Like the first two, this box does not have feet, but was positioned above a platform base. Only two sides of the box, those that would have been visible to viewers, are carved with reliefs. These are, again, garland with bucranium and the representation of an individual’s head, unfortunately damaged. Of the bodies, only noticeable are the shoulders covered by a *tunic* resembling the design of the second example.

Though this coffin has sustained damage, there are still extant three bull heads between others obscured by damage. They are also connected by a chain in a design resembling the first two coffins described above. On the other visible side are two bull’s heads joined by garland. Again, no trace of pigmentation was detected on the surface and the lid of this sarcophagus bears evidence of having been secured with metal clamps.

The three sarcophagi were left in place inside the tomb by the Director-General of Antiquities and Museums, as the local authorities decided to convert the tomb into a small museum.

4. Chronology and material

When considering garland-sarcophagi lacking human remains and other objects that may have been contained within the tomb, archaeological studies of the materials involved in the funeral rites must be based first and foremost on the analysis of the materials from which the containers were constructed. Indeed, for an appropriate analysis of their chronology and craftsmanship, we must first concentrate on aspects of archaeological interest: the raw materials used and the purpose of the object.

The use of stone sarcophagi along the eastern Mediterranean basin was known between late second and first millennium BCE exclusively for the elite class; as evidence we may note the example of the *Ahiram* sarcophagus in Byblos, Lebanon (Ferron, 1993: 22). These and other funerary art of ancient Amrit are remarkable for their variety of styles and subjects, and also for the insight they provide into the cultural practices of this ancient society.



FIG. 6. *Phoenician anthropomorphic sarcophagus inside the hall of Archaeological Museum of Tartus (Syria).*

The territory of *Amrit* has provided us numerous marble sarcophagi (Frede, 2000: 99; id., 2002: 217), but many of them are in the Phoenician anthropomorphic style (Fig. 6). According to the archaeological record, thirty Phoenician sarcophagi have been found in this area (Mustafa and Abbas, 2015). However, their dates of origin have been designated by scholars as between the late fifth and early third centuries BCE (Elayi and Haykal, 1996: 90; Haykal, 1996: 25; Mustafa, 2013: 120). We may note here that a stone coffin was found in the *al-Bayada* necropolis and documented in the archaeological record, but it is stylistically unlike the three under study here and chronologically belongs to the fifth century BCE (Mustafa and Abbas, 2015).

Since there were few artefacts remaining in or around our three subject sarcophagi, we have to rely on style and historical context for dating. If we attempt to look for stylistic similarity with other marble sarcophagi documented within the territory under study, we unfortunately find few cases of others that have been unearthed in the area that we might use for comparison. For instance, in the garden of the Archaeological Museum of Tartus, lie two damaged marble sarcophagi (Fig. 7) preserved under inv. n.º 1926, 3717 –both unpublished pieces–. This pair is from *Arados/Amrit* territory, but again were documented without reference to any other objects that may have been with them and so any contextual information is difficult to infer. They are both rectangular, as is evident in the image, and feature garland on the long sides.

Above the garland on one is carved in relief a bull's head, while in the other only garland and flowers are carved on the sides of the sarcophagus. We do not have data concerning their date of origin, even though many garland-sarcophagi have been unearthed in the region of *Laodicea, Apamea, Tripoli* and

Berytus. Their age is debatable, but due to their stylistic features they are thought to have originated between the early second and third centuries AD (Butcher, 2003: 376). If this is the case, these three sarcophagi would not have been unusual in the area of the Levant coast.

We also note that these sarcophagi generally follow the conventions characteristic of the Roman style, which in large part are the result of the imitation of an Egyptian style re-interpreted in Roman workshops according to the growing influence of the tastes of influential persons in that era of the Roman Empire. Thus in their formal aspects they are stylistically more complex—a feature that may help us to determine not only their date, but place of origin—.

In the funeral and burial practices of ancient Rome, the use of elaborately carved marble and limestone sarcophagi were characteristic of inhumation of what may be termed the elite strata of society from the second to fourth centuries AD (Newby, 2011: 301). Roman marble sarcophagi that came into widespread use in the second and third centuries AD (Koch, 1977: 390; Turcan, 1971: 94-95) are among the most artistically impressive sepulchral monuments, for their large surfaces are often elaborately carved with scenes from ancient Roman mythology. Placing a sarcophagus on a masonry base was very typical during the early Imperial Age and was a consistently popular practice throughout that period (Herdejürgen, 1996: 22-23; 2000: 31). This leads us to suppose that our garland sarcophagi, each placed on pedestals, may have been made and used during the Imperial Roman period.

The use of decorated stone sarcophagi spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire as one of the primary symbols of wealth. The iconographic representations on the surface of the coffins may be an important clue to understanding the person interred. Indeed, it may even be possible to draw

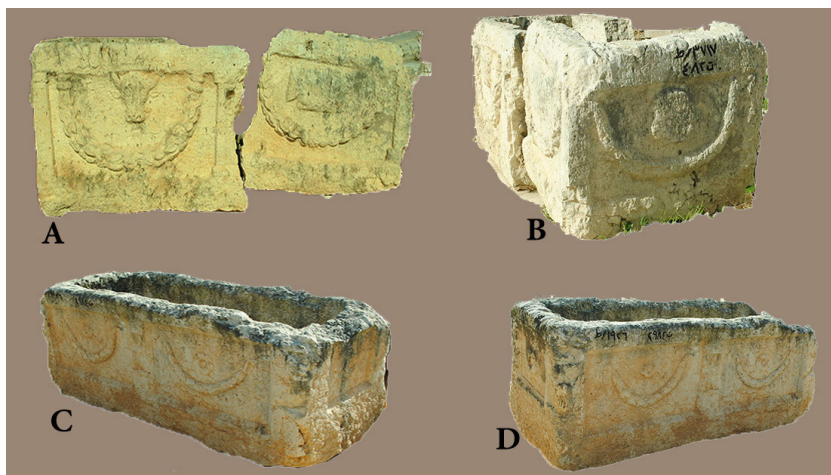


FIG. 7. Details of both sarcophagi boxes.

strong inferences from the surface designs concerning the ideology of the owner of the object. The most popular decorations among Roman sarcophagi—bucrania and garland—both derived from ancient decorative styles (Beltrán, 1984: 163; Corbelli, 2006); garlands symbolized the fruitfulness of life in the hereafter and were common in Roman art from the first century AD onward (Simon, 1965-68). The bull's cranium signifies spiritual wealth after death and is related to funerary sacrificial practices, as it is a part of the animal immolated by fire (Hersey, 1988: 63). We may emphasize how such garland-decorated sarcophagi were common along the Syrian coast (Butcher, 2003: 209), and that such sarcophagi were always left with two or more sides unworked or at most only partially crafted (McCann, 1978: 21). Undoubtedly this is due to the fact that the sarcophagus was intended to be placed against the wall or in the corner of the tomb as we find in the case of the three in the present study, which was very common during the Imperial Roman period. This leads us to hypothesize that our three coffins were made during this stage of the Roman Empire on the Syrian coast.

The raw material used in the sarcophagi was marble, as is the case with most others found in the area (Harden, 1963: 25; Lembke, 1998; id., 2001). However, throughout the Levantine coast there is no trace of even one marble quarry from which the blocks may have been sourced. Therefore, all

the marble for these impressive objects might have been imported at great expense² (Faegersten, 2003). Some scholars (Bucher, 2003: 206) suggest that the main center of extraction and elaboration of white marble was the island of Proconnesus in the Sea of Marmara (Ward-Perkins, 1957: 456-457), as quarries there are known to have supplied Levant coast, even extending into other adjacent regions during the Imperial Roman period. The eastern Roman sarcophagi production is very complex and diverse, there is a wide variety of production of finished and semi-finished sarcophagi. We may consider further investigation on behalf of this issue, to confirm the precedence of the marble.

We do not know whether the marble sarcophagi found in *Amrīt* cemeteries were delivered there completely finished or whether a partially crafted box may have been shipped to local artisans for finishing closer to the site of use according to the client's desires, as was common in ancient times (Koch, 1993: 544). This question remains difficult to answer with any certainty because of the lack of archaeological evidence of workshops local to the *Amrīt* territory. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, still, without rigorous excavation of a wide area we may never know whether local artisan shops existed somewhere right below our feet in this area of ancient *Amrīt*. It could be suggested that these sarcophagi may be traceable to a particular workshop that was active near the ancient quarry on Proconnesus in Asia Minor. In fact, according to extant archaeological records (Ward-Perkins, 1957: 457), perhaps these coffins trace to one of two major centers of production of Roman sarcophagi. One was at Attica in Greece, the other at Dokimeion in Asia Minor.

Coffins from the latter center are known to have been characterized as being decorated by garland (Işik, 1998: 280-281; Newby, 2011: 301). The discovery of coffins typical of the shop in Dokimeion illustrates the long-distance trade that was taking

place in even very large, extremely heavy, and difficult to transport luxury goods at the height of the Roman Empire.

5. Conclusion

The discovery of garland-sarcophagi on the Syrian coast may open a window into late Roman society, allowing us to more confidently reconstruct funerary customs of the Syrian coastal region during the Imperial period. The custom of decorated sarcophagi spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire functioning as symbols of monetary and political status as a consequence of profound ideological changes within that society. Specifically, we may draw upon the increased use of such burial practices as indicative of the increase of inhumation practice and decrease of cremation for the upper class Roman elite of the Levant coast as they attempted to imitate the burial practices of emperors in the main metropolises. However, the near absence of any petrographic analysis or any sort of exploration, all opinion of specialists indicate that the marble used in the preparation of these sarcophagi at *Amrīt* site, may have imported, so, we may perhaps be very skeptical about it, without rigorous investigation.

Our three marble sarcophagi may have belonged to "late" members of the Imperial family. Based on their style, they may be positioned in the third century AD, as they are indeed representative of art forms from this declining period of the Roman Empire. The iconography of the coffins ultimately derives from a long tradition of royal iconography in the Near East and makes them unique in the cemeteries of *Amrīt*. Further, being unworked on the sides not visible to the viewer, we may suggest that these particular sarcophagi would not have been part of the rituals of the deceased themselves, but were decorated solely to impress visitors. The representation of bucrania, garland, and human figures, female and male leads us to suppose they were remarkable funeral objects even in their time, made for the benefit of an aristocratic family and the descendants of those interred. Most probably,

² Faegersten, F.: *The Egyptianizing Male Limestone Statuary from Cyprus, A study of cross-cultural Eastern Mediterranean votive type*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis defended in 2003 at the University of Lund.

this family was composed of wealthy landowners who had easy financial access to these and other luxury items.

These sarcophagi can be assigned to a corpus of monuments that present scenes from farm life and a glorified image of death through a wealth of symbols. These monuments may have been created primarily in Asia Minor during the third century AD, are very probably fits well with the pattern of artistic production during the Roman occupation of Amrīt site, which flourished between second and third century AD.

Al-Bayada necropolis was an area of extraordinary importance during the late Archaic and Classical periods. The discovery of stone coffins in this region illustrates the process by which goods and ideas were adopted from the Roman Empire and adapted to variations in culture and beliefs of this region far removed from the main Roman culture on the Italian peninsula. By comparing and contrasting these differences we can discern how individual cities in the region of the Levant coast moved toward a relationship of rivals in terms of religious beliefs, even as a 'top-down' social structure was imposed on them from the Empire. It is not only the discovery of these three sarcophagi, but the wealth of already discovered archaeological matter in the region under discussion that clearly reveals an amazing potential for future investigation. Accelerated effort to explore, document, and protect these funerary monuments needs to be carried out before any more of the region's history is devastated.

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