


**Department of Classics and Archaeology**

# Reanimating the tomb: Interpreting Palmyra's banquet reliefs in context

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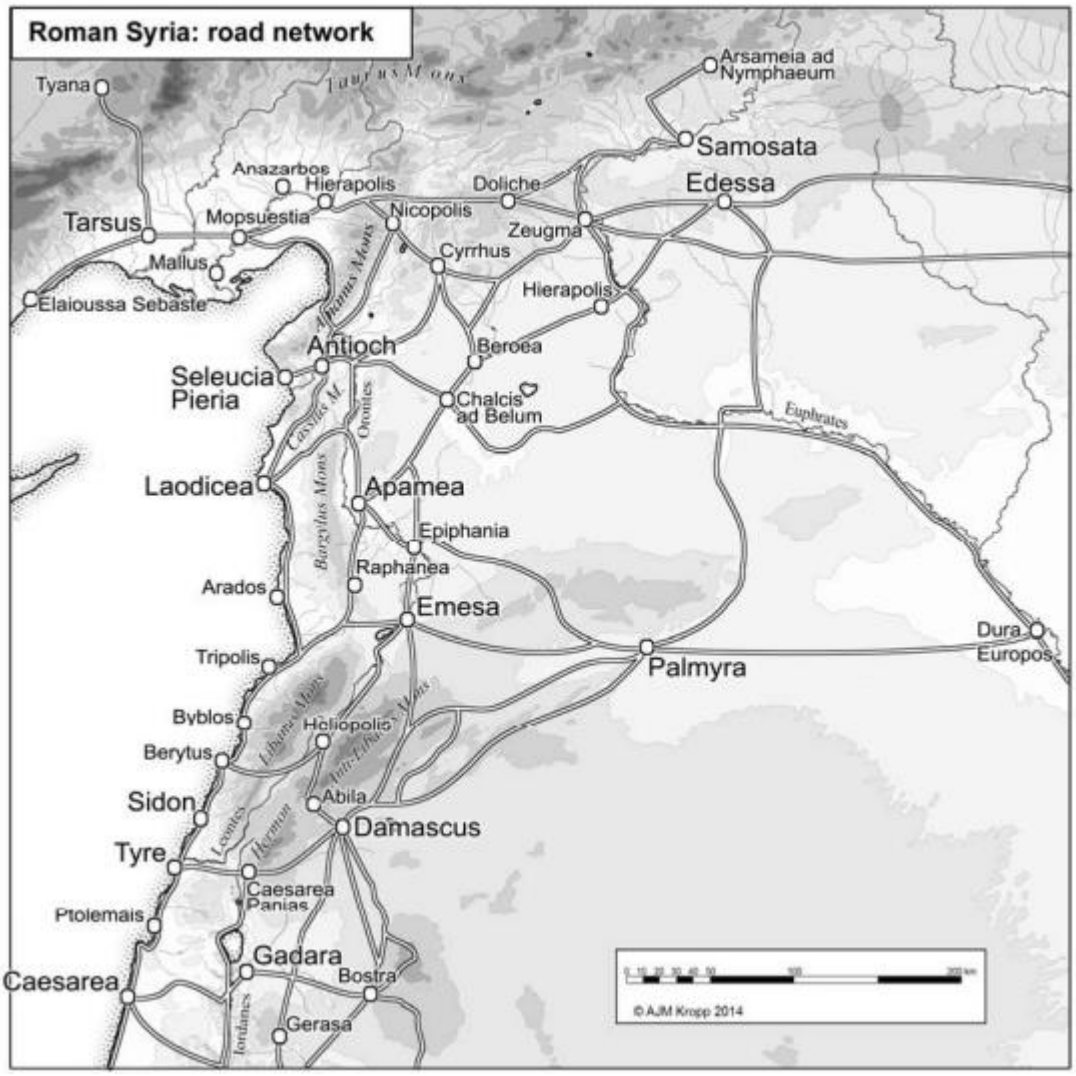
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# Introduction

Funerary portraits from the ancient world are multi-faceted, complex artefacts, their meanings influenced by the specific physical and cultural contexts of which they are a product. Palmyra's portraits are well-known for their distinctive style and the sheer number that have survived to the present day, predominately scattered in museum collections around the world. However, the severing of Palmyrene funerary sculpture from the tomb for which it was intended to be used and displayed unavoidably affects its reception.[1] Banquet reliefs, a type of funerary sculpture whose Palmyrene variation features a reclining central figure surrounded by family, are generally analysed detached from the tomb in scholarship. In this thesis, I argue that the specific contexts of the reliefs are integral to their interpretation and that by returning them to the tomb space we can gain greater insight into their meaning, their usage, and the values they were constructed to convey. My approach considers the tomb holistically, as a space that was impacted by the people who used it, in which multiple elements interacted with one another. Chapter 1 introduces the world of the dead at Palmyra, providing a foundation for the monuments and sculpture to be explored in detail later, before turning to a discussion of scholarship on the Palmyrene funerary sphere. The following chapters consider core elements of the tomb: the banquet relief in Chapter 2, its usage in and beyond Palmyra; the iconography of sculpture and paintings in Chapter 3; and the role of grave goods and architecture in funerary ritual in Chapter 4. Within these, I question whether eschatological beliefs are present, often dismissing earlier scholarly interpretations in favour of more compelling iconographic and material evidence. The final chapter uses a single tomb as a case study, the Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa, as an opportunity to explore specific relationships between sculpture, tomb architecture, and grave goods, in order to determine the impact that viewing the tomb holistically has on the banquet reliefs within. Overall, I will show that the construction of elite identity through the banquet reliefs is best understood when we consider them a part of a dynamic, multi-sensory space.

## Introducing Palmyra

Between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, Palmyra was a bustling metropolis in the heart of the Syrian desert. Located next to an oasis, the city grew and thrived as a result of Silk Road trade: an ideal

[1] Some museums recognise this, and attempts are made to recreate the arrangement of the sculpture to reflect how they might have looked in the tomb, e.g., portrait busts stacked in a 3 by 4 arrangement at the British Museum; a reconstruction of a niche using bust fragments from the Museo Gregoriano Egizio, Vatican City (1600, 15029, 15030, 56595, 56598, 56600-56604).

stopping point for caravans travelling along one of the five routes that converged there (Map 1). Situated between the two great Empires of the time -the Romans to the west, and the Parthians to the east- the citizens of Palmyra used this position to their great political and economic advantage.[2] The caravan city that it was, Palmyra was a cultural melting pot. This is reflected in many aspects of city life, not least in its sanctuaries, with their eclectic temple designs that blended classical with local and Eastern architectural traditions, constructed for the worship of a host of deities whose origins were wide and far-reaching.[3] Despite the annexation of Syria by Pompey in 64 BC, Palmyra retained a high degree of autonomy until its sacking by Emperor Aurelian in 272 and 273 CE, in response to rebellion by the famed Queen Zenobia.[4] Though the Roman footprint on Palmyra's material culture is not overwhelming, the influence of the region's Hellenistic past can be seen in the architecture of the city's public buildings and in its civic life.[5] While the elites of certain Near Eastern cities could be consider more Hellenised than others, local customs prevailed at Palmyra, particularly in the funerary sphere. Far from a straightforward adoption of certain social, artistic, and architectural traditions of the classical world, what can be seen at Palmyra are complex processes of adaptation: the weaving of particular elements into the fabric of local culture, like the 'meal of the dead' motif, or the funerary busts. Over 500 hundred funerary monuments have been identified at Palmyra, from which roughly 4,000 pieces of sculpture have been recovered, making the funerary sphere our greatest source of information on the construction of Palmyrene identity.

## Approaches and Methodology

From its 'rediscovery' by Europeans in the 17th century, up until today, Palmyra has been a site of great interest to travellers and scholars alike. Due in no small part to the striking image the tower tombs cut across the desert skyline, Palmyra's necropoleis were a focus of the first large-scale systematic excavations of the site in the twentieth century.[6] Excavations in the 1920s and 30s by Danish archaeologist Harald Ingholt, a pioneer in Near Eastern and Palmyrene studies whose fieldwork diaries have recently been made openly accessible through digital archives,[7] explored in particular 80 hypogea of the south-west necropolis. His development of a stylistic and chronological typology for Palmyrene

[2] Sommer 2020.
[3] Kaizer 2002.
[4] For a recently published history of Palmyra, see: Raja 2022.
[5] However, the colonnaded street should be considered a local adaptation of the Greek stoa to the Roman Syrian urban environment: Kropp 2022, 13.
[6] Raja and Steading 2021, 2.
[7] Raja 2021.

portraiture in his seminal monograph is still largely used today,[8] and the plans and sketches from his diaries are, in many cases, our only surviving evidence of those tombs. The digitization of thousands of pieces of funerary sculpture has created the possibility for comparative studies of Palmyrene portraiture on a scale not seen until now, enabling in-depth iconographical and stylistic analysis.[9] By the time of the publication of the first and to this day still, most comprehensive work on the art and architecture of Palmyra by Malcolm A. R. Colledge, Palmyrene afterlife beliefs continue to occupy an enigmatic place in its study. *The Art of Palmyra* from 1976 covers the breadth of Palmyrene art and architecture from religious, to civic, to funerary, his argument for afterlife beliefs hinging on the following evidence: the deposition of grave goods; the careful treatment of the deceased's body through mummification or other preservation methods; and the presence of inscriptions in Aramaic designating a tomb as a *bt 'lm'*, 'house of eternity', built by the founder for his descendants to reside in 'for ever'.[10] However, any details of this afterlife apparently lies beyond the bounds of our evidence. The author even claims that it was the ancient peoples of Syria and Palestine in general, and not modern scholars who were "confused" about *their own* afterlife beliefs.[11] Although the contribution by Colledge to the study of Palmyra is valuable beyond doubt, the tendency to homogenize Near Eastern cultures of the Hellenistic and Roman period has been prevalent in scholarship until recent years. Viewed from an Orientalist position, the art and architecture from this diverse collection of civilizations were often considered imitators of more advanced Greco-Roman culture and considered within a provincial framework.[12] Modern scholarship is keen to correct these misconceptions, focusing on processes of cultural assimilation, and indigenous adaptation and invention.[13]

[8] Ingholt 1928.
[9] As part of the *Palmyra Portrait Project*: Kropp and Raja 2014; Raja 2018.
[10] Colledge 1976, 61-2.
[11] "Confused notions of an afterlife have haunted the peoples of many cultures, and the ancient Semites were no exception." Colledge 1976, 58. Problematic also is Colledge's application of the term 'Semite' to a group of people as opposed to a linguistic usage, again on account of the cultural diversity of ancient Near Eastern peoples.
[12] Though highly influential, Klaus Parlasca's work on Palmyra is similarly at prey to provincialist tendencies.
[13] See the work of Andreas Kropp, on Palmyra and the wider Hellenistic and Roman Near East. Also, Rubina Raja; Michael Sommer.

# Chapter 1: The World of the Dead

## I. The funerary sphere

The variety of tombs across Roman Syria, each with their own architectural traditions, express important messages about the values and beliefs of the distinct cultures who developed them.[14] During the first three centuries of this millennium, up until the recent past, the first sight that greeted visitors to Palmyra was a desert panorama studded with looming stone towers which lined the roads into the city (Fig.1).[15] Commemorating the dead was an important aspect of elite life in Roman Palmyra, as evidenced by the wealth of tombs and the thousands of funerary portraits that populated their walls. These monuments functioned not only to honour and memorialise the ancestors of wealthy Palmyrenes, but as symbols of prestige for present and future citizens: embodying shared visual and physical experiences, drawing on the traditions of the past while projecting forward to endure for subsequent generations.[16] The location of cemeteries and funerary monuments in relation to urban dwellings is an



Figure 1: *Passage de deux grandes caravanes a Palmyre, par la vallee de Mausolees,* by Jean-Baptiste Hilaire, 1970 (Charles-Gaffiot *et al*. 2001 *Fig.*42).

[14] de Jong 2017, 37-76; *Appendix* 2, 314-334.
[15] For an overview of the influence of this striking image in the works of 17th-19th century European artists: Raja 2022, 57-58. The tombs may also have served as markers for merchants: Saito 2010, 41.
[16] de Jong 2019, 32-33.

important consideration in the classical world. While Greek and Roman traditions commonly dictated that the dead be confined to cemeteries outside the city walls, burial customs of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East are less clear.[17] Most, though not all, Palmyrene tombs are extra-mural, which may express a general desire to separate the living from the polluting influence of the dead.[18] Necropoleis surround the city to the north, southeast, southwest, and to the west (commonly known as 'the Valley of the Tombs') (Fig.2). Though we know of a period of Hellenistic occupation at Palmyra, little trace remains in either the archaeological record or the ancient literature.[19] One of the oldest known tombs from the city, in use between 175/150 BCE and 50 BCE/11 CE, was discovered beneath the sanctuary of Baalshamin, preserved due to the purification and sealing of the space prior to the construction of the temple on the site.[20] Even older is Tomb G, a pit grave containing a mature male in a wooden coffin in the south-east necropolis, dated to between 380 and 160 BCE.[21] Free-standing stelae, similar to

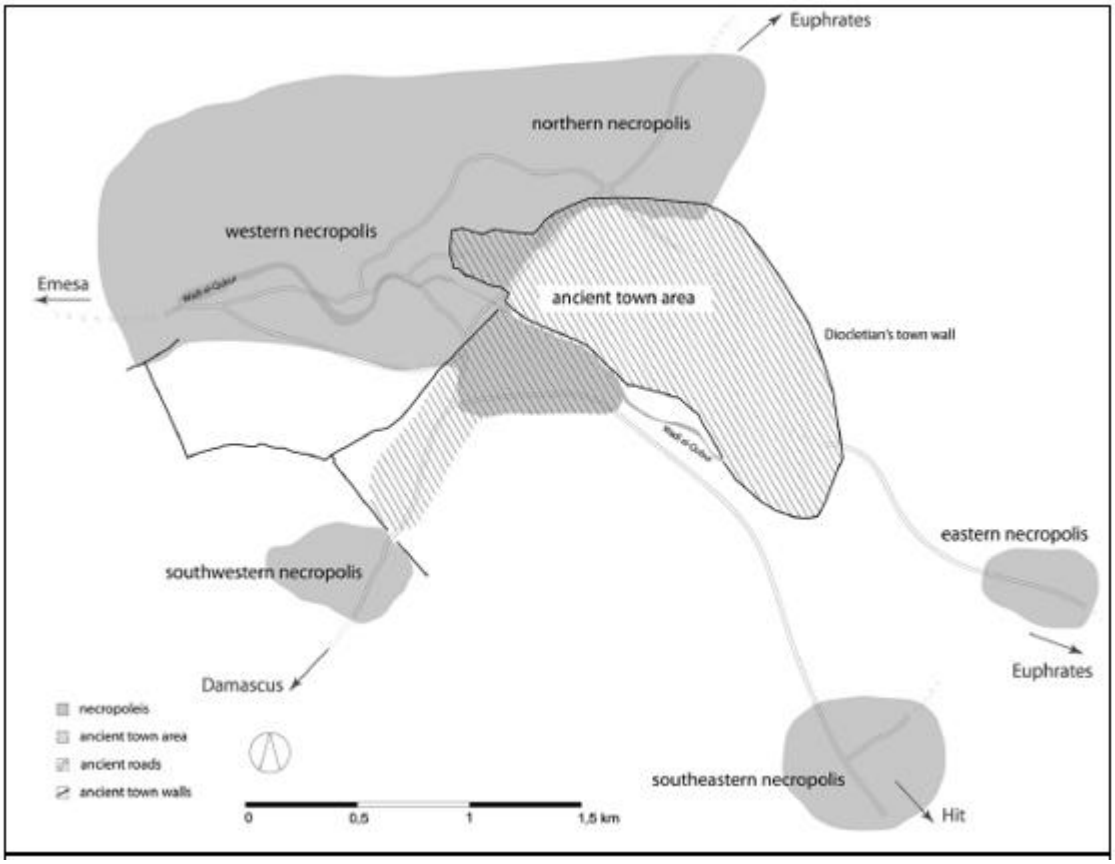



Figure 2: The necropoleis of Palmyra (A. Henning in Raja 2022, 59 *Fig*.17).

[17] See esp. Petra, with its rock-cut tombs scattered throughout the city: Kropp 2013, 176-180.
[18] Butcher 2003, 302.
[19] Gawlikowski 2021, 21-22.
[20] Gawlikowski 2005, 45; de Jong 2019, 38.
[21] Saito 2018, 192.

Hellenistic models, were used prior to the transition to monumental tomb types and largely phased out over the course of the 1st century CE (Fig.3).[22] Across all monumental tomb types, the dead were interred within stacked shelves of longitudinal slots, or *loculi*. These slots were sealed with limestone slabs, commonly carved in high relief with portraits of the deceased (Fig. 4). More rarely, burial occurred within decorated or undecorated stone sarcophagi. A single burial could contain multiple bodies, so the number of deceased that a tomb could accommodate was, as a rule, higher than the number of preserved slots. Though extremely uncommon in the funerary sphere, a few examples of statues also survive, due perhaps to the influence of Hellenised workshops.[23] In general, relief sculpture prevails in Palmyra, the local adaptation of half-figure busts to loculus slabs marking a distinct move away from Roman imperial and provincial modes of commemoration:[24] one of many distinguishing features of Palmyrene culture.



Figure 3: Stele of 'GB', daughter of RMY: h. 46cm, w. 25 cm (Tanabe 1986, 303 *Fig*.271).

[22] Parlasca 1976, 34-39; 1982, 22-23.
[23] E.g., a set of polychrome statues of a man and a woman from the main chamber of the Tomb of Zabdâ: Michałowski 1960, 185 *fig* 203; statue of a woman from the Tomb of Alaine; fragments from Tower Tomb nos. 15 and 19: Sadurska 1977, 105-107 *figs.* 46-47.
[24] Kropp and Raja 2014, 395.



Figure 4: Funerary busts from the Hypogeum of Yarhai, constructed 108 CE, west necropolis (Tanabe 1986, 278 *Fig.*247).



Figure 5: Tower of Elahbel, constructed 103 CE, west necropolis (Henning 2013a, 171 *Fig*.7).

## II. 'Houses of eternity': the tombs of Palmyra

### i. Tower-tombs

The first funerary monuments at Palmyra were tall stone structures known as tower-tombs (Fig.5). They are found in all four of the main necropoleis surrounding the city, often in prominent places such as raised outcroppings or otherwise lining routes which formed part of the web of trading networks connecting Palmyra to Emesa (modern day Homs), Damascus, and the Euphrates (Fig.6). The roughly 20 metre high monuments loomed over visitors to the city and residents alike, attesting to the wealth and status of the elites who owned and occupied them.[25] The earliest iteration of this type, a group of at

[25] Though the towers at Palmyra are unique, similar monuments are found at several sites of the Euphrates, e.g. Dura-Europos, Halabiyya, Baghuz: Gawlikowski 2005, 47.

least 16 spread out across the west necropolis, are dated to between 50 and 1 BCE, however, tower-tombs securely dated via inscription have been identified from 9 BCE, bringing the total to around 181.[26] Burials were generally dispersed across multiple stories, which could total as many as 6,[27] with hypogea expanding the burial space below ground in later versions of the structure. Loculi were first sealed with simple quarry stones and plasters, with portraits appearing around 9 BCE, with the construction of the tower of 'Atenatan,[28] leading the way for a funerary tradition that would endure until the end of Palmyrene culture. The portrait busts that sealed *loculi* formed a web of faces on the interior walls of the tomb, projecting onto the viewer a powerful message of a family, or a community, brought together and connected even in death. Painted and sculptural motifs have also survived on the walls and ceilings of some tower tombs, the incorporation of Hellenistic motifs into a local iconographic repertoire adding to the impression of wealth and status.[29] The tombs functioned to "insert the memory of people permanently into a landscape", while also developing a new set of mortuary traditions to bond a community disrupted by bereavement.[30] Though their use continued into at least the mid-2nd century CE, the last tower tomb was constructed in 128 CE, [31] when new types of monumental tomb came into use, following similar patterns of development alongside the changing social structure of Palmyra.



Figure 6: View of the west necropolis, from the city (Gawlikowski 2021, 152 *Fig*.121).

[26] Henning 2013a.
[27] Raja 2018, 288.
[28] Henning 2019, 21.
[29] Henning 2013a. Tomb iconography is explored in detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
[30] de Jong 2019, 48.
[31] de Jong 2019, 38.

### ii. Hypogea

Hypogea became the standard monumental tomb type at Palmyra in the second half of the 1st century CE. The transition in funerary customs from imposing towers to underground structures might be partly explained by the need for more burial spaces. As the city grew and prospered from the booming trade economy, so did the wealth of its citizens – and so these hypogea that could accommodate hundreds of burials may have been a response to increased demand from a growing merchant class. Though cessation texts inform us of the dedication of certain parts of the tomb to subsequent generations of the monument's founder,[32] burial spaces were also sold to people outside of the family. This may have enabled citizens from the middle classes[33] of Palmyrene society to be buried in these prestigious spaces, without needing the level of wealth required to construct a monument.[34] The standard plan for hypogea was an inverted T-shape, although some larger tombs had secondary chambers constructed off the main chamber space (see, tomb plans in Appendix 2). They were richly decorated, with not only portraits forming in effect a gallery, but often sculpted architectural and painted decoration. Stone sarcophagi were frequently placed in prominent places, such as exedra, often in an arrangement of three to emulate the benches of a Roman dining room (Fig. 7). Partially due to the favourable preservation conditions below ground, hypogea are our best source for exploring funerary sculpture and architecture in Palmyra, and accordingly my analysis in the following chapters will predominately focus on evidence from this tomb type.

### iii. Temple/House tomb

The third and least common type of monumental tomb at Palmyra are temple or house tombs, so-called for their mimicry of the architecture of classical temples and peristyle houses. These come into use within two decades of the last tower tomb construction, during the mid-1st century, and continue to be built up to 253 CE – essentially replacing tower tombs as highly visible monuments to commemorate the wealthy deceased.[35] A few have been identified within the city itself,[36] although most are found

[32] Hillers and Cussini 1996.
[33] An anachronistic but convenient term to describe social groups below the level of elites, but with the means to purchase burial space and have sculpture commissioned.
[34] Gawlikowski 2021, 170.
[35] Colledge 1976, 60–61. The last dated temple/house tomb being that of Ḥaddudan and 'Alaisha (no. 144), north necropolis: Gawlikowski 2005, 59.
[36] Temple tombs D301 (86) and E102 (173d) are located to the north-east of the Sanctuary of Allat (with A201-205 built into the northern city wall), according to maps by Schnädelbach 2010, 45-46.

within the necropoleis. Their luxurious aesthetic, lower quantity, and smaller size in comparison to the other two monumental tomb types at Palmyra suggesting they were accessible to a smaller group, have led to the idea that they were particularly exclusive and therefore reserved for the uppermost strata of society – and that the ones constructed within the city walls must have belonged to figures of particular importance. However, the limited number that have survived and been excavated makes it difficult to draw any definite conclusions about their builders and occupants, and doubts have been raised about them being more exclusive or prestigious than tower tombs on the basis of their limited number.[37] Although the transition of outwardly visible funerary monuments from tower tombs to the classical form of temple tombs may be regarded as a move away from native architectural traditions, particularly at a time when the Roman presence was perhaps made stronger by the visit of Emperor Hadrian in 129/30 CE,[38] the latter are in keeping with the eclectic style of some other buildings in the city. Tomb no. 36,[39] with its false pediment, open peristyle courtyard at the centre, classical columns, and crowsteps, exemplifies the blending of Greco-Roman architecture with eastern elements to produce a distinct local architectural tradition (Fig. 8).[40] Although local burial customs were still adhered to, the emergence of temple/house tombs clearly mirrors a shift in ideology – perhaps reflecting the rise of a new elite who desired to ostentatiously display their connections to the west.[41]

[37] Raja and Sorensen 2015, 440. Although they do also note here that the quality of sculpture from one temple tomb, known as Qasr Abjad ('the white castle') from the west necropolis, is particularly high.
[38] Smith 2013, 30. At this time, Palmyra adopts the name *Hadriana Palmyra*. Fn 103 See PAT 1374 (= Inscriptions de l'agora no. vi.04). The Palmyrene tariff of A.D. 137 identifies the city in Palmyrene as Hadrian's Tadmor (hdryn ʾ tdmr); see PAT 0259 (Tariff): Palmyrene, II.1.
[39] Q124 in Schnädelbach 2010, 43.
[40] See Schmidt-Colinet's (1992) two-volume monograph on Temple Tomb no. 36, the most in-depth investigation of a single temple tomb to date.
[41] On the rise of an elite merchant class in Palmyra, see: Seland 2020,



Figure 7: Triclinium arrangement of sarcophagi in the north exedra, Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, mid-2nd century CE (Eristov *et al*. 2019, *Pl*.81.1).



Figure 8: Temple Tomb no.85, reconstructed elevation of the façade (Raja 2022, 68 *Fig*.21).

## III. Commemorating the dead: funerary sculpture

Palmyra's tombs are abundant in sculpture. The number of recorded portraits from Palmyra totals over 4,000 at present, constituting the largest collection of funerary sculpture produced from a single place in the Roman World.[42] Although bronze statues were erected in the public sphere,[43] high-relief sculpture was the preferred medium of funerary contexts. Portraits of the deceased carved into locally produced limestone slabs can be divided into two main types: busts and banquet reliefs. Portrait busts were images of the deceased used to seal *loculi* slots within tombs (Fig. 9). While the majority of portraits represent a smaller-than-life-size bust of just one individual (slightly longer than the traditional Greco-Roman bust, shown instead from the waist upward) reliefs depicting up to three figures were also produced. Full-length portraits from funerary contexts also survive, common in depictions on early stelae but generally reserved for children within loculi reliefs. Labelling the reliefs as 'portraiture' has met with resistance in scholarship, given that the faces and bodies of the deceased are not individualized. Attempts to explain this phenomenon range from workshop mass production methods,[44] to the resulting evolution of the reliefs from *nefesh*[45] – a word used in various places across the ancient Near East to mean an embodiment of the soul of the deceased.[46] Represented by a single stele or an entire tower tomb, *nefesh* are attested over 100 times at Palmyra.[47] Regardless, the intention of the busts to represent the deceased qualifies them as portraits in most modern scholarship. Palmyrene funerary portraits bear resemblance to Roman 'freedmen reliefs',[48] although it is unclear why elites would choose to



Figure 9: Loculus relief of a male, Nurbel, 181 CE (Raja 2022, 73 *Fig*.24).

[42] Raja 2022, 71-72. For a breakdown of objects in the corpus: *fn*. 80.
[43] Though only fragments have survived, column brackets on colonnaded streets attest to this: Gawlikowski 2021, 227.
[44] For discussion of this idea, see Bounni 1971, 125; Schmidt-Colinet 1992, 139–40. Cf. Audley-Miller 2016, 577-578.
[45] Colledge 1976, 62.
[46] Kropp 2013, 216-224; Butcher 2003, 297-298.
[47] Gawlikowski 1972.
[48] Kropp and Raja 2014, 395

model their funerary sculpture on those of ex-slaves. Regardless, the introduction of the Palmyrene portrait tradition being roughly simultaneous with the start of Roman rule in Syria suggests direct influence, however, the label of 'provincial art' greatly devalues the innovative and distinctive aesthetic that is particular to the art of Palmyra. While the large-scale production and consumption of the portraits was typical of Roman elite culture,[49] these sculptures are unmistakably Palmyrene: large almond-shaped eyes gazing out ahead from a stoic visage, as if communicating with onlookers from beyond the grave. This front-facing position, or 'frontality', was also identified as a common feature of relief sculpture from frontier city Dura-Europos, and Edessa and Hatra in North Mesopotamia,[50] marking a break from earlier art of the area which generally depicted human figures in profile.[51] However, certain features set the portraits from Palmyra apart. Despite generalized faces the portraits held great potential for individualization: their clothing, gestures, and attributes all customizable to a certain extent.



Figure 10: Digital representation of female relief, Temple/House tomb of Qasr Abjad, west necropolis, 200-250 CE (Brøns *et al*. 2022, 1223 *Fig.*19).

**i. Portrait busts**

Palmyrene funerary busts generally followed particular conventions, with certain elements selected from an established but substantial repertoire. Women in portraits wear a tunic, himation, and veil, frequently accompanied by a turban and headband which could be decorated in a wide variety of patterns.[52] Painted decoration, particularly the rendering of patterns on fabric and jewellery details, could have individualized portraits further,[53] as in the exceptional 'Beauty of Palmyra' (Fig.10).[54] Jewellery is a prominent feature of female portraits from the earliest examples, changing over time in line with both real-life and sculptural fashions.[55] The amount of jewellery worn increased greatly

[49] de Jong 2017, 76.
[50] Rostovtzeff 1935, 235-238. His assertion that this 'frontality' was derived from Parthian art is largely dismissed in contemporary scholarship. For a study of the evidence, see Dirven 2016.
[51] Dirven 2022, 121.
[52] Finlayson 1998. However, her claims that headband patterns denoted tribal affiliation are tenuous.
[53] Heyn and Raja 2019.
[54] Brøns *et al*. 2022.
[55] Representations of jewellery worn in portraits have also been recovered as grave goods, e.g., a gold 2nd century CE fibule (Charles-Gaffiot 2001, 205 *Fig*. 48; 326).

from the 2nd century CE and has been considered a reflection on the wealth of Palmyrene citizens.[56] The cost of adding additional items of jewellery to a standard portrait likely incurred extra costs, suggesting a real-life correlation with the financial position of the patron,[57] but ultimately the *impression* of wealth is most significant to our understanding of Palmyrene societal values. Women were either shown raising their hand to their face or veil, or holding an attribute, most commonly the spindle and distaff, in association with the ideal feminine virtues of modesty and domesticity.[58] Men in bust portraits are consistently depicted in the Greek *himation*, rather than the Roman toga, a pattern witnessed in civic and funerary portraiture of the wider Eastern provinces as testament to their Hellenistic past, and considered the official garment of a citizen.[59] Two of most common attributes of male portraits are the book-roll, in reference perhaps to scholarly pursuits, and the more ambiguous leaf.[60] Twenty percent of men in portraits are depicted as priests,[61] identifiable by a distinctive cylindrical hat and attributes associated with ritual activities such as a jug and alabastron (Fig.11).[62] The frequent representation of fathers and sons together as priests in banquet reliefs has given rise to the suggestion that the position was hereditary, a role passed down from one generation to the next.[63] However, examples where only the father *or* son is depicted as a priest cast doubt on this idea.[64] Although the roles and responsibilities of priests in Palmyra are uncertain, their strong representation within funerary sculpture, coupled with frequent appearances in epigraphy, tesserae and reliefs from the public and religious sphere, are evidence of the prestigious position that



Figure 11: Loculus relief of a priest, Mariôn, 230-250 CE (Raja 2017c, 435 *Fig*.2).

[56] Heyn 2008.
[57] Krag 2018, 109.
[58] Heyn 2010, 635-636.
[59] Zanker 2008, 177-8.
[60] Colledge 1976, 68, 154.
[61] Heyn and Raja 2019.
[62] Heyn 2016, 196.
[63] Raja 2017c, 422.
[64] E.g., in the central banquet relief from the triclinium of Bôlḥâ, only the son wears the distinctive priestly headgear: Kaizer 2019, 88.

the title held.[65] As with the jewellery, the addition of extra attributes in the portraits in general may have added to the cost of the commission,[66] so a patron may have been expected to pay more for customization.

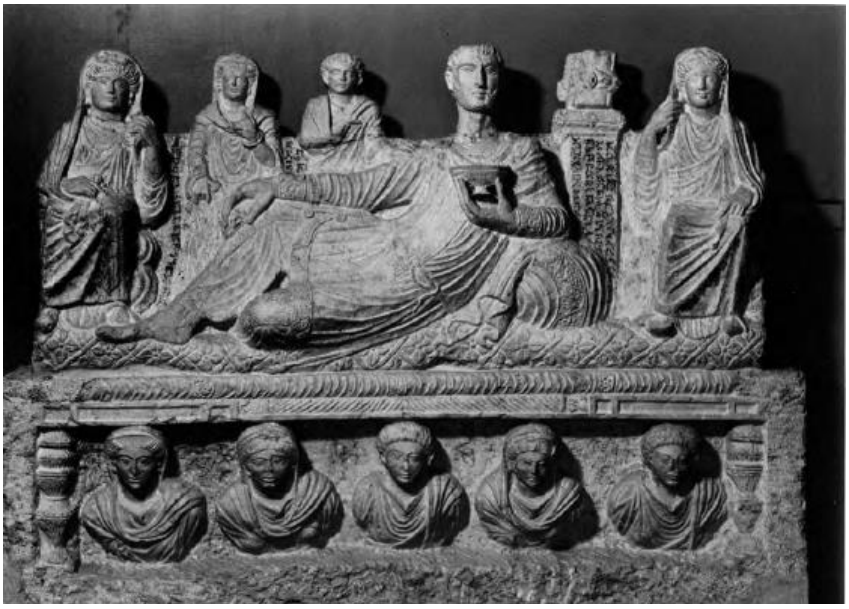


Figure 12: Banquet relief from the Hypogeum of Bôlbarak, 238/9 CE (Tanabe 1986, 424 *Fig*.393).

**ii. Banquet reliefs**

The other main category of reliefs from Palmyrene tombs depicts at its centre a figure reclining on a couch as if at a banquet, surrounded by seated and standing secondary figures, in a variation of the 'meal of the dead' (or from German scholarship, *Totenmahl*) motif. Most commonly, they represent a deceased male accompanied by his family (Fig.12). Banquet reliefs have been recovered in some form from all three tomb types at Palmyra. Originating on the sides of tower tombs, around halfway up embedded in niches, they become increasingly complex with their transition to the interiors of hypogea and temple tombs. The banquet relief is versatile, appearing as a large rectangular relief atop sarcophagi, as a full-length relief emulating the side of the sarcophagus box itself, and as miniature reliefs in which just one or two figures are depicted.[67] One of the most striking features of the relief type is the costume of the reclining figures, who frequently appear in a Parthian-style, embroidered, trouser-

[65] Raja 2017a.
[66] Heyn and Raja 2021, 2.
[67] E.g., Sadurska and Bounni 1994, *Figs.*151, 252, 253.

suit and boots, in contrast to the modest Greek dress of males in the individual portrait busts.[68] He is usually accompanied by a seated figure on his left, often identified by inscriptions as his wife. Infant or adult sons and daughters, and occasionally other members of the extended family, are positioned behind the central figure. A second male recliner, often identified as the father of the deceased, can be seen in some examples.[69] The luxurious nature of the scenes singles them out as particular markers of prestige within tombs and have attracted much scholarly attention as a result. As the central focus of this thesis, their meaning will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

### iii. Inscriptions

Funerary inscriptions are found on reliefs, sometimes incorporated into the sculpture in creative ways,[70] as well as on stone tablets, and as graffiti on tombs walls.[71] Palmyrene inscriptions might appear austere in comparison to those of the classical world, and some other places in the Roman Near East, that give occupations and moral attributes. [72] Regardless of this relative epigraphic stoicism, they divulge important information about the deceased and the values of wider Palmyrene society, most notably the importance of genealogy.[73] The following translation is a typical example of an inscription from a Palmyrene loculus relief of a woman:

"*Aqma, daughter of Hairan Aitibel A'arg, mother of Malku, son of Neša, son of Natanbel*."[74]

Aqma's position as daughter and mother, to and of males, confirms her position within the family unit, while the naming of her son's father, and of his father, highlights the patrilineality of Palmyrene society. Inscriptions from the funerary sphere are almost exclusively recorded in a local dialect of Aramaic, a notable contrast to the bilingual public examples, in Greek and Aramaic.[75] Unlike other aspects of Palmyrene life, where the influence of the city's Hellenistic roots shine through, the funerary sphere is more deeply entrenched in local tradition which may explain the predominant use of Aramaic here. Notably, a stone tablet inscribed with the foundation text from the tower tomb of 'Atenatan

[68] Heyn 2008, 176-77, presents a survey of 14 hypogea containing banquet reliefs, in which 36 out of 50 reclining males wear Parthian dress.
[69] E.g., in a banquet relief from the Hypogeum of Bôlhâ: Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 87-88.
[70] E.g., a key: Thomsen 2021, 57 *Fig*. 4.9; the folds of clothing, and an altar: Tanabe 1986, 424 *Fig*. 393.
[71] See the catalogue of Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions by Hillers and Cussini 1996.
[72] For example, Sidon, Antioch and Zeugma: Yon 2021, 132.
[73] Yon 2016, 123, discusses a rare mention of profession in an inscription from the Tomb of Elahbel that names one Nurbel Asia as a physician.
[74] 3rd century CE: Al-As'ad *et al*. 2012, 168.12. 2. Inv. 2934/9458.
[75] Hillers and Cussini 1996.

(constructed 98 BCE) which was set into an exterior wall and therefore visible to the public, was inscribed with both Aramaic and Greek.[76] The focus on local tradition within the funerary sphere is evident too in the content of banquet relief inscriptions, which give the name of the deceased followed by his or her patriarchal lineage, often going back multiple generations, conveying the importance of ancestry in its legitimization of elite status.[77]

The Palmyrene funerary sphere is a vast topic and, as a result, many features have only been covered superficially here, while others, merely touched on.[78] Without claiming to be extensive, this overview of the Palmyrene funerary sphere has served to highlight the distinctive qualities of its sculpture and monuments. Despite being part of the Roman province of Coele-Syria, the Roman influence in this area is slight, owing more to the lasting legacy of the Seleucids. Certainly, parallels can be drawn concerning the scale of production, and particular stylistic elements (e.g. the relief bust format, the use of gesture) of the Roman portrait tradition, but the funerary sculpture of Palmyra is ultimately the product of a blending of Hellenistic, local and eastern culture.

[76] Hillers and Cussini 1996, 27 PAT 0023.
[77] See, Chapter 2.
[78] For example, children in reliefs who, though an important element of any society, have less to contribute toward a study on the construction of identity. Contributions on the topic can be found in: Krag and Raja 2019.

# Chapter 2: Exploring the banquet motif in the funerary art of Palmyra and beyond

## I. Introduction

The study of Palmyrene tomb decoration -their sculpture, wall paintings and architecture- is essential to understanding the people who built, visited and occupied them. The manner by which the dead were commemorated, whether chosen by themselves, their relatives, or dictated by local tradition, reveals much about the core values and aspirations of Palmyrene society. But can we learn anything of Palmyrene ideas about the afterlife? For the Greeks and Romans, written accounts of the afterlife and of the various rituals associated with preparing the deceased are reflected in the decoration of tombs and of grave goods. Attic vessels deposited as grave goods in 5th and 4th century BCE Athenian tombs span mortal and mythical subject matter, some showing burial rites, in particular the *prothesis* (Fig.13), others the deceased embarking on their afterlife journey across the River Styx with Charon the ferryman.[79] Supplemented by literary sources these objects contribute an important insight into the cultural traditions and beliefs surrounding death in Archaic and Classical Athens.[80] On Roman carved sarcophagi mythological scenes became especially popular in the 3rd century CE:[81] debate continues over whether the imagery was intended as symbolism concerning the afterlife, or a link to classicism and education.[82] Palmyrene tombs, on the other hand, are comparatively lacking in either direct or allegorical references to the afterlife, despite a tendency in early scholarship to emphasize the 'mystical' or 'spiritual' character of Palmyrene portraiture.[83] In spite of, or perhaps in response to this dearth, the study of eschatological beliefs in the archaeological evidence from the Palmyrene tombs has been a topic of scholarly debate throughout the history of its study, with a particular focus on the



Figure 13: *Prothesis* scene on red-figure Attic loutrophoros, 4th/5th century BCE (Shapiro 1991, 648 *Fig.*18).

[79] E.g., Athens 17916 (Cat. No. 3, Fig. 3).
[80] Shapiro 1991.
[81] Dunbabin 2003, 122-124.
[82] Newby 2011. For a summary of the arguments: 288-289.
[83] Kropp and Raja 2014.

banquet reliefs. This focus can be explained by the use of the iconic *Totenmahl* motif (meaning 'meal of the dead') which, although now interpreted in the majority of ancient contexts as more corporeal than spiritual in meaning,[84] displays a versatility that evades any one fixed meaning. The origins of banqueting iconography in funerary art, and its varied use across the ancient world, will be explored in this chapter to develop a deeper understanding of its meaning in a Palmyrene context. The distinctive variant of this motif, prominently displayed in banqueting reliefs in the tombs of Palmyra's elites will be analysed: showing how, in keeping with the funerary art and architecture of the city, influences from within and without the city were combined in this unique memorial to the dead.



Figure 14: The Garden Feast of Assurbanipal, wall panel relief, 645-635 BCE (The British Museum, 237000001).

## II. The 'meal of the dead': origins and diffusion

How might the origins of the *Totenmahl* motif, and its usage in funerary contexts throughout antiquity, inform our interpretation of the banquet reliefs of Palmyra? The image of a figure reclining on a dining couch, or *kline*, is a common iconographical motif both to the east, in Mesopotamia, and west of Palmyra, throughout Greek and Roman territories. Its popularity in the Near East has been associated with the Hellenization of large parts of Western Asia under the Seleucid Empire, however, examples of the motif in art hail from as early as the Assyrian period.[85] In fact, the practice of dining while reclining

[84] Dentzer 1982, on the iconographical origins of the banqueting couch.
[85] Hemati Azandaryani *et al*. 2021, 4 footnote 5.

on a couch likely originated in the royal and dynastic palaces of Near Eastern rulers, adopted by the Greeks from at least the 7th century BCE.[86] An early example of the reclining banqueter in art can be found in the 'Garden Party' relief of Assurbanipal. In the wall panel relief fragment, the Mesopotamian ruler reclines on a couch while the queen sits on a throne to the left, the royal couple engaging in a banquet and attended by servants and musicians (Fig.14). Commonly termed 'the garden banquet' on account of the setting, the slab was part of a series of reliefs that decorated the walls of the North Palace at Nineveh, modern Iraq.[87] The relief has been variously interpreted as secular and religious in character,[88] however, it may also carry connotations of regeneration and immortality: a connection between the banquet and the beyond, present in Iron Age Syro-Hittite art, may inform the meaning of the Assyrian palatial decoration, reinforced by the verdant garden setting.[89] Clearly, meaning changes across space and time but similarities to the iconography of Palmyrene banqueting scenes are visible. Though in the tomb reliefs women are never depicted as actively engaged in banqueting,[90] in both scenes the male figure reclines propped up on one elbow, the other hand holding a drinking cup on his fingertips. Plants are a common attribute in Palmyrene funerary art and the presence of vine tendrils in the background of banquet reliefs, and of vegetal motifs in tomb decoration, in effect place the deceased in a vegetal setting.[91] Ultimately, explanations for the emergence of banqueting iconography in funerary contexts across the ancient world are difficult to pinpoint. There exists a long tradition of the banqueting motif in Etruscan funerary art, the reclining banqueter being a feature of tomb paintings, reliefs and sculpture beginning in the 7th century BCE and continuing into the 1st (Fig.



Figure 15: Cinerary urn from Chiusi, Etruria (Tuscany), with Orestes killing his mother Clytaemnestra (Naso 2017, 332 *Fig.*19.7).

[86] Dunbabin 2003, 11; Dentzer 1971, esp. 215-31.
[87] Álvarez-Mon 2009, 132-4
[88] Nylander 1999, 71-4.
[89] Ataç 2018, 158-163.
[90] In the rare examples where women recline, they do not hold cups or bowls, e.g., funerary stelae of Malê and Bôlayâ, Hypogeum of Ta'aî, late 2nd century CE: Charles-Gaffiot *et al*. 2001, 314 *fig*. 255; framed banquet relief of a woman with servant: Tanabe 1986, 464 *fig*. 438.
[91] For a deeper discussion, see Chapter 3 on tomb iconography.

15).[92] Though its long and variable usage throughout Etruria lends itself to multivalency, in certain contexts the banqueting takes place in an underworld setting.[93] Over in Western Anatolia it becomes a standard feature of tomb art slightly later, in the late-Archaic period/5th century BCE.[94] Though initially banqueting imagery in Classical Greece is mostly limited to votive reliefs,[95] during the Hellenistic period it becomes perhaps the most common subject of funerary reliefs.[96] The development of the Hellenistic funerary banquet relief is complex, however, two iconographic traditions are thought to have had a significant influence: the collective social banquets represented in funerary art of Asia Minor from the late 6th century, emphasising wealth, luxury and social status; and 4th century BCE votive reliefs from the Greek mainland, specifically Athens, depicting a reclining hero at a feast, often accompanied by a seated heroine and a group of worshippers.[97] Johanna Fabricius argues that the transference of the latter into funerary iconography should not, in general, be interpreted as the immortalisation of the deceased or a cult meal, but that it should be considered a reference to civic honour akin to the awarding of wreaths and statues – imagery that also strongly features in the iconography of Hellenistic funerary monuments.[98] As seems common in all iterations of the *Totenmahl* motif, the meaning of the funerary banquet in Hellenistic art is multi-faceted, its usage across such a vast geographical area alone necessitating a context-dependent approach.[99] However, both the concept of the banquet as a symbol of luxury, and the association of the reclining male image with civic status in Hellenistic may have contributed to the popularity of the iconography in the funerary reliefs of Palmyra. Given the extensive Hellenization of the Near East under Seleucid rule, the most likely source of direct influence on Palmyra's banquet reliefs is, arguably, *Totenmahl* motif iconography in Hellenistic funerary monuments. However, funerary banquet reliefs from 4th century BCE Lycia, on the southern coast of Turkey, provide a particularly interesting comparison to those of Palmyra. Their usage in Lycia is predictably diverse, however, in the study of particular scene types an "intimate, familial atmosphere" prevails (Fig.16).[100] While other types of Lycian 'funerary banquet' reliefs might emphasise the symposiastic nature of the

[92] Mitterlechner 2016.
[93] After 370 BCE, seven out of eight known painted banquet scenes from tombs are located in the underworld, a pattern that is later mirrored in funerary sculpture and reliefs: Mitterlechner 2016, 539-545 *fn*. 56.
[94] Draycott 2016, 220.
[95] Lawton 2016.
[96] Dunbabin 2003,106.
[97] Fabricius 2016, 36-40.
[98] Fabricius 2016.
[99] For an in-depth study of the iconography in the Hellenistic world, see Fabricius 1999.
[100] Lockwood 2016, 314. Also Dentzer 1982, 425–26, 551; Fabricius 1999, 32.

scene with the inclusion of tables of food, servants and musicians,[101] the decision to omit them places the focus on the reclining figure's position at the centre of his family. As in Palmyrene reliefs, this has been interpreted as a way to convey social status and the importance of ancestry and family ties.[102] Despite the incorporation of Lycia into the Achaemenid empire during mid-6th to the late 4th century BCE, its culture flourished.[103] In light of this, the comparison between the meaning of the motif in Lycia and Palmyra, the latter often showcasing Persian influence in the choice of Parthian clothing, gains further significance.



Figure 16: Banquet relief above the entrance to rock cut tomb (Tomb 9), Myra, eastern Lycia, ca. 350 BCE (Lockwood 2016, 306 *Fig*.3).

Returning to the time period in question, the popularity of the 'meal of the dead' motif continues under the Romans, its diffusion across provinces of the empire resulting in myriad adaptations to local tradition.[104] Certainly solidified by this point, if not earlier, as a theme appropriate for a funerary monument, the rendering of privilege, status and luxury as implicit to the meaning of the banquet in this context gave greater opportunity to highlight other features, according to personal taste or societal

[101] E.g., the relief frieze on the north side of the cella of the Nereid Monument from Xanthus, Lycia, ca. 380 BCE (British Museum, London).
[102] Lockwood 2016.
[103] Lockwood 2016.
[104] Stewart 2010, esp. 23-28.

values.[105] In addition to the popularity of the motif in reliefs, *kline* monuments became fashionable in Rome from the mid-1st into the 2nd century CE - three-dimensional renderings of the deceased reclining, placed over a grave or with an urn inserted inside (Fig.17). Just as *klinai* in the Greek world were multi-functional furnishings, used for dining, sleeping and for many as a deathbed,[106] so were the boundaries between life and death blurred with depictions of the banqueting couch in Roman funerary contexts. At times the central figure is shown not with attributes of the banquet but of the funerary cult, at others appearing asleep or deceased, indicating that there existed a "semantic glide between the convivial and the funeral couch" in the iconography of the 'meal of the dead' in Rome.[107] In a mid- to late 1st century BC relief from Amiternum, the deceased (or an image of him)[108] lies propped up his elbow on a *kline,* at the centre of his own funerary procession (Fig.18). Though similar imagery is extremely rare at Palmyra, a relief fragment of an apparently sleeping diner suggests an association between the furniture used for dining, sleeping and funerary rites might also be present here (Fig.19). Whether influenced by Assyrian, Hellenistic, Etruscan, or Roman models, the many iterations of the 'meal of the dead' motif display the malleability of the iconography in the ancient world. Though there may have existed in the mind of an ancient viewer certain inherent associations with the image, as a symbol of leisure and therefore luxury and prestige, the ambiguity and thus the potential adaptability of the reclining banqueter may be the key to understanding its enduring popularity as a memorial to the dead. While it is useful to trace the geographical and chronological development of the motif, and to search for comparisons between Palmyra's banquet reliefs and the innumerable other versions of the imagery used in ancient funerary contexts, ultimately the unique cultural context of the *Totenmahl* is tantamount to deciphering its meaning. The following section will explore the banquet reliefs in Palmyra, where they formed the central element of many tombs. After considering scholarly interpretations, the iconography of the scenes will be analysed – the individuality of Palmyrene banquet reliefs and the elements that reflect the culture and values of Palmyrene elites.

[105] Dunbabin 2003, 107-109.
[106] Baughan 2016.
[107] Dunbabin 2003, 112.
[108] Dunbabin 2003, 112 *fn*. 22.



Figure 17: *Kline* monument of C. Iulius Bathyllus, Rome, after 41 CE (Dunbabin 2003, 111 *Fig*.59).



Figure 19: Relief fragment of 'sleeping diner', Palmyra, late 2nd-early 3rd century CE (al-As'ad *et al*. 2012, 172 *Fig.*29).



Figure 18: Funerary relief from Amiternum, mid-late 1st century CE (Dunbabin 2033, 113 *Fig*.62).

## III. Feast of the dead, or real-life dining at Palmyra?

As laid out by Jean-Marie Dentzer in his influential work on the origins of the banqueting couch,[109] there are three established interpretations of the banqueting motif in ancient funerary contexts: that it depicts a particularly joyful, luxurious occasion from the life of the deceased, frozen in time surrounded by his family in an idealized snapshot; a link to funerary rites involving banqueting and food/drink offerings to the deceased, the scene here representing the reception of the sacred meal; while others place the scene in the afterlife as an otherworldly banquet, the ultimate symbol of "une immortalité bienheureuse."[110] Attempts to interpret the banquet reliefs of Palmyra as eschatological are generally rejected in scholarship. The justification for this is, quite simply, that nothing in the scenes indicates an afterlife setting. This conclusion, reached early on in the history of Palmyrene studies by Henri Seyrig in his 1951 publication, is further justified by the potential for living and dead to co-exist in the scenes.[111] An early 3rd century relief from the Hypogeum of Bôlbarak, for example, depicts the tomb founder with two wives, identified by inscription, interpreted as current and deceased since bigamy is not widely practiced in Palmyra.[112] But can we entirely rule out a reference to the afterlife based on the absence of explicit afterlife imagery? Perhaps the funerary context alone connected the portraits with a 'world beyond', and that the omission of eschatological iconography strategically left room to highlight other features. As explored by Johanna Fabricius, the world of the living, the life of the tomb, and the realm of the dead "can symbolically cross-reference each other",[113] leading to further interpretive difficulties. She concludes, however, in her study of the imagery's usage in funerary contexts across various cities in Hellenistic Greece and Asia Minor, that the motif in all its iterations here generally lacks eschatological content: that rather, they should be interpreted as opportunities to convey those socio-cultural elements valued most highly according to their particular contexts.[114]

The second popular interpretation, that the scene has ties to ritual banqueting, is similarly difficult to support considering the dearth of evidence. The idea that banqueting might have occurred inside the tomb, enabling relatives of the deceased to eat and drink amongst portraits of their loved ones, who both received the offerings of the meal and could participate in the commensality,[115] can be

[109] Dentzer 1971.
[110] Dentzer 1971, 256.
[111] Seyrig 1951, 38.
[112] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 148.
[113] Fabricius 2016, 43.
[114] Fabricius 2016.
[115] Recently, Audley-Miller 2016, 565 *fn*. 57.

ruled out over practical considerations: namely, that there was not enough space for the activity in either tower tombs or hypogea.[116] With regards to banqueting outside of the tomb, organised dining in designated banqueting halls is attested in Palmyra, and attempts have been made to link these activities with the banquet relief scenes. Franz Cumont connected the scenes with the cult banquets that were held in Palmyrene sanctuaries, an integral part of the festivities and preparation for entering the afterlife in the same way that feasting was to the Roman Bacchic cult. [117] The main source of evidence for his interpretation are the thousands of tesserae recovered from the city's sanctuary precincts. These small, predominantly clay objects have been interpreted as entry tokens to ritual feasts held by elite religious dining groups and drinking societies of Palmyra,[118] one common type featuring a reclining priest (Fig.20). Although the iconographic similarities with the central figure of the banqueting scene are clear, attempts to link the tomb reliefs with these organised cult feasts can be dismissed. Tesserae have not been recovered from funerary contexts, [119] and the presence of female figures in the banquet scenes jars with the apparent exclusion of women from participating in the city's cultic activity.[120] Imagery associated with Dionysus does occasionally appear in connection with banquet reliefs. A banquet scene carved onto a 2nd century sarcophagus box from the Hypogeum of Ḥennibel, son of Ḥamṭuš, depicts a priest reclining beneath a scrolling tendril (Fig.21). He is accompanied by a seated woman, and a standing servant holding a cornucopia and patena, both the tendril pattern and the cornucopia being typical Dionysiac symbolism.[121] The vine motif also adorns an arch above the banqueting relief alcove on the tower tomb of Kithôt, and traces of painted vine leaves have been identified on the back wall of the relief itself, [122] suggesting the association existed from the advent of the reliefs in Palmyra. Without



Figure 20: Obverse of a tessera depicting a reclining priest (Raja 2020, 395 *Fig*.2a).

[116] Funerary practices, and the feasibility of tomb feasting, are explored in depth in a following chapter.
[117] Cumont 1942, 421.
[118] Kaizer 2008, 187. On priestly iconography of tesserae: Raja 2020.
[119] Seyrig 1951, 37.
[120] See, the ritual procession frieze from the Temple of Bel, in which three figures appear to be fully veiled, female observers to the ritual activity: Colledge 1976, 37.
[121] al-As'ad 2013, 19.
[122] Will 1951. Harald Ingholt describes the decoration of a banquet relief fragment with a 'leaf decoration', from Tomb of Hairan: 1928.

ruling out the possibility of links to the religious sphere within tomb decoration, for priestly depictions are ubiquitous, but considering the use of the decorative motif elsewhere in Palmyrene tomb interiors,[123] there is little evidence to specifically link the banquet scenes to cultic activity in the city.



Figure 21: Sarcophagus from the Hypogeum of Ḥennibel (al-As'ad 2013, 24 *Fig*.9 (top)).

Applying Dentzer's 'interprétation terrestre' of the banqueting motif in ancient art in general to the specifically Palmyrene reliefs,[124] they can be viewed as aspirational scenes from the life of the deceased subject. The 'aspirational' element is of particular importance: rather than taking the scenes as depictions of a particular occasion, the banquet reliefs were an opportunity to convey wealth and prestige through a memorial composed of purposefully selected elements. The idea that Palmyrene funerary portraiture is best viewed as aspirational as opposed to directly reflecting the reality of the deceased to whom it was dedicated, finds further support when we consider jewellery in individual female portraits. While woman wear increasing amounts of jewellery in individual portraits in the 2nd century CE, the pattern does not necessarily correspond to an increase in the wealth or quantity of grave goods: [125] in fact, across the roughly three centuries of tomb usage even the relatively undisturbed tombs of elite families produced little in the way of personal ornaments.[126] However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the reliefs reflect the real-life banqueting that likely occurred in domestic contexts at Palmyra, as elsewhere in Syria. Evidence of domestic banqueting at Palmyra is scant, considering the

[123] For example, the Tomb of the Three Brothers (Eristov *et al*. 2019, *Pl*. 22, 26, 49, 52-53); decorating the background of the full-length painted figures in the Tomb of Hairan (Sørensen 2016, 106 *Fig*. 3-4); in painted stucco on the ceiling of the Tomb of Abd'Astor.
[124] Dentzer 1982, 1, 16.
[125] Krag 2018, 109-110.
[126] Colledge 1976, 96.

limited amount of houses that have been excavated.[127] However, a dining room fresco from a house in Dura-Europos, roughly 200km east of Palmyra, depicts a banquet scene in the style of Palmyrene banquet reliefs (Fig.22). Accompanied by inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic, using typical Palmyrene names and mentions of Palmyrene deities, the fresco was likely the product of a Palmyrene community at Dura, displaying an emphasis on male drinking culture which might have informed banquet scene iconography in Palmyra's tombs.[128] Michal Gawlikowski's comment on the earliest surviving example of the banquet relief at Palmyra, on the outside of the tower tomb of Kitot, might be extended to Palmyrene banquet reliefs in general: "Rather than an illustration of the world to come, this seems to be a picture of happy feasting together in this life."[129] The image of a general banqueting scene, already imbued in the mind of the ancient viewer with associations of celebration, luxury and prestige, expanded opportunities for individualized detail. Although conventions were certainly adhered to, the clothing, attributes, gestures, figural composition, and more, were to some extent customizable, with cultural or personal meaning potentially attached to every choice made.

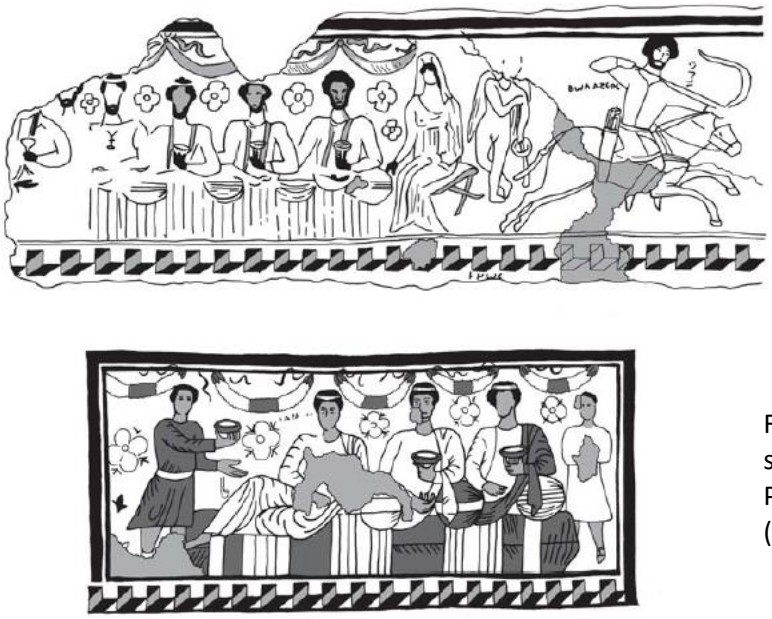


Figure 22: Drawings of frescoes from the south (top) and west (below) walls of the Palmyrene dining room at Dura-Europos (Audley-Miller 2016, 563 *Fig*.4).

[127] Gawlikowski 2021 103-104, Figs. 64-65; 224.
[128] Audley-Miller 2016, 562-564.
[129] Gawlikowski 2021, 159.

## IV. The iconography of Palmyra's banquet reliefs[130]

Commemorating the dead was evidently an important part of life for ancient Palmyrenes. Considering the amount of wealth committed to constructing funerary monuments, labelled as 'houses of eternity', and the sheer number of portraits memorialising the deceased, it is easy to imagine that the Palmyrenes believed that death was not the absolute end for them. However, the banquet reliefs cannot, at present, shine a light on this aspect, and it may be that Palmyrene afterlife beliefs will remain an enigma. What the reliefs do offer is a wealth of information on elite values and the importance of both the family unit and of particular roles within Palmyrene society: a deeply meaningful expression of kinship ties and prestige. Despite the de-individualized faces of figures in the reliefs (to a higher degree even than in the portrait busts)[131] and certain conventions of representation, most notably the relief commissioner reclining in the centre and the wife or mother seated at the foot of the kline, there was much opportunity for personalisation. The importance of family is apparent at Palmyra, through the presence of inscriptions detailing genealogy across all types of funerary portraiture,[132] in addition to the popularity of the banquet scene itself as a means of visually affirming kinship ties. In fact, the decision to homogenise the facial expressions to such a degree could reflect a desire to emphasise the family group over the individual in these reliefs. The use of costume to convey wealth and status was a vital element of the construction of identity in the banquet scenes. Parthian costume was the preferred choice for the reclining central figure,[133] with a tendency toward depicting figures in this way increasing throughout the first three centuries CE (Fig.23).[134] In light of trade connections between Palmyra and the Parthian empire, and considering such a style is not attested within the Roman world of fashion, it is highly likely that the exposure of Palmyrene merchants to this rich clothing style explains its transference and subsequent popularization amongst the Near Eastern city's inhabitants:[135] not only was Parthian clothing rendered in funerary relief sculpture, but similarly patterned clothing fragments have also been found in tombs at Palmyra.[136] The luxurious nature of the items, intricately embroidered and sometimes

[130] The following section has been developed from my undergraduate dissertation on the construction of identity in the Palmyrene banquet reliefs.
[131] Kropp and Raja 2014, 396, 403-406.
[132] The emphasis on family ties is reflected in sculpture elsewhere in Palmyra, in honorific inscriptions from sanctuaries and colonnaded streets concerning the same family group – a father honoured by his children, for example: Yon 2021, 134 *fn.* 20-21.
[133] Over 50% of reclining figures in Table 1 wear Parthian costume. This general pattern is supported by Heyn 2008: in a survey of 14 hypogea containing banquet scenes 36 out of the 50 reclining males wear Parthian dress (176-77).
[134] Long 2017, 73.
[135] Curtis 2017, 52.
[136] Stauffer 1995, 59: Fig. 96.

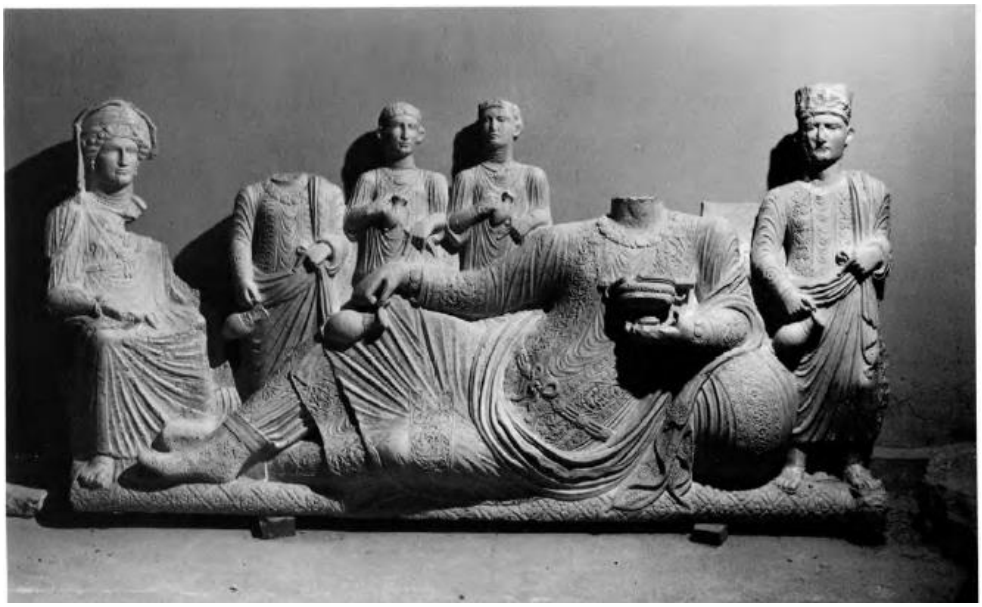


Figure 23: Banquet relief depicting the central figure in Parthian clothing, Hypogeum of 'Alaine (Tanabe 1986, 405 *Fig.*374).

decorated with pearls was certainly an expression of wealth. In addition to the cost required for such lavish decoration, textiles were expensive in antiquity, particularly Chinese silk imports, fragments of which have been found in tombs where they were cut into strips and used to wrap the dead.[137] Although this expression of wealth is an important factor in interpretating Parthian clothing in the reliefs, it often overshadows other possible meanings.[138] Given the predominance of this clothing worn by the central figure, it may have been considered appropriate attire for Palmyrene banquets,[139] the decision to display it in the reliefs perhaps showing off to the viewer a knowledge of banqueting customs or fashions. Although Parthian costume is popular in the banquet scenes, the reality is that many figures are depicted in Greek garb, in line with male costume of the individual funerary slabs and in other types of relief from Palmyra. These considerations raise questions about the extent to which Parthian attire was intended predominantly as a wealth signifier, or whether the meanings behind clothing choices were more intricately bound up in the formation of individual identities. Depictions of priests, wearing the distinctive hat as an instantly recognisable symbol of prestige, connect figures both within the scenes and without, by signifying their shared membership into a powerful institution of the city. The

[137] Finlayson 2002, 387.
[138] See, for example, Ingholt's theory that the preference for Parthian costume can be simplified down to its looking more impressive than the 'everyday' chiton and himation: 1954, 8. This binarism ignores the reality that some Parthian costumes are certainly more extravagant than others (e.g. Curtis 2017, 60, on the simpler version with a plain tunic), and that the chiton could also bear decoration (e.g. Padgett 2001, 360-1).
[139] Heyn and Raja 2019, 7.

scant evidence on priesthoods makes it difficult to draw conclusions, however, it is thought that they were at least informally hereditary, the position handed down through the male line.[140] Homogenous as these figures may look at first glance, there was room for individualization even among this cohesive iconography: in the decoration of the priestly headgear, and in whether to show it worn on or off the head, leaving space to display a range of identities in one depiction (Fig.12).[141]

Figural composition was another meaningful tool for personalizing the family tableaux, offering Palmyrenes "the opportunity to construct and define their own notion of family."[142] Decisions over how many figures to depict reclining could be used to strengthen the visual connections between family members, as fathers often shared the prestigious central position with sons, or brother propped up alongside brother.[143] The use of a *triclinium* to commemorate the family took this a step further, arranging the most important relatives of the deceased together into one cohesive sculptural monument, while emphasising wealth through the construction of the pieces themselves. The sarcophagi triclinium from the north exedra of the Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ is an ideal example of how composition could be used to visually display relationships and hierarchy. Dating to the end of the 2nd century AD, the sculptures were likely commissioned by a descendent of Bôlḥâ, a man identified as Malikû in the central relief (Fig.24).[144] Taking the prominent reclining position in the central relief of the arrangement, his father Ogeilû lies to his left. In the left wing of the *triclinium* (Fig.25) the two reclining figures are identified as sons of Ogeilû, while the single reclining figure of the right wing opposite is identified as Hermès, the emancipated slave of Malikû (Fig.26).[145] In each scene, smaller figures positioned behind the recliners depict a third generation of adult sons and daughters, their diminutive size conveying their position in the familial hierarchy. Other family members are shown in bust form below the banquet scenes on the sarcophagus box, the simplicity of the form presumably reflecting their importance in the family constellation - or at least, reflecting how the monument commissioner *desired* to convey their importance. While the representation of multiple reclining figures emphasises the collective family group[146] (although not a blood relative, the inclusion of the freedman in the monument suggests his importance in the family unit), sculptural details in the reliefs differentiate the

[140] Kaizer 2002, 240; Raja 2016, 142–144.
[141] Raja 2017a, esp. 124 *table* 8.1, on decoration of priestly headgear; Raja 2017b, on so-called 'former priests.'
[142] Audley-Miller 2016, 558.
[143] See Appendix 1, Table 1, for single vs. reclining figures in banquet reliefs.
[144] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 87-88.
[145] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 87-88.
[146] Audley-Miller 2016, 572.



Figure 24: Central relief of the triclinium arrangement from the north niche, Hypogeum of Bôlhâ (Tanabe 1986, 222 *Fig*.189).

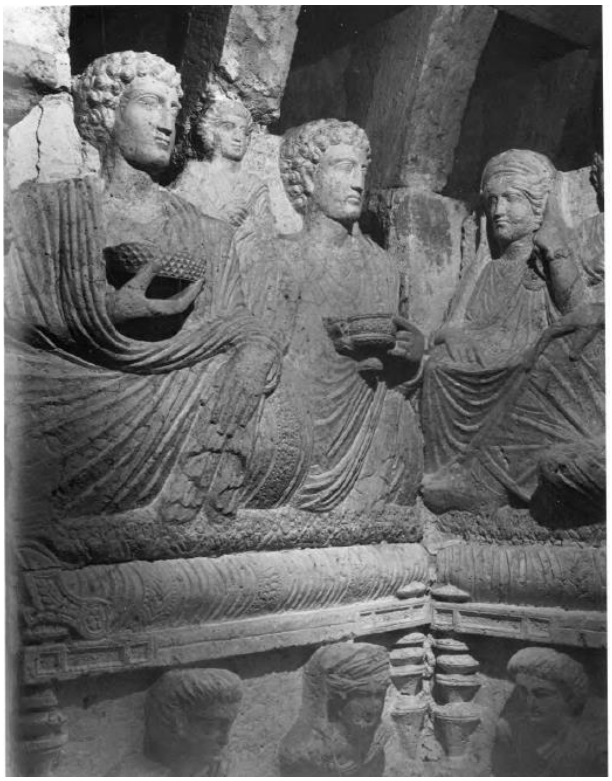


Figure 25: Left relief of triclinium (Tanabe 1986, 225 *Fig*.192).

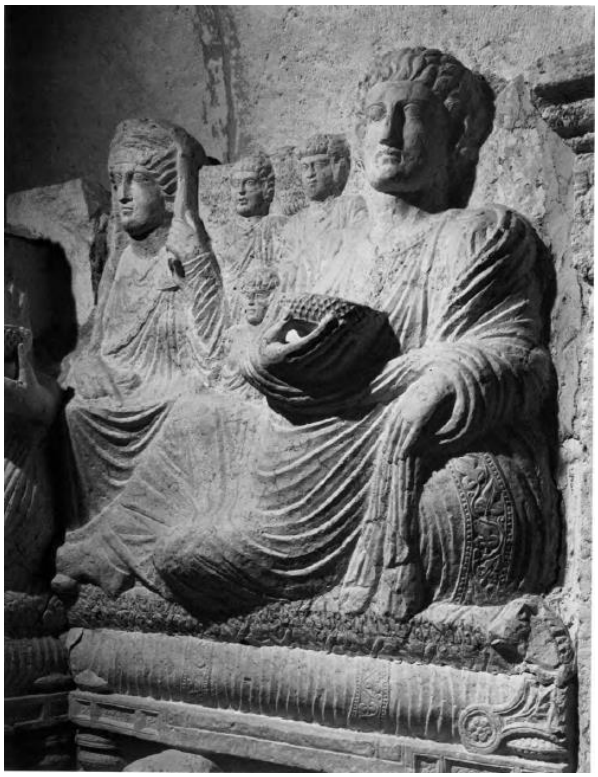


Figure 26: Right relief of triclinium (Tanabe 1986, 226 *Fig*.193).

figures and reassert the importance of Malikû. Notably, Malikû is the only figure to be depicted as a priest, identified as such by the cylindrical hat on his head. The headgear differentiates him visually from the other figures who are bareheaded and acts as an advertisement of his prestigious position in a priesthood.[147] Overall, however, a sense of cohesion amongst the reclining figures prevails, in that they all wear the Greek-style chiton and himation and carry one of two types of drinking vessel: each occupies a central position at the family banquet. While Malikû takes the central position and is distinguished through his pose and depiction as a priest, the flexibility of the *triclinium* monument to emphasise other figures is testament to the importance of family ties in Palmyra.

Familial relationships are visually defined elsewhere in the banquet reliefs. Though women are treated as secondary to the reclining figures in the reliefs,[148] evidenced by their generally smaller size and exclusion from the commensal element of the banquet in a likely reflection of real-life practices,[149] the consistent appearance of the seated female figure is testament to her importance in the family unit.[150] Over the three centuries that the banquet reliefs are constructed in Palmyra, the seated woman increases in size, though remains smaller than the reclining male.[151] Whether or not this aligns with a shifting position of women in society or simply a change to sculptural conventions is unclear, but regardless it is significant that the figure becomes more visually prominent in these prestigious reliefs. That the forms representing the wife or mother to the central figure are used interchangeably suggests that identity for women in Palmyra was largely constructed via the male to whom they were related. Patronyms of women in inscriptions are firm evidence for this, the names always accompanied by their position within the family, e.g. 'wife of…', 'mother of…', 'daughter of...'.[152] That women could be buried in the hypogeum of their husband or their father,[153] further emphasizes the indissoluble connection between their roles as wife, daughter and mother. Often, the eyes of the seated women line up horizontally with those of the reclining male figures,[154] visually connecting the wives with their husbands and thus presenting them as important elements of the scene. Gesture is also used to define relationships in the reliefs. While we can interpret certain hand gestures as similar to those in individual reliefs – fingers extended to draw attention to attributes, or women clasping their veil in a sign of

[147] On priestly status in Palmyra, see Raja 2017c.
[148] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 190-91.
[149] Krag and Raja 2017, 202.
[150] See Table 1 for the prominence of the seated female figure.
[151] This represents a general pattern to which there are exceptions: Krag 2018, 62-63.
[152] Cussini 2005, 27.
[153] Krag 2019.
[154] Krag 2016, 187.

modesty[155] - they serve a particularly important dual function in the banquet reliefs. In the banquet scene from the hypogeum of the family of Artaban, son of 'Oggâ, a child touches the knee of his reclining uncle while a grandson holds a wreath aloft beside his head, joining together two families from the same ancestral line (Fig. 29).[156] These details add animation and even an element of sentimentality to the scene, but most importantly they serve to emphasize the familial bonds that the reliefs were commissioned to commemorate.

While the reliefs may not have expressed beliefs about the afterlife, given their popularity and prestige as a form of commemoration they certainly held significant meaning to the people who commissioned them, to be viewed amongst their family portraits. As we may never definitively know whether any overarching meaning resides in the use of the *Totenmahl* motif in Palmyra, the multivalent approach may be most suitable: the iconography of the tomb, cultic activity and happy family occasions were not necessarily separate in the minds of those who commissioned and viewed the reliefs. Long stresses that although the realm of the dead and its associated artwork necessitated "a shared language of iconography to make it relevant and permit it to convey meaning",[157] the freedoms exercised by the families of the deceased and the deceased themselves when commissioning the reliefs allowed for the combining of particular elements in a personalized way. Elements of the banquet scenes discussed here -composition, clothing, and priestly representation- provide the means to display individual identities while still ultimately connecting figures together and underlining the importance of the family in elite Palmyrene society.

[155] Heyn 2010.
[156] Sadurksa and Bounni 1994, 38 cat. no. 41.
[157] Long 2017, 69.

# Chapter 3. Analysing Palmyrene funerary art: portraits and wall painting

## I. Individual funerary portraiture: The key

It has been shown that evidence of Palmyrene beliefs in the afterlife is not overtly present in the banquet scenes, and that the value of the reliefs lies in what they can tell us about the *living* in ancient Palmyra. However, the reliefs represent just one element of the tomb, intended to be viewed in connection with and indelibly linked to their surroundings, and therefore should be considered in connection with the rest of the decoration. In the following iconographical study of Palmyrene tomb, I focus on three elements that have been interpreted eschatologically: keys, curtains, and Greco-Roman mythology. Exploring patterns of use within the tomb, and appearances of the imagery elsewhere in the classical world, I ascertain whether tomb decoration can shine a light on the afterlife beliefs of Palmyra, or otherwise help to build a fuller picture of the lives of its citizens.

In spite of largely generalised facial features, Palmyrene funerary portraits were individualised through other elements, including attributes. Apparently selected from an established repertoire, given the repetition, these various attributes were predominately used to display social roles and status. The spindle and distaff held by women alone, for example, conveys their position as head of the household, and possibly also female rectitude and virtue.[158] Or the alabastron and bowl, implements of religious activity signalling membership in a priesthood, and the status connected to this role at Palmyra.[159] The meaning of other attributes, such as the rarer key, are more enigmatic. They appear predominately in bust portraits, either hanging from a fibula at the right shoulder (singular or as a pair) (Fig.27) or are less commonly held by the figure.[160] The use of the object in this context has invited a host of explanations, some of which interpret them as magical, or a symbolic means of access to the



Figure 27: Relief of a woman from the Hypogeum of Yarhai, constructed 108 CE (Tanabe 1986, 281 *Fig*.250).

[158] See, Heyn 2010, 635-636, who also recognises that interpretations of gesture should not be transplanted from the Roman models on which they appear to have been influenced, and directly applied to Palmyrene sculpture.
[159] On attributes in the funerary sculpture, see Heyn and Raja 2021.

afterlife.[161] In a more practical sense, they've been interpreted as keys to the tomb,[162] evidence of locks on doors and frames showing that access was restricted between visits.[163] An inscription on one example reading *bt'elm'* (house of eternity), a designation for tombs in Palmyra and wider Syria,[164] might support this interpretation although more examples would be needed to apply this idea to the keys overall (Fig.28).[165] Additionally, the idea that the keys are connected to tomb access is problematic when considering the gendered nature of the object: if they were intended to represent tomb keys, would we not expect them to be a more common feature of male portraiture? While inscriptions show that women were not barred from involvement in the construction and sale of funerary property in Palmyra it was a rare occurrence,[166] and perhaps only an option in families without a living male heir to fulfil the role. As part of the painted decoration from the Hypogeum of Ḥairan, a man and woman are depicted, the latter with two keys hanging from a brooch (Fig.29). The figures appear to be mounted on plinths, and as a result have been interpreted as representations of honorific statues.[167] If public statues are indeed depicted here, and not funerary statues which have been found in tombs on rare occasions,[168] this painted example supports the idea that keys (at least of this smaller type) are not inherently connected to the funerary sphere in Palmyra – that they were worn on the brooch of elite women predominately as an accessory without any deeper eschatological meaning.[169] Although the key is rare in the funerary portraits, its appearance with



Figure 28: Sculptural fragment of a woman holding a key (Drijvers 1982, 729 *Pl.*2).

[161] Ingholt 1928, 61, 143, 149, in Drijvers 1982, 712 *fn*16. Ingholt's theory is based on two Greek words inscribed onto keys.
[162] Ploug 1995, 91.
[163] Parlasca 1988, 216-17, argues that their diminutive size deems them more likely a means of securing jewellery boxes than buildings, however, they would need to be considered separate from the larger sized keys that are held in a few examples.
[164] Drijvers, 1982, 711.
[165] It is possible that the inscription is not connected to the key at all but merely a creative choice and another opportunity for individualisation - see, for example, inscription placement in the banquet relief from the Hypogeum of Bôlbarak: Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 147. See, also a *shedula* (book-roll) inscribed with a similar message: Thomsen 2021, 58 *fn*. 44
[166] Cussini 2005; 2016.
[167] Raja 2019b, 291-292.
[168] E.g., in the Hypogeum of Zabda: Michałowski 1960, *fig*. 203.
[169] Thomsen 2021.



Figure 29: Painted female figure, Hypogeum of Ḥairan, constructed 149-150 CE (Sørensen 2016, 106 *Fig.4).*

predominately women is a likely indication that this object, along with the spindle and distaff, was associated with certain female activities or values:[170] most obviously a key to the house and the domestic sphere, over which women had dominion.[171]

How then is meaning constructed in the female portraits? Are there any features that do connect women to the funerary sphere? How might these representations serve as counterparts to the banquet reliefs? Returning to attributes, the spindle and distaff is gradually phased out from the iconography of female portraiture at the end of the 2nd century CE. Some scholars have attempted to explain this shift as a reflection of the changing role of women in society, namely their domestic responsibilities, however Heyn views it as "evidence of societal priorities shifting to draw more attention to the wealth and strength of the family."[172] That the key also disappears in the 3rd century suggests that it might have been part of the same trend,[173] providing further support for the case that the key's meaning was connected to the domestic rather than the funerary sphere. Not that the focus on feminine virtue and modesty disappeared from the portraits altogether – rather, its embodiment in attributes may have shifted to hand gestures. The drawing of the viewer's attention to particular details in the portraits or to the portrait as a whole through a diverse range of hand gestures is a common phenomenon in Palmyrene portraits, and a powerful form of communication.[174] The raising of the hand to the face or veil is a popular pose in female portraits from the first half of the 2nd century CE, becoming increasingly more common as the spindle and distaff disappears. It has been compared to the *pudicitia* gesture of Greek and Roman portraiture, thought to

[170] Sadurska and Bounni (1994) identify roughly 20 male figures holding keys in funerary sculpture (e.g. fig.61 cat.2; fig.90 cat.204, etc.), however, their identification of the long, rectangular objects in this way is unclear.
[171] Colledge 1976, 70.
[172] Heyn 2016, 200.
[173] Colledge 1976, 71.
[174] Heyn 2010, 632-642. On the 'palm out' gesture, a common gesture of worship and divine benediction in ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures seen frequently on religious sculpture at Palmyra, see: Colledge 1976, 52-53.

symbolise modesty and sexual virtue, or even sorrow when the hand touches face,[175] although it should not be assumed that the same set of meanings hold true at Palmyra.[176] While functioning as a marker of female identity it was also used to add more movement to the sculpture.[177] Whenever the key is included in a portrait, the figure either holds the spindle and distaff and/or makes a raised gesture.[178] Although their appearance together might not in itself connect the meaning of the two features, an example featuring a key and a 'domestic calendar' could overtly link them together.[179] In one of only three known examples of this attribute in Palmyrene portraiture, the calendar is held in such a way so as to encircle the key – functioning as a way to draw attention similar to the use of gesture in the portraits,[180] while physically connecting the two objects as symbols of ideal femininity, valued in Palmyrene society (Fig.30).



Figure 30: Relief bust of a woman, Hypogeum no.6 of Sassans, south-east necropolis, c.120-140 CE (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, *Fig*.139 Cat. 44).

## II. The curtain

A similarly enigmatic feature of Palmyrene funerary sculpture which has been associated in scholarship with the afterlife is the curtain.[181] The image of a piece of cloth, pinned up on either side by rosettes or medallions, is more common than the key, on 246 examples of funerary sculpture, and in one wall painting (Fig.31).[182] The usage of the curtain is diverse in Palmyrene funerary sculpture, appearing across all types where it is depicted either in front or behind figures, or on its own as in the earliest examples.[183] As the attribute does not distinguish between representations of men, women or children[184] a gendered explanation can be ruled out here. It might be tempting to read some symbolic

[175] Heyn 2010, 634-35.
[176] Butcher 2003, 289.
[177] Krag 2018, 35-6; Colledge 1976, 71.
[178] See Appendix 1, Table 2.
[179] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 45-45.
[180] Heyn 2010, 641.
[181] Colledge 1976, 157.
[182] Raja 2019a, 68.
[183] For the full catalogue, see Raja 2019a, 75-146.
[184] However, there is a notable lack of examples of priests accompanied by the curtain, tentatively interpreted by Raja (2019a, 71-2) as a stylistic consideration.

meaning into these draped cloths, viewing them as a curtain providing access between the spheres of the living and the dead, similar to doors depicted in Greek, Roman and Etruscan funerary art.[185] As is typical of his approach to the Palmyrene funerary sphere, H. Seyrig rejects the possibility of spiritual symbolism in the image of his neutrally labelled 'voile' (cloth), tentatively suggesting a connection with funerary rituals, in particular banqueting, but certainly "un emblème de mort."[186] The connection to banqueting in his interpretation is unclear, however, an early stelae featuring the curtain without human figures (Fig.32) depicts at the top an arch of circular shapes, the cross-hatching of which draws comparisons to patterns stamped into bread from Rome and elsewhere in the Near East, dating back to Neolithic Mesopotamia.[187] As the curtain is always shown pinned up we can rule out their use as a shroud to wrap the deceased, as in Greek geometric vases that depict the *prothesis*, or 'laying out the dead', scene.[188] Even if the practical function of the cloth is not clear, it may have formed part of the funerary décor – the mise-en-scène of a Palmyrene funerary ritual.



Figure 31: Male portrait with curtain (Raja 2019a, 96 *Fig.* 6.32).



Figure 32: Funerary stelae depicting a curtain (Tanabe 1986, 287 *Fig.* 256).

[185] Gawlikowski 1970, 37; Drijvers 1982, 720.
[186] Seyrig 1936, 139-140.
[187] See e.g., the 'bread dole' fresco from Pompeii, House VII, tablinum *e* (Clarke 2003, Pl. 23); for bread stamps from the Near East, Kakish 2014.
[188] E.g., *Prothesis* scene on red-figure Attic loutrophoros, 4th/5th century BCE: Shapiro 1991, 648 Fig. 18.

Another depiction of a curtain appears behind a standing woman in a painted exedra from the Tomb of the Three Brothers, constructed mid-2nd century CE (Fig.33, right). The objects surrounding the figure are difficult to identify but, like other attributes in the sculptures they may relate to the societal role and status of the person with whom they are associated. An open vessel with a tapered foot and apparently filled with something, positioned just above a box, draws comparisons with the ritual bowls filled with grains held by priests in funerary representations.[189] In the presence of the curtain, this might suggest a connection between the offering of food during cultic activity, or to funerary feasting. However, H. Eristov and C. Vibert-Guigue, interpret the object as "une corbeille à laine" (a wool basket), similar to one seen in the painted lunette of the exedra, depicting the 'Achilles on Skyros' myth.[190] In this case, the object can be viewed similarly to the spindle and distaff, as a feminine attribute associated with a woman's domestic role and control over the household – complementing the female figure painted opposite, on the left side of the exedra, who holds a child (Fig.33, left). Returning to the interpretation of the curtain as an object used in funerary rituals at Palmyra, R. Raja suggests it may also have held symbolic meaning connected to mourning. Where more than one figure appears in a relief the curtain is usually depicted behind the head of the deceased, leading her to read the iconography as a gesture of mourning extended from the living to the deceased relative.[191] This interpretation is particularly pertinent where the reliefs in question depict a parent beside a deceased son or daughter, as a deep expression of loss



Figure 33: Reconstruction of female figures from painted exedra of the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers (Eristov *et al*. 2019 *Pl*.68).

[189] Sadurska and Bounni 1994, e.g., fig.84 cat.19, fig.84 cat.200; 154.
[190] Eristov and Vibert-Guigue 2019, 109. The identification of this object in the lunette is clear from the domestic context of the scene.
[191] Raja 2019a, 70-71.

towards a loved one who died before their time (Fig.34). Given the focus on motherhood in Palmyra and on lineage in general,[192] that the curtain might represent a symbolic gesture of mourning, particularly towards a deceased child, is feasible. Overall, the diversity of the curtain in Palmyrene funerary portraiture makes applying any one particular interpretation difficult, and the meaning of the object in this context could certainly have changed over the three centuries that it was used. While it initially appeared more prominently on stelae, a medium of commemorating the dead influenced by Hellenistic forerunners,[193] as the Palmyrene portrait tradition developed it became an attribute. It is possible that the curtain originally held some deeper symbolism in its depictions prior to the addition of figures, perhaps more closely linked to funerary practices, but that its meaning changed as it became absorbed into the repertoire of attributes in Palmyrene funerary sculpture.[194]



Figure 34: Relief of a woman mourning her son (Raja 2019).

## III. Wall paintings: Mythological imagery

A modest amount of painted decoration has been confirmed in Palmyrene necropoleis,[195] but the most elaborate, well-preserved paintings are found in the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers. As it offers the best opportunity for thorough iconographical study, the following section will centre on this tomb. While I make no claims that the decorative programme of this hypogea is representative of Palmyrene tombs, the cultural conditions that may have impacted the commissioning of this display might still be extrapolated beyond this unique example, to the wider society. The focus of the painted scheme is a lunette depicting a scene from the myth of Achilles in the exedra at the end of the hypogea's central chamber (Fig.35). The episode depicted here, of Achilles on Skyros, is commonly found in Roman houses and in a mosaic in a house in Palmyra,[196] and so the decision to decorate a prominent part of a tomb with this particular mythological scene surely holds some significance. Depictions of myth and deities in

[192] See, Ch.2 on the 'seated woman' figure in the banquet scenes.
[193] Raja 2017c, 322.
[194] Raja 2019a.
[195] Sorensen 2016; Colledge 1976.
[196] Colledge 1976, pl. 140.



Figure 35: Reconstruction of the 'Achilles on Skyros' painting, Hypogeum of the Three Brothers (adapted from Eristov *et al*. 2019, *Pl*.64).



Figure 36: Painted medallion showing the 'Abduction of Ganymede' on the ceiling of the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers (top), with drawing (bottom left) and reconstruction (bottom right) (Eristov *et al*. 2019, *Pl*.47.1).

Syrian tombs are rare and so its inclusion in this Palmyrene hypogea "may reflect local ideas about death and ornamentation, rather than cross-provincial beliefs."[197] It has been argued that the subject matter fits seamlessly into a funerary context, as Achilles stands on the brink of the decision that will dictate his fate and trigger his ascension from the mortal realm into the next.[198] A continuation of this theme of duality has also been read in the appearance on the ceiling of the tomb of the 'Abduction of Ganymede' myth (Fig.36). The story of Ganymede, the famed beautiful boy whom Zeus-turned-eagle abducted to be his cupholder, thereby petrifying the protagonist in a state of eternal youth, might have found parallels in the occupants of the tomb whose mortal lives were also cut short. Stylistically, the medallion may have roots in the Hellenistic tradition of depicting the myth. The possible presence of figures either side of Ganymede (made detectable using computer-graphics technology) aligns with a formula known from eastern mosaics, which derived from a Hellenistic prototype.[199] Stemming from a classical Greek tradition of depicting mythical abductions on vessels, some of which were recovered from tombs,[200] the abduction of Ganymede became particularly popular funerary imagery during the Roman period.[201] It is thought by F. Cumont to symbolise the premature death of one in the prime of their youth, a particularly literal explanation considering its connection with graves of adults as well as children,[202] and furthermore that it was associated with soteriological ideas of the deceased ascending to an immortal realm.[203] It is unclear just why this myth was employed in funerary contexts, but it was not restricted to them. The depiction of Ganymede's abduction in the Porta Maggiore's underground basilica, for example (Fig.37), and its positioning in the centre of the vaulted ceiling draws interesting parallels with the painted medallion of the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, raising questions of whether a common model influenced both versions - and whether we can necessarily connect the use of the myth with afterlife beliefs.[204] Particularly given the scarcity of such imagery in Palmyra, and despite the city's exposure to Hellenism, it may be problematic to apply classical readings of a myth to its appearance in a different cultural context. The mislabelling of the figures in Aramaic casts doubt on the idea that the myth held eschatological meaning to the brothers who constructed the tomb, or their family members who visited it: the figure of Odysseus, at least, would have been recognisable to one familiar with Greco-

[197] de Jong 2017, 162.
[198] Eristov and Vibert-Guigue 2019.
[199] Eristov *et al.* 2019, 108. On Hellenistic models, Tortorella 2004, 44-5.
[200] Roberts 1978, 179-180.
[201] Wypustek 2012, 134-136.
[202] See, Engemann 1973, 58-59, for examples of the myth used on epitaphs, where the dedicant did not die young.
[203] Cumont 1942, 28, 97-99.
[204] For other Roman examples with a similar iconographic rendering, see, *LIMC* IV (1), 162-163, (2) 88-89 *Pl.* 173, 178-180.

Roman mythology. Given the Hellenistic artistic style in the rendering of the figures, it is likely that the piece was painted by a Roman artist from a workshop outside of Palmyra – either from closer to Rome itself, or coastal Near Eastern city whose material culture was more influence by Greek and Roman models by exposure to foreign imports.[205] Based on its unusual appearance as tomb decoration in Palmyra and its foreign artistic style, we might read this set of wall paintings as a display of *padeia*: a way to convey to visitors, including the other families to whom burial spaces were sold off, the elite learning of the men who constructed the tomb.[206]

We might gain further insight into the meaning of wall paintings by quite literally taking a step back, in order to view the feature within its physical context. Positioned in the centre of the vaulted ceiling, directly overhead of one entering the main exedra (Fig.38), the content and the location of the decoration are intertwined - encouraging the viewer to imagine Ganymede being carried off into the sky beyond the tomb, the background of the scene rendered in a suitable shade of blue. So too is its enclosure within a medallion significant. The Victories/Nikes decorating the three walls of the niche below hold aloft medallion busts, each background painted in a matching sky-blue, lending a sense of cohesion to the decorative scheme of the niche. Bringing the mythological imagery back into its architectural context and considering it as part of a decorative scheme that blends Greco-Roman with local styles, like much of the art and architecture of Palmyra, the Three Brothers tomb might not be as much of an oddity as it first appears. While eschatological readings of the 'Achilles on Skyros' and 'Abduction of Ganymede' myths may or may not have been conscious considerations for the ancient tomb commissioners and its visitors, the sense of a desire to create an impressive, elite aesthetic with a cohesive decorative scheme is evident.

[205] The presence of the Achilles on Skyros myth in mosaic form in Palmyra might attest to a similar phenomenon.
[206] On *padeia* in Near Eastern cities, see: Butcher 2003.

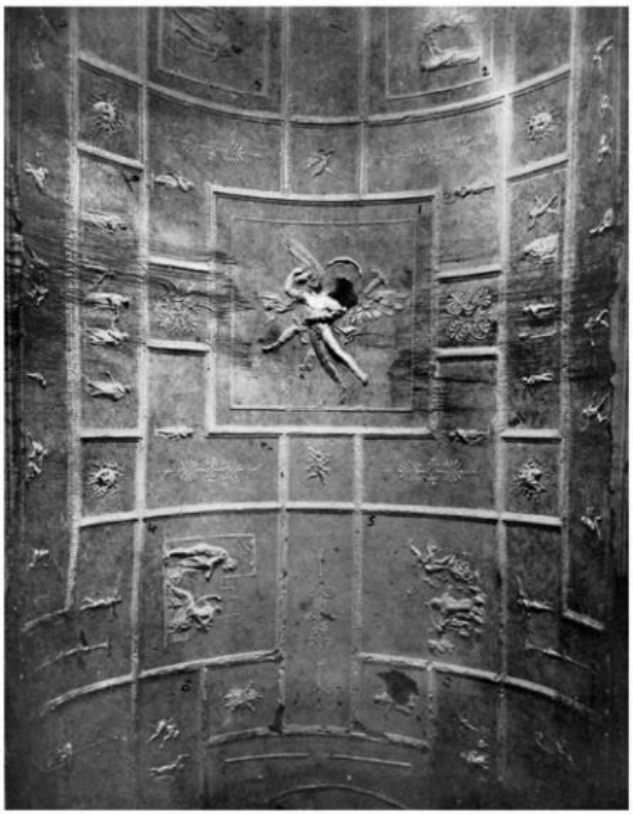


Figure 37: 'Abduction of Ganymede' on the ceiling of the underground Porta Maggiore 'basilica' in Rome, 3rd century CE (Wypusktek 2012, 139 *Fig*.6).

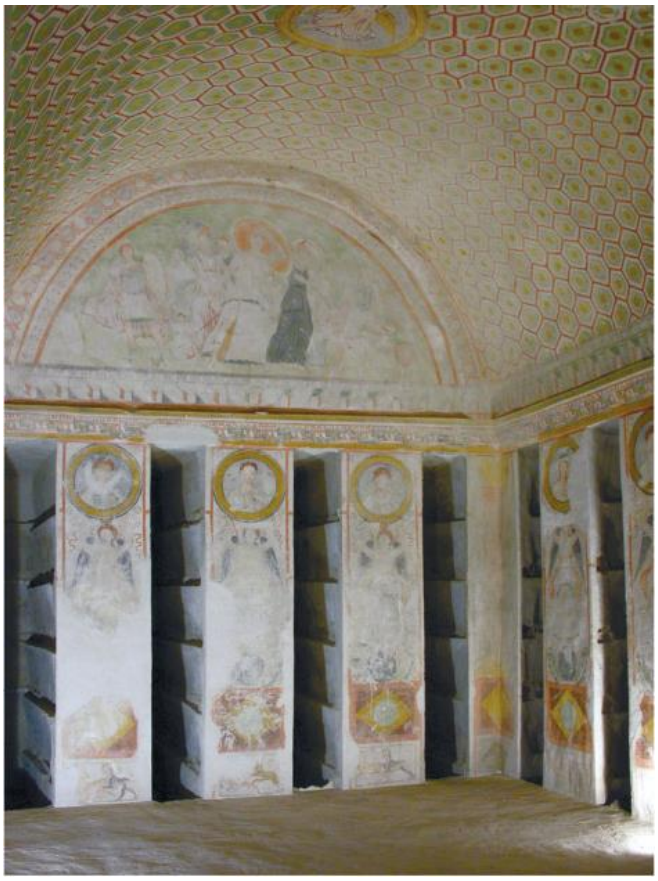


Figure 38: Painted niche of the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers (Eristov *et al.* 2019, *Pl*.13.2).

# Chapter 4: Interacting with the tomb: the archaeology of ritual

## I. Funerary ritual in the Roman world

At the heart of interpreting Palmyrene banquet reliefs in context is an understanding of their audience, and the relationship between person, place and object. In the urban environments of Greece and Rome, the meaning of buildings lay not in their functionality alone but in the ideological messages they transmitted which were, in turn, shaped by those who used them: spaces in which religious, political, social and personal purpose overlapped.[207] Although the privately-owned tombs of Palmyra were not a part of the urban fabric in the same way that its public monuments were, the idea that buildings are inherently bound up with memory, transmitting messages and values through the generations,[208] could not be more relevant to the funerary realm. In Rome, funerary rites and the cult of the dead are well-documented in ancient literary sources, and on grave monuments. With the available evidence we can trace the journey of the departed and their entourage: from the preparation of the body, to the funeral procession and burial rite, and the practices that followed both at the tomb-side and within the home of the deceased.[209] Evidence for funerary feasting is also visible in the Roman Near East, in the identification of banqueting facilities within tombs complexes of Petra.[210] In contrast, knowledge on Palmyra's funerary customs suffers due to an absence of surviving sources on the topic, and the extensive looting and destruction of tombs over the centuries. Even so, sufficient archaeological evidence survives to recreate a sense of Palmyrene burial practices and rituals,[211] particularly when supported by our knowledge of the Roman funerary sphere. Within and surrounding the Roman funeral we find a complex interplay of adherence to ritual and afterlife beliefs, navigating social dynamics, and the raw human experience of loss and mourning. And, with the universality of death, there is no reason to believe that Palmyrene funerary rites did not hold the same essential elements at their core. In order to build an understanding of how Palmyrene tombs were used, and what this can contribute to our knowledge of their beliefs and values, grave goods, tomb architecture, and burials, will be explored in the following chapter. Returning first to the banquet reliefs, and a discussion on whether the archaeological record shows signs of real-life feasting within or around the structures, the rest of section

[207] See, two complementary pieces from the same volume: Hölscher 2012, on Greece; and Purcell 2012, on Rome.
[208] Zanker 1998, 3.
[209] Toynbee 1971, 43-54.
[210] Notably, a rock-carved *triclinium* from the Tomb of the Soldier complex: Kropp 2013, 177-179.
[211] de Jong 2017, 151-152.

will consider the most common goods found in the tombs and how their deposition might inform our knowledge of Palmyrene funerary activity.

## II. Banqueting

When searching for evidence of funerary rites the architecture of the tomb space can communicate a great deal about the activities that may or may not have taken place there. Despite the popularity of the banqueting motif, no firm evidence for banqueting exists in any tomb type at Palmyra. The clearest restriction on group activities like this that involve large pieces of furniture, is a spatial one. The narrow corridors of hypogea and tower tombs make it unlikely that burial rites and any subsequent visits to the grave of the deceased involved banqueting rituals of the like known from the Roman funerary sphere,[212] with the average dimensions for the main chamber measuring between 3 and 4 metres in width.[213] Temple tombs were more spacious, with one reconstruction of Tomb 36 giving the interior dimensions of the central peristyle courtyard as roughly 6 metres squared.[214] Though providing ample space for a select group of visitors to gather, details about how these spaces were used are lost to us – the majority of this tomb type, regrettably, having been reduced to rubble.[215] The temple tomb being another example from Palmyra of distinctive architecture that blends local traditions with Greco-Roman aesthetics, it cannot be assumed that the courtyard of a tomb would have held a similar function to those social spaces in Roman villas or townhouses.[216] We see no sign of the simple stone benches that frequently feature in Roman tombs, let alone the finer masonry couches and even bake-ovens that were popular funerary dining accoutrements in 2nd and 3rd century CE Ostia.[217] The low benches found along walls in some hypogea housed loculi and supported sarcophagi or reliefs rather than being used for seating.[218] And in one early tower-tomb in Palmyra, they have also been interpreted as burial beds, for holding human remains.[219] Benches were multi-functional objects, and further afield in a hypogeum at al-Awatin, Iraq, there is evidence that one of the benches running along the walls in front of loculi was used for the placement of oil-lamps.[220] Unfortunately, nothing of the sort has been found at Palmyra, so

[212] Gawlikowski 2005, 48-9.
[213] Based on measurements from de Jong 2017, Online Appendix Palmyra Cat. 1 and 2.
[214] al-As'ad and Schmidt-Colinet 1995, 40 *fig*. 56.
[215] Additionally, the courtyards of these tombs varied in size. See, for example, that of the so-called 'Qasr abjad', with a more limited width of roughly 3 metres: Schnadelbach 2010, 95, after Parlasca 1989, 182.
[216] On the architecture of the Roman *convivium*: Dunbabin 1996.
[217] Meiggs 1973, 460-461.
[218] Gawlikowski 2005, 57.
[219] de Jong 2017, 152.
[220] de Jong 2017, 151-152 *fig*. 37.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| earring | 35 | pottery bowl | 2 |
| bracelet | 6 | pottery jar | 5 |
| ring | 25 | pottery amphora | 2 |
| pin | 13 | pottery cooking pot | 5 |
| amulet | 6 | pottery incense burner | 5 |
| necklace | 32 | pottery water pot | 5 |
| pendant | 22 | pottery water basin | 3 |
| bell | 9 | pottery unknown shape | 8 |
| other jewelry | 57 | lead vessel | 1 |
| shoe (single) | 6 | wicker vessel | 2 |
| textile | 16 | incense burner pottery | 7 |
| button | 2 | incense burner unknown material | 4 |
| glass bottle | 20 | vessel unknown material | 6 |
| glass small jar | 1 | bronze coin | 7 |
| glass small vessel | 4 | coin unknown material | 5 |
| glass cup | 4 | lamp | 640 |
| glass jug | 1 | bronze needle | 1 |
| glass unknown shape | 58 | grinding stone | 1 |
| pottery bottle | 8 | terracotta figurine | 1 |
| pottery small vessel | 1 | bronze/copper mirror | 1 |
| pottery plate | 2 | bone comb | 2 |
| pottery cup | 4 | flute | 2 |
| pottery jug | 2 | nail | 9 |
| pottery pitcher | 3 | unknown material/type | 65 |

Figure 39: Distribution of grave goods in Palmyrene tombs (de Jong 2017, 292 Table 7).

whether lamps were positioned in particular places to illuminate the chambers is unknown. Searching for signs of banqueting among the glass and pottery finds in Palmyrene tombs poses difficulties. In a survey of twenty-one Palmyrene tombs, 1,129 grave goods yielded a wide variety of vessels and containers, some of which could have been used for serving and consuming food and drink (Fig.39).[221] As recognised by L. de Jong, the categorisation of grave goods from Roman Syria is often not definitive, as classifications tend to vary between excavation reports which lack images,[222] and so attempting to identify dining through vessel type is problematic.[223] Additionally, the excavation of dining vessels within the tomb does not by default suggest that the activity occurred then, and might instead show evidence of offerings. Looking outside the tomb, we see no evidence to indicate that tomb-side banqueting was commonly practised in Palmyra,[224] or indeed evidence of mortuary ritual in general – a pattern that

[221] de Jong 2017, 292 *Appendix 1*, Table 7.
[222] de Jong 2017, 79.
[223] See, this approach (towards non-funerary Roman contexts) in: Hudson 2010.
[224] Gee 2008, on dining outside Roman house tombs.

applies to necropoleis of Roman Syria as whole.[225] Despite the prevalence of banquet reliefs, the archaeology of Palmyrene tombs lends little support to the idea that elite families gathered within those dark chambers to memorialise their dead with a feast. Moving away from dining, a study of grave goods and other tomb features, might inform our knowledge of other aspects of Palmyrene funerary ritual.

## III. Grave goods

In general, grave goods in Palmyra are not particularly abundant or luxurious and perhaps as a result, little attention has been dedicated to their study. In addition, the collapse of loculi shelving causing burials to mingle with those below, and disturbance caused by looting has led to difficulty in building an accurate picture of the state of grave goods in even the most meticulously excavated and recorded tombs.[226] Based on the excavation of a small group of hypogea from the South-East necropolis,[227] some patterns have been ascertained. Overall, grave goods are more common in the burials of mature women and children, with personal accessories such as jewellery also reserved for these burial types. Infant pit graves contain on average a higher number of grave goods than loculi burials[228] – although we cannot rule out that robbers, more likely drawn to the visible loculi slots over unmarked pits dugs into the ground, have affected these figures this phenomenon can be seen in even seemingly undisturbed (artificially speaking) tombs.[229] Male burials often contained no objects other than oil lamps: an object found in all burial types but not all burials. Though there appears to be an element of gendering in grave goods, it is interesting that they do not appear to reflect the wealth and status of the deceased. For example, in Tombs F (the Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa) and C (the latter seemingly free from looting), the graves of the tomb builders and their families appear to have been buried with no objects at all.[230] Certain items stand out from the recorded grave goods of Palmyra: an amulet of deity Bes, connecting Palmyra to the cultural belief systems of the wider Levant;[231] 6 bronze coins from a single burial, out of the meagre 7 found in tombs overall.[232] Unfortunately, the rarity of these objects among the recorded finds makes their appearance difficult to analyse and so as a result

[225] de Jong 2017, 151-2.
[226] Saito 2010, particularly on the removal of heads by grave robbers.
[227] Four tombs (C, E, F and H) excavated by a team from the Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture between 1990 and 2005.
[228] Saito 1995, 27, suggests a direct link between the deposition of grave goods and an untimely death.
[229] E.g. Tomb C: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 202.
[230] Saito 2005, 157.
[231] Higuchi and Saito 2001, *Pl.* 71.2 and 2. On the iconography of Bes: Wilson 1975.
[232] Hypogeum of Yarhai, Loculus 5, Niche 13: de Jong 2017, Table 22, *Online Appendix Palmyra Cat. 1.indd 2*.

the following section will focus on the deposition and usage of the most common grave goods in Palmyra: lamps and vessels.

### i. Oil lamps

The dim lighting of Palmyrene tombs, particularly in underground hypogea but windows are also scarce in temple and house tombs,[233] would have limited the kinds of activities that took place there. In many cases oil lamps would have been the singular light source, casting further doubts over the suitability of the space for banqueting. Oil lamps are the most common grave good at Palmyra,[234] attesting to their importance within the funerary context. They have been found in all chambers of tombs, on top of loculi slabs, and accompanying remains as grave goods.[235] The sealing of lamps within loculi is notable, raising the possibility that their significance in a funerary context went beyond practicality – particularly considering they have also been found inside unused loculi.[236] The objects are commonly found beside the feet of the deceased, whose bodies in loculi slots tended to be positioned with heads pointing towards the exterior wall[237] - a placement likely influenced by the limitations of adding the items to a deep burial slot rather than holding any symbolic significance. As suggested by K. Saito, the lamps may have ensured "that the dead would not lose their way in the darkness, or their space would be lighted like in the world of the living":[238] an aid for the deceased embarking on a journey to the afterlife, similar to the possible function of coins in many Roman burials.[239] The deposition of lamps in front and on top of reliefs, suggests these objects were left as offerings to the dead by relatives visiting the tomb. In one fortunate example of in situ preservation, a portrait of a man from the main exedra of Tomb C is associated with a collection of 17 oil lamps and 2 incense vessels, gathered around and piled on top of the relief (Fig.40).[240] Nor are the lamps reserved for adult burials, as a number have been recorded in infant pit-graves (up to c. 12 months old) from Tombs C and F. Pit grave EI 2, in the west side chamber of Tomb C yielded three lamps, one of which is decorated with an eagle (associated

[233] Pseudo-windows may serve purely decorative purposes, as in House Tomb no.129b: Saito and As'ad 2010, 2.
[234] de Jong 2017, 292 *Table* 7. Oil lamps are also one of the most common grave goods across Roman Syria overall (78-80 Chart 6).
[235] de jong 2017, 293.
[236] de Jong 2017, 87.
[237] Saito 2010.
[238] Saito 2005, 158.
[239] On how the 'Charon's Obol' interpretation actually restricts our understanding of coinage in ancient funerary contexts: Stevens 1991.
[240] de Jong 2017, 162-163. For the location of the portrait within the tomb, see Higuchi and Saito 2001, 203 *fig*. 106(A).

with Baalshamin) between two figures, interpreted as the local deities Yarhibol and Aglibol.[241] This design is extremely rare at Palmyra (just one other similar example is currently known, the deities here interpreted as Aglibol and Malakbel),[242] as is the general appearance of deities in funerary contexts there. It is not certain whether the oil lamps left in tombs were only used for that specific purpose (although for many the wick was lit just once for a short amount of time),[243] but perhaps the lamp was originally intended for a religious ritual, explaining the unique imagery in this context. The lack of recorded contexts for lamps, and for grave goods in general, makes it difficult to discern whether patterns of deposition are shared amongst Palmyra's tombs, thereby linking the objects to funerary rites.[244] However, their contexts in two tombs strongly suggests that some were deposited as offerings

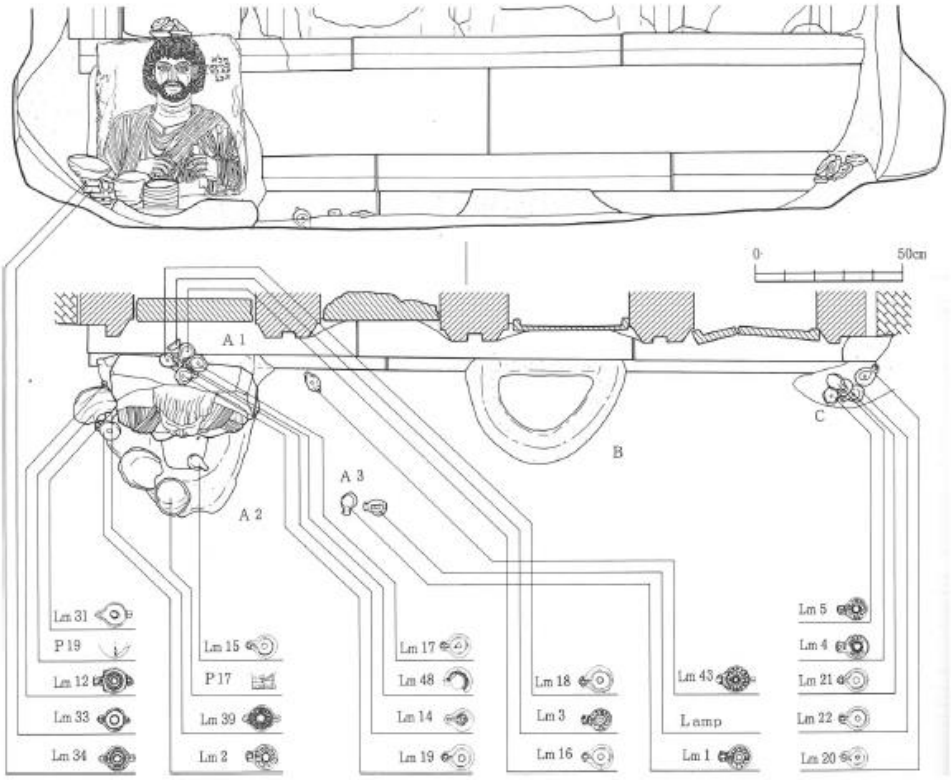



Figure 40: Grave goods surrounding a funerary portrait in Tomb C, Palmyra (Higuchi and Izumi 1994, 40 *Fig*.36).

[241] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 128-131 *fig.* 128 (L75). *cf*. configuration of figures on bas-relief of temple of Bel, the so-called 'triad' of Baalshamin: Sadurska 1975, 59 *fig*. 15.
[242] Sadurska 1975, 58 *fig*. 14. Additionally, two lamps decorated with the words 'Aglibal and Malakbel', come from funerary exedra ML3-0 and infant grave WNL1-0, in Tomb F: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 120 *Fig*. 78 L2 and L3.
[243] Saito 2005, 158.
[244] Even where this is recorded it may not reflect actual deposition, as grave goods are at risk of disturbance by looting and natural processes such as flooding which affects Palmyra roughly every twenty years: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 202.

and the high quantity of lamps found in funerary contexts at Palmyra overall displays their importance to funerary rites, whether or not their function was symbolic as well as practical.

### ii. Vessels

We have ascertained the difficulties behind tracing vessels found in Palmyrene tombs back to dining within that same space, but might there be clearer indications of their usage and deposition in a funerary context? During the two annual Roman festivals dedicated to commemorating the dead, the *Parentalia* (13-21/23 February) and the *Lemuria* (9, 11 and 13th May), it was common practice to pour libations onto the ashes of the deceased to appease their spirits.[245] In Palmyrene tombs, water-tight plaster bowls set into the floor in front of reliefs may have held a similar function, as vessels into which to receive libations (Fig.41),[246] while the inclusion of wells within hypogea indicates the use of water in tomb activities, potentially rituals.[247] While substances such as honey, wine and grain were used as libation offerings throughout the ancient world, water may have held particular significance in Palmyra given that the settlement was able to thrive in a desert environment due to its proximity to an oasis.[248] Water-tight plastered pots were typical,[249] suggesting that water was transported around the tomb, while other grave goods including pitchers, jugs and amphora (see Fig.39) likely served a similar function for pouring liquid. In Tomb C, pots were placed upside down on pit-graves of



Figure 41: Plaster basin and lamp in front of the 'freedman' banquet relief in the east niche, Tomb of Bolha and Borrefa (Higuchi and Saito 2001, *Pl*.28.1).

[245] Clarke 2003, 182 fn.2, Arnobius 7.20.
[246] See those from the Tomb of Bolha and Borrefa, 88 CE, South-east necropolis, identified as water basins (Higuchi and Saito 2001, PL. 33 and FIG. 12). Also, a plaster construction from Tower tomb 015 (Q273 in Schnädelbach 2010), labelled an 'offering-trough' by Henning 2013, 156-157.
[247] E.g., in Tomb F (Higuchi and Saito 2001, 20-21); Tomb C (de Jong 2017, 152-3 *fig*. 38). Saito 2005, 158, claims that they are always located on the right side.
[248] It is not clear whether lipid analysis has been conducted on the basins, however, so it is possible that a range of substances were used as offerings. See also, the manipulation and display of water by the Nabataeans at their capital, Petra (e.g. both cities had a Nymphaeum): Bedal 2002. Kaizer (2002, 143-148) mentions deities in connection with water at Palmyra but argues against the epigraphic evidence that has been used to claim the existence of a cult of Yarhibol at the Efqa spring.
[249] de Jong 2017, 84.

infants:[250] a ritual object used during a funerary rite or simply intended as a grave marker? Perhaps it was both? The multi-functionality of vessels in Palmyrene tombs is already exhibited through the frequent recycling of pottery bases into incense holders.[251] Scant evidence exists of vessels deposited in such a way as to suggest specific ritual activities, however, there are a few notable examples. The only evidence of intentional placement of glass outside of a burial in the whole of Roman Syria comes from Palmyra. In Tomb 32, a hypogeum in the Valley of the Tombs, glass cups were discovered in a plastered basin in the main chamber,[252] which might point towards a funerary rite involving communal drinking or libation pouring. Despite the invention of glass-blowing on the Levantine coast in the middle of the 1st c BCE, possibly in Syria itself,[253] Palmyrene tombs (and also burial grounds of Dura Europos) saw a low volume of glass vessels compared to sites close to centres of production beside the coast (e.g. Beirut and Tyre).[254] The relative rarity of the material compared to the commonplace ceramic adds weight to the possibility that the glasses and basin formed part of a funerary rite that took place within the tomb. Glass bottles were deposited in a joint burial of a male and female from Tomb C, south-east necropolis.[255] Their rarity as a grave good and their association with silver clothing attachments from the same burial further suggests that glass may have been considered a prestige item in Palmyra, appropriate for a funerary rite. Incense vessels are also very common finds in Palmyrene tombs. Liquid incense may also have been in use, with glass and ceramic finds from some tombs showing remains of vessels used for its transport and distribution, including *unguentarium* and *infundibulum* (Fig.42), the latter being popular fillers in the 1st and 2nd century Levant.[256] Again, their use was likely two-fold – incense could function as an offering, supported here by its discovery in front of funerary portraits. As is clear with the lamps, however, incense also served an important practical function, helping to mask the stench of decomposition that would pervade the enclosed tomb space.[257]

A second example of grave goods linked to specific funerary activity comes in the form of a flower-decorated bowl atop a 42cm high stone votive altar from Hypogea of Ḥennibel son of Ḥamtuš, south-west necropolis, the object being a standard feature of Palmyrene sanctuaries but a rare find in

[250] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 202.
[251] de Jong 2017, 84.
[252] de Jong 2017, 86.
[253] Butcher 2003, 201.
[254] de jong 2017, 84.
[255] Loculus M 1–1. Higuchi and Izumi 1994, 41 *Fig*.37.
[256] Gawlikowska 2015, 782-783.
[257] de Jong 2017, 87.




Figure 42: *Infundibulum* from the Hypogea of Zabda (left), and examples from the Beiteddine Museum (right) (Gawlikowska 2015, 783 *Fig*.3).

tombs.[258] Colledge claims that movable and fixed altars were used for burning incense within tombs, and that small bowls of cinders, sometimes placed before sarcophagi, have been found,[259] although no further details are given about these finds. Altars also appear in a variety of funerary sculptural types in Palmyra, for example: a miniature banquet relief in which one of the recliners is a woman;[260] a stele featuring a standing man dressed in Parthian clothing, accompanied by a dog;[261] and as part of a cultic scene carved onto a sarcophagus base. The latter example, a monument dated to the first half of the 3rd century CE, the exact context of which is unknown, is particularly notable. On its front the sarcophagus base depicts a priest engaged in a funerary rite, flanked on either side by male figures carrying offerings of food, and one leading a sacrificial bull to the altar at the centre (Fig.43). The relief sitting atop the sarcophagi, of a reclining male and presumably his family, might appear to directly connect the *Totenmahl* motif with cultic practices, giving an insight into customs surrounding the Palmyrene funeral. However, the monument is unusual at Palmyra both for the explicitly religious themes of the sarcophagi (the right short side depicts goddess Astarte leading a camel (Fig.43: bottom right) and for certain details of the the banquet scene – the priest wears a Roman toga and, though only fragments remain, a saddled horse once joined the composition. On closer inspection, it seems that what is being depicted is not connected to funerary rites at all, but the various cultural identities of the deceased, exhibited together in one impressive monument: representing himself as a proud Roman citizen, not at odds with, but as a complement to his Palmyrene heritage.[262] Ultimately, despite the funerary context of these pieces of

[258] Al-as'ad 2013, 20.
[259] Colledge 1976, 63.
[260] From the Hypogeum of Ta'ai.
[261] Michałowski 1960, 117. On dogs connected to chthonic deities in Roman sculpture: Toynbee 1973, 122-124. On the animal accompanying goddesses in Palmyrene cult reliefs: Dirven 2013.
[262] Schmidt-Colinet 2004, 193-194.

sculpture depicting altars, nothing in the imagery itself suggests the altar is intended to represent one used within the tomb, rather than a general cultic scene.

Although we cannot rule out the occurrence of domestic banqueting,[263] and the subsequent transference of vessels into the tomb as offerings, substantial evidence of banqueting within the tomb does not exist at Palmyra. Besides a lack of evidence for ritual banqueting these tombs, in particular the hypogea with their dark and physically restrictive conditions, were not constructed to accommodate a family feast. A lack of grave goods accompanying burials suggests that being equipped with certain prestigious objects to take into the afterlife was not necessarily a consideration at Palmyra. However, the consistency of the simple oil lamp is notable. It clearly held an important practical function, to illuminate the space, but its sealing inside loculi with the deceased adds a possible symbolic dimension. Just as vessel finds suggest that food, drink, and incense were left as offerings to the dead, perhaps the lamp held a similar function.

[263] Cussini 2016; Audley-Miller 2016, 562-4.



Figure 43: Sarcophagus and banquet relief, first half 3rd century CE, Palmyra: front view (top), detail of altar (bottom left), right short side (bottom right) (photographs by A. Kropp).

# Chapter 5: The Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa

## I. Selecting a case study

Important as a comprehensive, holistic study of Palmyra's tombs would be for enhancing knowledge of the Palmyrene funerary sphere, with implications for Roman Syria and the wider Near East, it is not feasible at this time. Many details such as the original locations of loculi reliefs within the tombs and the positioning of grave goods in connection with remains were never recorded,[264] and the current political climate in Syria has halted expeditions to the city for the last ten years, stemming the flow of new data.[265] Without claiming to be representative, a study of a single tomb enables me to explore how individual elements impact the meanings of one another within a shared space, looking at specific relationships between object and object, and viewer and object. As my research centres on the banquet reliefs, I limited my case study to hypogea, where the majority of banquet reliefs derive from. Hypogea accommodated the highest number of burials, such prevalence suggesting that it is the funerary monument most representative of Palmyra's upper echelons through the 1st to 3rd centuries CE. In contrast, extensive research has been undertaken on the particularly grand Temple Tomb 36, the largest known example of this type at Palmyra[266] - an undoubtedly important study, but potentially concerning a more exclusive group given the lower number of this type constructed. In addition, the subterranean conditions of hypogea have resulted in better rates of preservation on-the-whole, and so our best evidence derives from these monuments. When selecting the tomb to use as a case study, I began by recording hypogea that at some point had large-scale banquet reliefs installed inside, before attempting to resituate the pieces within their tomb plans.[267] On confirming specific contexts for a number of banquet reliefs, I established the amount of archaeological data available for each tomb based on the following categories: individual portrait reliefs; architectural features; burials; grave goods. Though the study of wall paintings contributes greatly to our understanding of Palmyrene tombs, I chose to omit this feature from my search criteria based on their relative scarceness. Though I was unable to

[264] de Jong 2017, 79.
[265] The publication and translation into English of Harald Ingholt's excavation diaries (Raja *et al*. 2021, esp. 'Diary 3 – 1925'), while undoubtedly contributing to our knowledge of Palmyra, lack the systematic standard of modern documentation that such an in-depth study would demand.
[266] Schmidt-Colinet 1992.
[267] See Appendix 2 for tomb plans with banquet relief locations.

retrieve extensive data from every category on a single tomb, the Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa, from the south-east necropolis, proved the optimal choice of case study.

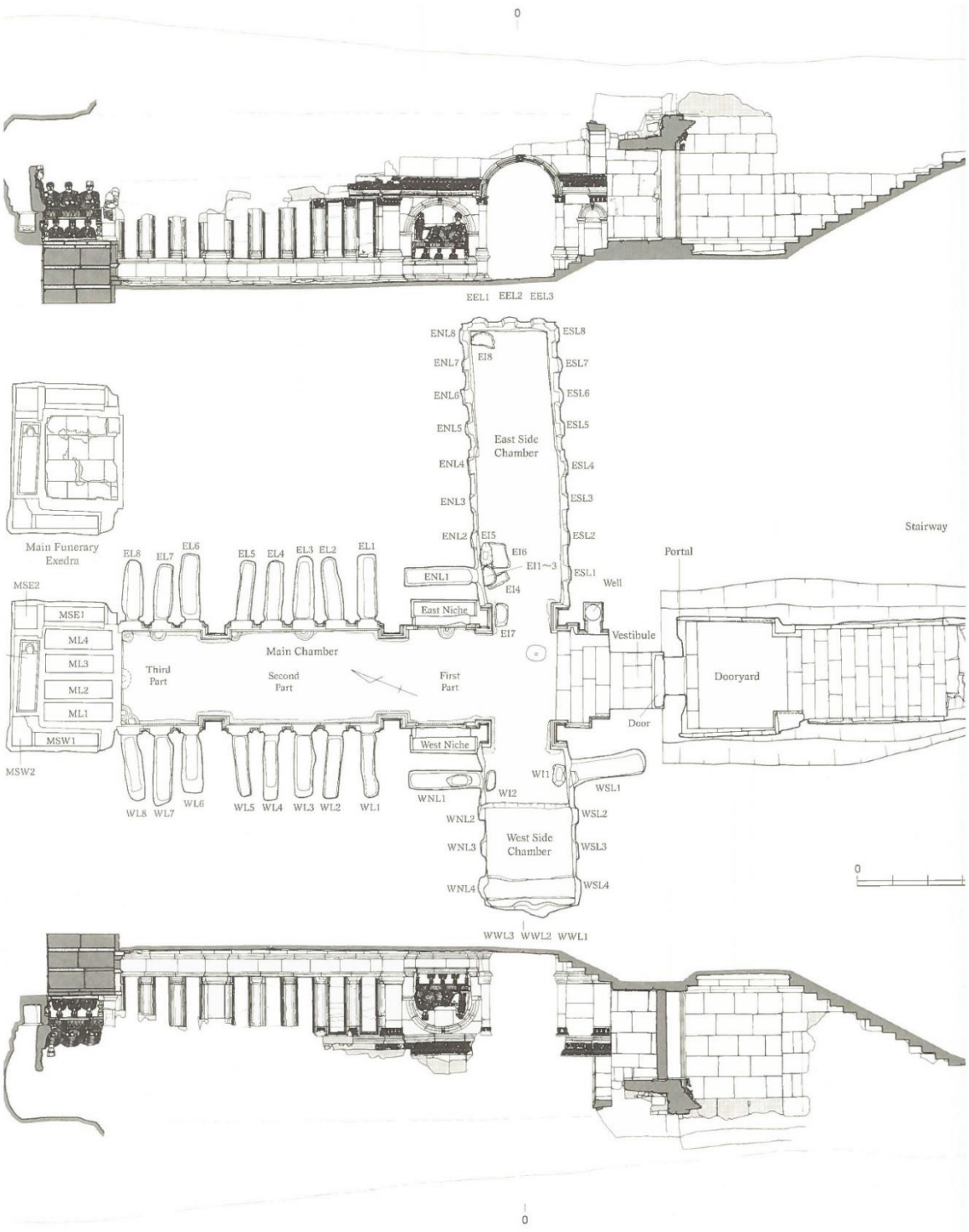



Figure 44: Plan and elevation of Tomb F, southeast necropolis (Higuchi and Saito 2001).

## II. Tomb F: The Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa

The Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa, also known as Tomb F, is located to the south-east of the city, in Palmyra's most remote necropolis.[268] Founded in 128 CE by brothers Bolha and Borrefa, sons of Malku, an inscription on the lintel above the entrance informs us that the tomb was in use for at least a century after its founding, announcing the ceding of parts of the tomb in 220 CE, and again in 222 CE.[269] The tomb takes the 'inverted T-shape' plan, the main chamber being modest in size in comparison to some other Palmyrene hypogea but typical of tombs from that necropolis (Fig.44).[270] Eighty individuals were identified in the tomb across 23 loculi, 5 sarcophagi and 10 pit graves. [271] While the main chamber was furnished with a full set of loculi and five banquet reliefs, including a *triclinium* arrangement of sarcophagi, the east and west side chambers remain unfinished: they contained only 12 burials between them, including infants in pit-graves.[272] Some loculi slots were dug out but unused, while spaces for others were marked out for future usage. Based on available tomb plans, it was common practice for loculi to be dug out as they were needed, and we often find that tombs were abandoned before being fully filled, giving an insight into the dynamic nature of these monuments in Palmyra. The following section will approach the tomb as an ancient Palmyrene, considering how the multi-sensory environment of the space might have impacted the viewing experience of the sculpture, in particular the banquet reliefs, and how this in turn can contribute to the construction of meaning.

### i. Just a door?

Whether they were a funerary party accompanying the body for burial, or relatives visiting the graves already in place there, every visitor to the tomb descended the same 10 metre-long stairway to the entrance, preparing to pass from the land of the living aboveground to the darkened chambers of the hypogea.[273] It is unclear how hypogea would have been marked aboveground to enable easy location, but there is evidence of a colonnaded structure above the entrance to the stairs of this

[268] Evidence of architectural structures beneath a farm between the city walls and the necropolis suggests that it may have extended closer to the city limits than: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 4. For a map of Palmyra's necropoleis, see Fig.2.
[269] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 15-16 *fig*.16.
[270] See, Appendix 2 for to-scale tomb plans.
[271] Loculi in the walls of the main and side chambers accommodate 5 slots on average, while those in the exedra contain only 3: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 49-101.
[272] Higuchi and Saito 2001.
[273] *Cf*. corridors in early Etruscan tomb architecture: "These long entrance corridors… emphasise the difference between inside and outside by stretching the mediative distance between them": Izzet 2007, 95-6.

particular tomb.[274] While the door primarily functions to secure the tomb, could it have held a deeper, symbolic function? Within Etruscan funerary beliefs there was a belief in liminal spaces between life and the afterlife, that the door to the tomb served as a symbolic threshold that the dead must cross to pass to the world beyond.[275] The demonic entities which flank doors in some Etruscan tombs, the predominate reason for the interpretation of doorways as portals,[276] are of course not present in Palmyra's funerary monuments. However, other decorative elements highlight the importance of this part of the tomb. The entrance itself is intricately decorated, featuring a pair of lion heads with rings in their mouths akin to door knockers, carved out of the middle of the door (Fig.45). While these faces might have simply served as decoration, they may also have held a symbolic function. Throughout the Near East, the lion appears as a guardian of temples and city gates. The animal is frequently found in cult reliefs as a consort of the goddess Allat,[277] the most famous example from Palmyra being the 3.5-metre-high relief that adorned the 1st century CE Sanctuary of Allat.[278] The differing context is important to our interpretation, and there is no reason to link the lions to Allat here, particularly considering the rarity of overt cultic imagery in Palmyrene funerary monuments. But the carved lion faces on the door may have been intended as protectors of the tomb - a warning to ancient graverobbers? cf. inscriptions from Roman tombs.[279] Outside Etruscan tombs of the late Orientalizing period onwards, statues of fantastic and real animals, including lions, were used to mark the imaginary border between the living and after world.[280] Lions with rings in their mouths are also very rare addition to funerary reliefs, perhaps

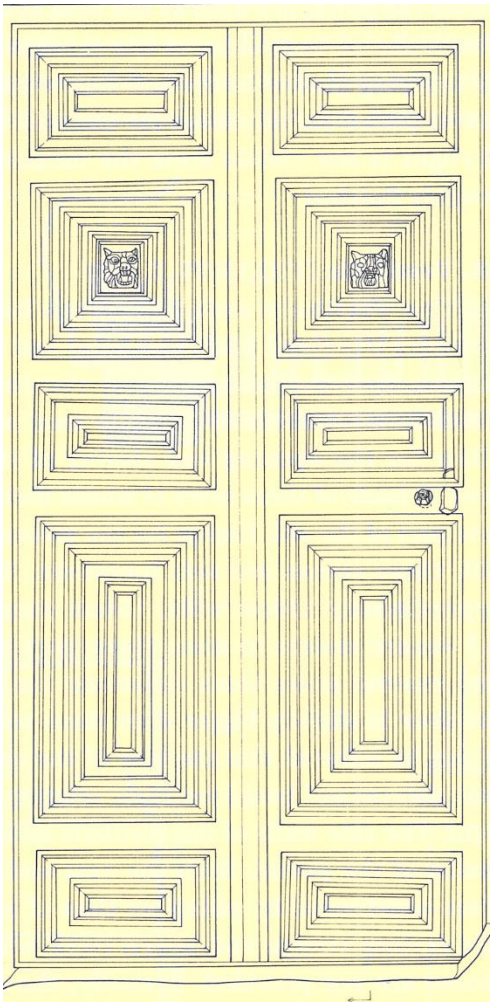


Figure 45: Drawing of door to Tomb F (Higuchi and Saito 2001, *Fig*.17).

[274] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 12.
[275] Krauskopf 2006, 67.
[276] E.g., Tomb of the Aninas and Tomb of the Caronti, Tarquinii, 3rd century BCE: Krauskopf 2006, 67 *Figs*.2-4.
[277] Butcher 2003, 309.
[278] Tanabe 1986, 196 *Fig*. 163.
[279] Tiny lions also decorate the couches of all five banquet reliefs in the tomb.
[280] Naso 2017, 333-334.

connecting the animal to doors and the tomb, the 'house of eternity' (Fig.46).[281] An epitaph plate, a stone relief featuring a non-human face positioned below an inscription detailing the construction of the tomb, was recovered from the floor inside the main chamber (Fig.47). It is likely that it was originally fixed above the lintel, where the inscription detailing the change of ownership was later added.[282] The face is interesting: though it has features of a satyr or faun, the beard and horns being characteristic of the Greco-Roman mythical creature, the expression with its wide-open eyes and protruding tongue is reminiscent of depictions of the Gorgon. A similar example of the face comes from Tomb No. 28, in the Valley of the Tombs, inserted into the façade wall which looked onto the main road.[283] Whether or not the blending of features is the product of religious syncretism, and the assimilation of local and Greco-Roman deities to one another, the position of the relief in these two examples suggests that it may have been a form of tomb protection from spiritual or mortal trespassers.



Figure 46: Portrait relief of a woman between two lion faces, Palmyra, c. 120 CE (Charles-Gaffiot 2001, 302 *Fig*.226).

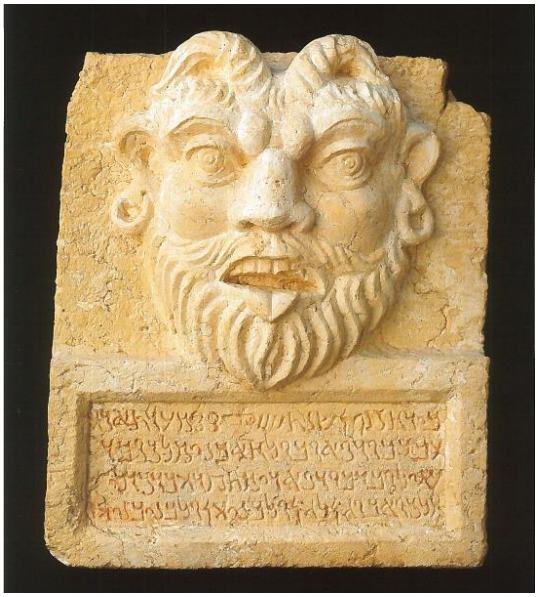


Figure 47: Epitaph plate with carved face (Higuchi and Saito 2001, Pl. 68).

[281] See also the banquet relief with Malkû and 'A'abi: Krag 2016, 189 *Fig*. 5; Cussini 2019, 75, *Fig.*4.
[282] Higuchi and Saito 2001: 102.
[283] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 42 *Fig.*27.

### ii. Experiencing the tomb

The sculptural decoration of the tombs is typical of Palmyra's monuments, with its blending together of numerous artistic styles in a distinctive local tradition. The main chamber, entirely finished with stone slabs, mimics classical house architecture, with its vaulted ceiling, columns, and arches.[284] There is a sense of order and cohesion in the sculptural decoration of the tomb, as the same floral and vegetal motifs that decorate the architectural features (the frieze, architrave and entablature of the main chamber) are reflected in various aspects of the reliefs: in the couch decoration, and the clothing and attributes of the deceased (Fig.48). Many of the oil lamps deposited in the tomb are also decorated with these motifs.[285] Keystones carved with gorgon faces adorned entrances to the east and west side chambers, their eyes downturned as if to watch over those passing through the arches below, further supporting the interpretation of the image as apotropaic when associated with Palmyra's tombs. The overall affect within the space is a sense of interconnectedness both within and without, reminding the viewer of the natural world and the fertile conditions on which the desert city so heavily relied. Plants are a prominent sculptural feature in Palmyra, the common appearance in religious reliefs of the palm branch in particular suggesting a cultic connection.[286] While the vegetal decoration might indicate a sacred space, coupled with the classical architectural features it has the additional effect of bringing nature into an interior, man-made space – reminiscent of the garden paintings in imperial Roman villas, and the luxury and prestige attached to the concept of taming the wild, natural world.[287] We know that the well was a main feature of Palmyrene hypogea, given its prevalence in this tomb type and the attention paid to its decoration, including a tiny medallion of a  woman. Despite these intricacies, it is unclear how visible such decoration would have been to the tomb's visitors. It is probable that the door was left open during visits to let in as much light as possible, backed up by the repairing of cracks on the front but not on the back of the door, suggesting the reverse of the door was rarely seen.[288] A skylight would have provided another source of natural sunlight to help illuminate the first part of the main chamber, where visitors would perhaps have gathered to draw water from the well for libations into bowls moulded from waterproof plaster into the floor itself, or transported other offerings of food or incense in one of the many vessel types deposited in the chambers.[289] Near the back of the main

[284] The doorway even had a roof constructed over the lintel, mimicking a house porch: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 9.
[285] Higuchi and Saito 2001, esp. 124-126 *fig*.80-81.
[286] Bobou 2021.
[287] Carroll 2015.
[288] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 18.
[289] See Chapter 4 on the use of vessels in Palmyra's tombs.

chamber, however, visitors will have relied heavily on lamplight, and perhaps much of the architectural decoration was obscured by darkness – leading us to question to what extent the tomb was meant to impress visitors, and how much was it intended as a luxurious surrounding for the deceased? By this point, was it simply a cultural expectation that those with the means to construct a family tomb should also have it decorated to an appropriate standard?

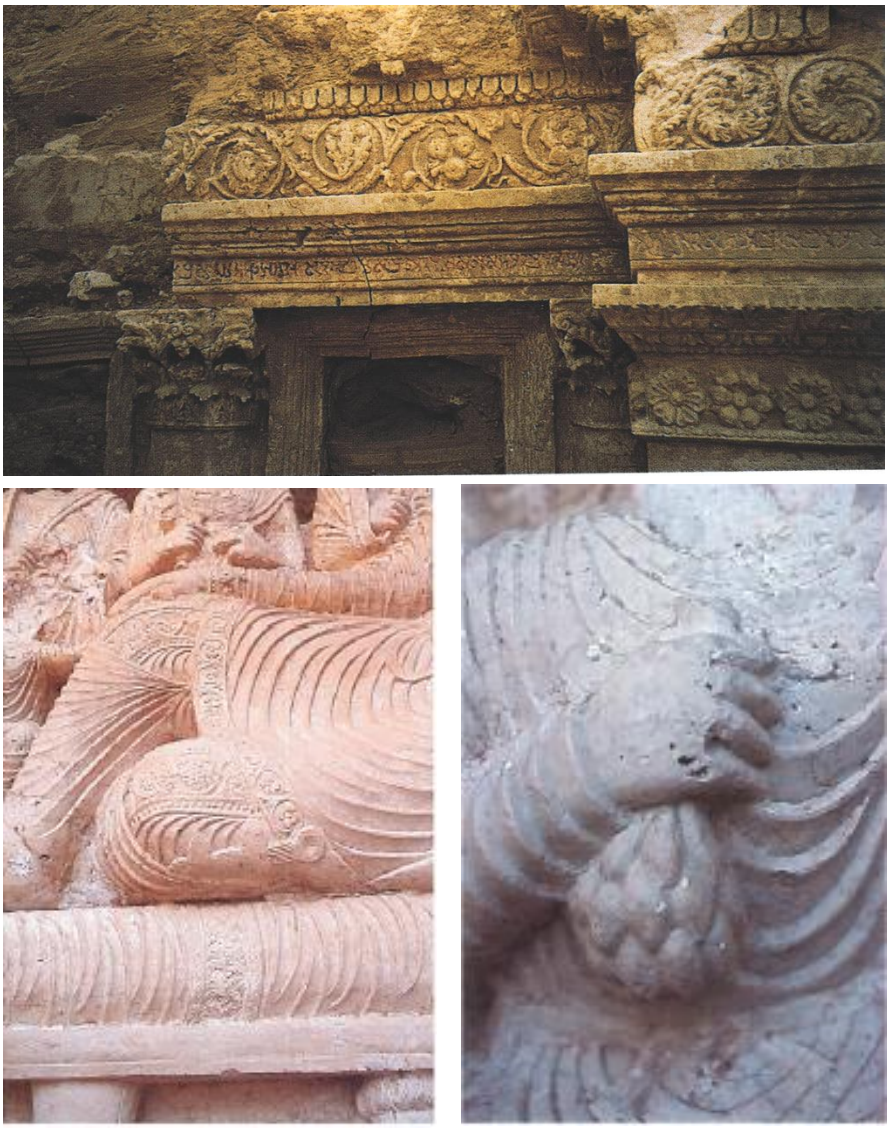


Figure 48: Floral and vegetal motifs in the sculptural decoration of Tomb F. Frieze and architrave in second part of main chamber, east wall (top); detail of clothing and mattress of central reclining figure (bottom left); bunch of grapes help by child in banquet relief (bottom right) (Higuchi and Saito 2001).

The display of the banquet reliefs in this hypogea is an ideal example of how the relationship between architecture and sculpture impacts the viewing experience and thus, the meaning itself. There is an overall sense of symmetry in the main part of the tomb: 'freedmen reliefs' standing in niches opposite each other in the first part of the chamber; and at the back, a *triclinium* arrangement of sarcophagi and banquet reliefs, the composition of the left wing mirrored in the right. We know that the allocation of loculi for particular families was important from inscriptions giving instructions on who was entitled to be buried in specific parts of the tomb,[290] and so we might infer deeper meaning into the placement of the relief sculpture. It is clear that certain parts of the tomb were considered more prestigious than others, based on the placement of banquet reliefs often honouring the tomb founder, such as the end of the main chamber or axial corridor.[291] In Tomb F, the main funerary exedra containing the *triclinium* is located directly opposite the door at the back of the main chamber, serving as the focal point of the tomb (Fig.49). Even without inscriptions identifying the figures, in the spatial organisation of the tomb a visual hierarchy is established, signalling to the viewer that this is a sculptural monument to the tomb's founders. We can imagine how this arrangement would have looked illuminated by the oil lamps found in the furthest part of the chamber,[292] perhaps originally placed on the platform itself: the eye drawn to a distant glow on entering the tomb and, as the visitor moves closer, the lamps becoming roughly level with the face. The 'wings' on either side of the central relief in effect enclose the viewer, creating a dynamic, three-dimensional monument that invites engagement with these striking images of the dead. Though the triclinium is elevated highest relative to its importance, so are the other reliefs raised off the ground.[293] This might have encouraged feelings of reverence in the viewer, gazing up into the faces of their ancestors. No individual portrait reliefs were discovered in this tomb, however, the existence of loculi slots containing burials suggests that they were once installed here - evidence of flooding leading the excavators to suggest that these reliefs were removed to another tomb.[294] With comparison to hypogea where many portraits *were* recovered, we can visualise how the central chamber might have looked: the portraits grouped together, sending a message about the power and

[290] Al-As'ad *et al*. 2012, 164-165 Inv. 2983/95; 165 Inv. 1457/8672.
[291] See, Appendix 2. Note that sometimes the side chambers but not the back of the main chamber contain *triclinium* arrangements – perhaps an indication that proximity to a well beside the entrance was another consideration.
[292] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 42-44.
[293] Although the loculi slots themselves were dug down to, or even below, ground level. See e.g. section of loculus stack EL1: Sato 2001, 67 *Fig.* 43.
[294] Higuchi and Saito 2001. Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 72, (Fig. 2 Cat. 96) mention the removal of a relief (and most likely skeletal remains) from an individual tomb to the communal Hypogeum of Bolha, son of Nebosuri, southeast necropolis.

influence of familial ties (Fig.50). Witnessing these excavated tombs in the modern age, illuminated by sunlight or lit up in a museum, couldn't be further from the reality of the original viewing experience. The flickering of lamplight across the features of wall-to-wall stone faces, catching on wisps of incense smoke in the air, might have produced a powerfully evocative, almost otherworldly, atmosphere, that unfortunately remains truly irretrievable.



Figure 49: View from inside the entrance, Tomb F (Higuchi and Saito 2001, *Pl*.4).



Figure 50: General view (left) and bust arrangement (right) of the western exedra, Hypogeum of Yarhai (Tanabe 1986, 270 *Fig*.237; 279 *Fig.248*).

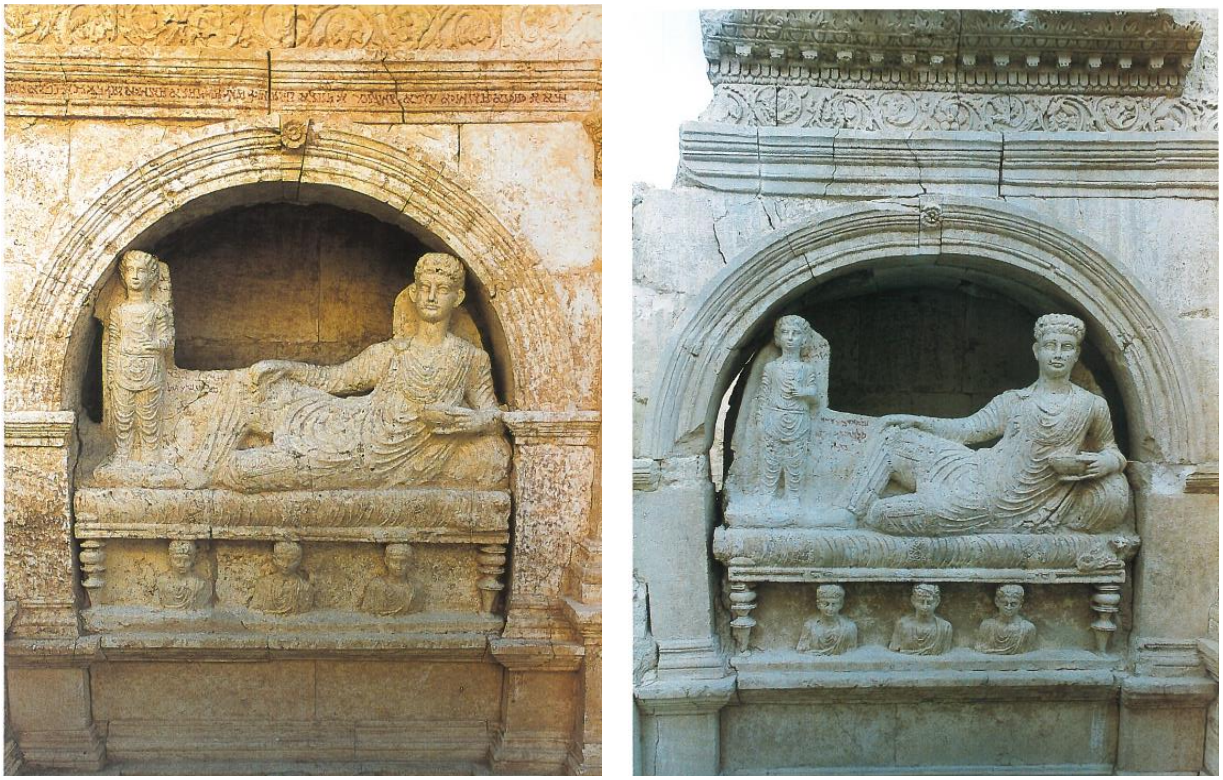


Figure 51: *Kline* monuments of freedmen in east (left) and west (right) niches of the main chamber, Tomb F (Higuchi and Saito 2001, *Pl*.20; *Pl*.23).

### iii. The banquet scenes

Set within niches atop sarcophagi, two almost identical banquet reliefs, each of a single reclining man accompanied by a standing child, greet the visitor as they enter the tomb (Fig. 54). Inscriptions on the reliefs tell us that the deceased men depicted are ex-slaves named Hermes.[295] These examples are notable, for not only is evidence of freedmen being buried in monuments scarce in Palmyra, but their memorialisation as the central figure in a banquet relief is not known anywhere else here.[296] Though we know little of the position of ex-slaves in Palmyrene society, these two monuments can be interpreted as part of a dynamic akin to that in Rome: the product of a system in which "a patron frequently depended in death on the maintenance of the family tomb by allowing his (often unnamed) freedmen, freedwomen, and their descendants to be granted a place of burial at his side."[297] Our Hermes are made explicit in Tomb F, but if a general anonymity associated with freedmen and women burials prevailed then this social contract may have been a common occurrence at Palmyra too. The dynamic in this example is interesting. The freedmen recline leisurely in Parthian attire, celebrating their family line by the presence of a son in the relief[298] - a celebration of lineage made more poignant by the legacy of freedom they will pass on. Though they appear in reflection of the heads of a prestigious family, represented in the reliefs they are both a part of and separate from it.[299] For, despite the honour that was no doubt bestowed upon the two men through this commemoration, in their placement on opposite walls just beyond the entrance, one cannot help but be reminded of their former position in life as slaves, greeting visitors as they enter the tomb. Considering now the central point of the tomb, the *triclinium* arrangement. There are no inscriptions to identify the figures but the reclining male in the central relief was likely one of the brothers who founded the tomb, mentioned in the inscription plaque (Fig.52).[300] The reliefs display the typical markers of prestige in the Parthian costume of the central figure, and the four visible appearances of the priestly headgear,[301] signalling membership in a priesthood – elements that serve to both distinguish the central figure and join his family together, emphasised by the seated child who touches his knee.[302] The presence of attributes in the portraits on

[295] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 24-25. Hermes was a common name for freedmen within the Roman Empire: Yon 2002, 276.
[296] There are 7 examples of freedmen buried in monuments at Palmyra: Raja 2022, 60 fn.18 & 19; 163.
[297] Carroll 2006, 244. Judging by the style, all the banquet reliefs here came from the same workshop.
[298] The inscription for the relief in the west niche gives the name of the boy as Hermes also: Saito and Higuchi 2001, 25.
[299] Cf. the freedman in the *triclinium* arrangement of the Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ: Ch. 2.
[300] Higuchi and Saito 2001, 32.
[301] Four heads belonging to male figures were removed and not recovered.
[302] See Ch. 2 on interpreting the banquet reliefs.

the sarcophagi and the spindle and distaff held by the seated woman in the central relief,[303] present an uncommon merging of the two sculptural traditions of the individual portraits and the group scenes. In addition, the miniature medallion busts decorating the three *kline* are different from one another, presenting further opportunities for individualisation within the cohesive family representation.[304]

We are accustomed to being presented with finished monuments but in reality they are the result of a process, and the way they were interacted with during and following their construction can add much to our knowledge.[305] Palmyra's communal tombs, which were gradually filled with bodies and had specific areas sold off to other families,[306] are a particularly compelling example of a monument as an interactive, constantly changing space, brought to life. The clearest marker of Tomb F as a dynamic changing space is the fact that it is incomplete – we find it frozen in time, in a state of being occupied and abandoned all at once. This case study has given the opportunity to journey through the tomb as an ancient visitor would have, making such connections between the sculptures and their surroundings as might have impacted their perspective on the space. Whether consciously or subconsciously realised by the original viewers, a visual hierarchy is present in the arrangement of the reliefs, potentially reflecting the societal position of the deceased they memorialised. The grave goods deposited centuries ago bring the tomb to life, as we imagine the lamplight and burnt offerings of incense filling the chambers, while a sense of regeneration prevails in the vegetal and floral decorative scheme weaved throughout the sculpture.

[303] For images, see: Higuchi and Saito 2001, Pl. 10.
[304] Images: Higuchi and Saito 2001, Pl.7.4, 9.6, 12.4.
[305] Steding 2021.
[306] See, the inscription from the east wall of Tomb F: Higuchi and Saito 2001, 22-23 *Fig.*19.

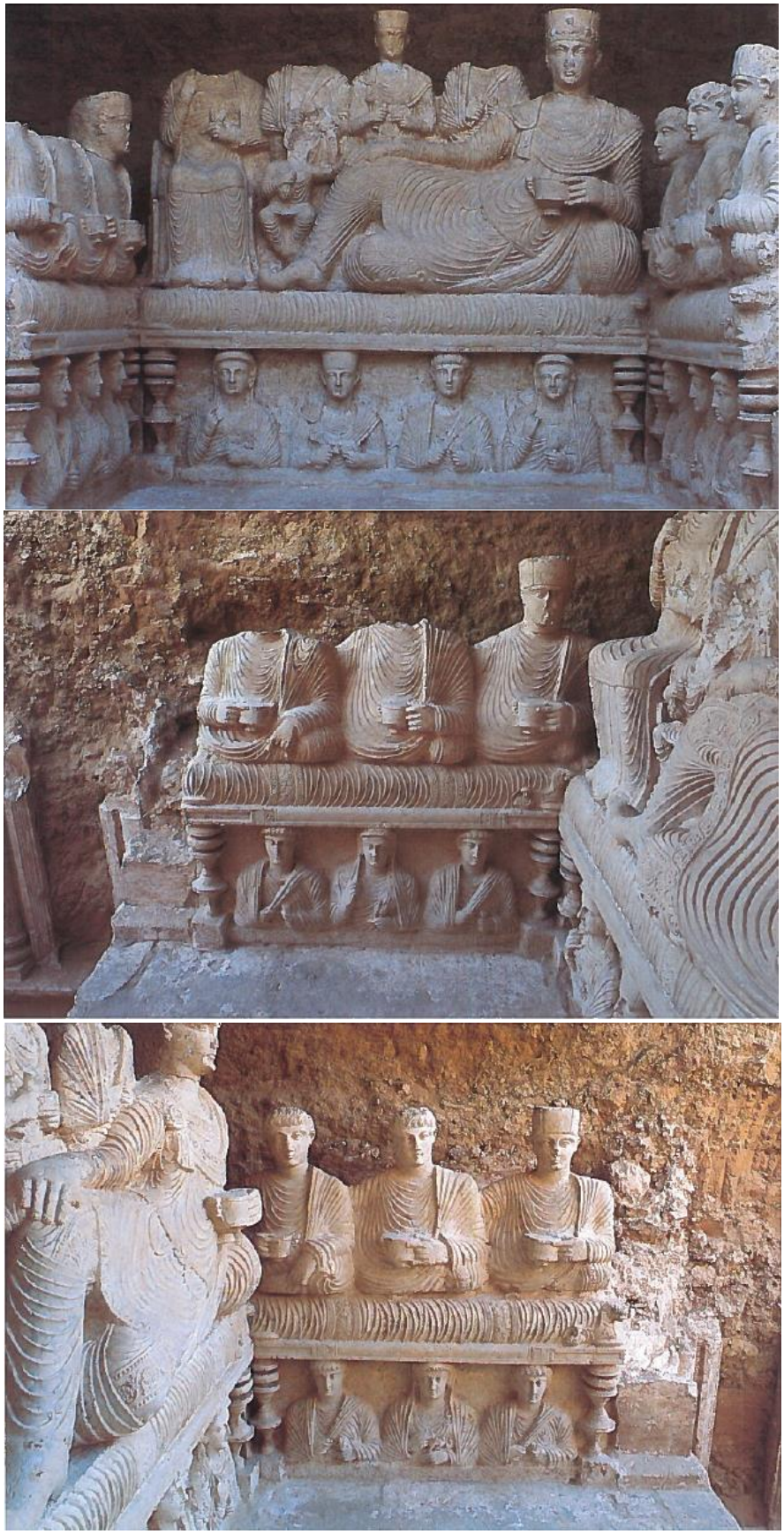


Figure 52: *Triclinium* arrangement from Tomb F. Central (top), west (middle), and east (bottom) banquet reliefs (Higuchi and Saito 2001: *Pl*.5).

# Conclusion

This thesis has considered the reflexivity of Palmyrene tombs and its sculpture, exploring the construction of identity within the funerary context -its function as an arena for the creation and proliferation of socio-cultural messages- while simultaneously seeking to understand how interaction with and within such contexts, in turn, shaped these meanings. Taking a holistic approach towards the banquet reliefs that served as centrepieces to many Palmyrene tombs, I have demonstrated how our understanding of them can be enriched by viewing them as inherently part of an interconnected, socially constructed space. A brief overview of the funerary sphere established the importance of commemorating the dead amongst the Palmyrene elites, tracing the development of the funerary monument to suit both the practical and ideological needs of the living. Despite influences from the Greek and Roman worlds, and from the empires of Mesopotamia to the East, the funerary sculpture of Palmyra represents a distinctive adaptation to the local context, both in terms of style and function. The half-bust limestone slabs, used to seal loculi slots, and the banquet reliefs set atop sarcophagi to recreate a banqueting couch, display a wealth of knowledge on Palmyrene identity behind (or perhaps enhanced by) their de-individualised faces. It is difficult to determine whether the variation of the *Totenmahl* motif employed in the banquet reliefs was directly influenced by its artistic precursors, or whether an awareness of its use in the contemporary wider Roman world affected its meaning in Palmyra. There are, however, a few things we can say with some certainty. The occasion represented in the reliefs at Palmyra do not depict a meal in the afterlife, the iconography being more indicative of a worldly setting. What they seemingly were intended to display was a snapshot of the luxurious family feasts that actually took place, or otherwise an aspirational scene, bound up as the image of reclining at a banquet was in ancient art with associations of wealth and prestige. But the generalized faces and body types of the figures in the reliefs belie a complex image, projecting elite values through a shared iconographical repertoire while providing ample opportunity for personalization and the display of multiple personal identities. Clothing, attributes, gesture, and figural composition were all customizable to an extent, allowing for the commissioning of individual memorials to the deceased. Ultimately, the banquet reliefs were intended to convey the importance of genealogy and the family group in Palmyra, and a legitimization of elite ancestry, as reflected in the growing popularity of communal tombs from the end of the 1$^{st}$ century CE.

When searching for evidence of the afterlife in the iconographic and archaeological material of Palmyra's tombs, as so much scholarship has attempted before, what we learn instead is how these spaces predominately reflected the world of the living. Without dismissing the existence of a 'realm beyond' in Palmyra's belief system, a study of funerary sculpture and wall paintings showed the enigmatic image of the key and the curtain to be polysemic: perhaps holding deeper symbolic meaning, potentially irretrievable in light of the scarceness of written evidence from Palmyra, but likely also serving as identity buildings tools, and depictions of objects used in actual funerary activities. The painted mythological scenes in the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, while analysed first within a classical cultural context, were equally considered a product of their specific physical context. Although we cannot ascertain the level of knowledge of the Greco-Roman-applied meanings of the scenes here amongst the tomb's owners and visitors, the desire to create an impressive space, referencing subject matter linked to elite Hellenistic learning is clear. After previously ruling out an afterlife interpretation of the banquet scenes, I established the infeasibility of their functioning as the focal point to funerary meals within the tomb, predominately on the basis of the practical restrictions imposed by dark, underground chambers. The reality of Palmyra's grave goods, while scarcely reflecting the wealth conveyed in the portraits, seem to reveal customs of ritual libation and offerings to the dead. The high number of lamps recovered, by far the most populous items left in hypogea, and the various conditions of their deposition both within burials and before portraits, hint at the importance of the object in Palmyrene funerary customs: while undoubtedly practical in their usage, it is tempting to also read them as a symbolic aid to guide the deceased through the darkness.

Finally, the case study of the Hypogeum of Bolha and Borrefa, viewed as a whole, provided an insight into specific visual and physical relationships, and the potential meanings behind them: introducing, in particular, the idea that members of the traditional elite were not the only ones who engaged with these prestigious forms of commemoration. Viewing the banquet reliefs alongside individual portraits lends an extra dimension to each sculptural type, displaying how although they both served a particular function, their full meanings cannot be grasped in isolation: they were intended to be viewed in collaboration. The appearance of the individual portraits, clustered together, filling sections of the walls, certainly gives the impression of cohesion amongst a clan or family, and the power that group can still invoke in death. While bust portraits gave the opportunity to express a higher degree of individuality amongst the two relief types, serving as the commemorative medium best suited to personal expression, the banquet reliefs stood as an unmistakeable message of the importance and influence of family and lineage. I have aimed to highlight through this work the abundance of the

funerary sphere as an arena for exploring the construction and proliferation of identity. If nothing else, I hope to join others in the field of Syrian studies in helping to shine a light on but one of the many fascinating cultures that coloured the vibrant past of the region.

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# Appendix 1: Tables

| | Context | Date (CE) | No. figs | Reclining | Seated F | Priest | Stndng M | Stndng F | Children | Greek | Parthian | Image ref |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Founder reliefs | Tomb no.44, tower tomb of Kithôt | 40 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | Will 1951, 73 fig.1 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sarcophagus reliefs | N/A | 130-150 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | Raja 2019, 147 fig.43 |
| | Hypogeum of Zabd'ateh and Moqîmû, north exedra | 130-150 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | Sadurksa & Bounni, fig.217-9 |
| | N/A | 140-160 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | Raja 2019, 148 fig.44 |
| | Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, north exedra, centre triclinium | mid-2nd c | 5 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | Tanabe 1986, 255 fig.222 |
| | Hypogeum of Artaban | 150-170 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | Tanabe 1986, 262 fig.229 |
| | Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ, north exedra, centre triclinium | 170-200 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | Tanabe 1986, 222 fig.189 |
| | Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ, north exedra, left triclinium | 170-200 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | Tanabe 1986, 225 fig.192 |
| | Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ, north exedra, right triclinium | 170-200 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | Tanabe 1986, 226 fig.193 |
| | Hypogeum of Ḥaṭrai, central exedra | 180-240 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | al-As'ad 2013, 24 fig.9 |
| | Hypogeum of Malkû, south chamber | 188 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Raja 2019, 133 fig.29 |
| | Hypogeum of Shalamallat, vestibule, south wall | 200-220 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | Tanabe 1986, 427 fig.396 |
| | Hypogeum of Bôlḥâ, south exedra | 200-220 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | Tanabe 1986, 242 fig.209 |
| | Hypogeum of 'Alaine, central exedra | 220-240 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | Raja 2019, 134 fig.30 |
| | Hypogeum of Malkû | 220-240 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | Tanabe 1986, 441 fig.410 |
| | Hypogeum of Bôlbarak, central exedra | 239 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Raja 2019, 112 fig.21 |
| | Hypogeum of Yarhai, west exedra | 240-273 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | Raja 2019, 135 fig.31 |
| | Hypogeum of Yarhai, west exedra | 240-273 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | Raja 2019, 136 fig.32 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sarcophagus bases | Temple/house tomb no. 85b, Tomb of A'ailamî and Zebidâ | 180-240 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | Raja 2019, 150 fig.46 |
| | Hypogeum of Hennibel | 200-220 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | al-As'ad 2013, 24 fig.9 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Totals: | | 20 | 90 | 31 | 21 | 22 | 28 | 7 | 2 | 41 | 21 | |

Table 1: Selection of Palmyrene banquet reliefs (with figures in-tact), showing breakdown of composition and clothing type (K. Honeker 2021, edited from unpublished undergraduate dissertation).

| | Sculpture type | No of keys | Inscription | Left hand | Right hand | Other figures | Image ref |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | bust | 2 | - | veil | clothing | | Tanabe: 342/373 |
| 2 | bust | 1 | - | clothing | calendar | | Sadurska & Bounni 1994: fig.139 cat.44 |
| 3 | bust | 2 | - | point gesture | s+d | | Tanabe 1986: 380 fig. 349 |
| 4 | bust | 1 | - | raised gesture | s+d | | Sadurska & Bounni 1994: fig.132 cat.9 |
| 5 | bust | 1 | - | point gesture | s+d | | Sadurska & Bounni 1994: fig.138 cat.159 |
| 6 | bust | 2 | ΔIOC NEIKH (Victory of Zeus) | n/a (raised gesture?) | point gesture | child? L shoulder | Tanabe 1986: 390 fig. 359 |
| 7 | double bust | 2 | - | veil | s+d | male, right | Tanabe 1986: 397 fig. 366 |
| 8 | bust | 2 | ? | gesture | veil | - | Tanabe 1986: 281 fig. 250 |
| 9 | bust | 1 | - | point gesture | s+d | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.133/cat.10 |
| 10 | bust | 1 | - | raised gesture | s+d | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.136/cat.33 |
| 11 | bust | 1 | - | fist | s+d | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.137/cat.143 |
| 12 | bust | 1 | - | point/veil gesture | s+d | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.146/cat.73 |
| 13 | bust | 1 | - | veil | clothing | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.166/cat.93 |
| 14 | bust | 2 | - | veil | gesture | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.167/cat.141 |
| 15 | bust | 1 | - | point gesture | s+d | - | Sadurska & Bounni: fig.173/cat.133 |
| 17 | bust | 1 - held | - | key | s+d/point to insrptn | - | Drijvers 1982: 731 pl.4 |
| 18 | standing fragment | 3 - held | ANY/bt 'elm' = house of eternity/OHEA | n/a (raised gesture?) | keys | - | Drijvers 1982: 729 pl.2 |
| 19 | bust | 2 | - | veil | clothing | - | Drijvers 1982: 732 pl.5 |

Table 2: Survey of keys in Palmyrene funerary sculpture, including gestures and other attributes (K. Honeker 2022).

## Appendix 2: Locations of banquet reliefs on tomb plans

**Key**

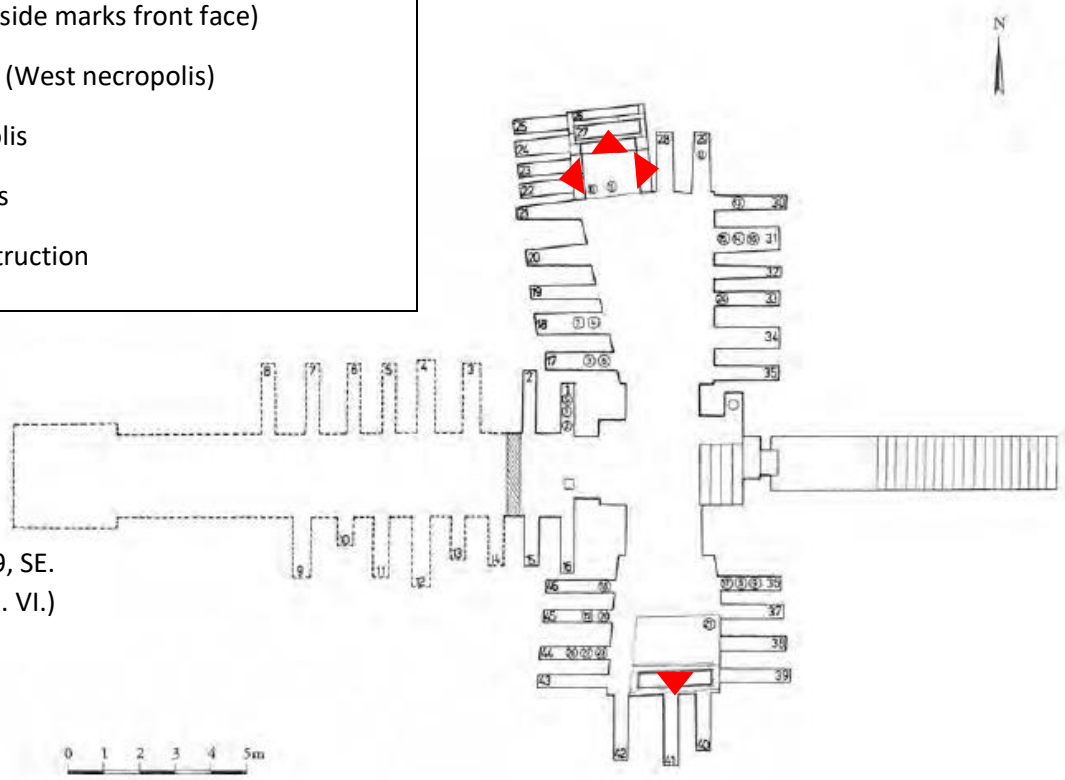
◀ = banquet relief (long side marks front face)

VT = Valley of the Tombs (West necropolis)

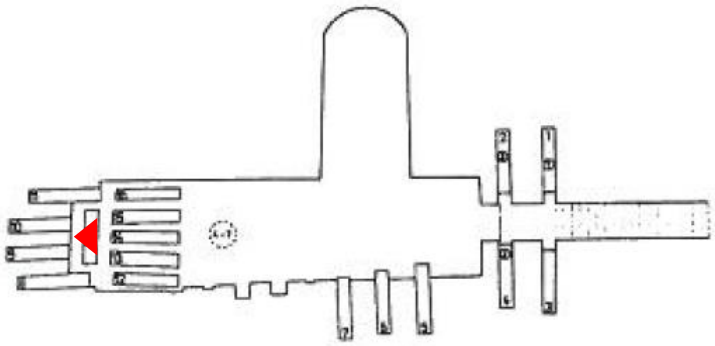
SW = Southwest necropolis

SE = Southeast necropolis

Dates refer to tomb construction

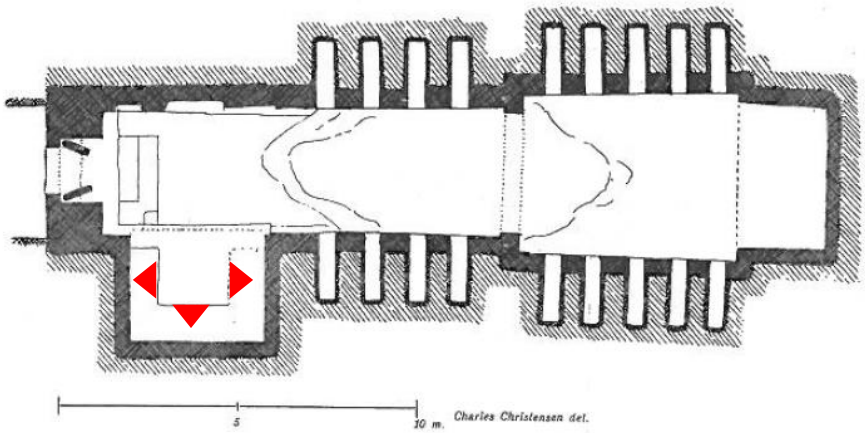



1. Hypogeum of Bôlhâ, 88-89, SE.
(Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Pl. VI.)



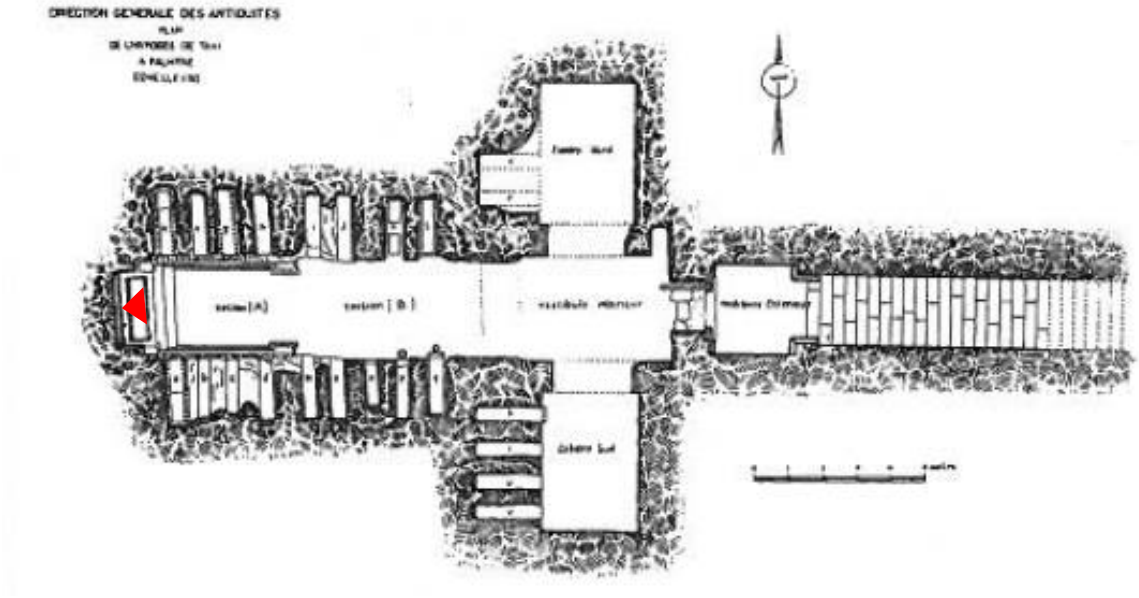
2. Hypogeum of Bolborak, 90–120 CE. VT.
(Sadurska and Bounni, 1994 Map VII).



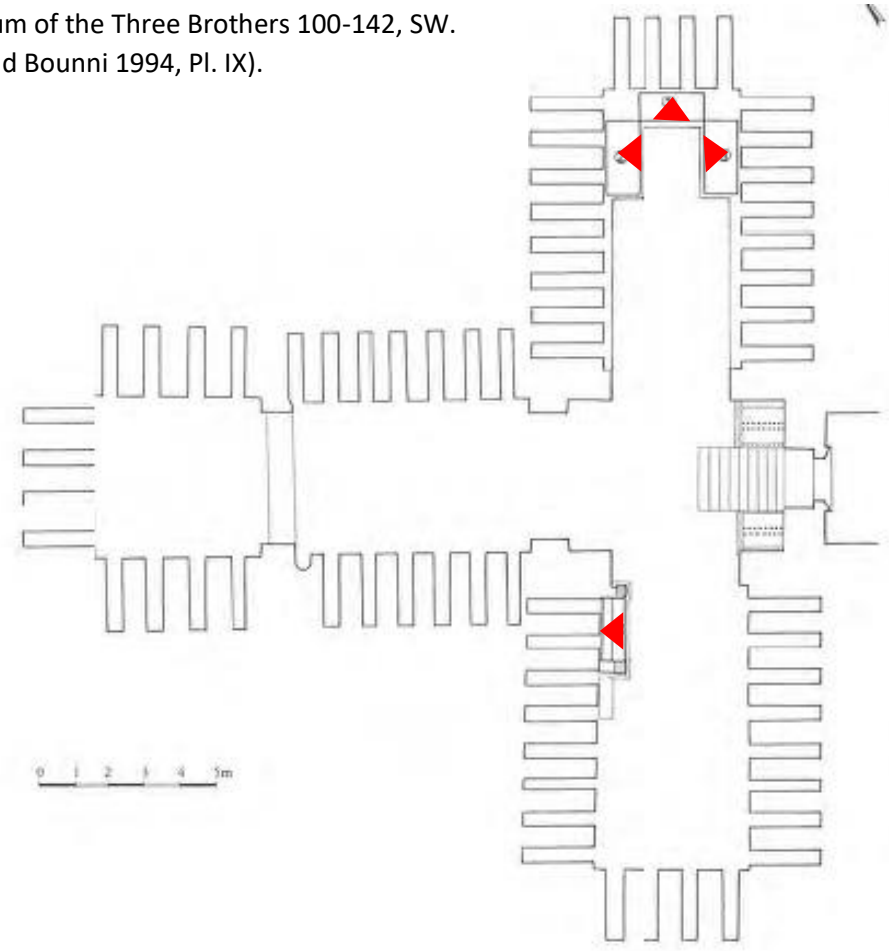




3. Hypogeum of ‘Atenatan, 98 CE, SW.
(Ingholt 1935, Pl. XXIII).

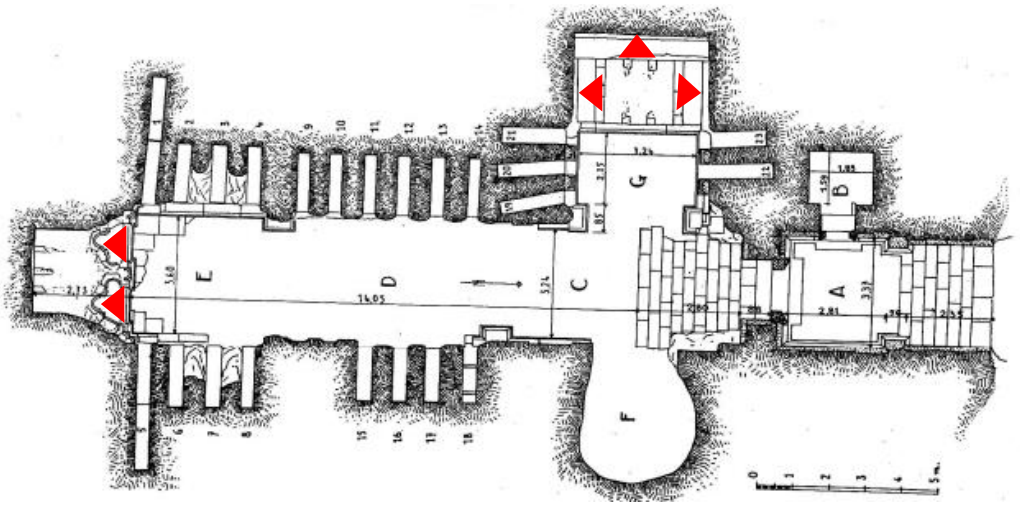
4. Hypogeum of Ta'ai, 100-125 CE, SE.
(Abdul-Hak 1952, in Schnadelbach 2010, 99).



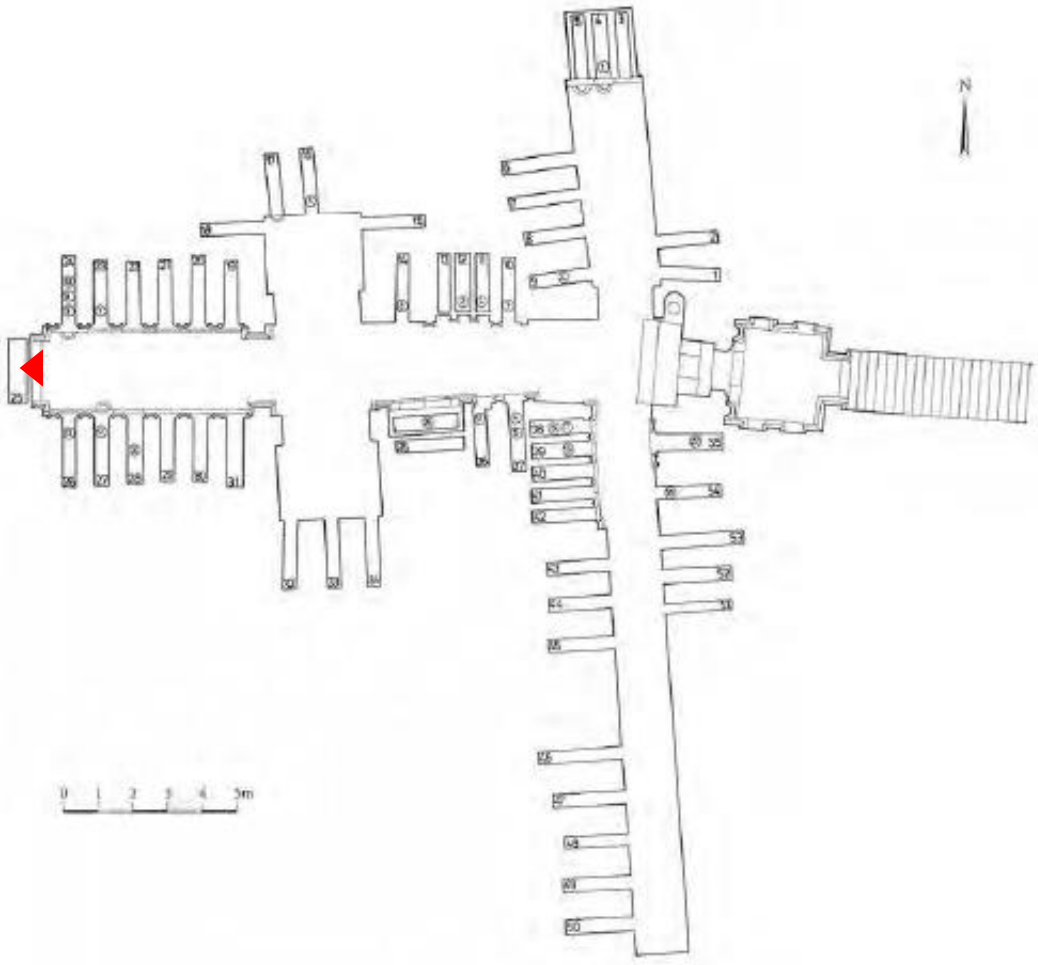
5. Hypogeum of the Three Brothers 100-142, SW.
(Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Pl. IX).



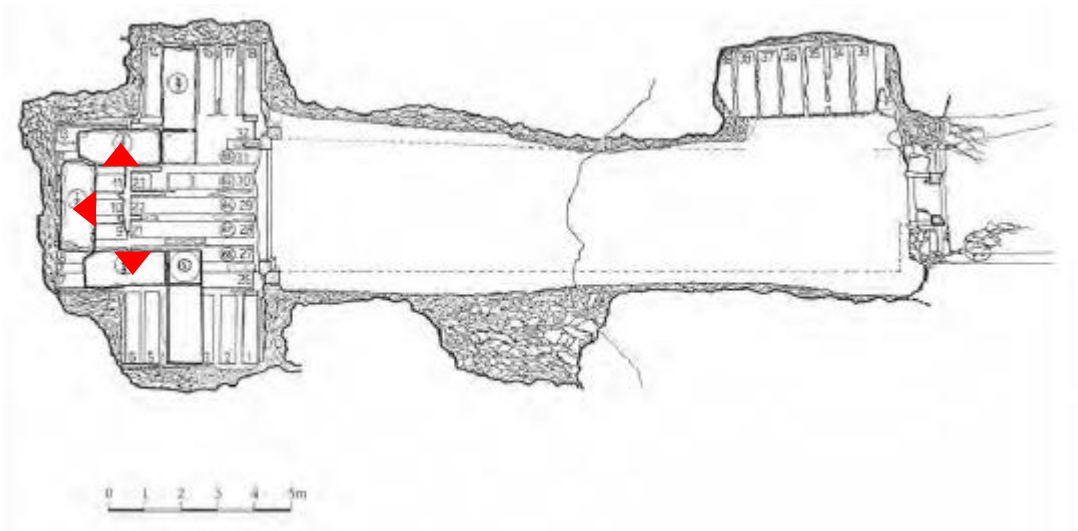
6. Hypogeum of Yarhai, 108 CE. VT.
(Amy and Seyrig 1936, 232 Pl. XXVII).




7. Hypogeum of the family of Artaban, early 2nd century CE, SE.
(Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Pl. IV).



8. Hypogeum of ‘Alainê, 138 CE, VT.
(Sadurksa and Bounni 1994, Pl. XIV).



9. Hypogeum of Šalamallath, 147 CE, VT.
(Bounni and Saliby 1957, in Schnadelbach 2010, 93).

