

## Preface

On September 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the conference “Burial Customs in Bilad ash-Sham from Roman to Islamic times. A German-Arab Round Table” took place at the University of Jordan, in Amman. It was organized by Ch. Eger and Th. M. Weber in collaboration with N. Turshan, then Dean of the Faculty of Archaeology and Tourism, and funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The aim of the conference was to bring German scholars or academics working in Germany together with colleagues from the Near East to discuss current research on and excavations concerned with death and burial.

For the organizers, such a meeting was long-cherished. Weber has long been working on the burial customs of the region. During his 1985–1990 excavations in *Gadara/Umm Qais*, both an early Christian crypt with burials beneath the five-aisled basilica and an Ottoman cemetery were uncovered. Eger received a 2010–2013 scholarship from the Orient Department of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI, Berlin) to carry out the research project “Studies on regional funeral practices in the early Byzantine Empire. The rock chamber of Khirbat Yajuz and late antique burial grounds in the province of *Arabia*”. In cooperation with L. Khalil, Faculty of Archaeology and Tourism at the University of Jordan, and M. Hamoud, then head of Damascus Countryside Archaeology at the General Directorate of Antiquities of Syria, both of whom generously supported the project, it was possible to document extensive, previously-unpublished material from excavations of necropolises in both Jordan and Syria.

It soon became clear that the necropolises that were studied raised many questions about the nature of the late antique death rituals in the Near East. Very little is known about the architecture and types of tombs and grave-chambers built in Late Antiquity. It was also necessary to clarify the relationship between burial-chambers and flat graves, the widely differing customs of furnishing the dead with material goods, as well as the mechanisms that regulated the equipment in individual graves. Then there was the identity of the people who were buried locally – a serious problem in light of the complex, heterogeneous population living in the Syro-Palestinian region.

To date, only a few necropolises of the Roman to early Islamic period have been systematically studied and published. Rescue excavations carried out by the local authorities are largely unknown to researchers because they are not published or published only in brief preliminary reports. What also severely impedes the study of late antique cemeteries, is the fact that an unknown number of necropolises have been looted or even destroyed in the course of time. Unless there remain at least some traces of distinctive grave architecture suitable for the cultural and the historical assessment as well, fully looted graves provide hardly any clues.

Nonetheless, interest in Near Eastern tombs and burial mounds of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD has increased in recent years, as is shown not only by the number of international projects working in Syria before 2012, as well as in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, but also by the activities of local conservation groups. Again and again undisturbed or only partially disturbed cemeteries have been detected, providing rich information about funeral rituals, grave goods, and material culture as reflected in those grave goods. It therefore seemed worthwhile to the organizers to hold a meeting to report on current or recent excavations as well as to revive study of older excavations and review the funerary traditions of the Near East (not only from an archaeological point of view).

In addition to various kinds of archaeologists, the speakers included an architectural historian, an anthropologist and a geophysicist. The Jordanian Department of Antiquities was represented by A. Abu Shmais, J. Haron and A. Lash, all of Amman, and R. Gharib of Zarqa. From the Lebanese side came H. Curvers, who has been coordinating city centre excavations in Beirut for many years on behalf of Solidere<sup>1</sup>. From Syria, M. Hamoud and M. al-Maqdissi, both of the General Directorate of Antiquities at Damascus kindly provided papers when they were unable to travel because of the civil war. M. Ibrahim, Representative of Jordan to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Kh. Jbour, M. al-Tantawi, both of Amman, and H. Hayajneh of Irbid also participated. From the German side came F. Arnold, formerly Cairo, of Madrid, R. Gogräfe of Mainz, B. Huber of Tübingen, D. Jordan, formerly Mainz, of Liverpool, Th. Kabs of Berlin, A. Nabulsi of Hamburg, C. Pogoda of Bochum, now Münster, and R. Schick of Mainz. From Greece came K. D. Politis of Chalkis. The meeting was also attended

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1 The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, s.a.l.

by B. Porter, Director of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, to whom we offer our sincere thanks for her hospitality.

Several of the speakers at the conference did not prepare their papers in writing or had already published them elsewhere. Thus the important contribution of Abu Shmais and Nabulsi on the urn graves of Roman times in the Amman countryside can be found in the 10<sup>th</sup> session on the history and archaeology of Jordan<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, other scholars who could not attend the conference at Amman, provided us with a contribution: I. Eichner of Vienna/Austria, L. de Jong of Groningen/Netherlands, K. Lembke of Hanover/Germany, M. A. Perry of Greenville, NC/USA, and A. Schmidt-Colinet of Vienna/Austria.

Geographically, we included territory from Syria to Egypt. The time frame ran from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the modern day, focussing on the Roman up to the early Islamic period. Thus the participants had the opportunities to discuss structural problems affecting the research not only across modern borders, and to detect common aspects and tendencies in the development of burial customs. In this context, the historical development of the wider region is significant. This went through four major historical or social processes: Hellenization, Romanization, Christianization and Islamization, which did not, however, occur simultaneously in every region. With the conquests of Alexander the Great, elements of Greek or Macedonian culture found their way into the Near East. It was especially the elites of our region who participated in that culture. Next, the Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers fought over influence in Syro-Palestinian territory which lay midway between the dominions of the two dynasties. In the course of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Rome became increasingly engaged in the Near East. In 63 BC, Syria fell into Roman hands. After the battle of *Actium*, Egypt was integrated as a province in the Roman Empire. It was not until more than 130 years later, in AD 106, Trajan annexed the Nabataean Kingdom, which was converted into the province of *Arabia* (*Arabia Petraea*). Only then was the whole region from the Nile to the Euphrates (and temporarily beyond) under Roman control. Both the chronology of these developments and the different populations resulted in differences in the process of Romanization in the more localized landscapes of the Near East.

The birthplace of Christianity was Palestine, from where the new faith spread in all directions. Christian communities existed in many cities in the Near East even before the proclamation of Constantine the Great. A broad Christianization of the population can be assumed to have occurred after the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Christianization began of Arab tribes living inside and outside the empire's borders. With the battle of Yarmuk in AD 636 and the conquest of Egypt, a couple of years later, not only the political but also the religious framework of the Near East changed. Muslim Arabs now ruled over the former Byzantine provinces. Conversions to the new faith were differently motivated – for religious, for economic reasons (e.g., remission of the poll tax imposed on non-Muslims) – or out of political opportunism. From the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, large parts of the Near Eastern population had become followers of Islam.

Admittedly, the acculturation phenomena and the extent of interaction by the indigenous population with the processes of Hellenization and Romanization are vigorously debated. Also, the turn to Christianity and later to Islam is far from being fully understood in terms of both the chronological development and the cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, these four processes are to be considered as matrices for analyses of burials and funerary practices, since all four historical phases have influenced the funerary culture in the whole of the Near East. How and to what extent this happened is one of the great questions in the study of death and burial. In the present collection, however, it was not possible to focus on this in particular; rather different aspects of death and burial in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt are examined, to highlight the importance of tombs as an archaeological source. This is particularly important at a time we have witnessed the irretrievable destruction of many funerary monuments in Syria and Iraq.

Of particular concern is the oasis city of *Palmyra*. Two contributions deal with its now largely-destroyed tower tombs of the necropolis. L. de Jong traces the early monumentalisation of tomb architecture shortly before the turn of the era, while A. Schmidt-Colinet deals with the main types of graves from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The tombs of *Palmyra* can be explained only partially by Roman influences. In addition, phenomena of a re-orientalization, among other things, influence the funeral representation. Two further contributions on Syria deal with previously unpublished excavations that are not only of great importance in terms of local history, but also supplement the small number of published necropolises from the Hellenistic, Roman and late antique periods. The basis of the contribution by M. al-Maqdissi is an unpublished report, held in the archives of the Musée du Louvre/Paris, on a survey carried out 1927 in and near *Emesa*/Homs. Then there is the cemetery of Chisphin in the Golan studied

2 A. ABU SHMAIS/A. NABULSI, Cremation burials in 'Ammān, Jordan. In: F. al-Khraysheh (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 10 (Amman 2009) 513–524.

by R. Gogräfe, which was already uncovered in 1942 by the Syrian Archaeological Service. It boasts a number of exceptional grave goods, which have long been among the treasures of the National Museum in Damascus but have never been presented in their original grave context. An unprecedented number of grave goods marks the late Roman-Byzantine necropolis of Darayya, southwest of Damascus, as presented by M. Hamoud and Ch. Eger. The preliminary report presents a small selection from the extensive range that includes several hundred bracelets and thousands of pearls as well as numerous glass vessels.

Probably for no other city in Syria or Lebanon than Beirut can such a full diachronic documentation of the cult of the dead be made. The excavations carried out in the city centre after the end of the civil war which have provided grave finds from all eras from the Bronze Age to the Ottoman period are presented here by B. Stuart and H. Curvers.

Monumental grave architecture plays a prominent role in research at *Petra* as it does at *Palmyra*. For a long time there were questions about the funerals themselves. The exposure of some unlooted shaft graves in *Petra*'s North Ridge quarter gave M. A. Perry and J. L. Walker the opportunity to investigate the death rituals from the last decades BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, of members of the social hierarchy who ranked below the elite buried in the famous rock-cut tombs, and to study the skeletal material. As a major city of the *Decapolis*, *Gerasa* / Jerash also had extensive necropolises, but only a few graves have been systematically examined and documented. A large inventory of limestone sarcophagi of local production is discussed here by C. Pogoda. Ch. Eger and R. Schick deal with the early Christian church burials within what is now Jordan. The starting point for Eger is the only partially disturbed and now fully excavated rock-chamber necropolis of Khirbat Yajuz on the northern outskirts of Amman, where the connection of the burial-chamber to a small, early 6<sup>th</sup> century single nave church testifies to a desire for "*ad sanctos*" burial. Based on his excavations of a chamber tomb in the so-called Lower Church of Quwaysma Schick divides the church graves of Jordan according to various social types.

Four authors treat the cult of the dead in Egypt from Roman to Islamic times. The country has a special place insofar as the cult of the dead was greatly affected even in later epochs by ancient Egyptian traditions. Using three necropolises, K. Lembke shows that burial customs in the Egyptian regions differ quite considerably from one another. With respect to the adaptation of Hellenistic and Roman elements, a north-south divide can be detected. B. Huber and I. Eichner deal with necropolises of the late antique / Coptic period. Huber investigates the large burial ground near Qarara and the church cemetery of Sharuna. Variations in the burial rituals are noteworthy, especially with respect to grave goods. Eichner considers the cemetery of the monastery of St. Paulos in Deir el-Bakhît at Western Thebes. The different treatment of corpses and different bone traits allow the necropolis to be divided into two parts: the monks were buried in one area, in the other probably servants. F. Arnold focuses on the Fatimid grave architecture of Cairo. Using the example of Masğid al-Ğuyūšî, he shows that the floor plan is borrowed from domestic architecture. The design of the tomb as a dwelling or house of the dead has a long tradition in Egypt and it dates back to predynastic times.

Islam's special funeral regulations have always distinguished Muslim graves from those of other faiths. Despite this, several traditions developed, especially with regard to grave construction, and in the final contribution J. Haron and A. Lash give a brief overview of the Islamic funerary tradition that is found in modern Jordan.

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