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RURAL FUNERARY LANDSCAPES ON THE SYRIAN COAST DURING THE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS: ARCHITECTURE, EPIGRAPHY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This paper investigates the funerary landscapes of rural settlements along the Syrian coast during the Roman and Byzantine periods. Spanning the 1st–6th centuries CE, lebanit examines how burial forms and mortuary rituals reflected broader transformations in social, religious, and cultural identity. Drawing on epigraphic evidence (Aliquot, 2010; Gatier, 2005), national archaeological surveys (Badawi 2010, 2015, 2016-2019), and the author's own field documentation in the Jableh hinterland, the study develops a typology of rural tombs. It situates them in relation to settlements, agricultural installations, and sacred sites. Case studies from Khirbet al-Mirdesiya, Bishman, Barsoomah, Arab al-Milk, and al-Rahbiyya highlight the predominance of rock-cut tombs, the selective use of Greek funerary inscriptions by rural elites, and the gradual Christianization of mortuary space. By comparing these practices with funerary traditions in Lebanon and the Syrian Limestone Massif, the paper demonstrates both regional continuities and unique coastal developments. The analysis highlights how burial spaces were not passive residues, but rather active social and symbolic constructs. They

encoded kinship, memory, and belief into the physical landscape, thereby offering a valuable lens into the cultural identity of rural communities in Late Antiquity.

Keywords:

Roman–Byzantine Syria, Rural Archaeology, Funerary Practices, Epigraphy, Sacred Landscapes

Introduction

By studying the social, religious, and cultural dynamics of ancient societies through their funerary customs and funeral ceremonies, we can gain a deeper understanding of how identity and ideology were expressed in different ways. However, despite their potential to shed light on these alternative expressions, rural areas in the Roman and Byzantine Near East have received much less attention than their metropolitan centers a pattern noted broadly in wider studies of provincial Syria (Sartre, 2001). One notable burial record, which has not been thoroughly integrated into broader studies of late antique mortuary landscapes, is preserved in the upland villages of the Syrian coastal area, particularly in the hinterland of ancient Gabala (now Jableh).

Most previous research has centered on large urban cemeteries or imposing tombs, leaving us with a limited understanding of how rural communities handled death and remembrance. The countryside of Jableh, with its scattered rock-cut tombs, communal burial chambers, and engraved stones, offers valuable evidence for reconstructing regional customs that differ from, yet intersect with, urban funeral traditions. Between the first and sixth centuries CE, these sites allow us to examine the tangible expressions of memory, family, and religious growth in rural settings.

The present study aims to explore the funerary culture of Syria's rural coastal region, using a combination of field observations, epigraphic data, and archaeological evidence. The study closely examines the physical connection between burial sites and nearby settlements, the architectural styles of rural tombs, and the linguistic and symbolic meanings behind inscriptions.

The central research question guiding this paper is as follows: How did the funerary practices of rural communities in the Jableh region reflect broader transformations in social identity and religious affiliation during the Roman and Byzantine periods? The article's contribution to the study of provincial mortuary landscapes is significant, as it addresses a major gap in the literature. Furthermore, it offers novel insights into how rural communities negotiated cultural continuity and religious change in Late Antiquity.

Typologies of Rural Tombs in the Syrian Coastal Hinterland

The funerary record in the rural Syrian coastal hinterland, particularly in the mountainous zones of ancient Gabala, presents a notable variety of tomb types. These reflect a variety of social structures, architectural traditions, and evolving ritual practices from the Roman through the Byzantine periods. While many sites exhibit limited archaeological

exposure and remain only partially documented, emerging patterns allow for a provisional typological classification.

The most prevalent of these are rock-cut tombs, which are characterised by their direct carving into limestone cliffs or bedrock formations. In many cases, these artefacts are the most archaeologically visible, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in villages such as Bishman, Barsoomah and Khirbet al-Mirdesiya. (Badawi, 2016–2019; Aliquot, 2010). Moreover, the landscape comprises collective or mass burial installations, which are often found in clusters or recut chambers. It has been observed that these have sometimes been reused across centuries, as evidenced in al-Rahbiyya. (Badawi, 2016–2019). A third type comprises tombs associated with ecclesiastical structures, either integrated into or adjacent to rural churches or shrines. Here, Christian symbols or burial orientations signal new theological sensibilities, particularly in the later Byzantine period.

In certain cases, funerary inscriptions offer an alternative classification axis. Bilingual or Greek-inscribed stelae, such as those found at El-Khorba and Bishman, have been shown to reveal linguistic and cultural affiliations, as well as the social identities of landowning families or local elites (Aliquot, 2010; Gatier, 2005). Furthermore, the presence of tombs embedded within or adjacent to reused domestic or agricultural buildings adds another dimension to the study, indicating a degree of funerary integration into inhabited spaces. This phenomenon is, however, still understudied in Syrian provincial archaeology.

The present section commences its typological and interpretive analysis with rock-cut tombs, a decision that is made for two principal reasons. Firstly, these monuments are frequent in the region. Secondly, they exhibit considerable morphological variability, architectural complexity, and a broad chronological range. The ubiquity of these monuments renders them an ideal point of departure for exploring the intersection between burial architecture, topography, and evolving religious and social meanings.

Rock-Cut Tombs: Architectural and Contextual Features

Rock-cut tombs represent one of the most prevalent burial forms in the rural Syrian coastal region during the Roman and Byzantine periods, particularly in the hilly and upland villages situated in Jableh. The tombs under consideration here range in scale from single interment niches to more complex burial chambers featuring carved benches or multiple recesses. They have been carved directly into limestone outcrops, cliff faces or reused structural remains. (Badawi, 2010).

These architectural structures demonstrate a remarkable ability to adapt to their environment. The use of local limestone not only addresses practical requirements but also alludes to a more profound symbolic association between the tombs and the surrounding landscape. Many of these structures are constructed on high or prominent sites that overlook valleys or fields, raising questions about the intersection of topography and ritual in terms of visibility. These tombs usually appear in scattered, irregular patterns, often located on the outskirts of towns or within farm terraces, rather than being part of a structured, urban-style necropolis. (Badawi, 2010).

From an architectural perspective, the variety is striking: some tombs are simple rock-cut shafts, while others feature internal elements like carved benches, multiple burial chambers, or open chambers that resemble small hypaethral sanctuaries—as seen, for example, at Bishman and Barsoomah. In rare cases, symbols such as engraved crosses appear above entrances, possibly indicating a shift in ritual significance and the increasing Christian influence on burial spaces during the later Byzantine period. (Aliquot, 2010).

The intricacies of the materials and layouts employed in the construction of these tombs are such that they compel a more thorough examination. The question of ownership is therefore raised: were the tombs the property of extended families or clans, or were they used as community burial grounds? The proximity of these sites to later shrines and sacred sites gives rise to questions regarding the continuity of the sacred landscape and the practices of memory. Furthermore, variations in architectural features, symbolic marks, and grave goods may serve as indicators of differing social status or alterations in burial customs across temporal periods.

Rather than viewing these tombs as inert archaeological structures, this study approaches them as socially embedded artifacts that encode patterns of land use, lineage, memory, and religious affiliation. The following case studies illustrate these dynamics.

Khirbet al-Mirdesiya (Qabr al-Thawra)

Khirbet al-Mirdesiya, also known locally as Qabr al-Thawra, features a carved entrance that leads into a tomb with multiple chambers (Figure 1), which is dug directly into the bedrock. Inside, they found a bunch of funerary items, like bronze bracelets, ceramic jars with Greek designs, a spindle whorl, fifth-century clay lamps, beads, and bits of polished glass. A Greek inscription on one bracelet demonstrates how Hellenistic epigraphic traditions persisted in a rural Byzantine setting (Badawi, 2010). The tomb suggests a family burial site

with a history spanning several generations, firmly rooted in local customs but also influenced by broader late antique cultural trends.

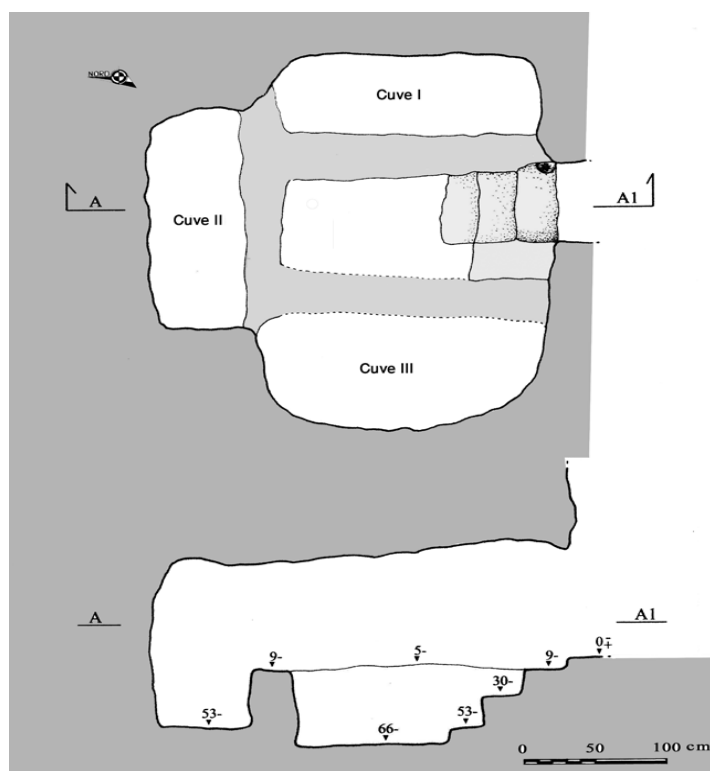


Figure 1. *Plan and section of the tomb of al-Thawra. (Badawi,2010)*

Bishman

Located east of Zama, the Bishman site features two large rock-cut burial chambers (Figure 2), with a Greek inscription from between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. The inscription honors Zenodoros, son of Diogenes, and his wife Dionysia, highlighting how elite rural families used Hellenistic commemoration practices (Aliquot, 2010). The size of the chambers and the



Figure 2: *General view of the rock-cut tomb complex at Bishman (author's field survey, 2023)*

Beit al-Fi

Researchers found a simple rock-cut single-chamber tomb in Beit al-Fi, which did not have any inscriptions or decorations. This plain style was typical of non-elite rural burial practices. A nearby rock-cut well might indicate ritual purification ceremonies tied to burial, but its purpose is still unclear. Overall, the tomb demonstrates how rural communities approached death more equitably. (Badawi, 2016–2019)

Barsoomah

The site of Barsoomah features multiple rock-cut tombs, some of which are shared, and one of these is marked by a carved cross above its entrance (Figure 3). This element illustrates the process of Christianization of rural funerary spaces during the Byzantine era, as evidenced by the pottery unearthed on site, which indicates long-term use and reuse (Badawi, 2016–2019). The communal setup is in stark contrast to elite tombs such as Bishman, thereby underscoring the diversity in burial practices and customs.



Figure 3 . *Rock-cut tomb at Barsoomah with a carved cross above the entrance (Badawi, 2015)*

Arab al-Milk (Paltos)

The rock-cut tomb at Arab al-Milk was discovered accidentally in 2012 and was found to contain twelve loculi and terracotta sarcophagi (Figure 4). A displaced funerary stele with a Greek inscription naming Noumenios was found in the vicinity, suggesting both

communal and elite commemorative practices within the same funerary landscape (Aliquot,



2010).

Figure 4. *Interior view of the collective rock-cut tomb at Arab al-Milk, showing multiple loculi (burial recesses) arranged along the chamber walls (Badawi, 2015).*

Al-Rahbiyya

Researchers excavating a collapsed rock-cut tomb in al-Rahbiyya have uncovered pieces of Late Roman and Byzantine ceramics, including red slip ware and glass. The absence of inscriptions or Christian symbols suggests that traditional practices persisted among rural communities (Badawi, 2016–2019).

Ajlaniya

At Ajlaniya, a rock-cut tomb with three chambers and loculi was found near a rural press. Pieces of ceramic artifacts suggest the site was used during the Byzantine period. The fact that production-related features are close to the funerary structures suggests a connection between the economic and mortuary landscapes (Badawi, 2016–2019).

Epigraphic and Symbolic Dimensions: Funerary Inscriptions from the Jableh Countryside

Funerary inscriptions found in rural areas of Jableh, located along the Syrian coast, provide a valuable glimpse into the social and symbolic systems of local communities during the Roman and Byzantine eras. By analyzing three key inscriptions from Bishman, El-Khorba,

and Jableh, we can identify basic patterns of cultural identity, religious expression, and the shift from pagan to Christian funeral customs.

In Bishman, located to the east of Zama village, approximately 20 kilometers from Jableh, a Greek funerary inscription was carved directly into a rock near two unroofed burial chambers (Figure 5). The text commemorates Zenodoros, son of Diogenes, who dedicated the monument to himself and his wife Dionysia. The formula, as well as the names, reflect a form of familial piety associated with Romanized elite households and Hellenistic traditions. Since there is no Christian iconography present, the structure likely dates to between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, before the widespread adoption of Christianity in funerary spaces. (Aliquot, 2010).

In El-Khorba, a locality affiliated with the village of Qal‘at Banī Qaḥṭān, southeast of Jableh, a standalone funerary inscription was discovered bearing the name Theodora (Figure 6). The text, also in Greek, appears to have been associated with a coffin lid or funerary slab. From the 3rd century onward, the name Theodora became increasingly popular in Christian Eastern Mediterranean contexts. This suggests a connection to Christianity or, at the very least, a symbolic link to the growing Christian cultural influence. Although the name does not include explicit Christian symbols, using it in a rural setting implies that Christian identity was spreading through naming conventions. (Gatier, 2005).

When they were digging in Jableh, they found a Roman milestone that had been used again in later construction. (Figure7) The Greek inscription on its surface might have originally been used for either a commemorative or funerary purpose. Milestones are usually used to mark distances along Roman roads, but this one is an interesting example of a building that combines the practical and the symbolic. (Badawi, 2015).

Collectively, these three inscriptions underscore the pervasive and enduring preeminence of the Greek language as the medium of choice for funerary expression across the Syrian coastal countryside. The use of names such as Zenodoros and Theodora serves to emphasise the social and religious identities of the individuals in question, thus suggesting dynamic interactions between the local rural elites and the broader cultural networks of Roman Syria. Furthermore, these inscriptions evince a subtle yet steady evolution in funerary symbolism, whereby Christian forms were gradually accommodated without the aesthetic and linguistic norms of the classical tradition being entirely abandoned, a pattern also noted in broader analyses of mortuary change in the Roman East (Meyers, 1999).

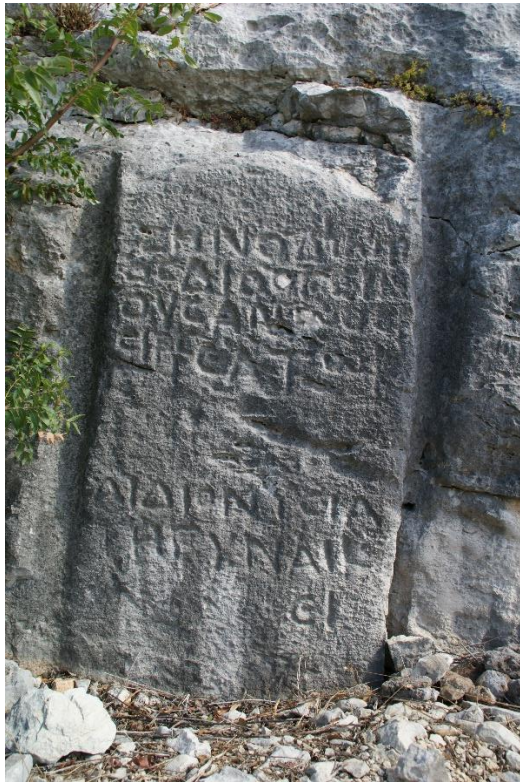


Figure 5. *Greek funerary inscription from Bishman commemorating Zenodoros and Dionysia (Gatier, 2005).*

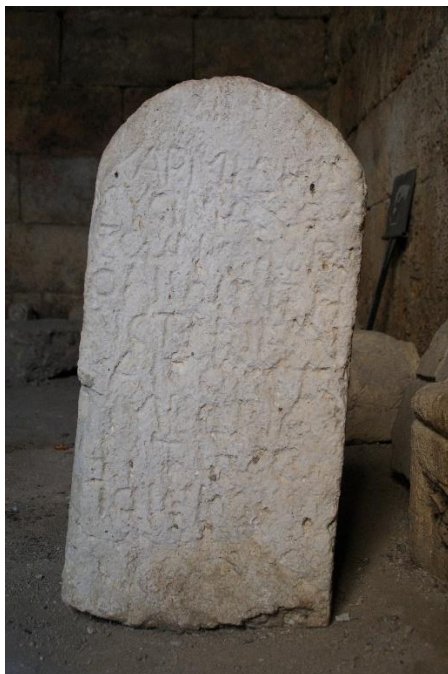


Figure 6. *Greek funerary inscription from El-Khorba, mentioning Theodora, reflecting the diffusion of Christian naming practices in rural Syria (Gatier, 2005).*



Figure 7. *Roman milestone from Jableh reused in later construction, with a Greek inscription that may have had a commemorative or funerary role (Badawi, 2015).*

Regional Comparisons

When considered within a broader regional framework, the funerary record of the Jableh countryside reveals both parallels and divergences with neighbouring rural zones of the Levant. In the Dead Cities of northern Syria, rock-cut chamber tombs and multi-generational mausolea also dominate the mortuary landscape. However, they are frequently associated with monumental façades and urban-style planning (Foss, 1997; Rey, 1866).

In contrast, the Jableh region exhibits more modest installations, frequently lacking the intricate architectural articulation that is characteristic of the limestone massif. In the hinterland of Apamea, collective burial chambers and funerary inscriptions attest to a comparable continuity of Roman practices well into Late Antiquity. However, epigraphic evidence in this region is more abundant and often linked to urban elites (Foss, 1997).

In the southernmost region along the Lebanese coast, rural necropoleis such as those in the vicinity of Byblos and Tripoli exhibit closer affinities to the Syrian coastal examples, characterised by modest rock-cut tombs, occasional inscribed stelae, and a gradual Christianisation of burial spaces without the erasure of earlier traditions (Aliquot, 2009; Gatier, 2005).

These comparisons highlight the hybrid nature of the Jableh hinterland, which is characterised by its affiliation with a broader eastern Mediterranean mortuary culture, while also being influenced by local topographies, economies, and religious dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper examines the funeral landscape of Roman and Byzantine rural villages along the Syrian coast, focusing on burial architecture, epigraphic artifacts, and symbolic expressions within a specific geographic and historical context. From simple cave tombs to more complex rock-cut chamber tombs, several case studies show the variety and continuity of burial traditions, from Bishman to Arab al-Milk.

The spatial organization of tombs in proximity to agricultural lands, roads, or settlement centres suggests a deliberate integration of the dead into the rhythms of daily life. The recurrence of features such as carved steps, burial niches, and modest architectural façades reveals a shared technical and symbolic vocabulary across rural communities. The utilisation of Greek funerary inscriptions and Christian iconography, as evidenced in Bishman and El-Khorba, signifies the gradual adoption of imperial religious discourse and eschatological motifs within local contexts, without the obliteration of prior cultural strata.

Instead of uniformity, the funerary evidence from the Syrian coastal countryside indicates a localised negotiation of identity, memory, and belief, where social status, religious transition, and regional traditions intersected in tangible forms. Despite the archaeological record being fragmentary and often shaped by surface documentation, the materials presented in this paper invite a more grounded understanding of how death was architecturally and symbolically managed within the rural fabric.

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