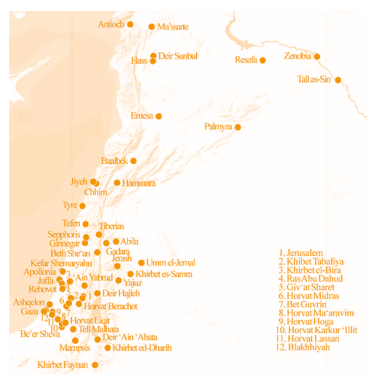


Burial practices in early Byzantine Syro-Palestine (4th–7th centuries CE) – review article



Abstract: This review paper of current knowledge of burial customs in Syro-Palestine in the early Byzantine period (4th–7th centuries CE) identifies elements that were a continuation of burial practices from the Roman period (1st–3rd centuries CE) while noting new customs. It considers the material in terms of location of the burial grounds, forms of graves, variety of grave goods and body positioning data. A quantitative approach to the data demonstrates a gradual departure from chamber tombs and sarcophagi in the early Byzantine period. An emerging trend in this period are burials being made in monasteries and, to a lesser extent, in churches; this can be related to the spread of Christianity. Discussing the results of available radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analysis, the paper calls for more widespread use of these methods to further knowledge of burial customs in Syro-Palestine in the final phases of antiquity.

Keywords: burial practices, Syro-Palestine, early Byzantine, grave goods

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Acknowledgments

The research was financed from a grant of the National Science Centre of Poland (2016/21/N/HS3/00040) "End of tradition of chamber tombs as an indication of cultural change among the inhabitants of Syro-Palestine in the Roman period".

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past 150 years or so, which is how long archaeological research on the sepulchral traditions of ancient Syro-Palestine has been ongoing, numerous studies have explored various types of tombs, individual necropoleis and regional mortuary habits. The focus has been for the most part on monuments from the Roman period (1st century BCE–3rd century CE), neglecting to look at burial practices of early Byzantine times (4th century–first half of 7th century CE). It is this gap in the research that the present paper seeks to fill, making use of published excavation reports.

Burial customs that were continued from the Roman period can be established based on archaeological and, to a lesser extent, epigraphical sources. Included among these is, for instance, the use of family chamber tombs and varied burial equipment. New phenomena can be related to a growing number of Christian believers in the local population. The most characteristic of these is placing tombs inside monastery enclosures, which signifies the disappearance of the threshold between the worlds of the living and of the dead. At the same time, burials on the outskirts of built-up areas endured in the cities.

A rapid development of funerary architecture was—apart from public and sacred architecture—one of the most distinctive features characterizing Syro-Palestine in the Roman period. Existing forms of tombs were developed even as simpler forms, such as rock-cut chambers with increasingly ornate interiors and facades, gained increasing popularity

(e.g., Sartre-Fauriat 2001a; 2001b; Kloner and Zissu 2007; de Jong 2017). New forms, like mausolea and tower tombs, emerged, becoming a landmark of Near Eastern culture even today. Suffice it to mention monuments found in Petra, Jerusalem and Palmyra. Simple but richly equipped pit and cist graves with inscribed tombstones also turn up in this period, while Jewish ossuaria (that is, small coffins for skeletal remains) and so-called Samaritan sarcophagi gain in popularity (Magen 1993; Rahmani 1994; Sartre-Fauriat 2001b: 103–110; Konrad 2014; Sartre-Fauriat 2001a: 97–111).

These changes reflect cultural processes shaping the Semitic population in the lands between the Euphrates River and the Red Sea [Fig. 1]. The cultural legacy of the region in the early Byzantine period can be addressed based on an examination of burial customs in terms of their continuation and innovative development or discontinuation, considered in a regional context as well as from the perspective of practices prevalent in other areas of the Mediterranean. Without pretending to be exhaustive regarding the presented data, this paper aims to draw attention to certain trends that can be observed within these broader processes.

Also considered is the function of elements of the burial assemblages. Quantitative analyses of different kinds of coffins, burial types and their distribution made use of statistical methods. In view of an often broad dating of the studied elements, weighted averages were applied, that is to say, uniform fractional distribution of a given dating for par-

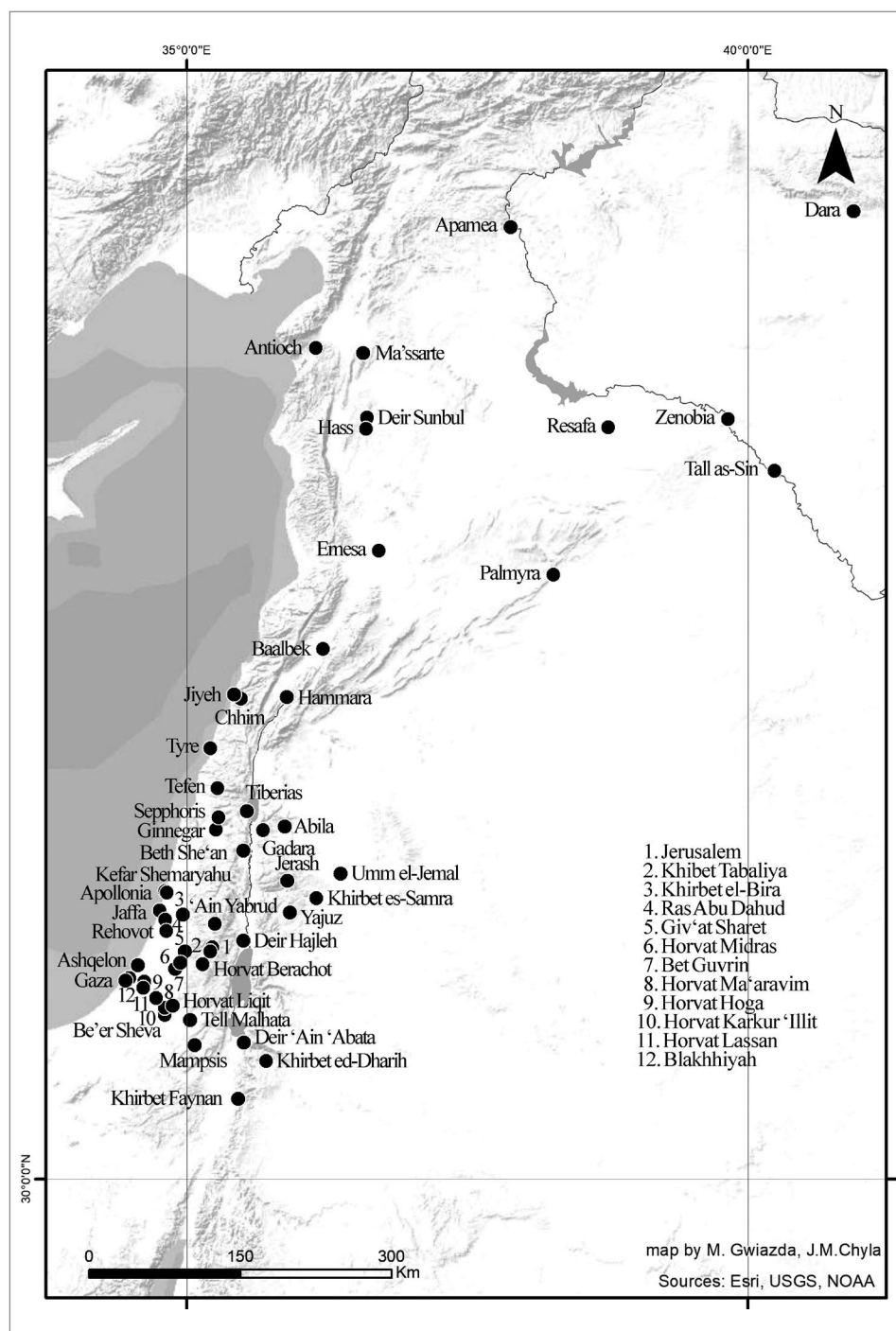


Fig. 1. Map of Syro-Palestine indicating location of sites mentioned in the text (Sources: Esri, USGG, NOAA | map M. Gwiazda, J.M. Chyla)

ticular centuries (van Beek and Depauw 2013). For example, if a tomb is dated to the 3rd century CE, the century is assigned the value 1, and if the dating is to the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, then each of the two centuries has the value 0.5 assigned to it. This calculation method gives more weight to tombs with a narrow dating, for example, a year date for the foundation inscribed inside the tomb.

A comment on the state of research in various parts of Syro-Palestine is in order here. For one, chamber tombs, whether rock-cut or built of stone, are overrepresented compared to the pit and cist graves that were undoubtedly the staple form of burial for most of the population. This is largely because

simple graves are easily overlooked at archaeological sites. Secondly, exploration of the various microregions is hardly similar in extent. For example, chamber tombs in Galilee outnumber those discovered in Samaria, but this should hardly be interpreted as proof of differences in burial customs. More probable by far is the greater number of research programmes pursued in Israel compared to the territory of the Palestinian Authority. However, the small number of chamber tombs in locations such as the Negev desert and southern Transjordan is deemed significant, and can be explained by lesser settlement development in these two regions, as well as by specific environmental and geological conditions.

2 THE ROMAN LEGACY AND NEW BURIAL GROUNDS

2.1 ATTITUDE TO OLDER GRAVES AND CEMETERIES

As far as sepulchral architecture is concerned, the transition between the Roman and early Byzantine periods was in many cases fairly smooth. Dozens of collective tombs from the 3rd century CE continued to be used as burial sites in the following century (e.g., Avshalom-Gorni et al. 2002: 186*; Cheyney et al. 2009: 346; Lefebvre, Abadie-Reynal, and Caillou 2012: 43; Abu Raya and Weissman 2013: 217; for more examples see Gwiazda 2019; 2020). One of the best-preserved necropoleis of Syro-Palestine, located in Tyre, evinces continuous use between the 1st and 7th centuries CE. This does not mean that the form of the burial site and the burial customs of the population which made use of it did not change

in any way during that period (de Jong 2010). An exceptional example of continuous use is a 1st–2nd century CE tomb in Jerusalem, whose later owners, who made use of it until the 4th or 5th century CE, treated the surviving early Roman ossuaria with full respect (Gudovitch 1996; see also R.W. Smith 1992: 219; Zissu and Klein 2014: 208; Ecker 2018: 636). Certainly, there are instances of Roman tombs and even entire burial sites being either forsaken in the early Byzantine period or adapted for other purposes. For example, the late Roman pit-grave necropolis in northern Jerusalem was turned into a quarry and partly destroyed in later centuries (Avni and Adawi 2015: 50, 60). The Iron Age II (925–586 BCE) rock-cut tombs of the northern Hebron Hills were in many cases cleared of the old burials

and mortuary assemblages after the 3rd century CE, and subsequently reused. Additionally, Christian crosses were carved on some of the facades (Batz 2007: XII). Two mausolea discovered in Tiberias were stripped of the basalt blocks used in their construction (Stepansky 2000: 20*). Similarly, a Christian mausoleum from Rehovot was partly dismantled by the worshippers themselves, and the building material was used to cover pit-graves constructed nearby (Tsafirir and Holum 1994: 107). One of the Roman mausolea in Beth Shean shared the same fate. Partly demolished, its remains were cut through by a pit which served as a waste dump in the early Byzantine period (Tepper 2008).

Sarcophagi from Tyre are another example of reuse of older sepulchral monuments. Serving burial purposes initially between the 1st and 4th centuries CE, these sarcophagi were subsequently reused by Christians, who adorned them with inscriptions and engraved symbols.¹ A Roman sarcophagus from Palmyra was, likewise, reused for a religious purpose, being placed in a church and most likely transformed into a large reliquary (Lassus 1947: 168). Finds from northern Syria attest to the process of secondary use of Roman tombstones and stone burial sculptures in early Byzantine buildings (Griesheimer 1997: 190, 191, 203). Similarly, inscribed stelae of 2nd–4th century CE date from Khirbet es-Samra were used in the 6th–7th centuries to cover new cist graves (Nabulsi, Husan, and Schönrock-Nabulsi 2013: 554–555). Other religious

groups were just as apt as the Christians to take over older tombs and burials with little if any respect. For example, Samaritans living in the 4th–5th centuries CE adapted a 2nd-century CE Jewish tomb at Ras Abu Dahud (Ben Ami, Yohanan, and Buzaglo 2017: 119–120).

Only a very few instances of looting of Roman tombs have been detected. One such example is a tomb at Khirbat el-Bira, which was looted in the 5th century CE (Elisha 2015). A cemetery dating from the times of the Tetrarchy in the northern part of Resafa, where soldiers from the town garrison were buried, also appears to have been treated perfunctorily in the 6th century CE, when the so-called al-Mundir building that probably served as an *extra muros* commandant's office and reception hall was built over it (Ulbert, Brands, and Konrad 2016: 107–108). In another case, several tombs in the city of Abila were destroyed when constructing water-supply tunnels in 568/569; indeed, one of the graves was plastered in order to be used as a water tank (R.W. Smith 1992: 225). In 5th-century Yajuz, a Roman tomb was cleared and adapted for olive oil production (Thompson 1972).

Another threat to the old graves was the expansion of settlements, which led to the destruction of old burial sites or to the construction of buildings adjacent to them (R.W. Smith 1992: 225; Griesheimer 1997: 203; Yeivin and Finkielsztejn 1999: Fig. 38; Waliszewski and Ortali-Tarazi 2004: 20, 52, Fig. 16). There were also cases of tombs being adapted as hermitages by

1 For more on the sarcophagi of Tyre see Ward-Perkins 1969. On their early Byzantine reuse see Rey-Coquais 1979: 287–288.

monastic recluses (di Segni 2006–2007; Taxel 2008: 59).² However, such cases are relatively few, because this custom failed to gain any significant popularity in Syro-Palestine.

On the whole, however, most tombs did not succumb to any major disturbance apart from looting. The available evidence does not substantiate any increased interference at burial sites between the 4th and 7th centuries CE. Cemeteries were not intentionally destroyed and pagan graves with their figural decoration were not christianised. Sepulchral structures apparently did not constitute an ideological threat for Christians. In the instances mentioned above, the circumstances point to pragmatic transformation rather than destruction on ideological grounds.

2.2 LOCATION OF CEMETERIES AND BURIALS

The chief criterion for the location of a burial site in 4th-to-7th century Syro-Palestine was an extra-urban location. This did not change much from the earlier period. Topography and geological conditions are both factors that are common to all periods.³ Farming land would have been avoided for practical reasons, e.g., Apollonia, Baalbek, Resafa and northern Syria (Tal 1995: 116; Konrad 2013: 205; de Jong 2017: 25). For the same practical reason, abandoned quarries and their immediate surroundings were a popular choice (Griesheimer 1997: 200; Porat 1997: 15*; Sion 2007: 166–167; Syon and Porat 2010; Konrad 2013: 205; Tate

et al. 2013: 451, Pl. C-1; Sharvit et al. 2015; Eser-Kayaalp, Erdoğan, and Palmer 2017: 168–169). Same as in the Roman period, burial sites continued to be located along roads exiting the settlements (Griesheimer 1997: 200; Nabulsi et al. 2009: 167; de Jong 2010: 599–601; Konrad 2013: 205; Tate et al. 2013: 563). Several early Byzantine cemeteries were situated near aqueducts (de Jong 2010: 600; Aviam and Amitai 2014: 15). In these cases, the location is not proof of any practice in particular, but is rather an indication that proximity of this kind was not considered an impediment. Production zones were also viewed as a natural neighbourhood for areas allotted to the dead. Thus, cemeteries or single tombs were frequently situated next to pottery or glass workshops and wine presses (R.W. Smith 1992: 224; Varga 2012; Gwiazda 2014: 33; Huguenot 2018: 304–306).

The expansion of burial grounds often led to the incorporation of areas which had previously been reserved for other purposes. The burial site in Tyre first occupied the abandoned shrine of Apollo, and then part of the main road leading to the city (de Jong 2010: 616–617, Fig. 15). Meanwhile, in Hrovat Midras, the 4th century CE tombs were built within the so-called hiding complex dating back to the times of the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–135 CE). In the suburbs of Gerasa, several rooms of the hippodrome's *cavea* were used for burials from the 3rd–4th centuries CE on (Ganor et al. 2012; Kehrberg and Ostrasz 2017).

2 The inspiration for this may have come from Egypt where installing hermitages in tombs was a popular tradition (O'Connel 2007).

3 For instance, at Horbat Mitla tombs were carved into a layer of soft gypsum on a mountain slope, taking advantage of a bed of hard limestone which formed the ceilings (Sharvit et al. 2015).

The emergence of Christianity introduced an entirely new burial tradition. In Syro-Palestine, tombs and cemeteries from the Iron Age and Roman period became associated with burial sites of martyrs, saints and figures known from the Old and New Testaments, leading to the construction of memorial churches and monasteries in their vicinity (Di Segni 2006–2007, with references to Christian written sources; Magen 2012a: 182–183; Dahari and Zelinger 2014). The tombs were incorporated into new buildings without disturbing their integrity. The most famous example of this practice is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on a site widely regarded as the tomb of Jesus. To some extent the practice itself relates to the Christian pilgrimage movement, which had been gaining in popularity from the time of St Helen (Emperor Constantine's mother).⁴ From the beginning of the 5th century CE, relics (fragments of the bodies or objects belonging to individuals regarded as saints) were placed in some of the churches and kept in small imitations of sarcophagi. The place of their custody was related to different traditions of specific ecclesiastical provinces. Most frequently, the relics were stored beneath the altar or in one of the rooms adjacent to the presbytery.⁵

The consequent changes in burial customs are signalled by tombs being more and more frequently located within

Christian shrines. This practice was not as common, however, as it was in the case of North Africa.⁶ The number of churches containing documented burials is rather low, even though such cases appear throughout Syro-Palestine (**Palestine:** Delougaz and Haines 1960: 15–16; Goldfus 2006; Ameling et al. 2018: 261, ins. no. 2812; **Jordan Eastern Bank:** Al-Muheisen 2008: 335; Bianchi 2018; Eger 2018: 162–167; Schick 2018: 173; **Phoenicia:** Waliszewski and Ortali-Tarazi 2002: 44; **Syria:** Lassus 1947: 230–232; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 138, 175, 271–272, note 18; Gawlikowski 2000: 254–255).⁷ The same is true of neighbouring Egypt, where burials in churches are known, but not commonplace in the period between the 4th and 7th centuries CE (Grossmann 2014: 111). They are usually either cist graves or sarcophagi situated in the church aisles and narthex. The largest number of these—20 cist graves with 50 bodies—was discovered in a church in Horvat Karkur 'Illit in the Negev. It appears, however, that the church itself was abandoned prior to its transformation into a cemetery (Figueras 2004: 55, 60–61, 67; Zias and Spiegelmann 2004: 31). Low numbers of individual burials in churches and their immediate neighbourhood suggest that these locations were reserved for a limited population group. Bones belonging to males and epigraphic evidence gathered at these sites suggest that it was usually clergymen who were buried there.

4 On pilgrimages in Syro-Palestine see Maraval 1985.

5 On relics in churches see Comte 2012: 77–98.

6 On graves in churches and *intra muros* in other parts of the Mediterranean: Duval 1986; Wataghin 1999; Costambeys 2001; Leone 2003. On the absence of such a phenomenon in Asia Minor see Wenn, Ahrens, and Brandt 2017: 205–206.

7 For a general overview of burials in churches see Sodini 1986: 236–238.

Mausolea adjacent to churches and crypts placed beneath them were especially popular in villages, but less so in cities.⁸ This difference indicates that legal regulations regarding burials were observed more strictly in urban areas.⁹

Transforming deserted buildings and city districts into burial grounds became a wide-spread phenomenon during the early Byzantine period in Athens (Tzavella 2008: 368), Corinth (Iverson 1996: 103–105, 111–112) and Carthage (Leone 2007: 166–189). This process has not been attested so far in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, mainly because of the continuous prosperity of the cities of Syro-Palestine, which in many cases lasted through the mid-8th century CE (Walmsley 2007; Avni 2014). Cities located directly on the coast (such as Caesarea Maritima and Berytus) were an exception in this regard. Starting from approximately the mid-7th century CE, these cities started visibly to shrink as a result of the wars waged in this region between the Arabs and the Byzantines. A declining sea trade was most likely also responsible for this phenomenon (Gwiazda et al. 2021 with further references). However, no archaeological evidence of the development of burial grounds in the deserted districts of these cities has been discovered to date.

Burials of the so-called *ad sanctos* type, with the deceased being buried next to

remains of martyrs and saints, were rare in Syro-Palestine.¹⁰ They are found primarily in Antioch, where St Babylas was buried, and perhaps in Gaza, where the grave of St Hilarion is located (Lassus 1947: 228–229; Elter and Hassoune 2007: 191). A burial chapel with two niches for stone reliquaries, between *arcosolia*, was discovered in Ma'ssarte (Peña, Castellana, and Fernández 1990: 164–165, Fig. 116). This arrangement suggests that the people buried in the chapel had considered the proximity of the saint's relics as an important aspect of their resting place. A far more characteristic custom was the burial of anchorites in the place of their isolation. In northern Syria, where the most extreme forms of monasticism were especially popular, individual tombs were placed next to eremitic towers or pillars of *stylites* (Peña, Castellana, and Fernández 1975: 97; Peña 1984). Similarly, in Khirbet Tabaliya near Jerusalem, an underground cell with the remains of a young monk bound with iron chains was found. At a later time, a memorial structure was built above the cell, leaving the corpse of the anchorite intact (Kogan-Zehavi 1998).

The onset of coenobitic monasticism (based on community life) brought about the widespread foundation of conventual cemeteries and tombs. Monasteries were founded in cities, suburbs

- 8 For examples related to countryside churches see Butler 1969: 147; Canivet and Canivet 1987: 279–282; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 44; Griesheimer 1997: 205–209; Ein Gedy and Golan 2007; Batz 2012: 386; Tate et al. 2013: 547; Eger 2014: 74; Tzaferis 2014: 186–187. Examples of urban churches with chamber tombs: Amer et al. 1982: 271–272; Weber 1992: 251–252; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2011: 69, Ins. No. 9533.
- 9 Laws prohibiting burials in settlements were issued in two imperial codes, *Codex Theodosianus* and *Codex Iustinianus* (CTh 9.17.6; CJ 3.44.12).
- 10 On *ad sanctos* burials mentioned in written sources see Duval 1988.

and uninhabited areas. They usually held two types of monk burials, individual and collective. Single inhumations have been discovered in a monastery cemetery in Deir Hajla, where pit graves containing only male burials were placed at regular intervals in a small cemetery (Peleg 2009: 40*–41*). Collective tombs in the form of crypts, as well as isolated burials constructed under churches or other types of buildings within monasteries, are better evidenced by archaeological finds (Corbo 1955: 125–128; Butler 1969: 96, 102; Peña, Castellana, and Fernández 1983: 163, 169; Tzaferis, Amit, and Sarig 1996: 112; Hirschfeld 1999: 102–103; Griesheimer 2003: 188; Barbé and Zelinger 2005; Goldfus 2006; Re'em 2009; Magen 2012b: 273–276; Fourdrin 2013: 250; Ashkenazi and Aviam 2014: 169–171; Dahari and Zelinger 2014; Schick 2018: 177).

From the 5th century CE rapidly developing monastic communities provide the best scope for a study of changes in the relationship between the living and the dead in the early Byzantine period. For one, the inhabitants of monasteries lived in very close proximity to the dead. Moreover, collective graves placed within monastic premises evince a new burial practice, that is, individuals buried in this manner were no longer family-related but were members of monastic communities.

2.3 RELIGIOUS SEPARATION

The early Byzantine periode witnessed the foundation of cemeteries related ex-

clusively to specific religious communities. For example, one of the inscriptions from Umm el-Jimal, from the first half of the 4th century CE, mentions a Christian cemetery (de Vries 1998: 230, with further references). Similarly, the necropolis in Abu Kabir in Jaffa held only Jewish burials, as attested by inscriptions discovered on site (Ecker 2018: 589). At the same time, no Christian traces were found in this location, even though Jaffa is known to have been inhabited by a religiously heterogeneous population. In the Roman period, Sepphoris was inhabited by a Jewish community which made use of the necropoleis around the city.

Meanwhile, in the early Byzantine period, new Christian grave forms, different from Jewish ones, were introduced. They were concentrated mainly on the eastern side of the city (Aviam and Amitai 2014: 15). This shows that worshippers of different religious denominations tended to be separated from one another in sepulchral contexts. However, Christian and Jewish tombs have been found adjoining one another in the southern necropolis of Bet Guvrin, where co-occurrence of Christian and Jewish symbols has been observed within individual tombs (Avni, Dahari, and Kloner 2008: 80, 133–134).¹¹ This may point to religious diversity within families as a consequence of the conversion of individual generations. Moreover, it demonstrates the lack of ecclesiastical control over burials taking place in private family tombs.

11 Co-occurrence of Jewish, Samaritan and Christian symbols was also noted in the case of several other chamber tombs from Palestine (Macalister 1912: 377–379; Iliffe 1934a; Rudin et al. 2018: 282).

3 DIVERSITY OF TOMB TYPES

Two main types of burial, individual and collective, prevailed in the early Byzantine period, same as in earlier times. The former, in which caves the graves usually take on the shape of pits either dug in the ground, with or without a stone lining (cist and pit graves respectively), or carved in the rock, contain individual bodies. The latter comprise chamber tombs constructed from stone or carved in rock, holding multiple corpses buried over a longer time. A transitional form between the two are the freestanding sarcophagi—usually rectangular chests standing out in the open. Skeletal remains found inside these chests evince repeated use. These different types often coexisted within one burial site (Waterhouse 1998: 3–15; Rose and Burke 2004: 5; Avni 2005: 377–380).

Inhumation was the usual form of burial. It was common among the Semitic populations and, with few exceptions, prevailed in Syro-Palestine in the Roman and early Byzantine periods. Cremation does not occur, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean, although burying the ash of burnt bones is attested for the Roman period, being linked to soldiers coming from other parts of the Roman Empire (Abu Shmais and Nabulsi 2009: with further references).

3.1 PIT AND CIST GRAVES

Pit and cist graves are usually no more than 2.00 m long and from 0.50 m to 0.80 m wide, enough to hold a human body. The depth of these graves varied even within one cemetery, reaching 2.50 m at the deepest (Humbert 1998:

266–267; Nabulsi et al. 2009: 167–168). Pit and cist graves differed depending on burial traditions present in a given region or settlement, available building materials and local geology. The shorter sides are either rounded or straight, and sometimes contain a niche for the head of the deceased (Figueras 2004: 57; Baumgarten 2005; Peleg 2009: 41*). Various components, such as the lining or cover, can be made of stone ashlar, undressed rocks, mud- or baked bricks (Parker 1997: 32; Peleg 2009: 41*; Golding-Meir 2010: 6; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604–605; Talis, Nagar, and Aladjem 2017). Occasional reuse of stone blocks and columns (Govrin 2003: 66*; Nahshoni 2008) suggest an arbitrary choice of building material. The covering is usually flat and made of stone slabs laid in a row, less frequently as a gable roof (Govrin 2003: 66*; Baumgarten 2005; Nabulsi et al. 2007: 275; 2011: 25). At a burial site near Khirbet Faynan (Findlater et al. 1998: 72; see also Nabulsi 2010a: 604–605), gaps between slabs covering the pit were filled with smaller stones and sealed with a mud mortar. Only in exceptional cases were stone slabs used for the bottom of this type of grave (Golding-Meir 2010: 6); most frequently, it would be a natural earth layer or bare rock (Tsafir and Holum 1988: 124–126). Some of the pit graves carved in rock had more sophisticated covers, such as monolithic sculpted stone of the same kind as the sarcophagus lid. This usually imitated a gable roof with acroteria at the corners, sometimes decorated with crosses. This cover type was most popular in northern Syria (Griesheimer 1997: 171–173).

Several of the known cist graves are doubled, with the stone linings separate for each grave but joining along one of the longer sides or else wide enough to accommodate two bodies laid side by side (Bar'el 2002: 98*; Govrin 2003: 66*; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604–605; Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013: 201; Nabulsi, Husan, and Schönrock-Nabulsi 2013: 553). Bodies could be buried also one atop the other. In Khirbet es-Samra, several burials of this type bear evidence of multiple use (Bar'el 2002: 98*; Nabulsi et al. 2009: 167–168). Bodies laid diachronically in one grave necessitated the displacement of older bodies. Even so, most of these graves were intended for individual burials.

Large necropoleis comprising cist and pit graves are found most frequently in the semideserts of Arabia and southern Palestine (Kirk and Welles 1962: 132–133; Humbert 1998: 262). This geographic dependency might have been connected to the customs of the Arabic population inhabiting these areas (Desreumaux 1998; Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005: 9–23). This is also evidenced by the prevalence of Semitic names on tombstone inscriptions from these burial grounds.

Many such graves were not marked in any way on the ground. In the cemeteries of Khirbet Faynan and Rehovot in the Negev, grave locations were marked with rows of stones (Tsafrir and Holum 1988: 124–126; Findlater et al. 1998: 74). Vertical tombstones were placed on the shorter side of graves, next to the head of the deceased. Sometimes, as at Khirbet es-Samra, such markers were placed along each of the shorter sides. Both cut and undressed stones served as tombstones (Tsafrir and Holum 1988: 124–126;

Findlater et al. 1998: 69, 72, 79, 80; Bar'el 2002: 98*; Nabulsi et al. 2009: 167). The appearance of the former varied depending on regional traditions in the Roman period (Klein and Mamalya 2014). They were either rounded or cut straight at the top, and some of them were given anthropomorphic shapes. The stones were furnished with inscriptions and engravings, such as religious symbols, most commonly the cross. Greek inscriptions consisted of the names of the deceased, date of entombment, and less frequently, funerary formulas (Kirk 1939; Tsafrir 1988; Desreumaux and Couson 1998: 281–282; Findlater et al. 1998: 79–80; Humbert 1998: 260–262; Misgav 2002: XVI; Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005: 9–23; de Jong 2017: 48–49, 57, 104–105). In the cemeteries in the Negev, these formulas differed from site to site, but were rather invariable over time. Such a local conservatism—also known from North Africa—according to A.M. Yasin (2005: 444–446, 451) “stressed the unity and cohesion of each Christian community while simultaneously suppressing genealogical connections and individual accomplishments”.

3.2 SARCOPHAGI

Sarcophagi gained in popularity in Syro-Palestine in the Roman period. Their use is also well documented between the 4th and 7th centuries CE. Either they constituted independent burial units or were located inside chamber tombs. In the former case, they were often placed on platforms (Lauffray 1943–1944; Siegelmann 1992: 178).

Sarcophagi were made of locally available stone, primarily limestone, and less frequently basalt and sandstone. The di-

mensions of the boxes were adjusted to the required size for the deceased. They were covered with monolithic lids in the form of a gable roof. The relief decoration on their sides turned distinctly Christian over time: the cross, the letters *alpha* and *omega*, birds and plant scrolls (Naccache 1992: 249–246; Tate et al. 2013: 454–459, Fig. C-17, 18, Pl. C-4). Anthropomorphic depictions appeared only occasionally (Sartre-Fauriat 2001a: 225).

Coffins of this kind in early Byzantine Syro-Palestine are not a straightforward continuation of Roman traditions. Their use in chamber tombs declined [Fig. 2], which can be explained in various ways. In the 4th century CE, marble sarcophagi from Asia Minor and Greece ceased to be imported to the Levantine coast (Ward-Perkins 1969). The import of ceramic sarcophagi from Cilicia and/or Cyprus was stopped at this time as well (Aviam and Stern 1997b: 19*). Meanwhile, the produc-

tion of coffins made of lead on the central and southern coasts of Syro-Palestine encountered difficulties. Following peak production between the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the number of lead containers clearly fell, possibly triggered by limited access to lead, which was imported from the western Mediterranean (Rahmani 1994). Other symptoms of economic duress in the eastern Mediterranean included declining imports of ceramic fineware (Bes 2015: 133–135). Of note is the much more rapid development of sarcophagus art in the western part of the Mediterranean in late antiquity compared to Syro-Palestine (e.g., *Antiquité Tardive* 1, 1993; Ulbert 2003).

In the early Byzantine period, locally produced sarcophagi in the cemeteries on Mount Carmel and in southern Syria were much rarer than in Roman times (Kuhnén 1989: 174; Sartre-Fauriat 2001b: 76). The number of so-called Samaritan sarcophagi, made of soft yellow

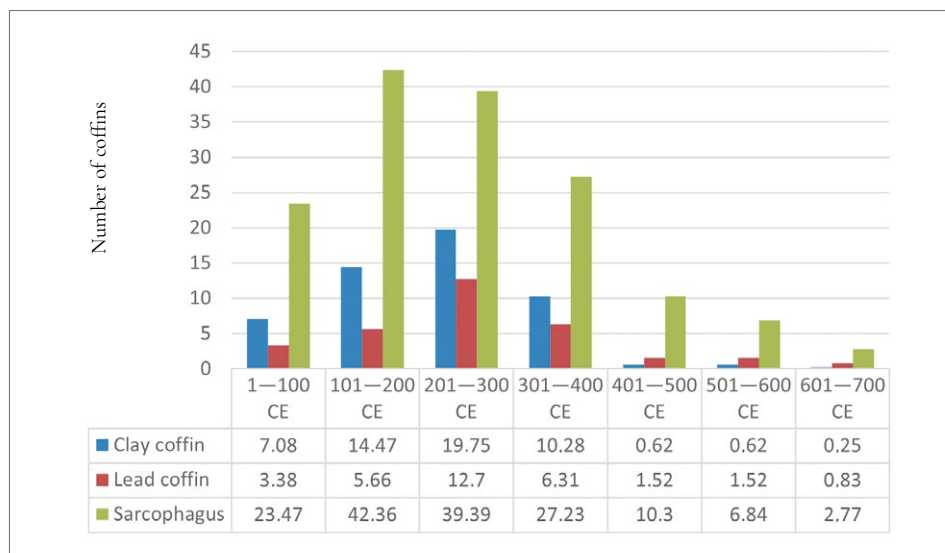


Fig. 2. Coffins found in Roman- and early-Byzantine-period chamber tombs per century (weighted average; calculated using data collected in Gwiazda 2019)

limestone, found mainly in the Hills of Samaria as well as in the central and northern part of the Palestinian coastal plain, continued to dwindle throughout the 4th century CE (Magen 1993). Still, the tradition of using sarcophagi made of locally available materials persisted, especially in northern Syria. Some instances of Syrian sarcophagi with a year-date inscription come from as late as the second half of the 6th century CE (Jarry 1992: 106–107; see also Prentice 1908: 184, Inscr. No. 207; 1922: 76, Inscr. No. 986; Clauss-Balty 2009). In some cases, they are associated with the so-called canopies, which consisted of a platform with a pyramidal roof supported on pillars. Judging by the epigraphic evidence, the construction of canopies gained in popularity in the 4th century CE (Butler 1903: 108–110).¹² In effect, clearly diverging regional trends can be observed in the development of sarcophagus art.

3.3 CHAMBER TOMBS

A clear rise in the number of chamber tombs during the Roman period was followed by a gradual decline in later centuries [Fig. 3]. The process was gradual and must have resulted from changes in the approach to family burials. However, the exact causes of the trend remain difficult to pinpoint and were most likely of a complex nature (Gwiazda forthcoming).

The gradual decrease in the number of chambered tombs had a limited impact on the diversification of form among burials of this kind. A simplified classification of early Byzantine burials encompasses the following forms: rock-cut chambers, pit chamber/shaft tombs, built hypogea, mausolea and towers. Bodies were laid in niches of different sort, for instance, niches placed perpendicular to the tomb walls (Latin *loculi*/Hebrew *kokhim*), or parallel (troughs) under an arched vault (Latin *arcosolia*). In some

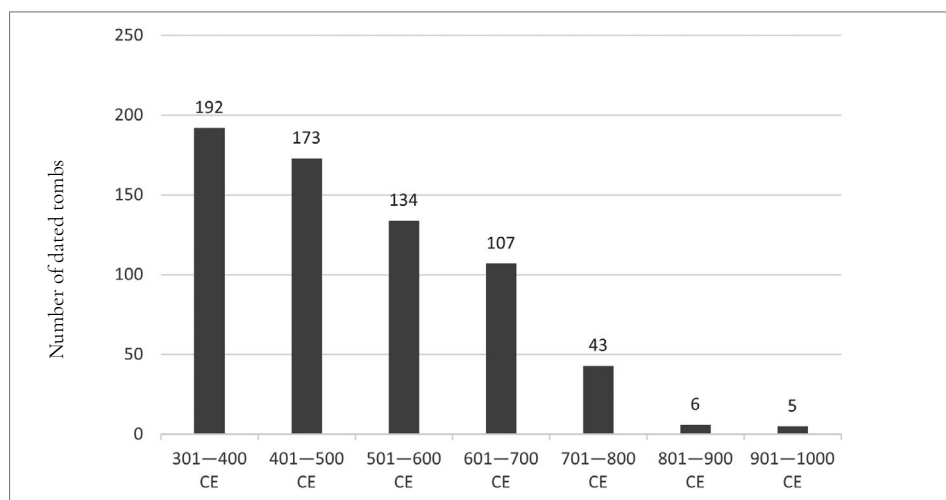


Fig. 3. Number of precisely dated chamber tombs used per century in Palestine (based on data collected in Gwiazda 2019)

12 For a similar grave type discovered in Dara see Eser-Kayaalp, Erdoğan, and Palmer 2017: 171.

cases, rectangular niches cut in the floor resembled pit graves. These burial forms were in use concurrently, although loculi prevailed in Palestine during the Roman period. In early Byzantine times, loculi gave way to troughs (Kuhnén 1987: 56–59; Waterhouse 1998: 13, 139; Avni 2005: 385; Avni, Dahari, and Kloner 2008: 106–108). The latter held multiple burials, while loculi were intended for one interment at a time.¹³ The preference for troughs over other forms of niches in the early Byzantine period can be understood as a consequence of a rational choice based upon their larger capacity. In addition, the decline of the Jewish custom of bone redeposition in ossuaries played an important role in the disappearance of loculi in Palestine.¹⁴

Considering the large capital investment required for the construction of a chamber tomb, the individuals sponsoring such undertakings should be presumed to have been not poor. Surprisingly, inscriptions, where present, never mention individuals from the social and financial elite. On the contrary, the epigraphic evidence points to low-level officials, estate managers, rabbis, clergy, fishermen, food and goods producers, merchants, and occasionally representatives of free professions (Rey-Coquais 1979: 281–282, 290; Ameling et al. 2011: 432, 435, 442, 462, 469, 488, 489, *Ins. Nos* 1491, 1495, 1504, 1530, 1536, 1563, 1564; Cotton et al. 2012: 258, 273, 344, *Inscr. Nos* 880, 892, 968; Ameling et al. 2014: 38).

3.3.1 Rock-cut chamber tombs

The most common burial place in both Roman and early Byzantine times was a rock-cut chamber taking on the form of room/s carved in mountain slopes and cliffs with an entrance on one of the sides. The interiors and exteriors of such tombs were seldom decorated, the only known ornaments being found in northern Syria (Griesheimer 1997: 180–181). Catacombs, which can be treated as a large-scale version of the rock-cut tomb, are hardly ever encountered. Most of the catacombs in Jerusalem were situated in monasteries and churches (Avni 2005: 379; see also Avni and Zissu 2016).

Another burial form popular in Syro-Palestine in the early Byzantine period is the so-called shaft tomb. Vertical shafts, resembling pit graves in their upper part, were cut in bedrock. Flanking the space at the bottom of the shaft were two troughs with *arcosolia* over them, while a sculpted stone covered the shaft opening (e.g., Butler 1903: 104; Saller 1951–1952: 157, 159–161; Fischer 1993: 44; Gudovitch 1999: 37*; Scheftelowitz and Oren 1999: 42*; Avni 2005: 377; Haddad 2007: 75*; Freiman and Govrin 2013: 172–175; Tate et al. 2013: 451–454).

3.3.2 Built hypogea

Built hypogea are especially frequent in the Hauran and Golan regions (e.g., Abou Assaf 1974; Hartal 1991: 65–66; Fischer and Oenbrink 2010). They were located in natural rock depressions, occasionally enlarged by stonemasons. Their interior

13 At least six skulls were discovered in an *arcosolium* at 'Ain Yabrud (environs of Ramla); see Husseini 1937: 54. The count in small tombs with *arcosolia* in Jerusalem and Ramla amounted to 50 bodies of children and adults (Kogan-Zehavi 2006: 160; Kol-Ya'akov 2010: 110).

14 On ossuaries and burial customs related to them see Rahmani 1994.

held stone-built chambers. The structure was thus partly subterranean and partly aboveground.

The preference for this burial form derived from local geological conditions. The hard basalt rock common to the regions of Hauran and Golan is unsuitable for cutting chamber tombs, hence demonstrating the significance of natural conditions for the development of sepulchral architecture in different parts of Syro-Palestine. Further evidence comes from the coastal plain between Gaza and Tel Aviv, where the absence of rock formations was not conducive to the rock-cut chamber tradition. Instead, in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the burial form of choice was a built hypogeum, constructed from broken rock bonded with mortar and partly buried in sandy soil (Huster and Sion 2006). These structures featured chambers with burial troughs under a barrel vault.

3.3.3 Mausolea

Yet another form of tomb is the mausoleum, that is, an above-ground chamber tomb built of stone blocks. Contrary to the trend in the Roman period, in early Byzantine times mausolea were more frequent in villages than in cities (e.g., Tchalenko 1953: 35–37; Vitto 1974; Mokary 2014; Sartre-Fauriat 2001b: 71, 97; Huguenot 2018). Toward the end of antiquity, this was also the case of other chamber tombs which were often built in rural areas [Fig. 4].¹⁵ They are a clear indication of the development and economic success of rural settlements in Syro-Palestine in that period (Wickham 2005: 443–457, with extensive references). Nevertheless, the number of mausolea was significantly lower overall compared to Roman times. This was also the case of tower tombs, a storied form of mausoleum. The latest instance of this type of tomb comes from the village of Hass and dates to 397–398 CE (Clauss-Balty 2009).

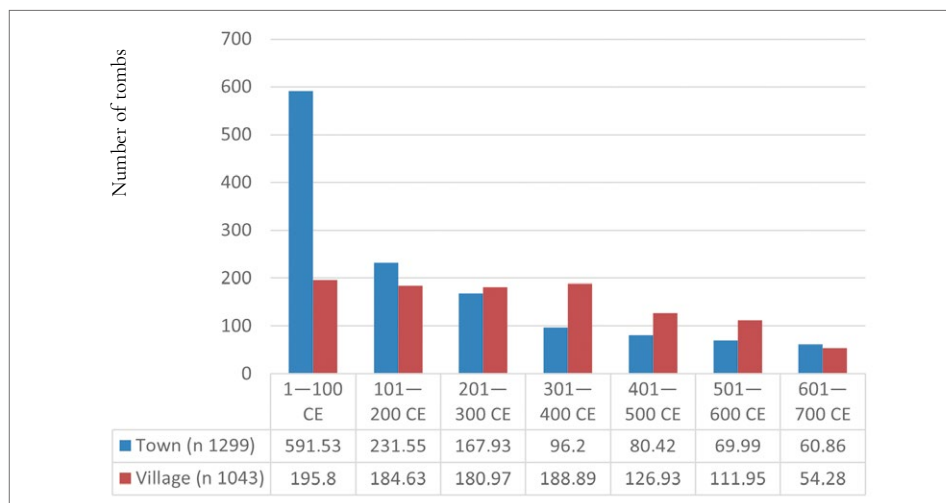


Fig. 4. Chamber tombs per century in Syro-Palestinian town and village cemeteries (weighted average; based on data collected in Gwiazda 2019)

15 On Roman mausolea in Syria see de Jong 2017: 71.

4 SEPULCHRAL ART

The number of sculpted and painted figural depictions, including portraits, popular in Syro-Palestine in the Roman period, clearly decreased in later centuries.¹⁶ Several motifs, such as altars for example, vanished, both images of altars and the altars themselves.¹⁷ The so-called *nefesh*, a symbolic seat for the soul of the deceased, represented by a stone or its depiction, also disappeared, which was clearly the outcome of spreading Christianity in the local communities.¹⁸ This explanation is supported by the contemporary emergence of new motifs of a Christian nature. These include, above all, crosses, and occasionally—in Palestinian territory—sculpted menorahs, a Jewish religious symbol.¹⁹

The decline in the popularity of figural depictions was not tantamount to their extinction. For example, images of the prophet Daniel in the lions' den have been discovered in several tombs in Syria and Palestine (Lassus 1936: 34, 35, 39, Fig. 43; Zissu 1999; Severini 2005: 92, 100, 160; Maayan-Fanar 2010: 72). Generally, this motif from the Old Testament was especially popular in Syro-Palestinian art of the early Byzantine age (Gwiazda 2016). Other figural motifs include the representation of birds, quadrupeds and fish, while

non-figural motifs usually include the letters *alpha* and *omega*, as well as trees, plant-scrolls, ribbons and lampstands (Moulton 1921–1922: 98–100; Michaeli 2008: 192–196; Maayan-Fanar 2010; Michaeli 2013: 137). These motifs were also popular in the sepulchral arts of other parts of the Mediterranean world (Valeva 2001), attesting to the existence of an artistic bond deriving from Christian culture.

Mosaic decoration was a novelty in Palestinian graves. In chamber tombs, the floors in standing pits and the bottoms of adjacent troughs were covered with mosaics. Most of these floors were plain, but there were several instances of geometric ornamentation. For example, an exceptional mosaic with floral motifs and a braided border decorated the crypt of a church in Horvat Berachot (Tsafrir et al. 1979: 310–319). This was a new trend in sepulchral architecture and its appearance was connected to the growing popularity of this type of pavement in houses and other buildings in Syro-Palestine in the early Byzantine period (Avshalom-Gorni 1997; Eliaz 1999: 47*–48*; Gudovitch 1999: 37*; Kletter 2010; Kol-Ya'akov 2010: 111–112, 114; Shmueli et al. 2013: 135).²⁰

Regarding tombstones accompanying pit and cist graves, their decoration

16 On Syrian sepulchral sculpture in the Roman period see Parlasca 1981.

17 On tomb altars in Syria in the Roman period see Griesheimer 1997: 191; Sartre-Fauriat 2017: 118–122.

18 On the *nefesh* see Gawlikowski 1972: 5–15.

19 For painted crosses see Goldfus 1997: 246; Taha 1998: 336–339; Barbé and Zelinger 2005; 'Ad 2011; Klein and Sapir 2014; Jakubiak 2014–2015: 152; Avni, Dahari, and Kloner 2008: 212; Blétry 2015: 466. For menorah depictions in graves see Lederman and Aviam 1997: 18*.

20 On the popularity of mosaics in the Early Byzantine period see Dauphin 1980; Merrony 2013: 44.

was limited to religious symbols. For example, grave slabs with funerary inscriptions, accompanied by depictions of the Golgotha cross, were popular in the Gaza cemeteries (Ameling et al. 2014: Inscr. Nos 2473, 2480, 2483, 2498, 2502, 2575). At Khirbet es-Samra, the

dominant image on tombstones was a Moline or Miller's cross with double-pronged arms (Desreumaux and Couson 1998: Figs 80–92). These motifs are an indication of a common Christian language—with its own microregional dialects—being used in the arts.

5 ORGANIZATION OF CEMETERIES AND BURIAL CUSTOMS

5.1 PIT AND CIST GRAVE CEMETERIES

In flat cemeteries, that is to say, cemeteries of exclusively cist and pit graves, burial distribution was important. At Blakhiyah, Be'er Sheva and Khirbet Faynan cist graves were often arranged in rows at regular intervals (Findlater et al. 1998: 82; Nabulsi 2010a: 604; Abadi-Reiss and Eisenberg-Degen 2013: s.p.; Shmueli and Rasiuk 2017), suggesting in these cases the existence of a dedicated institution responsible for cemetery planning. However, some parts of the cemeteries in Be'er Sheva and Khirbet es-Samra present an irregular layout (Nabulsi et al. 2009: 169; Peretz 2014). The excavators of Khirbet es-Samra believe that the different depth of graves was intentional in order to avoid a close proximity between the feet and heads of adjacent burials (Nabulsi et al. 2007: 275). Empty spaces observed between cist graves have been interpreted as paths enabling mobility within the cemetery area (Nabulsi, Husan, and Schönrock-Nabulsi 2013: 554). Several tombs at Resafa and Tyre, as well as in rural cemeteries in northern Syria, were surrounded by stone wall enclosures. Hydraulic installations occurring within the perimeter of these walls suggest the presence of gardens next to the burial sites (Griesheimer 1997: 195–196; de Jong 2010: 608–609, 627; Huguenot 2018: 304–306).

Meanwhile, small stone fences surrounding some groups of cist graves apparently reflect internal divisions in some cemeteries (Nabulsi and Humbert 1996: 491). Clusters of cist graves located at a certain distance from other similar formations were discovered in Blakhiyah (Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604). In Zenobia, subterranean chamber tombs were concentrated around older tower tombs, suggesting that the individuals buried there were related (Blettry 2015: 458, 469–470), although meaningful conclusions without confirmation from epigraphic sources are hardly tenable.

5.2 COLLECTIVE BURIALS

Kinship between interred individuals is suggested by the collective character of chamber-tomb burials, and is sometimes confirmed by inscriptions, which often list the names of one or both spouses as founders of family tombs. In some cases, the offspring is mentioned (Prentice 1908: 151, 153, 154, 158, 231, 235, Inscr. Nos 147, 153, 154, 172, 278, 282; 1922: 100, Inscr. No. 1028; Lauffray 1943–1944: 53; Sartre-Fauriat 2001a: 36; Clauss-Balty 2009: 269–270; Ameling et al. 2011: 419–420, 432, 486, Inscr. Nos 1476–1477, 1491, 1560; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2011: 143, 250, 251, Inscr. Nos 9661, 9829, 9830; Shmueli et al. 2013: 136;

Ameling et al. 2014: 37–38; Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2014: 270–271, Inscr. No. 201; Zissu and Adawi 2014: 22–23).²¹ These features appear in both Christian and Jewish burials of this type. At the same time, there are a few instances of collective tombs sponsored jointly by a group of unrelated individuals (R.H. Smith 1973: 188–190; Sartre-Fauriat 2001a: 182; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2011: 281, Inscr. No. 9865). Inscriptions rarely mention a purchase or ownership of only one tomb section (Ameling et al. 2014: 37–38). The monastic collective tombs mentioned in the first part of this article exemplify a similar variety of joint ownership.

The number of burials in the catacombs of Jerusalem and Dara seems to exceed the potential needs of even the largest families. These tombs were most likely of a communal character and were open to all of the city inhabitants. In the case of Jerusalem, pilgrims deceased during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land could have also been buried in such tombs. An inscription found in the city mentions a tomb that belonged to a hospice (*xenodocheion*) and hospital (*noskomeion*), establishments which were founded for the sake of the pilgrimage movement (Cotton et al. 2012: 393–394, Inscr. No. 1008). Similarly, a cistern located next to a church was reused for collective burials of pilgrims from St Lot's sanctuary at Deir 'Ain 'Abata (Schick 2018: 177).

Mass graves from the times of the plague of Justinian and the Byzantine–Sasanian war of the early 7th century CE differ from the collective burials men-

tioned above. Societies in crisis are apt to abandon established rules, including burial customs. According to the written sources, the population of Jerusalem was massacred in 614 CE on account of their resistance to the Persian invaders. Gideon Avni (2010: 36–40) claims that early-7th-century-CE mass burials located in the suburbs are related to these events. The corpses were buried in caves, cisterns and reused rock-cut chambers. The mass entombments from the Hippodrome of Gerasa, dated to the mid-7th century CE, might have been associated with the plague (Ostrasz and Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2020: 147, 151, 183, 190, 308, 311, 370).

A small cist grave from the beginning of the 7th century CE, found in a church at Chhim, contained a mass burial of 50 skeletons (Waliszewski and Ortali-Tarazi 2002: 44). It was initially linked, based on a coin of Phocas, to the bloody conquest of the Levantine coast by the Sassanids in 613 CE. However, recent radiocarbon dating of the burials has placed them between 434–565 CE and 709–880 CE, proving either secondary burials across several centuries or redeposition (Soltysiak and Waliszewski 2021: 108).

Another interesting example is the Ashkelon discovery, where the corpses of nearly 100 infants from the 6th century CE were placed to rest in a sewer (P. Smith and Kahila 1992). The find is seen as one of the chief examples of infant exposure. Imperial law banned the practice from the moment that Christianity became the dominant religion (Grubbs 2009). The Ashkelon find is evidence that

21 On family burials in the Roman period see Gawlikowski 1970: 127, 146, 168–173; Sartre-Fauriat 2001a: 180–182; Regev 2004.

central legislation was unable to put an end to practices of this kind. Giving children to monasteries might have been a way of preventing such activity (Boswell 1984: 17–18). Discoveries of children's bones at burial sites within monasteries in Palestine may constitute archaeological evidence in support of this hypothesis (e.g., Re'em 2009; Seligman 2015: Table 1).

5.3 POSITION OF CORPSES AND CHILD BURIALS

The position and orientation of corpses in early Byzantine burials from Syro-Palestine is known from the exploration of cemeteries of flat graves. The one-time use of graves in such cemeteries is more conducive to the undisturbed preservation of a corpse in anatomical order. In contrast, sarcophagi and chamber tombs were often reused, necessitating the displacement of the older decomposed remains, distorting the arrangements. Even so, it was observed in the case of some troughs that the bodies had been laid in fully extended position on their backs (Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 45, 49). The same arrangement prevails in the cist graves of southern Palestine and Arabia. Apart from a supine position, other details of the body arrangement included clasped hands placed on the abdomen, pelvis or chest, as well as a slightly raised head resting on a fieldstone (Findlater et al. 1998: 72; Peleg 2009: 41*; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 607; Talis, Nagar, and Aladjem 2017). The latter custom corresponds to the use of headrests cut out in one of the shorter edges of troughs in the chamber tombs (Najar 1989–1990: 119; Fischer 1993: 44; Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 47–48; Lederman and Aviam 1997: 18*; Gudovitch 1999: 37*).

In contrast to the pit and cist graves, the orientation of the body in chamber tombs frequently depended on the form of the tomb. The position of troughs, loculi and pits was either parallel or perpendicular to the tomb walls. Moreover, tombs of this type were not oriented according to the cardinal directions. The rock-cut chambers from Zenobia and Tall al-Sin, oriented towards the east, are an exception to this rule (Blettry 2015: 459). In addition, headrests in the troughs of chamber tombs from the environs of Tefen were located on the right-hand side, while in one of the monastery crypts in Jerusalem, they were located on the left-hand side (Lederman and Aviam 1997: 18*; Barbé and Zelinger 2005). This indicates that the respective position of bodies in different parts of the tomb was intentional.

In the case of pit and cist graves, the orientation of bodies in a desired direction was practically unrestricted. We thus observe an intentional and repetitive arrangement of bodies in many flat cemeteries. Simultaneously, however, there are pronounced differences in this respect which frequently occur between various sites. For example, in Be'er Sheva, several graves were oriented on a northeastern or southwestern axis (Peretz 2014; Shmueli and Rasiuk 2017), as is also the case in Tell Malhata, Blakhiyah and Rehovot (Tsafirir and Holum 1994: 107; Nagar and Sonntag 2008: 81; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604; Talis, Nagar, and Aladjem 2017). At Be'er Sheva, however, several cist graves were oriented east–west, as in Horvat Lissan, Horvat Liqit, Horvat Ma'aravim, Horbat Hoga, the so-called Third Mile Estate near Ashkelon, Tel Ashdod, Deir Hajleh, Khirbet es-Samra, Khirbet Faynan, Jeru-

salem and Resafa (Findlater et al. 1998: 72; Bar'el 2002: 98*; Govrin 2003: 65*; Nagar and Sonntag 2008: 83; Nahshoni 2008; Peleg 2009: Fig. 1; Re'em 2009; Nabulsi et al. 2011: 25; Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013: 201, 205; Konrad 2013: 207–208; Oron 2017; Varga 2018). In nearly all of these cases, the heads of the corpses pointed to the west or northwest. An east–west orientation may indicate the growing popularity of this custom, characteristic of Christianity (Rahtz 1978), in Syro-Palestine. However, pit and cist graves positioned towards the east or southeast are also known from the Roman-period necropoleis in Khirbet edh-Dharikh and Mampsis (Negev 1971: 121–122; Ibrahim and Gordon 1987: 15; Delhopital 2010: 130, 136). For this reason, the derivation of this custom from an older pagan tradition is not entirely to be excluded.

Two main child burial customs can be reconstructed to some extent based on available archaeological and anthropological evidence. First, children were buried independently, in regular but smaller pit and cist graves (Bar'el 2002: 98*; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604–605; Shmueli and Rasiuk

2017). Children could also be buried with an adult, usually a female (e.g., Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 47; Figueras 2004: 67; Peretz 2014; Zissu and Adawi 2014: 18).

Independent infant burials in amphorae are known from southern Palestine (Rahmani 1961: 153; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 604–605; Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013: 202). The practice is well-documented in regions now forming part of modern Israel in the late Bronze and Iron Ages (Bloch-Smith 1992: 31–33). However, there is no proof to indicate that the practice was embraced by the local population as late as the early Byzantine period. Starting from the 2nd century CE, burying infants and older children in amphorae spread to other parts of the Mediterranean (Peña 2007: 165–170; Stevens 2013: 626–640). In Tall as-Sin on the Euphrates, small niches holding the bodies of children were discovered in chamber tombs (Montero Fenollós 2008: 315). These were located in the walls of dromoi leading to chambers holding adult burials.

All in all, the evidence on hand leaves no doubt that the remains of children were treated with particular care.

6 GRAVE GOODS AND BURIAL EQUIPMENT

Special production of goods for inclusion in mortuary assemblages is not attested in Syro-Palestine for either the Roman²² or the early Byzantine period. Objects described in this section, excavated from 4th to 7th century burials, were also found in contemporary settlements.

Grave goods are present in all types of tombs, but the cist and pit graves of semidesert areas, inhabited for the most part by an Arabic population, were more moderately equipped.²³ This could reflect either local customs or the degree of affluence of these communities. In Khirbet

22 On grave goods in the Roman period see de Jong 2017: 98.

23 On the ethnic origin of individuals buried in graves in southern Palestine and Arabia see Kirk and Welles 1962: 132–133; Humbert 1998: 262.

es-Samra, objects (jewellery and cosmetic items) were identified in only half of the cist graves. In most cases items of this kind were associated with female burials (Nabulsi et al. 2009: 169–170). This also suggests that the gender of the deceased played an important role in the choice of the mortuary assemblage.

Chamber tombs in use for several generations usually contained a greater number of goods deposited over the years together with successive burials, which resulted in accumulations seemingly indicative of different burial customs when compared to cist and pit graves. At the same time, it cannot be excluded that there was a similar number of bodies unaccompanied by any mortuary goods in all types of burials. For this reason, it seems that the function of the finds, rather than their quantity, is of greater importance. However, grave goods and burial equipment are much more commonly found in the Levant than, for example, in Cyprus in the same period (Fox et al. 2012: 76). This is evidence of a partial disparity between the burial customs in these two regions.

6.1 TEXTILES

Traces of textiles have occasionally been found, especially in southern Palestine, where the climate is particularly arid (R.H. Smith 1973: 148; Tsafirir and Holum 1994: 107; Findlater et al. 1998: 72, 74; Talis, Nagar, and Aladjem 2017). However, distinguishing between shrouds or clothing is impossible because of the poor state of preservation of these remains. More explicit evidence of shroud usage has been preserved in the form of dark brownish spots detected on the surface of several

skulls found in Khirbet es-Samra (Nabulsi 1996: 315–316), while the presence of robes is attested by finds of metal belt buckles and fibulae used to pin clothing in place (Makhoully 1939: 49; Findlater et al. 1998: 74; Eger 2003; Govrin 2003; Figueras 2004: 63–64, 234, 31; Ortali-Tarazi and Stuart 2004: 122; Montero Fenollós and Masó Ferrer 2008: 246). The remains of leather sandal soles and associated small nails are generally associated with male burials (Tsafirir and Holum 1994: 107; Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 60; Findlater et al. 1998: 72, 74; Figueras 2004: 63–64; Figueras, Area Guerra, and Metz 2004: 234; Vitto 2008: 124; Badawi 2010: 272; Talis, Nagar, and Aladjem 2017).

6.2 OIL LAMPS

Oil lamps are among the most frequent finds. Practical needs appear to have dictated their presence: the exigency of illuminating the chamber interior during the entombment, for instance. This was the case in Christian, Jewish and Samaritan burials (Al-Maqdissi and Hussami 1990; Porath 2007: 48–54; Tal and Taxel 2015: 41–47, 143; Rudin et al. 2018: 271–274). However, the presence of oil lamps in pit and cist graves indicates a symbolic meaning attributed to lighting devices interred with the corpses in some communities (Nabulsi 1998: 274). Sometimes the nozzles of these lamps bear no evidence of burning, suggesting that they were never lighted (Solimany, Winter, and de Vincenz 2006: 161; de Vincenz 2013: 123). There is also reason to believe that some of them were in fact eulogies related to holy pilgrimage places. According to Ádám Bollók (2018: 783, 788–792), their hallowed and protective

properties motivated their deposition in the tombs. Finds of this kind have been found clustered in front of some of the Samaritan chamber tombs. Also, niches for oil lamps in tomb facades point to lamps being lighted customarily in front of the tombs (Tal and Taxel 2015: 195; see also Sharvit et al. 2015).

The presence of ceramic incense burners, well-attested in tombs ascribed to the Samaritan population, is perceived as a clear indication of the need to eliminate the smell of decaying bodies as well as to retain ritual purity (Taxel and Iserlis 2014).

6.3 POTTERY AND GLASS VESSELS

Pottery vessels placed in graves had at least two functions. In the chamber tombs, jars were occasionally used as repositories for human bones. This rare practice occurred in both Christian and Samaritan burials (Ayalon 1994: 189; Tal and Taxel 2015: 51, 197, 198).

Other instances of vessels being deposited in graves are difficult to interpret from a functional point of view. Ceramic vessels included bowls, pots, jugs, mortaria, unguentaria (Iliffe 1933: 183; Delougaz and Haines 1960: 33; Abou Assaf 1974; Nabulsi 1998: 274; Avshalom-Gorni 2000: 199; Batz 2003: 331; Eger and Hamoud 2011: 74; de Vincenz 2013: 130–133; Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013: 203; Zissu and Adawi 2014: 18; Tal and Taxel 2015: 51–52; Rudin et al. 2018: 274–276). Glass was represented by bowls and beakers (Iliffe 1934b: 88–89; Abou Assaf 1974; Liebermann-Wander and Aviam 1994: 111; Aviam and Stern 1997a:

16*; Stern 1997: 17*; Vitto 2008: 119). Additional proof would be needed to connect them to libations or funerary banquets taking place during the burial or on death anniversaries. Food leftovers that would support this idea have been found in only a few tombs (R.H. Smith 1973: 182; Kogan-Zehavi 2006: 160; Nabulsi 2011: 35–36).

Some of the vessels, especially those made of glass, could have held ointments and perfume (Fischer and Oenbrink 2010: 227). Their use for this purpose was confirmed by archaeometric analyses of the content.²⁴ Written sources may also be of assistance in this regard. John Chrysostom mentions the use of spices—by which he means perfume or incense—to protect clothes against theft and conceal the putrid odour of decomposition (John Chrysostom, *Hom. on John* 19.16–18). The practice had a long tradition, as indicated by the presence of unguentaria in earlier-period tombs (e.g., Anderson-Stojanović 1987). It cannot be ruled out, as noted in the Mishnah and Tosefta, that these containers may have also been connected with anointing the body and sprinkling it with perfume not only after it was deposited in the grave, but also before the burial and during the preparation of the body and the funeral procession (Green 2008: 145, 160–170; Rife 2012: 160, 194–196).

Double cosmetic tubes made of glass, characteristic of female burials, along with spatulae, were also popular (Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 47, 49; Jackson-Tal 2015: 57–80; Klein 2015). In only one case, this kind of vessel was placed at the feet of a deceased man (Seligman, Zias,

24 For results of laboratory tests of vessel content see Khalil 2001: 127–138. Examples of graves with closed glass vessel forms: Jackson-Tal 2015: 57–80; Barag 1974: 13*; Bar'el 2002: 98*; Winter 2013: 218; Freiman and Govrin 2013: 177; Solimany, Winter, and de Vincenz 2006: 161.

and Stark 1996: 49). This indicates that some of the vessels, made of ceramic or glass, could have been treated as personal belongings. The theory is supported by the presence of glass vessels in cist graves as well as in chamber tombs.²⁵

6.4 MISCELLANEA

Items often recovered from male burials include tools and, less frequently, weapons, namely sickles, chisels, dental tools, hammer-adzes, strigils, axes, spearheads, arrowheads, knives, and daggers (Delougaz and Haines 1960: 61; Künzl and Weber 1991; Tal 1995: 112; Nabulsi 1998: 274; Govrin 2003: 66*; Montero Fenollós and Masó Ferrer 2008: 257; Fischer and Oenbrink 2010: 218, 225; Peleg 2012a: 235; Tsfania-Zias and Golding-Meir 2013: 182; Tzaferis 2014: 187; Tal and Taxel 2015: 107).

Other finds attest to the custom of interring with the dead their personal belongings, for instance, basalt mortars, cymbals, spindle whorls, mirrors and cosmetic sticks (Sellers and Baramki 1953: 23; Abbadi 1973: 71; R.H. Smith 1973: 191; Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 49; Aviam and Stern 1997a: 16*; Stern 1997: 17*; Findlater et al. 1998: 79; Oren and Scheftelowitz 2000: 50*–51*; Figueras 2004: 60; Figueras, Area Guerra, and Metz 2004: 232, 234; Nabulsi et al. 2007: 278; Sharvit 2009; Badawi 2010: 273; Peleg 2012b: 110–111; Tsfania-Zias and Golding-Meir 2013: 182; Tal and Taxel 2015: 105, 161, 184; Piasetzky-David et al. 2020: 535–536).

The interment of objects from earlier periods is a peculiar practice. Among such objects one finds Egyptian scarabs and

other types of seals from the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE (Scheftelowitz and Oren 1999: 42*; Nabulsi et al. 2007: 278). In fact, as Adi Erlich (2020: 28–29) notes, “[t]he most common context in which old seals are found in Roman-Byzantine deposits is funerary”, which is linked to luxury items being offered as grave goods.

Child burials at Khirbet es-Samra have yielded toys in the form of plaster figurines (Nabulsi, Humbert, and Abbadi 1998: 618; Nabulsi 2010: 218–219; Nabulsi et al. 2011: 27–29, Fig. 3).

Bronze bells are a particularly numerous category of finds, noted in cities and villages, and in tombs located in churches, both Christian and Samaritan burials (Makhoul 1939: 45–46, Pl. 31; Saller 1950–1951: 223; Delougaz and Haines 1960: 60, 62; Al-Maqdissi and Hussami 1990: 465; Avni and Dahari 1990: 311, Fig. 10; Magen 1990: 283–284, Fig. 12; Lieberman-Wander and Aviam 1994: 111; Stern 1997: 17*, 124, Cat. No. 59; Scheftelowitz and Oren 1999: 42*; Avshalom-Gorni et al. 2002: 274, Cat. No. 39, Fig. 11:2; Rafael 2008: 448, Cat. No. 233; Fischer and Oenbrink 2010: 219; Eger and Hamoud 2011: 76; Peleg 2012a: 235; Tsfania-Zias and Golding-Meir 2013: 182; Tal and Taxel 2015: 107, 186; Ecker 2018: 624). Bells are often assigned an apotropaic function (Vitto 2008: 123; Tzaferis 2014: 192; Tal and Taxel 2015: 107, 186). Thomas Weber (1992) interpreted two chains with several bells attached, found in a church crypt in Gadara, as a punitive mark of an offender. Most commonly, however, bells are discovered singly. It is thus pos-

25 For glass vessels found in cist graves see Eldar and Nahlieli 1982: 68; Ploug 1986: 109; Findlater et al. 1998: 78–79; Golding-Meir 2010: 6.

sible that they were simply components of bracelets and clothing.²⁶

Confirming this interpretation are frequent finds of a wide variety of jewellery items among the grave goods. Apart from bells, this group of finds includes metal and glass bracelets, earrings, pendants, necklaces, beads, rings, and metal and bone hairpins, all of which are usually found in female burials. Jewellery finds discovered in male burials include primarily rings and bracelets (Ilfie 1933: 182; 1934b: 90; Makhoul 1939; Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 49; Aviam and Stern 1997a: 16*; Porat 1997: 15*; Bar'el 2002: 98*; Figueras, Area Guerra, and Metz 2004: 232; Haddad 2007: 75*; Badawi 2010: 270–272; Peleg 2012b: 110; Eger and Khalil 2013; Cooper and Al-Saad 2015; Tal and Taxel 2015: 99–102, 108–114, 161–168; Eger 2018: 156; Rudin et al. 2018: 278). Similar finds have been noted in various regions of Syro-Palestine, indicating the commonplace nature of this practice.

A characteristic feature of Christian burials of the period were small crosses with loops, making them likely pendants (e.g., 'Abbadi 1973: 71, Pl. 42.2; Abou As-saf 1974: Pl. 5; Avni and Dahari 1990: 311, Fig. 10; Avshalom-Gorni et al. 2002: Fig. 11; Cheyney et al. 2009: 342, Fig. 16; Eger and Hamoud 2011: Fig. 6; Eger 2018: Fig. 10).

6.5 COINS

Graves of the early Byzantine period have also yielded numerous coin finds (e.g., Iliffe 1934b: 81; Bounni 1970: 48; R.H. Smith 1973: 191–192; Liebermann-Wander and Aviam 1994: 111; Nabulsi

and Humbert 1996: 491; Stern 1997: 17*; Bar'el 2002: 98*; Waliszewski and Ortali-Tarazi 2004: 44; Badawi 2010: 272; Nabulsi et al. 2010: 608; Zissu and Adawi 2014: 17; Bijovsky 2015: 81–85). This invites questions regarding the origin of this tradition: was it related to the so-called Charon's fee widespread in Roman times? According to this tradition, a coin should be placed in the mouth, hand or on the eyes of the deceased (Stevens 1991). Isolated cases of the find seem to attest to the deep-rooted nature of this pagan practice (Nabulsi 1998: 274; Zias and Spiegelman 2004: 309, 312; Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013: 205; Piasetzky-David et al. 2020: 486, 542–544).

Coins were intentionally placed elsewhere as well. Eight gold coins of Heraclius were found by the feet of a body buried in a chamber tomb in Ginnegar (Oshri and Najjar 1997: 51). Similarly, in Giv'at Sharet, a glass jar with two coins was placed at the feet of the deceased (Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 48–49). The significance of this practice is unclear, but it surely has important symbolic dimensions, even in cases where it might have been connected with Christian burials. Coins became important to the practitioners of this religion relatively soon, including in the context of rites of passage (Perassi 2018: 61–62). There are known cases where coins were used in graves as chronological tokens, in particular in mass burials or where the body was moved from one place to another (Travaini 2016: 210–213). The presence of coins in graves from late antiquity is not limited to Syro-Palestine; similar finds have

26 For examples of bell application in this context see Barag 1974: 13*; Peleg 2012b: 110–111.

been reported from numerous sites across the Mediterranean (e.g. **Gaul**: Young 1977: 40–43; **Greece**: Rife 2012: 192–193; **Asia Minor**: Wenn, Ahrens, and Brandt 2017: 207–209, all with further references).

Placing coins in graves was most certainly practiced only by part of the population. That such finds were limited to only a few communal and individual graves untouched by robbers is proof of this fact (Gwiazda 2019). It should also be noted, that some coins had holes, which points to their being used as amulets, pendants, components of bracelets and clothing ornaments (Delougaz and Haines 1960: 50; Gudovitch 1996: 112; Seligman, Zias, and Stark 1996: 48–49; Fischer and Oenbrink 2010: 219; Tzaferis 2014: 187; Bijovsky 2015: 83). Again, the practice was not confined to the region and was and continues to be widespread even now in different cultures that use coins (e.g. Bruhn 1993; Fulghum 2001).

Coin finds from tombs are most frequently dated to the 4th century CE and the 6th. This does not mean, of course,

that 5th century CE practices differed in some way; rather the sparsity of coins is related to the nature of coin circulation in this period, which is characterized by a prolonged circulation of 4th century CE bronzes, usually illegible 5th century CE coins and an almost complete absence of gold and silver coinage (Bijovsky 2012: 165–170).

Objects of a magical character are also present among the things accompanying the deceased. They include amulets, rings, bracelets, engraved gems and inscribed lamellae of apotropaic function (Sellers and Baramki 1953: 23; Delougaz and Haines 1960: 60; Tal and Taxel 2015: 119–121, 170–172; de Jong 2017: 213; Eger 2018: 158). Both Christian and Samaritan burials have yielded this type of find. Nothing, however, indicates that the deposition of these objects was part of magical practices; rather, they were worn as part of clothing during the life of the deceased, and they were interred with the other jewellery of the owner after his or her death.

7 BURIAL CUSTOMS IN 4TH-TO-7TH CENTURY SYRO-PALESTINE: FINDINGS AND GAPS IN RESEARCH

First and foremost, the data reviewed here has revealed an ambiguous approach of the 4th-to-7th century CE inhabitants to the graves and cemeteries of earlier, Roman times. On the one hand, cases of their destruction and reuse were dictated by practical needs. The Egyptian practice of reusing pagan tombs as hermitages apparently did not gain the same kind of popularity in Syro-Palestine. On the other hand, old cemeteries were extended

in the early Byzantine period even as new ones were constructed. Many chamber tombs evince continuous usage in both periods. Moreover, dynamic urban development in the period in question did not necessarily encroach upon and destroy existing necropoleis from previous eras, even though constructing water-supply systems, crucial for urban functioning, was considered as a sufficient excuse for causing damage to older tombs.

The spatial organisation of cemeteries remains little studied. Nevertheless, the row arrangement of cist/pit graves in some Syro-Palestine necropoleis indicates respect for some form of superimposed spatial order. Respect for older tombs is evinced also by the construction of churches and monasteries in the vicinity of alleged burial sites of martyrs and saints. These graves, however, did not play an important role in the development of Christian cemeteries.

New graves, as was common in earlier periods, continued to be built on the outskirts of settlements. Burial within church grounds and in very close proximity to the churches was exceptional, reserved for a select group of members of the Christian community. The blurring of the division between the worlds of the living and of the dead was especially evident in the monasteries. Crypts and other forms of tombs became components of monastic architecture, as seen in northern Syria, Palestine and Arabia.

The forms of tombs used in the early Byzantine period did not differ from those used in Roman times. However, in some regions, forms that had previously thrived (for instance, towers) disappeared from the landscape, while other types of tombs, like crypts built in the monasteries, exemplified developing Christian customs. Accompanying a dynamic rural expansion in Syro-Palestine between the 4th and 7th centuries CE was a marked increase in the number of new chamber tombs, previously built mostly in urban locations. The popularity of family burials continued in the early Byzantine period, but the overall number of chamber tombs dropped gradually.

Even though tomb decoration was significantly more modest compared to the flourishing funerary art of preceding periods, a few surviving examples show a continued preference for figural representations, even as the imagery repertoire was transformed to meet Christian needs and taste. This was connected to more general changes in art following the demise of paganism, wherein pagan motifs gave way to Christian depictions. The decreasing number of funerary reliefs and paintings reflected gradual changes in capital investments, foreshadowing a much deeper transformation of sepulchral culture.

Regional trends dependent on geological factors are clearly visible in the form of tombs. This is especially relevant in the case of hypogea built in southern Syria and in the southern part of the Palestinian coastal plain. The distribution of cist graves appears to coincide with the traditions of the population inhabiting the semideserts of Palestine and Arabia. Another regional trait are graves with canopies, the occurrence of which is restricted to northern Syria and which thrived in the early Byzantine period.

Regarding coffin forms, even though a customary usage of locally produced sarcophagi after the 4th century CE is well attested, it was accompanied by a simultaneous decline in marble and clay coffin imports. Lead coffins also went out of use during this time.

Traces of textiles and associated items, as well as frequent jewellery finds, may be related to the practice of interring fully-clothed bodies. Grave goods sometimes included ceramic and glass vessels, which most probably contained perfume and ointments. This might have been related

to various practices both before, during and after deposition of a body in a grave. The practical aspect of burning oil lamps is well attested, but the presence of oil lamps may have had a symbolic meaning as well. Also observed is a custom according to which various personal belongings could be buried with their owner; this is often helpful in establishing sex and age of the deceased. Since this practice was equally popular in Samaritan, Christian and Jewish burials, it is often difficult to distinguish between the burial rituals of these religious groups, especially in the absence of additional archaeological evidence (for instance, inscriptions, and objects imbued with religious symbolism). The function of coins deposited with the deceased still remains unclear. However, it does indicate that Christians adopted a pagan practice for their own purposes.

On the whole, burial customs, like other components of local culture in Syro-Palestine, did not undergo any dramatic transformation between the Roman and the early Byzantine periods. The widespread Christianisation of the local population did not have an immediate impact on the material culture and rituals related to the sepulchral sphere. Nevertheless, evolutionary changes in this respect between the 1st and 7th century CE are clearly discernible.

Similarities to other regions in the Mediterranean include such burial practices as the kind of funerary art, the custom of placing coins with the dead and an abbreviated form of epitaphs. Burial customs in the early Byzantine period were evidently grounded in a system of Christian beliefs, which shaped how the general population thought about death

and the afterlife. Thus, the burying of the dead was based on the same set of dogmatic principles, leaving not much room for variation, this unlike the Roman period when local traditions tended to prevail. However, there were also elements that failed to fit this trend toward unification. In contrast to the western regions of the Mediterranean, burials *ad sanctos* and within city limits were a rarity in Syro-Palestine. Sarcophagi also gradually disappeared from the cemeteries.

Looking at the archaeological source material as a whole, it should be noted that archaeological explorations in recent decades have yielded an extensive range of data enabling a reconstruction of numerous aspects of burial customs in Syro-Palestine. Nonetheless, extended use of archaeometry in new fields of study should help further in-depth examination of the topic. A prime issue affecting current interpretations of existing evidence is the uncertain or vague dating of individual burials. Erroneous conclusions are often the result of interpretations based solely on material culture: coins, ceramic and glass vessels, and oil lamps found in the graves. The mass burial site in Chhim in Lebanon is a case in point. Thus, to properly interpret certain burial customs, it is necessary to radiocarbon date individual skeletons. As regards family chamber tombs, radiocarbon dating of the human remains would enable a more precise determination of the period in which the tombs were used, potentially demonstrating a division into unrelated phases. In effect, it might be possible to ascertain how often such burial sites were reused in the period between the 4th century CE and the 7th.

Radiocarbon dating of early-Byzantine-period graves can also give additional insight into potential changes of burial customs during this time. At present, there is not enough well-dated grave assemblages to enable a study of whether and how grave furnishings changed across these four centuries.

Another significant research gap is determining where individual deceased could have come from. The results of systematic strontium, oxygen and lead stable isotope studies and aDNA analyses could be of significant importance, particularly in the case of burial sites in monasteries and at pilgrimage site. For example, identification of migrants on these grounds could help to ascertain whether they were

buried according to different customs than the local population. Currently, population groups at given cemeteries are treated as being one and the same.

Last but not least, a DNA testing programme aimed at detecting *Yersinia pestis* genes in anthropological material is also definitely suggested. The bacterium was responsible for the bubonic plague outbreak during the reign of Justinian, which had a severe impact on local demographics. Mass burials dated to the 6th and 7th centuries CE are often linked to this outbreak, this despite the lack of epidemiological evidence. Such a hypothesis stands, for instance, with respect to the extensive remains found buried in the Jerash hippodrome (see above).

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How to cite this article: Gwiazda, M. (2022). Burial practices in early Byzantine Syro-Palestine (4th-first half of 7th century CE) – review article, *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 31/2) (pp. 285–331). <https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam31.01>

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CJ

CTh

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