

SOME TOMBS RECENTLY EXCAVATED IN PALMYRA

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The tombs of Palmyra have been explored by several foreign, Syrian and joint missions for more than a century now. The first to be studied was the underground tomb once called Magharat Abu Sukheil and known later as the Tomb of the Three Brothers; its paintings were published as early as 1901. More underground tombs were explored (although never completely published) in the same Southwest Necropolis by Harald Ingholt in the 1930s, while the first built tomb, that of the brothers A'ailami and Zebida (No. 85b), was cleared by Jean Cantineau in 1929. More recent excavations are too many to be listed here, but mention should be made especially of the Japanese work in the Southeast Necropolis and currently in temple tomb 129d incorporated into the northern rampart, as well as of the exemplary publication of temple tomb 36 by the Syro-German mission. Many underground tombs were investigated in the past by Syrian archaeologists: Adnan Bounni, Obeid Taha and Khaled al-As'ad. In 2007–2010 an extensive program of tomb excavation was undertaken under the auspices of the Palmyra Museum, with the unfailing support of the DGAM (the program continues on a current basis). Tombs were chosen for excavation for largely practical reasons: hypogea had been exposed by collapsing ground and built tombs were deemed in danger of illicit digging. The end result is the clearing of many tombs located in the Southwest, Northwest and Southeast necropoleis, in addition to some tombs embedded in the northern city wall, the latter being part of a long term program consisting of the uncovering and repair of these fortifications. I would like to review briefly the results of some of this recent work and to present the most important finds.

The oldest tomb discovered so far in Palmyra is dated to the 2nd century BC, but the next dated monument, the tower tomb of 'Atenatan (No. 7), is from 9 BC (Gawlikowski 1970). Other towers, the most conspicuous and the most characteristic in the landscape of Palmyra today, were built through the 1st century until AD 128, which is the date of the latest one. They were replaced in the course of the 2nd and 3rd centuries by elaborate mausolea, which are often called house or

temple tombs today (Schmidt-Colinet 1992), while subterranean tombs were popular throughout the existence of ancient Palmyra (Bounni, al-As'ad 2004). All of them, unlike the much less known individual graves, were family monuments intended for many generations of the founder's descendants, laid to rest in rows of storeyed loculi, usually closed after burial with a plaque bearing a sculpted likeness of the deceased. Whether towers, temple tombs or hypogea, the tombs were commonly referred to as 'houses of eternity'. It can be safely assumed that the souls of the departed were believed to remain associated with their tombstones and mystically share in the funerary banquets held by their living relatives and descendants (Saito [ed.] 2005).

TOWER TOMB N206 [FIG. 1]

A tomb, which went unnoticed by the Wiegand expedition (mentioned in Will 1949: 88; Gawlikowski 1970: 151), was marked on the most recent plan by K. Schnädelbach (2010: 51) as N206 and can be seen at the southern edge of the modern road, right against the garden wall of the Dedeman Hotel (formerly Méridien, later Sham). Only the ground floor has been preserved, a square 12.30 m to the side. The entrance, 1.30 m wide and 2.30 m high, opened to the north.

The tomb was built of hard grey limestone, known locally as 'blue stone', cut rough and not evened. This was building material typical of the early tower tombs, later replaced by regular ash-lars of hard white limestone, such as those seen in the towers of Iamblichus and Elahbel. The room was 6.70 m long and 1.50 to 2.20 m wide, and was covered with slabs on a level 3.70 m above the floor. The walls are nearly vertical and contain four loculi on each side, each 2.15 m high and 0.60 m wide, and divided by stone slabs into four burial slots. The loculi opened at a level 0.75 m above the floor, even with the entrance sill. There was no staircase to the higher storeys opening from this room. The first floor, of which nothing remains, was accessed probably through another entrance on the opposite, southern side.

At the back of the extant chamber there was a podium 2.16 m long and 0.50 m high, extending from wall to wall. It bears a weathered inscription in three lines. A sarcophagus, 2.06 m long and 0.80 m high, stood on it. Its front side is mostly broken, but one can still distinguish three very damaged headless busts, the middle one holding two wreaths against the chest. Between them stand two small figures, also incomplete.

Two other sarcophagi were placed along the east wall of the room, at right angle to the one at the back. They had not been sculpted on their front side and were left unfinished. Broken remains of two standing statues were found in the room.

The inscription on the podium is dated to November AD 128. The text consists of a long genealogy of the sarcophagus owner, who was represented on the now missing banquet slab together with his wife and children, also mentioned. There is every reason to believe that the sarcophagus was introduced into the tower some time after the original construction, which could hardly have been later than the first half of the 1st century AD.

TOWER TOMB N207 [FIG. 2]

The tower tomb stands to the north of the modern road, very close to the edge of the residential quarter known as the 'Hellenistic town' and not far from tower tomb N206. Only the ground floor, which is 10 m square, has been preserved. The entrance opened to the south and into a chamber 6.40 m long, only slightly larger than the door (1.50 to 1.90 m). The walls tapered toward the slabs forming a narrow ceiling. There were four loculi on each side of the room, each 2.30 m high and subdivided into three burial slots. Access to the missing higher storeys must have been on the opposite side of the tower.

Three funerary busts were found in this tomb. One Ababa daughter of Iamla, wearing the usual garments and several necklaces, was represented on one of the slabs. Another lady, not identified by an inscription, wore earrings in the form of bunches of grapes. The third sculpture figured a man, Lišamš son of Bar'a. His face is broken off.

A bronze furniture leg in the shape of lion's paw is remarkable among the finds from this tomb.

TOMB 135¹

It is a house tomb situated in the western part of the North Necropolis, some 100 m east of the restored tomb of Marona. It is, as usual, square in shape, measuring 13.70 m to the side. Only a course of orthostats of hard grey limestone 1 m high has been preserved above the foundation [Fig. 3]. The entrance was located on the southern side, where the threshold has been preserved in the middle, and the foundation of a porch, jutting forward 3.25 m, can be seen.

There are rows of loculi — sixteen preserved — on two levels along the lateral walls. In the middle of the tomb there was a square well, showing that the original floor must have corresponded to the threshold, while the preserved loculi were all below floor level. There were also two single burials dug into the floor, the pits lined with stone slabs.

The walls of the tomb were completely dismantled above the threshold level, no doubt in order to obtain building blocks for the nearby wall of Diocletian. Some decorated pieces, less handy in reuse, were left behind: carved cornices and elements of niches once set in the façade, as well as pilaster fragments decorated with scrolls. Fragments of banqueting scenes indicate that sarcophagi were disposed along the walls of the chamber, above the rows of loculi.

TOMB 146

This temple tomb from the North Necropolis (Watzinger, Wulzinger 1932: 64) is even less well preserved than the tomb described above [Fig. 4]. Only one course of upright slabs is still standing, forming a square 12.50 m to the side. The entrance was from the east. Loculi were set along the west, south and north walls; there were 19 burial niches, but only their outlines on the ground can be seen. Four sarcophagi were disposed two by two to the right and left in front of the loculi. The relief decoration has been utterly obliterated; only one sarcophagus still retains the very worn remains of four busts on the front of a funerary bed.

TOMB 149

The tomb is located in the western part of the North Necropolis. It was nearly square in shape, 9.60 m and 9.90 m to the side, entered through a wide entrance (2.40 m) in the slightly longer eastern side. The collapsed lintel bears a Greek and Palmyrene inscription, dated to AD 159 (*Inv.* VIII 5).

The interior of the tomb was cleared to the ground. A few slabs can still be seen lining the walls, as well as the outline of 12 loculi along the south and north walls. In addition, there is a low bench in front of the east wall (8.20 m by 0.75 m), intended probably for sarcophagi. There is no trace of the upper storey mentioned in the inscription added by a son of the founder. No significant finds were discovered in this tomb.

Another tomb of similar dimensions, not marked on existing plans, stands close by to the north. It appears to have been robbed completely and was not excavated.

TOMB 175

This tomb was much smaller, nearly square (7.80 m on the lateral sides and 7.12 m on the entrance side). It stood in the North Necropolis, but closer to the city, at the edge of the built-up area. Instead of being dismantled, it was included in the rampart of Diocletian as one more defensive tower, jutting obliquely from the curtain of the wall.

The podium of the tomb has been preserved and consists of two courses set on a plinth, together 1 m high. The first course of the walls, made of upright slabs 1.30 m high, was partly pre-

1 All the following aboveground tombs were given numbers by C. Watzinger and K. Wulzinger (Watzinger, Wulzinger 1932: 44-76, Pls 25-35). For this tomb, Watzinger, Wulzinger 1932: 63.

served on the inside of the rampart. It was subsequently restored with elements of the second and third courses. There was apparently no architectural decoration.

An inscribed door lintel lay among other fallen blocks. The bilingual inscription, published for the first time over a century ago, contains a date, AD 212 (*CIS II 4201; Inv. VII 4*).

The narrow entrance (1.60 m) opened in the west wall of the tomb and was partly blocked by the curtain wall abutting from this side. Both doorjambs are still standing.

A square stairway of three steps led to the entrance. Inside, there was a rectangular room 2.20 m wide, extending for 6.30 m, all the way to the back wall between two parapets made of upright slabs, elbow height [*Fig. 5*]. Right and left there were eight loculi on each side. Only the lowermost tier on the northern side and one niche higher up in a corner, reaching the floor level, have been preserved. On the opposite side only the outlines of the niches at the bottom have been left. The tomb interior was cleared when the structure was incorporated into the defensive wall, but it is likely that the tiers of loculi once reached the height of the lateral parapets, which could have supported banquet reliefs, now gone.

Two outside burials were found close to the entrance: an almost complete baby skeleton inserted in a common-ware pot through an opening in the vessel body, and an adult skeleton, supine with the head facing east, laid to rest in a terracotta coffin 1.95 m long. More individual burials were discovered by the south wall, lying on different levels and in varying directions: two child burials framed with mud brick and stones against the wall, and other infant burials laid in jars and terracotta pipes. It is unclear whether these burials occurred during the tomb's use in the 3rd century or were added after the tomb has been expropriated by the builders of the rampart. Similar outside burials were recently found next to temple tomb 129d, currently excavated by the Japanese mission (unpublished report for the 2010 season by K. Saito).

TOMB 174

This tomb is the next in line of a whole series of similar monuments incorporated into the northern rampart in its last stretch before the Camp of Diocletian. It measured 10.50 m and was adorned with four pilasters on each side. The entrance was 1.70 m wide between two jambs, which are still in place [*Fig. 6*], and was closed with a two-winged door of carved stone, now replaced but not revolving. In front of the door there was a paved porch (7 m by 4.10 m), into which two graves were dug. Inside, there were ten loculi on each side, forming benches right and left of the central passage, all of them destroyed. Sarcophagi in the form of banquet beds were arranged on top of the loculi, but only two of them, badly damaged, were found; remains of busts can be seen on them.

TOMB OF ḤAṬRAI

This hypogeum is situated in the western part of the Northwest Necropolis, at the foot of Jabal Munṭar. It displays a typical inverted-T plan, but the loculi carved in the soft rock are very poorly preserved. The inscription on the lintel states that the tomb was built by Zabd'ateh and Neša, sons of Ḥaṭrai, and by their nephew Belšuri, son of Ma'ani, in the Seleucid year 442 (=AD 130/131). A concession inscription on the doorjamb concerns the sale of an exedra by Ḥaṭri son of Neša to Taymo'amad son of Gohaynat.

Behind the stone doorway there were three galleries: the main one behind the door and oriented east to west, was 14.50 m long and 3.35 m wide, while the northern and southern galleries, both 2.80 m wide, were respectively 6 m and 5 m long. There was no attempt at architectural decoration; the walls and vault, which were hollowed out in the ground, were plastered thinly. A lateral exedra in the main gallery, with two loculi built transversely inside a raised platform, bears sketchy paintings on plaster [*Fig. 7*]: a row of servants carrying vessels and two men reclining on a banquet couch. Only the contours of the figures were drawn, the faces left blank. These murals, possibly older than the painted decoration of the Three Brothers tomb, clearly imitate common motifs found on stone sarcophagi. It has never been satisfactorily determined whether these scenes

represented the happiest moments of family life on earth or rather a spiritual encounter of the living and the dead (Seyrig 1951: 32–40).

Many sculptures were found in the tomb. There is a banquet scene showing the family in their best attire, reflecting their high social standing [Fig. 8] and several busts of men and women. As usual in the tombs, many lamps, as well as pottery and glass fragments were found.

TOMB OF 'AQRABAN

This is yet another underground tomb in the eastern part of the Southwest Necropolis, among the gardens of the oasis. It will be treated in more detail by Khalil al-Hariri (2013, in this volume).

TOMB OF HENNIBEL SON OF HAMṬUŠ

A natural collapse in a garden in the eastern part of the Southwest Necropolis revealed remains of an underground tomb of common design, which consisted of three galleries arranged in the form of an inverted T. The tomb had a stone door, facing the east at the bottom of a stairway cut in the ground. The tomb was hollowed out in very soft rock and almost devoid of stone decoration. Some of the burial niches could be explored, including one containing a bronze bell.

A foundation plaque with a Palmyrene inscription was discovered. It stated that this 'house of eternity' was built and decorated by one Hēnnibel son of Ḥamṭuš in the Seleucid year 435 (AD 123). The tomb was equipped with a well at the beginning of the northern gallery and not at the entrance, as is usual. The main gallery contained eleven loculi, while there were no burial niches in the lateral galleries except for one in the southern passage. The tomb appears to have been used only briefly and ceased to function before the need arose to use the lateral galleries.

The rich funerary sculptures discovered in the tomb were diverse, offering data on the high status of the family. The high artistic level of the carved subjects and their symbolic significance concerned not only the dead, but were also a reflection of the family image as intended for public view (Sadurska 1996).

A sarcophagus of hard white limestone [Fig. 9, top] found in this tomb (now outside the entrance to the Museum, on the right) is remarkable in that it bears a banquet scene sculpted on its front side. Usually, such groups were made in high relief on a separate slab set at the edge of a sarcophagus. Here, a priest in richly embroidered Parthian dress was shown reclining under a scrolling branch. His wife sits at his feet, wearing a veil over her head and robes, revealing only her headband and locks of hair at the temples. Between them, a Palmyrene inscription says: "Malku son of Taima Hēnnibel Ḥamṭuš and his wife Rabna". A rectangular mass of unworked stone behind the lady seems to indicate plans for representing yet another person. On the other side of the relief, there is a standing servant, wearing garments similar to his master's and holding a cornucopia in his left hand and a patena in his right. The scrolling tendril, never found before in Palmyra in such context, in addition to the cornucopia, refer clearly to Dionysiac symbolism, seldom invoked in the funerary art of Palmyra.

A banquet slab, once probably rectangular but now broken irregularly all around, represents in relief a reclining man, his elbow resting on a pillow [Fig. 9, bottom]. The mattress is not shown. The man wears a Greek cloak draped around his legs over a short-sleeved tunic and holds a skyphos in his hand. At his feet a much smaller figure of his wife sits frontally (and not slightly sideways as usual), while a boy wearing a himation stands behind the man. The inscription between the boy and the head of the man, in neat 2nd century script, says: "This image and the sarcophagus under it was made by Kutbai son of Hēnnibel, to honor his father, Hēnnibel. Alas!" The name of the wife is lost; only the beginning of her patronymic, Taim..., can be read.

Among several busts found in this tomb we shall name one of a Palmyrene lady wearing a luxurious dress embroidered with a rosette scroll on the right side and on one sleeve, and a cloak pinned with a triangular clasp. The cloak covers her hair but shows the headband and two long locks descending from behind the ears, resting on her shoulders. She wears four necklaces, each different, and earrings in the form of bunches of grapes. Twisted bracelets decorate her wrists.

Behind her right shoulder a boy is standing, holding a bunch of grapes in his right hand and clutching with his left the edge of his mother's veil. A Palmyrene inscription over her left shoulder identifies her as "Ḥanna daughter of 'Ogga, wife of Taimiša Ḥennibel Ḥamṭuṣ".

A bowl ornamented with eight rosettes tops a stone votive altar, which is 42 cm high. Such altars were seldom found in tombs, being used rather in the worship of the gods. In the tombs, frankincense was burned in honor of the dead in small bowls of plaster set directly on the floor in front of the burial places.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work of Palmyra Museum in 2007–2010, reported in this brief account, was headed by Dr. Khalil al-Hariri, Omar As'ad and Rania al-Rafidi. All plans were drawn by Omar As'ad. I wish to express my thanks to the members of the Polish mission to Palmyra for preparing this paper for publication.

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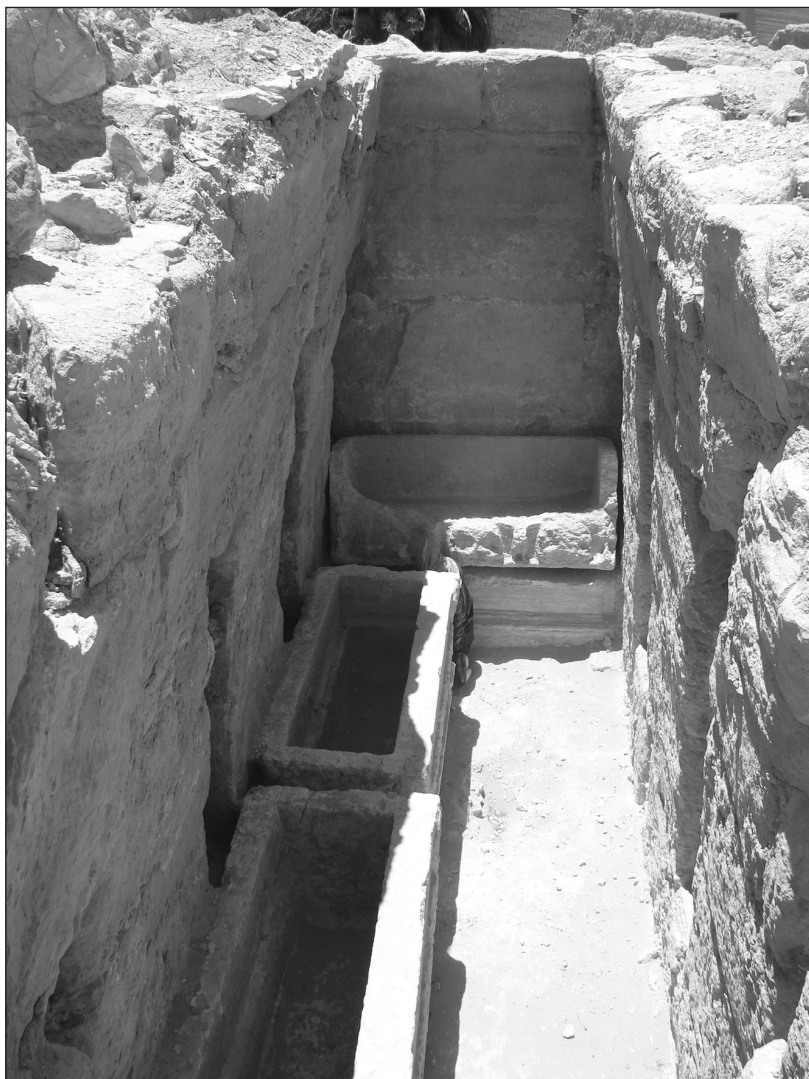


Fig. 1. Tower tomb N206, view of the chamber after clearing (All photos by the author)

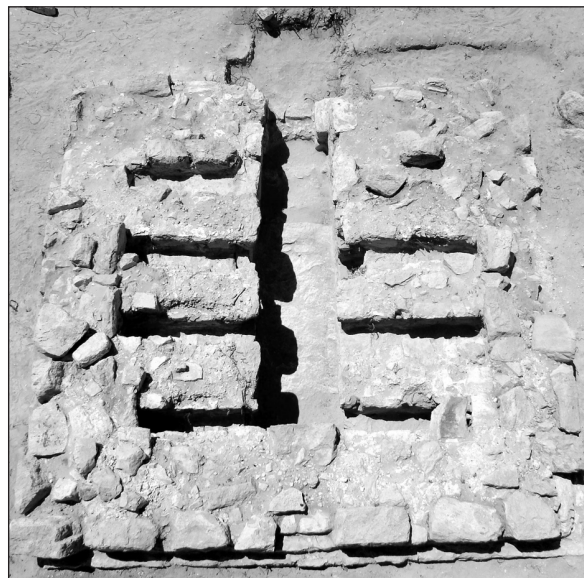


Fig. 2. Tower tomb N207, view from above after clearing



Fig. 3. Tomb 135, general view after clearing



Fig. 4. Tomb 146, general view



Fig. 5. Tomb 175, after restoration



Fig. 6. Tomb 174, view of the entrance after clearing and restoration



Fig. 7. Painting in the tomb of Ḥaṭrai



Fig. 8. Banquet relief from a sarcophagus, made by Kutbai for his father Ḥennibel



Fig. 9. Sarcophagus from the tomb of Ḥamṭuṣ (top) and banquet relief from the tomb of Ḥaṭrai (bottom)