

PLACING THEM “IN ETERNITY”: SYMBOLIC MUMMIFICATION IN LEVANTINE PHOENICIA

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Abstract: This study examines and synthesizes a diverse corpus of evidence relevant to the possible practice of mummification or embalming among some Levantine Phoenicians in the Achaemenid Persian period (ca. 500 – 300 BCE). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century descriptions of partially preserved corpses are discussed alongside mortuary inscriptions, anthropoid sarcophagi, and grave goods. The variety of preservative evidence described by excavators, the emphasis on the arrangement and permanence of the burial in inscriptions, the depiction of oil bottles on three sarcophagi, and the frequent inclusion of oil bottles in burials as grave goods combine to suggest a wider range of preservative actions than has previously been suggested. This evidence indicates that some elite Persian period Phoenicians may have been utilizing oils and resins in various ways to enact a kind of symbolic mummification—ritual acts that reflected the importance of the integrity of the burial but did not necessarily result in a well-preserved corpse. The possibility that oils and resins were similarly used in the interment rituals for adult cremations is also examined. This study supports recent scholarship on Phoenician mortuary practice that contends that both cremations and inhumations (partially embalmed or otherwise) are compatible expressions of a shared continuum of ideas held by Levantine Phoenicians.

Keywords: Phoenicia; Mummification; Mortuary Practice; Persian Period; Oil Bottle.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been suggested that Levantine Phoenicians¹ practiced some kind of mummification or embalming in the mid- to late 1st millennium BCE. Nearly 150 anthropoid stone sarcophagi attributed to Phoenician or Punic workshops in this period have been discovered throughout the Mediterranean, in addition to impressive varieties of rock-cut and built tombs, other types of burial vessels, and cemeteries of various sizes throughout Levantine sites described as Phoenician by their excavators. While skeletal remains (some cremated, some the remains of inhumations) abound, the paucity of recovered mummified remains has precluded scholarly consensus on this point, as it has not been possible to conduct detailed analysis of the

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1 “Phoenicia” is of course a scholarly construct, consisting of the anachronistic application of a Greek term to a number of often-competing city states and their surrounding territories (controlled in some periods by these urban centers) along the Levantine coastal strip stretching from modern Syria to the Carmel region. As Peckham once memorably put it: «Phoenicia was neither a nation nor a political entity but comprised a few principal cities and their dominions, which, through commercial interest, by historical necessity, and with the complicity of the Greeks, established separate and independent settlements in various parts of the Mediterranean world» (Peckham 1987, pp. 79-80). “Phoenician” as a self-ascribed identity was not in use before the Roman period, and only for specific political ends (Quinn 2018; see also López-Ruiz 2017, esp. pp. 369-370). However, I stand with Sader (2019) in asserting that a scholarly application of the term is still useful to describe 1st millennium BCE inhabitants of the central Levantine coast who shared a language, worldview, and certain aspects of material culture (as well as the colonies they founded throughout the Mediterranean world). Most recently, Garbati explored this etic/emic application of the term in his enlightening 2021 work.

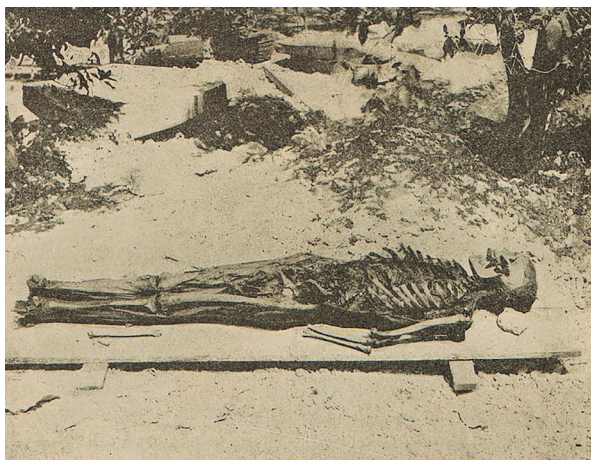


FIG. 1. The mummy of King Tabnit, photographed soon after its excavation (Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, fig. 97; public domain: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/hamdybey1892bd1>).



FIG. 2. The mummy of King Tabnit of Sidon, displayed on its original plank support; Istanbul Archaeological Museum (object number not available; photo by the author).

processes used, the geographic or chronological extent of the practice, or distinguishing factors like the social class of individuals who were treated in this way.

Despite accounts of strangely preserved corpses written as early as the mid-19th century, only one poorly preserved so-called mummy² from the Phoenician Levantine homeland is known – the late 6th or early 5th century BCE remains of King Tabnit of Sidon, excavated in 1887 and currently in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum (FIGS. 1-2). Because of the lack of scientifically excavated evidence, contemporary accounts of Phoenician mortuary practice tend to approach the question of mummification with skepticism or avoidance, focusing on other issues in the interpretation of documented ritual patterns.

Phoenician Levantine mortuary practice (see map; FIG. 3) seems to have been more diverse than that of other Iron Age (ca. 1100-300 BCE) Mediterranean cultures, including adult cremation as a frequently occurring alternative to inhumation.³ Inhumations vary significantly, sometimes buried directly in the ground, placed on stone benches in rock-cut tombs, or in anthropoid or other forms of stone sarcophagi. Cremations can be gathered for burial in vessels of various types, sometimes including a variety of aromatic materials⁴ and/or grave goods. Cremation burials sometimes can appear side-by-side with inhumations in the same tomb (e.g., Tomb 121 at Khaldeh or Khaldé,⁵ a cemetery discovered during construction at the Beirut airport, south of the modern city), and at other times are the exclusive choice of burial for entire cemeteries (e.g., at Tyre al-Bass associated with ancient Tyre, exclusively dedicated to adult cremation interments⁶). The criteria or circumstances under which either cremation or attempted preservation was chosen over inhumation are not currently understood, though scholars have in recent years argued that these should be viewed not as competing practices, but as compatible parts of Phoenician belief sys-

2 So-called because of the preservation of internal organs and some skin (see discussion of the term “mummification”, below), though the visibility of most of the skeleton might preclude this label for casual observers (and even some scholars: the photo of the corpse in Frede 2002, pl. 49 is captioned «Skelett des Tabnit auf Sykomorenbrett»).

3 See Dixon 2013 for the full corpus of burials to that date.

4 Dixon 2021.

5 Saidah 1966, pp. 64-72.

6 Aubet 2004, along with other chapters in that volume and extensive subsequent publications.

tem(s),⁷ both of which were sought out by elites. As far as we know, no cremated individual was buried in a sarcophagus, but both inhumations and cremations can be found along the ancient Levantine coastline from coastal Syria to northern Israel/Palestine in the mid-first millennium BCE. One notable exception to the pattern is that we have no stone anthropoid sarcophagi as yet discovered at Tyre, perhaps pointing to different preferences among the elites of this particular Phoenician city-state.

This study reexamines evidence historically interpreted as Phoenician mummification attempts in tandem with iconographic, inscriptional, and other evidence for ideas about death and burial, and in light of the full corpus of burials known from the Phoenician Levant. It presents an alternative hypothesis to explain the seeming paradox represented by the full corpus of diverse mortuary techniques, ranging from what appears to have been the utmost concern for bodily- and tomb-integrity in some cases, to the purposeful destruction of the body in others. It necessarily deals primarily with the inhumed bodies from the Phoenician Levant, focusing on the Achaemenid Persian (or Iron Age III) period, ca. 500-ca. 300 BCE. But this work goes beyond attempting to reconstruct a simple distinction between plausible mummies and the more ordinary inhumed dead. Instead, this study explores the possibility that the wide spectrum of preservative actions used in the treatment of the Levantine Phoenician deceased plausibly indicates the importance of a kind of symbolic mummification, in which concern for the conservation of the body is enacted through iconographic, epigraphic, and ritual acts intended to evoke the idea of an undisturbed burial, without necessarily resulting in a preserved body. I propose the term “symbolic” mummification precisely because of this apparent lack of concern surrounding effectiveness: I suggest that we can observe several related ritual behaviors performed on or around the dead that seem intended to point to the idea of eternal preservation, without ritual specialists needing to remove organs or treat the interior of the corpse, check the results of preservative actions, or otherwise literally ensure an intact body over time.

The symbolic mummification hypothesis presented here results from the synthesis of several types of evidence, to be examined below:

- nineteenth- and twentieth-century descriptions of partially mummified or embalmed Phoenician bodies (and the few surviving archaeological remains related to these burials);
- extant Persian period (ca. 500-300 BCE) Phoenician grave inscriptions that emphasize the preparation of the body for burial and express hope that it would remain undisturbed;
- iconographic representation of oil bottles on three Persian-period anthropoid sarcophagi (of only seven that depict the deceased holding anything carved in relief); and
- various types of oil vessels that tend to dominate the grave goods in Iron Age Levantine Phoenician tombs.



FIG. 3. Map of major Levantine Phoenician city-states and burial sites mentioned in the study (created by C. Wuthrich).

7 See, for example, Aubert 2013.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that elite Persian period Phoenicians may have shared a belief in the importance of rituals and adornment to enact symbolically – but not necessarily literally or completely cause – the preservation of the body.

An exact reconstruction of how and why Phoenician mortuary specialists undertook various acts of embalming must remain speculative given the current state of our archaeological data and what we know about Phoenician beliefs surrounding death and afterlife. However, this study suggests that Levantine Phoenicians in the Persian period conceptualized the tomb as a place where time and space were conflated, where one could place the dead – in the words of one Phoenician inscription to be discussed below – “in eternity”. This conception generated a variety of attempts to establish the grave as an inviolable and eternal resting place for the dead. These included inscribing inventories of corpse adornment or preservative ingredients, complex methods of corpse, coffin, and tomb containment, and the eventual metonymic use of the oil bottle to symbolize the sealed burial, as will be discussed below. The hypothesis presented in this paper supports the growing consensus that both intact burials (with evidence of attempted mummification or not) and cremations reveal a broader continuum of Phoenician religious behavior.

2. THE PHOENICIAN “MUMMIFIED” DEAD

The term “mummification” refers to any process by which the soft tissue of a corpse is preserved. This can happen naturally, by means of a cold, arid, acidic or otherwise antibiotic environment,⁸ or through intentional intervention. Intentional mummification can be accomplished through augmenting natural processes (for example, building elaborate drying rooms to enhance desiccation⁹), or by adding preservative substances to the corpse, a process often referred to as embalming. For the historical periods in the ancient Mediterranean world, mummification and embalming are frequently used synonymously.

Recent historical syntheses have tended to refer to Phoenician mummification or embalming only in passing, often citing a lack of concrete evidence or problems with early excavations. However, early accounts of the discovery of partially intact or strangely preserved Phoenician corpses have much to offer the scholar of Iron Age mortuary practices. Here I re-examine the initial accounts of the Levantine embalmed dead, tracing the rhetorical developments that saw Phoenician historiography shift from direct comparisons between Egyptian and Phoenician mummies, to an eventual distancing of the two mortuary cultures and ultimately to skepticism regarding any purposeful Phoenician mummification. I argue that it is this unclear, continually reinterpreted evidence for ritualized Phoenician preservative actions that suggests Phoenicians were interested in what I call symbolic mummification: Levantine Phoenicians were clearly using oils, resins, and other preservative ingredients in elite burials, perhaps to precipitate or signify the beginning of a timeless and undisturbed burial. However, these early accounts of the Phoenician mummified dead point to an addi-

8 While the so-called bog bodies of Europe’s peat bogs are perhaps the best-known example of acidic mummification, there are less dramatic environments – like soils containing antibiotic molds, known from sites in Italy, Ireland, and France – that also foster preservation of the dead. On bog bodies: see Parker Pearson *et al.* 2011 for evidence that as early as the Middle Bronze age in Scotland, bodies may have been preserved by submersion in acidic peat bogs and later removed for display; cfr. Granite 2016 for a survey of other interpretations or theories about bog burials. For examples of mummification via naturally occurring antibiotic soils, see Koudounaris 2011, p. 62.

9 The Capuchin monks in Palermo (perhaps as early as the 16th century CE) dehydrated bodies in a *colatoio*, a purpose-built room where the corpse was placed on a metal grate over running water to aid the circulation of air (full drying might still take up to eight months). Like practices in many other communities, this process seems to have followed the observation of natural mummification (in the tufaceous soil of a nearby burial ground, discovered after bodies were disinterred for reburial in the newly built convent), and was further augmented by vinegar washes and other embalming attempts (Koudounaris 2011, pp. 53-54). Another community of Capuchin brothers, at the monastery in Brno, Czech Republic, began in the 17th century to dry bodies using the convent’s system of sixty vents connected to a chimney, to facilitate air circulation (Koudounaris 2011, p. 55).

tion of preservative ingredients only within the sarcophagus or at the site of interment, and therefore mostly unsuccessful preservation of the corpse. Phoenician ritual practitioners do not seem to have been focused in a pragmatic way on the ongoing, stable physical condition of the remains of the dead, instead incorporating preserving oils or resins in a more symbolic or performative way. Levantine Phoenician mummies were first mentioned during publication of the excavations in the Magharat Tabloun necropolis in Sidon in the 1850s,¹⁰ during which the monumental anthropoid sarcophagus of Eshmunazar was discovered.¹¹ Published discussion of the phenomenon began in earnest with Renan’s *Mission de Phénicie* (1864), commissioned by Napoleon III, which detailed Renan’s travels and excavations in the areas around Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and Arwad (Amrit). Upon encountering Phoenician stone anthropoid sarcophagi, he compared them to Egyptian exemplars, likely designed to mimic the shape of the Egyptian mummy with bound legs. It seems Renan presumed that the Levantine sarcophagi would likewise have contained mummies; in fact, he seems to assume throughout the work that a significant percentage of the Phoenician dead were mummified.¹²

The comparisons with Egypt only increased in subsequent publications, as the Persian and Hellenistic period Phoenician royal necropolis at Ayaa in Sidon continued to be excavated. By 1887, it had produced dozens of spectacular tombs filled with carved marble sarcophagi (FIG. 4).

The finds were advertised and described through a series of published letters from the field. One of the first, written in March of 1887, mentions a tomb containing “decayed wood or decayed mummy-remains”¹³ and a report later that year gave the author’s first impressions of the spectacular June discovery of the intact tomb and sarcophagus of King Tabnit (FIG. 5):

«In this deep chamber was found a splendid anthropoid sarcophagus in black basalt, resembling that of King Eshmunazar, in the Louvre. It contained a mummy and a golden diadem. The lid is covered with hieroglyphs. Toward the feet of the sort of mummy which forms the lid is engraved a Phoinikian [*sic*] inscription in eight lines [...]».¹⁴

By the end of the excavations conducted by Osman Hamdy Bey, Director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum in Istanbul, eighteen sarcophagi were removed, and all were opened in front of a crowd of interested local and foreign dignitaries.¹⁵ Full publication of *Une nécropole royale à Sidon: fouilles de Hamdy Bey* came in 1892, detailing the relatively careful attention paid by the excavators to evidence for mummification:

«Only then could we finally see inside the sarcophagus [of king Tabnit of Sidon]. A layer of damp, yellowish sand – from which emerged the gaunt face, clavicles, kneecaps, and feet (which were missing toes)—filled the bottom of the vessel, about 25 cm from its upper edge [...]».¹⁶

10 One of several necropoleis at Sidon (including, for example, Ayaa and ‘Ain el-Helwe). Spelling variants are numerous: Magharet Abloun, Mugārat ‘Ablūn, etc.

11 Aimé Péretié, Chancellor of the French Consulate in Beirut, is said to have been responsible for its discovery in 1855. It was then sold to the Duke de Luynes, who gifted it to the Louvre (Oppert 1877, p. 109).

12 For example, he asserts quite generally that «There is no evidence that the Phoenicians kept their mummies above ground or in their houses; all were deposited in hypogea, which the rains that fall in winter on the coast of Syria render very humid. Wooden coffins would hardly have survived under these conditions» (my own translation of Renan 1864, p. 415: «Rien ne prouve que les Phéniciens aient gardé leurs momies à la surface du sol, ni dans leurs maisons; toutes étaient déposées dans des hypogées, que les pluies abondantes qui tombent sur la côte de Syrie, pendant l’hiver, rendent fort humides. Des cercueils de bois, dans de pareilles conditions, eussent très-peu résisté»).

13 Eddy 1887, p. 101.

14 Frothingham 1887, pp. 431-432.

15 Hanssen 1998, p. 24.

16 Here and below (where originals are quoted in endnotes), the translations of secondary sources are my own: «Alors seulement nous pûmes enfin voir l’intérieur du sarcophage. Une couche de sable jaunâtre et humide de laquelle émergeaient la face décharnée,

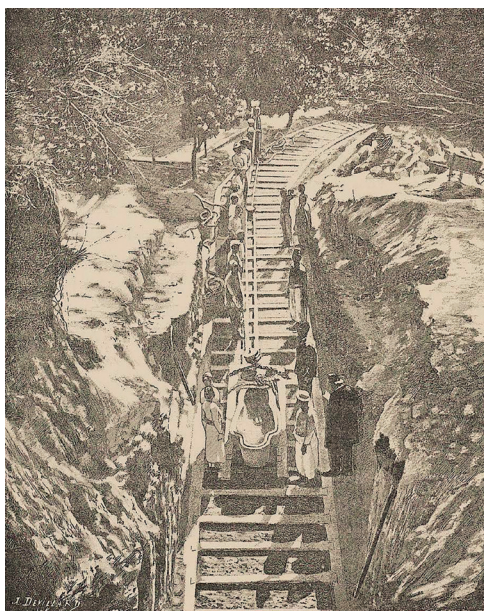


FIG. 4. Removal of anthropoid sarcophagi at the late 1880s Sidonian royal necropolis excavations (Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, fig. 7; public domain: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/hamdy-bey1892bd1>).



FIG. 5. Anthropoid amphibolite sarcophagus of King Tabnit of Sidon (circa 525–475 BCE), containing his mummified remains. Istanbul, Topkapi Palace Archaeological Museum 800 (image courtesy of Art Resource).

«Having removed the lid, I [Osman Hamdy Bey] ordered that the body of the king be pulled out of the sarcophagus and laid on a plank, to be carried to Dr. Mourad Effendi, a town doctor from Saïda [ancient Sidon], whom I had charged with preparing the king for transport to Constantinople, since all the posterior muscles of the corpse, as well as the internal organs of the chest and abdomen, were perfectly preserved. After having emptied the sarcophagus, I kept a portion of the sludge – made of sand and rot – that was in it, and poured the rest through a sieve after diluting it with water. Nothing was found in it, except some fragments of silver rings».¹⁷

Torrey's report of 1902 paints an even more detailed picture of the various specialists who were consulted. While the reported medical evaluation of king Tabnit's possible smallpox was pure speculation,¹⁸ it

les clavicles, les rotules, ainsi que le bout des pieds auxquels manquaient les doigts, remplissait le fond de la cuve jusqu'à 25 centimètres de ses bords [...]» (Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, p. 101).

17 «Débarrassé du couvercle, je fis d'abord tirer de la cuve le corps du roi et j'ordonnai de l'étendre sur une planche pour l'emporter dehors et le confier au docteur Mourad Effendi, médecin municipal de Saïda, que j'avais chargé de le mettre en état d'être transporté à Constantinople; car tous les muscles des parties postérieures ainsi que tous les organes internes du thorax et de l'abdomen étaient parfaitement conservés. Après avoir fait vider la cuve, je conservai une portion de la boue formée de sable et de pourriture qu'elle contenait, et je fis passer le reste à travers un crible quand cette boue eut été, au préalable, délayée dans l'eau. Rien n'y a été trouvé, si ce n'est quelques fragments d'anneaux en argent» (Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, p. 103). It is somewhat unclear from this passage whether the plank Hamdy Bey describes as being used to transport the body of the king is original to the burial. But several wooden planks (described as sycamore planks by Hamdy Bey and Reinach) were removed from sarcophagi at Sidon during the excavations that produced Tabnit, and the display of the remains of Tabnit in Istanbul presents the plank underneath as original. Whether or not he was removed via an ancient or late-19th-century wooden plank, it seems likely that an ancient wooden board was buried beneath the king inside his stone sarcophagus.

18 The earliest verifiable evidence for smallpox accepted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is from three third-century BCE Egyptian mummies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016).

remains a striking account of the efforts taken to document, understand, and preserve the remains observed by the excavators:

«When the sarcophagus of Tabnit was exhumed [...] and the lid was removed, the body of the king was found to be in a very good state of preservation. It was lying in a brownish-colored, somewhat “oily” fluid, which nearly filled the sarcophagus. The eyes were gone; the nose, lips, and the most prominent part of the thorax, which had not been covered by the liquid, had decayed away; in other respects, however, the corpse was like that of a man only recently buried. It was but slightly emaciated; plenty of flesh remained on both face and limbs, and the skin was soft to the touch. The vital organs and viscera had not been removed (a note-worthy circumstance), and were perfectly preserved. Dr. Shibly Abela, of Sidon, a physician of education and experience, remarked that the face showed traces of small-pox; it was not apparent, however, that the king had died of that disease. The color of the skin was described as somewhat “coppery,” the tinge being perhaps due to the influence of some substance, or substances, held in solution by the enveloping fluid. The fluid itself may have been partly, or even wholly, rain-water, which finds its way into most of the tombs about Sidon; but in any case it is evident, from the facts just given, that the body of the king had been skillfully [*sic*] embalmed. I do not know that any similar case has ever been observed and reported. After the body had been removed from the sarcophagus and exposed to the sun, it decomposed and shrunk to withered skin and bones in a very short time. My chief authority for these facts is the Rev. William K. Eddy, of Sidon, a keen observer and cautious reporter, who was one of the few who saw and touched the body of Tabnit when it was first exposed to view. Mr. Eddy was positive in his opinion that the king, at the time of his death, had not passed middle life; the face, he thought, was that of a man of less than fifty years of age».¹⁹

While organic residue analysis was of course unavailable to these early investigators, Hamdy Bey describes the sarcophagus’s contents in terms of “damp, yellowish sand” that left a “sludge – made of sand and rot” filling the base, an interesting variation when compared to Torrey’s description of the “brownish-colored, somewhat ‘oily’ fluid.” This seeming divergence may have been a simple matter of perception framed by each man’s expectations (“brown” relative to clear water, perhaps, but “yellow” relative to the color of the body or surrounding stone or cleared soil). Regardless, in both cases, three elements seem likely to have constituted the liquid matrix: some particulate or solid residue (the sandy or brown element), a lipid component (the “rot” or oily feature), and a low-viscosity, high-volume base (the “enveloping fluid” of Torrey’s description; this may have been supplemented by intrusive water as Torrey suggests, though it is impossible to say for sure). Both Hamdy Bey and Torrey note that the corpse of Tabnit was not prepared in what they thought of as the Egyptian fashion – with the removal of organs from the body cavity. Although it seems that other preserved bodies were discovered in the necropolis, they quickly decomposed upon being uncovered, and not all could be examined for remnants of the embalming methods.²⁰

As excavations continued, the appearance of wooden boards (often bearing holes or attached rings) within the necropoleis of Sidon, as well as the remains of cloth bands or linen bandages inside several sar-

19 Torrey 1902, pp. 168-169, fn. 2.

20 «One sarcophagus, when the lid was opened, contained a human body floating in perfect preservation in a peculiar fluid. The flesh was soft and perfect in form and colour. But, alas, while Hamdi Beg [an alternate spelling of Bey, a Turkish title for the leader of a kin-based group] was at lunch, the over-officious Arab workmen overturned it and spilled all the precious fluid on the sand. The beg’s indignation knew no bounds, but it was too late and the body could not be preserved, and the secret of the wonderful fluid was again hidden in the Sidon sand» (Jessup 1910, p. 507). In his 1914 campaign to Sidon, Contenau also was unable to extract much information from physical remains, though he tried: «l’écrasement prématuré des ossements au contact de l’air, ne m’a pas permis de procéder à des mensurations. La boue du sarcophage, passée au crible avec le plus grand soin, n’a absolument rien donné, ce qui est quasi de règle lorsqu’il s’agit de sarcophages anthropoïdes» (Contenau 1920, p. 219).

cophagi led to the assumption that many bodies had simply «been very imperfectly mummified»,²¹ before disintegrating over time.²² These boards seem to have been used to stabilize the deceased, though whether for ease of transport, preservation of the body, or some other purpose is a matter of interpretation. The prevalence of these boards, many with evidence for tie-downs (e.g., bearing up to twenty holes, arranged in pairs²³), was reinforced by the 1990s discoveries in the necropoleis surrounding Amrit, where nearly all the undisturbed burials in the *zone des chalets* region proved to contain bodies which had been placed on their backs on top of these kinds of planks.²⁴

The late 19th and early 20th century excavations at Carthage further contributed to evolving scholarly conclusions about Phoenician mummification.²⁵ Delattre noted several sarcophagi that contained what he termed «morceaux or grains de résine»;²⁶ he also described 12 Hellenistic tombs from the Sainte-Monique/Bordj-Djedid/Borj-Jedid/*des Rabs* necropolis²⁷ in which remains appeared to have been submerged in a vegetal or resinous substance.²⁸ Early 20th century analyses of the material collected at Carthage were being undertaken alongside (and by the same scientists as) materials from Egyptian mummies and tombs.²⁹ These remains were consistently assumed to indicate influence from Egyptian embalming techniques in Punic mortuary practice in North Africa.

By the 1920s, a scholarly genealogy of dozens of cultural traits connecting Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the biblical lands was being constructed, and mummification was no exception. Smith's narrative, as presented in his 1929 work, tellingly titled *The Migrations of Early Culture: A Study of the Significance of the Geographical Distribution of the Practice of Mummification as Evidence of the Migration of Peoples and the Spread of Certain Customs and Beliefs*, offers one of the fullest treatments:

«It is important to remember that many of the features of the embalmer's art as it is practiced in the far East are modifications of the Egyptian method which were first introduced in the region of the Upper Nile, so that the East African Coast must have been the point of departure for such methods. Other features, not only of the method of embalming, but also of the associated megalithic architec-

21 Rawlinson (1889, p. 304), quoting from an unnamed "eye-witness" as published in the journal *al-Bachir* (Rawlinson calls it *Le Bachir*) on 8 June 1887. I was unable to obtain a copy of the original publication.

22 For another example, see Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, p. 77 and fn. 1. Presumably it was the linen bandages that sparked this conclusion, since Egyptian mummies are not typically tied to boards before being buried; the term "mummy board" in that context refers to a covering that is usually decorated, often with the likeness of the deceased.

23 One of the wooden boards on display in May 2013 at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, in the cases near the sarcophagus of Tabnit, featured four pairs of holes evenly spaced down each side, with a pair of holes at both the head and feet of the plank (making a total of 20 holes). The display includes objects found in the Sidon necropolis (ca. 500-300 BCE), but no object number or associated tomb was indicated on a label to describe the board.

24 Though it was only sarcophagi II.12 and z. T. that produced bronze brackets to which ropes or cloth strips were probably fastened or anchored; see Frede 2000, p. 35.

25 Delattre reports having discovered the first Punic necropolis at Carthage in April 1878. Permits for excavations in the necropoleis were issued through 1956 (M. Fantar, in Moscati 2001, p. 207).

26 E.g., Delattre 1898, p. 18; Delattre 1905, p. 31. Bénichou-Safar later characterized it as a material «sous forme de pains ou de plaques fines – et peut-être de languettes aussi» (Bénichou-Safar 1978, p. 133).

27 The site of the necropolis is located on Sainte-Monique Hill, facing the Bordj-Djedid plateau, near the convent of the same name (e.g., Delattre 1903, p. 11). Delattre often referred to it as «La nécropole des rabs» (e.g., Delattre 1905), and excavated there 1898-1906. The locations of these excavations are difficult to reconstruct, though see the useful attempt (especially the map labeled «Colline voisine de Sainte-Monique», p. 19) in Bénichou-Safar 1976.

28 See Bénichou-Safar 1978 for discussion. One example may be found in the body inside the famous 4th-3rd BCE priest's sarcophagus, now in the Carthage National Museum (Delattre 1903, pp. 14-15); this burial contained both skeletal remains and a wooden staff.

29 Reutter (e.g., 1915) conducted the first evaluations of Delattre's samples from Carthage, though his results were later criticized by Lucas (1926, pp. 118-120), a chemist and employee of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities.

ture were equally distinctive of the Phoenician region and may have been transmitted by the Euphrates. Other features again were distinctively Babylonian. Of the former, the African influence, I might refer to the use of the frame-like support for the mummy, the custom of removing the head some months after burial, and the sacrifice of wives and servants. As to the Phoenician and Babylonian influences, the use of honey might be cited, and the emphasis laid upon “cedar” wood and “cedar” oil in mummification; and the Phoenician adaptation of the New Empire type of Theban tomb seen at Arvad [Arwad...].³⁰

Despite the confidence presented in publications like this one, by the 1960s the historical reconstruction of this component of Phoenician culture had changed dramatically. With continued archaeological excavation in the Levant, it became increasingly clear that the early finds from Sidonian royal necropoleis were rarer elsewhere. Harden’s general history of the Phoenicians does not mention mummification at all, but rather focuses only on the dualistic cremation and inhumation characterization of their mortuary rites.³¹ Moscati’s *The World of the Phoenicians* addresses the phenomenon in passing in a single line, with no examples.³² Even those works that continued to characterize the Phoenician finds as Egyptian in style or derivation seem to minimize the extent to which mummification was undertaken.³³

Scholarly representation of the phenomenon has remained much the same since that time. In 1988, Ribichini wrote: «In the case of kings or nobles, there is occasional evidence of embalming and the use of aromatic substances»,³⁴ while Gras, Rouillard and Teixidor contrasted eastern and western Mediterranean burials along these lines.³⁵ Markoe gave a fuller but equally reticent summary with respect to embalming practices:

«The ritual preparation of the deceased for interment varied according to social class. The body was washed, doused with perfumed oils, and wrapped in cloth bandages. As surviving fibulae (ancient clothing pins) and jewellery [...] attest, the affluent were more elaborately dressed – in one or more tunics. For the upper classes, purifactory rites may often have involved the use of imported aromatics; a funerary inscription from Byblos notes that the deceased was ‘swathed in myrrh and bdellium’ (a gum extracted from certain palms). The practice of embalming was rare, and probably reserved only for royalty and aristocracy; the body of the Sidonian king Tabnit was thus prepared».³⁶

In this depiction, one could be embalmed (rare) or not embalmed, but aromatics were used in all permutations of interment.

The early 1990s excavation of the Ram az-Zahab/Ram al-Dahab tombs near Amrit produced further evidence of the use of wooden planks and tie-downs, described by the excavators as follows:

30 Smith 1929, p. 76. Contenau also refers to Tabnit’s corpse as having «subi une momification à l’imitation des cadavres égyptiens» (1931, p. 1480).

31 He further reiterates the opinion that this distinction in the burial record represents «a mixed origin for the population» at least at Carthage and Atlit (Harden 1963, p. 96).

32 «There is no doubt that the Phoenicians believed in an after-life: besides the usual funerary offerings this is proved by the rich coffins and the embalming process, of which traces have come to life» (Moscati 1968, p. 40).

33 For example, Assmann wrote «Zusammen mit Resten von Mumienbinden, Sykomorenbrettern und ägyptischen Amuletten, die auch nur in dieser Phase vorkommen, weisen sie auf ägyptische Totenbräuche» (Assmann 1963, p. 704), but does not explore the phenomenon, and goes on to contrast Hellenistic Phoenician sarcophagi with their Egyptian counterparts in both the style and function of their decorative elements.

34 Ribichini 2001, p. 142.

35 «[...] point de momification, pas de traces de bandelettes dans la Méditerranée occidentale, comme dans quelques tombes de Sidon ou de Byblos» (Gras – Rouillard – Teixidor 1989, p. 201).

36 Markoe 2000, pp. 138-139.

«Within the stone sarcophagi, the bodies were probably attached in the Egyptian manner to sycamore planks, since wooden remains and metal fastening-rings were found. The position of one of the skeletons [...] showed that it was very tightly wrapped and therefore probably mummified, a ritual well-attested in the necropolis of Sidon».³⁷

However, no preserved soft tissue was recovered from the burials in these and nearby tomb excavations around Amrit, and the samples of material from inside a sarcophagus that were tested for evidence of embalming ingredients as part of the analysis turned out to be naturally occurring calcium deposits.³⁸

The most recent syntheses have been even more minimal or skeptical regarding the scope of Phoenician mummification.³⁹ For example, Bartoloni refers to Tabnit's corpse as *mummia reale* and mentions the sycamore plank found beneath it,⁴⁰ but does not discuss the phenomenon more generally or outline the process involved. Sader's 2015 discussion offers more detail, but is hesitant to generalize:

«Before placing the body in the tomb, the general practice was to wrap it in a shroud. In spite of the fact that textiles are rarely preserved, the presence of pins and fibulae attest this practice. While shrouding the body with a cloth seems to have been common practice, embalmment is difficult to assert in the present state of the evidence. Except for the above-mentioned textual evidence suggesting this practice by using myrrh and bdellium no evidence allows us to conclude that this practice was generalized. Mummification seems to have been restricted to the royal family. Indeed only three examples of mummification, all of them from the royal necropolis of Sidon, have been so far attested in Lebanon».⁴¹

Perhaps even more often, summaries of Phoenician mortuary practice include no reference to preservative agents or actions at all.⁴²

This evolution of the scholarly presentation of the evidence for Phoenician embalming reflects several complicating features of the burial record and its interpretation. First, it is difficult in each case to separate post-depositional preservative elements (like the effects of long-standing submersion in rainwater, or closure in an air-tight sarcophagus) from intentional embalming agents when not accompanied by markers like organ removal. Second, at this stage of archaeological investigation, it may be said that the bodies that show evidence of soft-tissue preservation represent a vast minority of the total burials from Phoenician Levantine Persian-period sites, and were likely all elite (i.e., high energy-expenditure) burials. Third, those remains with the best state of preservation were excavated at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, when analytical techniques for assessing possible embalming agents were very limited. Finally, wooden planks, metal tie-down rings, and linen strips or bandages found in sarcophagi might have other practical explanations; it could be argued that they were used solely for transportation of the unembalmed corpse from home to cemetery, or to facilitate lowering a body into a sarcophagus. Recent scholarly reti-

37 «Dans les sarcophages en pierre, les corps étaient vraisemblablement attachés à la manière égyptienne sur des planches de sycamore dont on a retrouvé des restes de bois et des anneaux de fixation. La position d'un des squelettes [...] a montré qu'il était très étroitement enveloppé et donc vraisemblablement momifié, rituel bien attesté dans les nécropoles de Sidon» (Elayi – Haykal 1996, p. 121). See also Frede 2000, pp. 34-35.

38 See Elayi – Haykal 1996, pp. 116-117, and Appendix B.

39 Perhaps one exception can be found in Jiménez Flores, who writes of the Punic mortuary traditions of Cadiz and Huelva: «Estos usos de influencia egipcia e importados directamente de Oriente favorecen la adopción de prácticas de embalsamamiento o preparación de los cuerpos con resinas y otros productos» (Jiménez Flores 2010, p. 276, citing Bénichou-Safar 1978, who posited connections between evidence for organic residue in sarcophagi at Carthage and practices in Egypt; see below).

40 Bartoloni 2015, p. 46.

41 Sader 2015, p. 62.

42 E.g., Ribichini 2004; Morstadt 2015.

cence to discuss the phenomenon of Phoenician embalming is understandable in light of these manifold confounding factors.

Still, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the Phoenicians were at a minimum concerned that the body in these elite interments stayed in place. The tying down of bodies onto boards (whether for transport, stabilization, or preservation) would have been completed as part of the burial ritual and witnessed by those in attendance; under these conditions the body would likely have been seen as secured in ways that were not simply practical, but also symbolically or even magically secured. Given the preservation of soft tissue in the cases described above, as well as the accounts of oily or resinous liquids observed in several sarcophagi, it seems likely that in some elite Phoenician burials, oils, resins, or other agents were added to the burials, effecting partial preservation of the corpse. Even the fact that organs were not removed from any known Phoenician burial may evince a concern for the integrity of the deceased. Perhaps it was important in Phoenician cosmology not to remove any part of the inhumed body or change its appearance with elaborate interventions, in contrast to the specific and elaborate Egyptian beliefs about what organs or treatments of the deceased were required for a successful afterlife.

3. THE LANGUAGE OF DEATH IN LEVANTINE PHOENICIAN INSCRIPTIONS

Human remains are of course only one element in a complex web of ancient practices, ideas, and symbols surrounding death and burial. As will become clear below, the choice of language and content of Phoenician mortuary inscriptions also seems to indicate preoccupation with the integrity and preservation of the burial itself, as well as offering further support for the use of oleoresins⁴³ in Phoenician elite burials of the Persian period.

The corpus of Phoenician inscriptions offering explicit insight into ideas and practices surrounding death and burial from the Iron Age I through the Persian period (ca. 1100-300 BCE) Levant is a small one.⁴⁴ The total count is six inscriptions from stone sarcophagi, all originating in royal contexts; these will first be discussed together as a corpus, and then individual inscriptions will be analyzed below as they bear on the present study. These six inscriptions may be supplemented by one accompanying short inscription in the shaft of the oldest tomb to have produced one of these sarcophagi inscriptions. This tomb represents the only Phoenician Levantine epigraphy from the Iron Age I-II periods (ca. 1100-500 BCE) that contains significant information about Phoenician mortuary practice:

- i. the Ahiram sarcophagus inscription and its accompanying tomb graffito (inscriptions from ca. 10th century BCE [see below]; Byblos).

In the Persian period (ca. 500-300 BCE), the number of extant longer inscriptions increases; all five are (like Ahiram's) inscribed sarcophagi from members of the royal families of Byblos and Sidon:⁴⁵

43 An oleo-resin or oleoresin is any mixture of fats and resin (that is, a resin in solution in an essential and/or fatty oil). Often, they involve a flavor-bearing, scent-bearing, or medicinal element alongside a wax, oil, or other fatty compound. Naturally occurring oleoresins include saps from certain trees or shrubs (these plant-based oleoresins can be referred to as balsams, though that term is often used imprecisely), but the term as used in this paper includes both naturally occurring or artificially prepared solutions.

44 The majority of the types of epigraphic works that relate (archaeologically or in content) to mortuary behaviors and ideas offer scant data; they include grave stelae carved in most cases with only the names of the deceased (from Khaldeh, Tell el-Burak, Sidon-Dakerman, Akhziv, and Tyre al-Bass, all from the Iron Age II period), inscribed vessels or other objects buried with the dead, or royal building inscriptions, the latter giving some indication of the hoped-for post-mortem legacy of kings. For a full catalog and discussion of Iron I-II (ca. 1000-500 BCE) inscriptions relating to Phoenician burial and afterlife beliefs, see Dixon 2013, pp. 25-86. For those from the Persian period (ca. 500-300 BCE), see Dixon 2013, pp. 163-202.

45 These royal inscribed sarcophagi are often dated from the *terminus post quem* of the Achaemenid Persian invasion of Egypt, ca. 525 BCE, in which Phoenician soldiers accompanied the Persians as allies of Cambyses. The basalt or amfibolite sarcophagi of

- ii. a fragment of the sarcophagus of an unknown king of Byblos (late 6th-early 5th century BCE; Byblos);
- iii. the son of Shipitbaal III's sarcophagus fragments (late 6th-early 5th century BCE; Byblos);
- iv. the Tabnit sarcophagus (early – mid-5th century BCE; Sidon);
- v. the Eshmunazar sarcophagus (mid-5th century BCE; Sidon), with two iterations of text occurring in two locations on the sarcophagus;
- vi. the Batnoam sarcophagus (late 5th-early 4th century BCE; Byblos).

Interpretation of the oldest specimen from this corpus of inscriptions, the Ahiram sarcophagus (Beirut National Museum 2086), is somewhat complicated by the probable gap in age between the sarcophagus itself (along with its carved decorative elements) and the added inscription – perhaps as much as 300 years.⁴⁶ But the context of the inscription itself is clear – it has been dedicated by the son of a king of Byblos, to contain his father's remains:

«[This is the] coffin which Itthobaal, son of Ahiram, king of Byblos, made for Ahiram, his father, *kšth b'lm*. If a king from among kings, or a governor from among governors, or a [military] commander should come up against Byblos and then uncover this coffin, may the scepter of his rule be stripped off, may the throne of his kingdom be overturned, and may peace leave Byblos. [As for] him, may his writing be erased from before Byblos».⁴⁷

The two-line inscription contains the evocative phrase *kšth b'lm* to describe the burial, rendered variously as «thus he put him in seclusion»,⁴⁸ «as his dwelling for eternity»,⁴⁹ «when he laid him away forev-

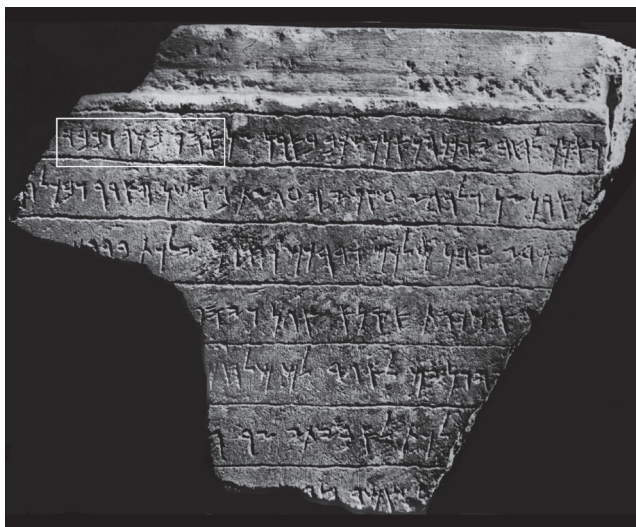


FIG. 6. Inscribed marble sarcophagus fragment of a late sixth–fifth-century BCE unknown king of Byblos, with a box indicating the phrase “prepared in myrrh and bdellium”, describing the burial preparations for the king’s body. Beirut National Museum 26780 (modified image from Starcky 1969, pl. 1).

Tabnit (reinscribed in Phoenician while retaining the original Egyptian hieroglyphic dedication to an Egyptian general, and accompanying Book of the Dead selections) and Eshmunazar may have been part of Sidon’s share of the military spoils (see e.g., Gibson 1982, p. 102), subsequently imitated in Levantine-manufactured marble anthropoid sarcophagi that adapted the form for an elite Phoenician audience. Epigraphic and historiographical data also inform the dating of the inscriptions.

⁴⁶ There is still debate around whether or not the decorative elements on the limestone sarcophagus (and the traces of paint still visible) were carved for Ahiram or for an earlier king (perhaps separated from the inscription by as much as three centuries). Further, disagreement around the age of the inscription based on epigraphic comparanda remains, since the Ahiram sarcophagus inscription and the associated tomb shaft graffito are seen by some as among the oldest extant Phoenician inscriptions, and by others as featuring a later Byblian dialect and script features. There are helpful summaries of scholarly opinion in Cecchini 2006, Dixon 2013, pp. 35–40 and Gómez Peña – Carranza Peco 2021, p. 116. Here I follow Lehmann’s dating as outlined in Lehmann 2005 and 2008.

⁴⁷ Translation my own. See also Gibson 1982, p. 14; Teixidor 1997, p. 31; and Lehmann 2005 for recent translations and philological discussions.

⁴⁸ Lehmann 2005.

⁴⁹ «Comme sa demeure pour l’éternité» (Dussaud 1924, p. 136).

er»,⁵⁰ «as his abode in eternity»,⁵¹ «when he placed him in “the house of eternity”»,⁵² or «when he placed him in the tomb»,⁵³ to name a few. This use of a temporal metaphor or expression to represent a spatial dimension – a conflation of space and time, centering on the tomb – alludes to an important element in Phoenician conceptions of death and burial; I prefer the translation «when he [Ittobaal, the living son] placed him [Ahiram, the dead father] in eternity» to preserve the fusion. This insistence on permanence when describing the tomb (as well as the warnings against disturbing the grave that follow) is reaffirmed and elaborated in later, Persian period inscriptions, often through description of the corpse itself in some way.

The inscription of most relevance for the present study is that of the late 6th or early 5th century BCE unknown king of Byblos (ii; Fig. 6).⁵⁴ Only a 0.56 x 0.43 m marble fragment survives, found in the courtyard of the crusader castle at Byblos and preserved in the Beirut National Museum (no. 26780). Seven lines of Phoenician characters are visible, but only the first three preserve enough text to be legible. Cross’s 1979 transcription of the three first and most complete lines of the seven-line inscription reads as follows:⁵⁵

[’nk (PN and titular) škb b’rn] zn ’nk lhdy wkn hn ’nk škb b’rn zn šp bmr wbd[h | w’m kl ’dm ybqš lpth] [lt
’rn zn wlrz šmy h’gzt bqšn h’dr wvkl dr [bn ’lm | mlk prs] wmdy ’dn mlkm wdrkm {wdrkm} ylkt brbm[

I suggest the following translation (emphasis added):

I [PN and titular] lie in this sarcophagus – I alone, here! **Behold – I lie in this sarcophagus,⁵⁶ prepared⁵⁷ in myrrh and bdellium [...].** | [...] and if anyone tries to open this sarcophagus or to **disturb my remaining bones,⁵⁸** find him, [Ba’al] ’Addir, and with all the assembly of the gods [...] | [...] king of the Persians and the Medes, lord of kingdoms and dominions {and dominions}.⁵⁹ I walked among the great [...].

The inscription, written in the first person, specifies that the body of the king was prepared through treatment with two gum resins. The first, myrrh (Phoen *mr*; Akk *murru*; Hbr *môr*; Grk *μύρρα*), comes

50 Torrey 1925, p. 270.

51 Albright 1947, p. 155.

52 Gibson 1982, p. 14.

53 «Quand il l’a placé dans la tombe» (Teixidor 1987, p. 140).

54 The inscription was dated on the basis of paleographic comparanda and political context (see Cross 1979, fn. 1 for a brief history of the early analysis).

55 Cross’s English translation may be found in Cross 1979, p. 41. See also Starcky 1969 for initial publication.

56 The same Phoenician term (’rn) is used to refer to carved rectangular sarcophagi, plain thecae, and anthropoid sarcophagi, as Elayi (1988, p. 275) has pointed out.

57 While *šp* is often translated “gathered” (see Hofstijzer – Jongeling 1995, p. 89 for the inscriptional corpus), it is clear from Hebrew comparanda in Jeremiah 8:2 and 25:33 that the verb can be used of bones and corpses that are being collected, arranged, or prepared for burial (Brown – Driver – Briggs 2001 [1996], p. 62). Starcky translates “recueilli dans la myrrhe...” (1969, p. 262).

58 Cross interprets the phrase with the translation “mouldering bones,” rendering *šmy h’gzt*, interpreting the second word as the adjective *’ajūz*, and translating “to be old, weary, impotent” rather than its second meaning, “that which is left behind” or “remains.” Cross writes: «Following the first we can render “aged bones”, or “decrepit bones”, or following the second “my bones left behind”, i.e., “my remains”. I prefer in this context to translate “my decrepit/ mouldering bones”» (Cross 1979, p. 42). See Hofstijzer – Jongeling 1995, 824 for further discussion of the root *ḡ*.

59 Translating “dominions” for *drkm*, a plural noun derived from Semitic *drk*, a verbal root which in Phoenician contexts (appearing primarily in the Qal) has the sense of walking, entering, or traversing, and as a noun can be translated “path, way, road”, or, as first suggested by Starcky, as “dominion” (here in parallel with *mlkm*, kingdom; Hofstijzer – Jongeling 1995, p. 261). The curly brackets in both the inscription and translation indicate that the repetition is likely a scribal error (i.e., the term *drkm* appears twice, but for no grammatical reason).

from one of several small, thorny tree species of the genus *Commiphora*.⁶⁰ The myrrh in question probably comes from the *Commiphora gileadensis* species, known to have been grown in the southern Levant. The second resin, bdellium (Phoen *bdllh*; Akk *guhlu*⁶¹/*budulhu*; Hbr *bedolat*; Grk βδέλλιον⁶²), is another aromatic gum very similar to myrrh, in this case probably from the *Commiphora wightii* tree.⁶³ Since both of these aromatics were used in perfumes, medicines, and as incense, the process referred to as being “prepared in” (*šp b-*) them for burial could be interpreted in several different ways:

- oils containing these resins could have been used to soak cloth strips or a shroud applied to the body;
- oils containing these resins could have been poured directly over the body;
- thicker unguents containing these resins could have been rubbed into or layered on top of the body;
- the solid resins (in droplets or chunks) could have been poured over the body or included with it inside the sarcophagus;
- the solid resins – or oils, unguents, or poultices containing them – could have been stuffed inside the body cavities;
- smoke from the burned resins could have been released over the body or perhaps trapped inside the sarcophagus.

There is literary support from Classical authors for several of these methods being in use in the ancient Mediterranean. Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BCE), whose account of Egyptian mummification methods has proved generally consistent with even Predynastic mummy preparations,⁶⁴ describes the body of the deceased undergoing the most expensive form of preservation as being filled with ground myrrh (σμύρνα) and cassia (κάσια, along with “other spices, except frankincense”) before it spends seventy days desiccating (Hdt. II 86,5). Four hundred years later, Diodorus Siculus (writing ca. 60–30 BCE) discusses Egyptian mummification, mentioning cedar oil (κεδρία), myrrh (σμύρνα), cinnamon (κιννάμωμον), and other spices as used to prepare the body over the course of thirty days (Diod. Sic. I 91,5). The author of the gospel of John (dated ca. 90–110 CE) also mentions myrrh (actually μίγμα σμύρνης καὶ ἀλόης, “a mixture of myrrh and aloes”) being used in conjunction with linen to wrap the body of Jesus after his crucifixion and death (John 19:39–40). Around the same time, Plutarch’s account (and appropriation⁶⁵) of the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris in *Moralia* (written ca. 100 CE) gives a curiously similar account of Isis’s treatment of a “pillar” made from wood that had grown from the location where a chest containing Osiris’ body had washed ashore:

«Then the goddess disclosed herself [to the queen of Byblus, Ashtart/Astarte,] and asked for the pillar which served to support the roof [of the palace]. She removed it with the greatest ease and cut away the wood of the heather which surrounded the chest [containing Osiris’ corpse]; then, when she had wrapped up the wood in a linen cloth and had poured perfume [μύρον] upon it, she entrusted it to the

60 See van Alfen 2002 for discussion, e.g., «Twenty-nine species of scraggy, thorny trees of the genus *Commiphora* (formerly *Balsamodendron*), native to East Africa, Arabia and India produce oleo-gum-resins known in antiquity (and today) by the names balm, balsam, bdellium, myrrh and *stakté*» (van Alfen 2002, p. 37).

61 Potts *et al.* 1996 summarizes the arguments for this identification.

62 Though the term does not appear in Greek until the third century BCE; van Alfen 2002, p. 41.

63 Bdellium was first associated with the species *Commiphora wightii* in Medieval Arabic treatises (Dalby 2000, 109). The Hebrew term is mentioned in Genesis 2:12 (LXX: ἄνθραξ) and Numbers 11:7 (where manna is compared to bdellium; Josephus *Ant* 3:28 clarifies that the spice is intended, though the LXX understands the term as a valuable stone [κρυστάλλου]; Feliks 2007).

64 See Jones *et al.* 2014 for this revelation.

65 For an excellent analysis of Plutarch’s use of the myth, as well as bibliography on consensus opinion that it represents «a relatively accurate account of the cultic practices associated with Isis in the Pharaonic period», see Richter 2001, p. 192.

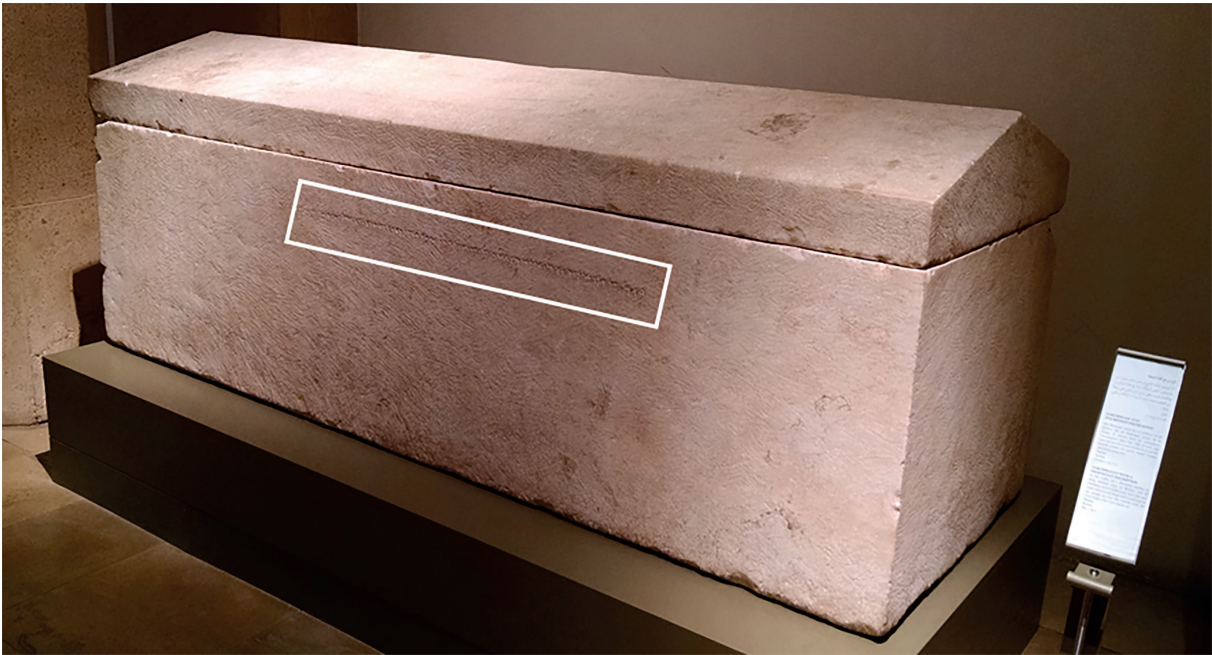


FIG. 7. Sarcophagus of Batnoam with inscription highlighted; Beirut National Museum (object number not available; photo by the author).

care of the kings; and even to this day the people of Byblus venerate this wood [ξύλον] which is preserved in the shrine of Isis. (Plut. *Mor. De Is. et Os.* 16).⁶⁶

This account is all the more remarkable for our purposes given its setting in Byblos (modern Gbeil), a Phoenician Levantine city, and the fact that it seems to illustrate the treatment of a corpse through the proxy of the wood or chest that encased the body of the god. The treatment of the wood – wrapped in linen with a perfumed oil or unguent poured over it – offers an intriguing parallel to the Persian-period physical remains discussed above.⁶⁷

While the inscription (ii) on the unnamed king of Byblos’ sarcophagus is the only one to mention specific resins used to treat the corpse, other inscriptions place significant emphasis on the treatment of the body in other ways. In particular, (vi) the inscription carved into the fourth-century BCE sarcophagus of Batnoam (FIG. 7) paints an intriguing picture of the interment of the mother of a king of Byblos:

«In this coffin I lie, Batnoam, mother of King Azbaal, king of Byblos, son of Paltibaal, priest of the [divine] Lady, in a garment [swt], and with a tiara [mrš] on my head and a gold bridle [mḥsm ḥrṣ] on my mouth, as was the custom [kmš] with the royal women [mlkyt] who came before me».⁶⁸

66 Translation from Babbitt 1936, pp. 41-43. For discussion of possible cults of such sacred trees in Sidon and Tyre, see Na’aman 2006.

67 I have explored these sources and further evidence for the use of scented oils and other aromatics in the Phoenician Levantine burial record in Dixon 2021.

68 Translation my own, adding the relevant Phoenician terms in square brackets after my suggested translation. See Dunand 1931, pp. 151-156; Friedrich 1935, pp. 348-350; Dussaud 1936, pp. 98-99; and Dunand 1939, p. 30f for early studies. See Gibson 1982, pp. 99-100 for a more recent discussion of the philological issues.

Like the previously discussed inscription, the central concern of Batnoam's inscription is to describe the preparation of the corpse for burial, underscoring the ways in which previously established traditions concerning the treatment of "royal women" were followed. This inscription is also unique in that it is the only surviving decoration on an otherwise relatively plain rectangular sarcophagus (with a slightly gabled lid), although the body of the sarcophagus is lightly textured by chisel marks, indicating either a stylistic choice unique among Phoenician stone sarcophagi, or that it was inscribed despite being "unfinished" by the craftsmen. The inscription was written in a small script relative to the height and length of the vertical sarcophagus side, with its 90 letters running in a single line, no more than four centimeters high, taking up less than half the length of the sarcophagus. It is as if the inscription serves as an archivist's label, itemizing the contents of the sarcophagus and their relation to the various parts of the body, reassuring the reader that due diligence was taken to enact the burial in a manner in keeping with past traditions. While this inscription does not mention specific preservative actions, it does paint a relatively detailed picture of the adornment of the body after death, as if to emphasize its permanence in a particular arrangement. The inscription preserves a kind of symbolic inventory, recorded in perpetuity, reinforcing both the arrangement of the physical remains and material goods at the time of deposition and their continuity with past traditions among royal women at Byblos.

The remaining inscriptions relating to death and the afterlife make reference to preserving the integrity of the tomb or burial, without including the specifics of dressing of the corpse. Like the inscribed sarcophagus of the unknown king of Byblos (ii) described above, the surviving fragments⁶⁹ of the son of Shipitbaal III's⁷⁰ sarcophagus (iii; from Byblos) also refer to the "bones" (*šm*) as the essential synecdochic element of the body:

- A1) «...[So]n of Šipit-Baal, king of Byblos, I made for myself this resting place [*mškb*]...
 2) ... ??? coffin on/over coffin [*ʾrn ʾlt ʾrn*]. Thus I made...
 3) ...in this resting place, (in) which I lie, and in [this] place...
 4) ...for me (?)... among the great. And I gave...
 5) ...[you should not op]en this [resting place over me(?)], to disturb my bones...
 6) ...».

- B1) «...
 2) ...on the side of [this] resting place...
 3) ...QR, the resting place, which you [open...]
 4) ...T coffin. And over the coffin...
 5) ...M and Baal Addir and Baalat and all [the gods of Byblos...]
 6) ...Baalat and all [the gods of Byblos...]».⁷¹

69 The inscription, found in 1929 on the grounds of the Crusader castle at Byblos, originally existed in three pieces labeled A, B, and C. Milik originally joined fragment C with fragment B (Dunand 1937, pl. XXXIII, 2: no. 1143 a-c). The reconstructed text is used in Donner – Röllig 1973.

70 This designation as the third king of the same name has been made on the basis of collations between other, earlier inscriptions that mention Shipitbaal as part of the tenth century genealogy of the kings of Byblos, as well as on the basis of Assyrian tribute records that mention one *Ši-pi-it-ti-bi-i-il* who paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser III ca. 738 BCE (alongside Hiram II of Sidon/Tyre), and who is now posited to be an otherwise unknown eighth-century BCE king, Shipitbaal II. Shipitbaal III is known from two inscriptions, one discussed here and another text inscribed on a silver roll and published by Lemaire (2003). Because the former inscription does not explicitly mention Shipitbaal ruling over Byblos, and the latter inscription features a number of textual difficulties, Elayi concluded that «we shall use the mention of Shipitbaal III as a king of Byblos with caution, as this needs to be confirmed» (Elayi 2006, p. 16).

71 This reading, first presented in Dixon 2013, is based on the text as prepared by Donner – Röllig 1973. A very thorough study was conducted by Puech (1981) in which a new drawing was made and several new reconstructions suggested, especially for the very

This focus on the bones as a symbol of the physical (perhaps eternal) remains of the deceased is echoed and elaborated in the Hebrew Bible, where the concept is referenced more than 120 times. It is clear that both the physical skeletal remains and metaphorical use of the term “bones” (to refer to the dead more broadly, among other nuances) are entwined with conceptions of personhood, family, inheritance, and pious treatment of the dead in the Hebrew traditions.⁷² Though further afield and from a much later literary context, it is perhaps also notable that Pomponius Mela, writing from Roman Spain (ca. 43/44 CE), speaks about the local Punic settlement of Gades/Gadir, where a temple to the “Egyptian Hercules” was established by a group of Tyrians at the site of the burial of “Hercules’ bones” (often interpreted in this context as the Tyrian god Melqart).⁷³ It is the *ossa* or bones of the god that are here remembered and described as the source of the sacred site’s significance to its Levantine Phoenician founders.

The Phoenician inscription (iii) further details the arrangement of the “resting place” (*mškb*) in terms of nesting coffins (*ʿrn ʿlt ʿrn*⁷⁴) and calls on the gods to ensure it remains undisturbed. This concern with the integrity of elite Phoenician burials, echoed in the other mortuary inscriptions discussed above, is underscored by the inscription’s threat to tomb-robbers (i.e., that they themselves would not be granted undisturbed burial, along with the denial of other kinds of legacies such as offspring or legible inscriptions). The import of this threat, coupled with an invocation of divine assistance, likely also indicates the idea’s religious currency in Levantine Phoenicia across different social strata.⁷⁵

It seems significant that four of the six total relevant Phoenician tomb inscriptions (ii, iii, iv and vi) focus on the preparation, arrangement, or interment of the body and reflect concern that it not be disturbed. Another inscription (i) takes as its central motivation the preservation of the intact burial without mentioning the body itself, and the final inscription (v) also includes curses for those who would disturb the burial, although the primary purpose of the inscription is arguably to detail the life and accomplishments of the deceased. These inscriptions offer tantalizing glimpses into what was important to Phoenician leaders after death, with intact physical remains at the forefront of their epigraphic efforts.

What emerges from the surviving Levantine Phoenician inscriptions is a clear pattern of insistence on the survival of an assemblage of nested containers and components: tomb, sarcophagus, accessories, adornment, corpse (or “bones”). This assemblage seems to have been a concern for both elite men and women, who evoke both the mortuary past (i.e., the way things were done in previous generations) as well as the

difficult line A2. Because many of these are highly speculative (suggesting the presence of other gods in the divinity list on the basis of the Yehhīmilik inscription, for example), I have not included them here.

72 For a helpful discussion of the many roles played by this term in the biblical texts, see Römer 2012. A particularly relevant use of the term may be found in Num 19:16 and 18, which equate a dead body (whether killed or having died naturally), a human bone (literally “a bone of a man”: ׀ַךְ ׀ַךְ), and a tomb (׀ַךְ) in terms of their ability to contaminate.

73 «[...] et fert in altero cornu eiusdem nominis urbem opulentam, in altero templum Aegyptii Herculis, conditoribus religione vetustate opibus inlustre. Tyrii constituere; cur sanctum sit, ossa eius ibi sita efficiunt» (Pompon. *De situ orbis* or *De chorographia* III 46,6-9; <https://latin.packhum.org/loc/929/1/0#2>). For a full English translation see Romer 1998, p. 114. I thank S. Rebecca Martin for this connection and reference.

74 Line A2; Donner and Röllig suggested that «der Ausdruck “Sarkophag über Sarkophag” deutet vielleicht auf die Anlage eines Doppelgrabes hin» (Donner – Röllig 1973, p. 11), whereas Puech interprets this line with further speculation: «La nécropole royale antérieure approchait du point de saturation, aussi dans sa prévoyance le fils de Šiptibaʿal [...] a fait creuser un hypogée ou construire une annexe, évitant ainsi à son fils ou successeur d’avoir à entreprendre ce travail et de s’en glorifier» (Puech 1981, p. 156). It seems likely that, in at least a few cases, wooden coffins were placed inside stone sarcophagi; the female anthropoid sarcophagus from the Cadiz Museum, discussed below, may have contained one of these, or another kind of wooden covering (Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2010, p. 379).

75 See Hays 2008, p. 144 for further discussion. Diod. Sic. XIII 86,1-3 describes the Carthaginian soldiers’ response to disturbing even non-Punic Sicilian tombs (at Agrigento, Sicily, in the mid-3rd century BCE), including fear, cattle and even child sacrifice, as they saw their destruction of several tombs as connected to a lightning strike and onset of a plague. See Ribichini 1987 and 2001 for foundational work on Phoenician afterlife beliefs.

mortuary present (that everything in one's own tomb is deposited correctly). The inscriptions describe the arrangement of the body, or the coffins, or the tomb, reinforcing the disposition of the deceased in his or her final repose. This is the arrangement that will "place them in eternity", as Ahiram's inscription says. Whatever final ceremonies took place as mourners left the tomb, whatever myrrh, bdellium, or other oils were deposited in the sarcophagus, these actions sealed the grave in a way that, according to these Persian period Phoenicians, should be inviolable. To open a sealed tomb was to disrupt the order of things as they were meant to be, and to bring down the wrath of a pantheon of gods on oneself in both the present – in that the glories of this life will be denied to you – and the future – such that the legacy of children, monuments, or your own eternal mortuary rest would be henceforth out of your reach.

4. ICONOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FROM ANTHROPOID PHOENICIAN SARCOPHAGI

A further strand in the complex web of death practices, ideas, and symbols comes from a different kind of mortuary carving. The uninscribed corpus of anthropoid sarcophagi, from elite graves across the Phoenician world, offers additional suggestive evidence for this focus on burial treatment in the depiction of the oil bottle as a symbolic or metonymic iconographic element associated with death and the dead.

Nearly 150 anthropoid sarcophagi are known from Phoenician sites throughout the Mediterranean,⁷⁶ and most scholars have agreed that a workshop at or near Sidon was the primary production point.⁷⁷ Most are made of white marble (although examples in limestone, basalt, gypsum, and terracotta survive⁷⁸), with carved face and hair, minimal detail along the body, and often with feet cut as if exposed at the bottom of a tunic. Those anthropoid sarcophagi that are associated with grave goods or other datable contexts seem to indicate a collective origin in the Persian period.⁷⁹ While the majority of the sarcophagi were found in the Levantine homeland (especially near Sidon and Tartus), others have emerged from Cyprus (Kition and Amathus), Carthage, Sicily (Cannita), Greece (Paros) and Spain (Cadiz). We know that anthropoid sarcophagi were used alongside stone sarcophagi of other types in the same tombs,⁸⁰ so the criteria for who could or would choose to be put to rest in this fashion eludes us. That said, any of these elaborate sarcophagi would have been limited to individuals or families able to expend significant resources on interment.

The iconographic range of the full corpus of Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi has been discussed elsewhere in detail,⁸¹ with analysis often centering on distinctions between so-called Egyptian or Aegean stylistic features. Since scholarly consensus is that most of the sarcophagi came from a single Sidonian workshop, it seems more productive to think of the choices made by artisans (or customers) as constituting a unified Persian-period Phoenician style. Within this repertoire, variety is most evident in choices made from the shoulders upward: hairstyle, head covering or adornment, and facial features – though all the portraits appear to depict humans in an idealized, youthful style, with a relaxed facial expression that could be

76 Lembke (2001) catalogs 126 sarcophagi, and Frede (2000; 2002) includes 136 specimens found throughout the Mediterranean, including along the Levantine coast (from Tartus in the north to Gaza in the south). A few sarcophagi have been discovered since the publication of Frede's catalogs (e.g., Mustafa 2013). The largest collection is held by the Beirut National Museum, where 31 specimens may be found (see Doumet-Serhal 1995a).

77 See, e.g., Buhl 1987 and 1991 for discussion.

78 Karageorghis characterizes these as cheaper, local variants: «The poor man's version was made of local stone: gypsum at Kition, limestone at Amathus, and in Tartus local basalt or terracotta» (Karageorghis 2000, p. 469).

79 For an example of one such burial repertoire, see Doumet-Serhal 1995b. Dating individual sarcophagi more precisely is a controversial endeavor (many must be dated on the basis of stylistic evolution); see discussion in Elayi 1988, pp. 277-297.

80 For this phenomenon at Sidon, see Ferron 1993; for examples from Cyprus see Hermery 1987, Georgiou 2009, and Frede 2009, pp. 65-67.

81 For example, Kukahn 1951; Fellon 1993; Frede 2000; 2002.



FIG. 8. Group of Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi in the Beirut National Museum, where angled mirrors provide visitors with a better view of the sarcophagus heads (photo by the author).

described as neutral in terms of emotional affect. Overall, the vessels seem to be individually styled, but the general effect for the modern observer of seeing several of the marble sarcophagi together is one of relative homogeneity (see FIG. 8).

This basic corpus-wide similarity makes those sarcophagi that deviate from the norm – even in small artistic details – especially intriguing. Of particular note for present purposes are three sarcophagi that have been carved with two arms in low relief, and one hand holding an oil bottle in the shape of what is often called an *alabastron*.⁸² The number of exemplars of this type is low, but more striking when the total corpus of sarcophagi depicting a held object is considered: only seven total extant anthropoid sarcophagi show the deceased holding anything at all (TABLE 1).⁸³

Two sarcophagi – one complete and one fragment, both made of basalt,⁸⁴ now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum – hold a tall staff with an ornamental head that is, to my knowledge, unique in Phoenician art,⁸⁵ and have therefore not resulted in interpretive consensus. The range of remaining held objects is limited

82 The term typically refers to an elongated bottle with rounded bottom and may be used to describe a vessel made from alabaster or other stone, terracotta, glass, or faience.

83 In fact, very few sarcophagi feature carved arms at all. The other sarcophagus from Picco Cannita, near Palermo, features carved arms with nothing in its hands (Buhl 1987, fig. 13; Frede 2000; 2002, no. XIII.1); Sarcophagus B from Kition's tomb 128 is depicted with two arms resting with hands on the front of its thighs (Georgiou 2009); another unfinished sarcophagus with sculptured arms was found in Sidon (Jidejian 1971, pl. 20; Frede 2000; 2002, no. I.5.5), though it is too broken to tell if the artist intended an object in its right hand.

84 Thought to be from Tartus, Syria, since there are basalt quarries just southeast of Tartus, at Şafita (Buhl 1983, p. 200), perhaps belonging to two kings of Arad.

85 The object has a simple, uniform, straight staff, but its head bears a complex shape – perhaps like an elaborated Egyptian *was*-scepter with an extra appendage: cfr. Buhl 1983, p. 200 where the type is explicitly compared to 19th dynasty Egyptian sarcophagi, depicting Osiris holding the *was*-scepter. Mendel wrote in his 1912 catalog that this head: «[...] imitant peut-être une tête d'animal, rappelle l'appendice qui termine la crosse des bergers grecs et albanais de nos jours» (Mendel 1912, p. 254).

Sarcophagus (date)	Provenance	Sarcophagus notes (L x W x H in meters) ^a
Palermo Archaeological Museum I N 5630; Inv. 693 ^b (late 6th – early 5th c. BCE); see FIG. 4	Portella di Mare, inland from Solunto, Sicily (discovered 1725)	Female wearing detailed tunic, with alabastron in the left hand. Painted in blue and red: hair in red; seated female figures on long side of base; male bust and four rearing horses on short sides of base. Marble. (2.25 x 0.90 x 0.79)
Istanbul Archaeological Museum 1885 ^c (ca. 480–470 BCE)	Confiscated on a ship sailing from Tripoli, Syria (probably from Tartus) ^d	Oval-shaped fragment of sarcophagus lid. Preserves the head and hands of a male, and the top of a staff or scepter held in both hands; traces of yellow ochre. Basalt. (0.96 x 0.54 x 0.27)
Archaeological Museum of Cadiz ^e (ca. 475–460 BCE.); see FIG. 5	Cadiz / Gadir / Gadeira, Spain (discovered 1980?)	Female wearing undetailed tunic with alabastron in the left hand; lid painted. Marble. (2.14 x 0.86 x 0.42)
Archaeological Museum of Cadiz ^f (ca. 475–440 BCE.)	Cadiz / Gadir / Gadeira, Spain (discovered 1887)	Bearded male wearing undetailed tunic with fruit (apple? Pomegranate?) in the left hand and a painted wreath in the right (now no longer visible). Marble. (2.15 x 0.67 x ?)
Louvre Museum AO 4970 ^g (ca. 470–460 BCE.); see FIG. 6	Magharat Tabloun, cave 34, near Sidon, Lebanon (discovered 1861)	Male (?) wearing undetailed tunic with alabastron in the left hand; broken and missing the face and portion of the upper body. Marble. (2.11 x 0.74 x 0.33)
Istanbul Archaeological Museum 1414 ^h (ca. 470–460 BCE)	Unknown provenance (from the Perthius collection, Beirut)	Male holding a staff or scepter in both hands, which spans from feet to chin. Basalt. (2.06 x 0.81 x 0.45)
Beirut National Museum ⁱ (late 5th – early 4th c. BCE)	Magharat Tabloun necropolis, southeast of the Barghout river bed, near Sidon (discovered 1966)	Woman holding a flower or fruit ^j in her right hand. Marble. (unknown dimensions)

TABLE 1. Anthropoid Phoenician sarcophagi depicted as holding objects in their hands (arranged chronologically according to suggested dating).

- a Sarcophagi measurements are taken from the catalog in Frede 2000, with the exception of the female sarcophagus from the Archaeological Museum of Cadiz, updated based on the online museum catalog entry.
- b Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, no. 29/30; Di Giovanni 1847; Marconi 1932, no. 6; Kukahn 1955, no. 8; Buhl 1959, “Imitations” (no. 3); Buhl 1987, fig. 12; Frede 2000 and 2002, no. XIII.2; Gubel 2002, p. 104; Kreikenbom in Frede 2002, pp. 103–107.
- c Mendel 1912, no. 98; Buhl 1959, “Heads” (no. 7); Frede 2000 and 2002, no. II.11.
- d Frede 2000, p. 113, citing Mendel 1912.
- e Chiera 1981; Freijeiro – Corzo Sánchez 1981; Martín Ruiz 1995, pp. 188–193; Frede 2000 and 2002, no. XIV.2; Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2010.
- f Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, no. 44; Vives y Escudero 1917, p. 17, no. 36; Kukahn 1951; Kukahn 1955, no. 28; Buhl 1959, VII(b); Buhl 1964, fig. 8; Freijeiro – Corzo Sánchez 1981; Buhl 1987, fig. 15; Martín Ruiz 1995, pp. 188–193; Frede 2000 and 2002, no. XIV.1; Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2010.
- g Renan 1864, pp. 404–405; Hamdy Bey – Reinach 1892, no. 3; Kukahn 1955, no. 10; Buhl 1959, VII(d); Frede 2000 and 2002, no. I.2.2; Gubel 2002, p. 104 [missing head possibly detailed in Gubel 1994].
- h Mendel 1912, no. 96; Buhl 1959, no. VI(a); Frede 2000 and 2002, no. II.10.
- i Saidah 1967, pp. 164–165; Jidejian 1971, pl. 21; Chéhab 1983, pp. 171–72 and pl. XXVI, 1; Buhl 1987, fig. 14; Doumet-Serhal 1995b; Frede 2000 and 2002, no. I.2.12.
- j Buhl refers to this as “un miroir” (1991, 680), but no other scholar takes up this interpretation to my knowledge. After viewing the sarcophagus in Beirut, I conclude that a flower is the most likely interpretation.

to what Doumet-Serhal called «flowers, fruit, and perfumed oil»,⁸⁶ a repertoire of iconography associated with death, though not always in clear or direct ways.

The identified objects held in the carved hands of these five stone sarcophagi have been universally described as symbolic (as opposed to representing objects from ritual practice) by scholars, though their meanings or referents have been debated. A few examples follow, with varying degrees of interpretive license:

86 Translating “fleurs, fruits et huile parfumée”, the title of Doumet-Serhal 1996.

Kukahm saw the selection of fruits, flowers, and crowns as standard Greek funerary motifs.⁸⁷ Elayi compared the flower to «a lotus flower, recalling the representation on Egyptian mummies»,⁸⁸ while Jiménez Flores describes lotus flowers as associated with Ashtart/Astarte⁸⁹ and with fecundity or regeneration.⁹⁰ Freijeiro and Sánchez called the carved oil bottle a cult vessel,⁹¹ and both Lopez Rosendo and Mustafa describe the alabastron as relating to a cult of Ashtart/Astarte or Tanit, eventually becoming an abstracted representation of death and the afterlife.⁹² Doumet-Serhal writes of the full constellation of objects:

«The objects held by the deceased are a sort of illustration of the network of contacts established throughout the Mediterranean basin at a time when the Phoenician aristocracy was particularly taken by a taste for ‘Greek things’ [...]. At this time, a new way of doing things developed in Phoenicia – going beyond the Egyptian mortuary grammar – and the figures depicted on the sarcophagi as holding a flower, crown, fruit or alabastron appear somehow ‘heroized’ in the vein of ancient Canaanite ideology, illustrating reciprocal influence crossing the eastern Mediterranean basin in the 5th–4th centuries B.C.»⁹³

Finally, Almagro-Gorbea and colleagues consider the repertoire of held objects to be symbols linked (perhaps “mythically”) to the sociopolitical ideology of Phoenician elites or royalty both at home in the Levant and cities abroad.⁹⁴

While each of these theories is intriguing and finds support in Mediterranean comparanda, I suggest that the most productive framework for examining this collection of symbols is as emic, multivalent, and interrelated. First, emic, since whether or not the symbols echoed similar iconographic elements in Egyptian, Greek, Cypriot, or other Mediterranean cultural contexts, for the purposes of interpreting their significance within Phoenician ritual and belief it seems most prudent to examine them as Phoenician art, with emic referents within a Levantine coastal symbolic milieu. Second, multivalent, since we know that symbols tend to be reused, adapted, and reinterpreted over time;⁹⁵ in particular, the identification of specific gods and goddesses by name

87 «La costumbre funeraria griega de poner en las manos del difunto frutos o flores se hizo tan general que sería ocioso dar testimonios de ello. Igualmente general fué el uso de coronas en el culto a los muertos, uso al que se han buscado tan varios significados que aquí no podremos hacer otra cosa que aludir a los principales aducibles en nuestro caso» (Kukahm 1951, p. 30). The influence of Greek thought on burial ritual, practice, and symbolism in the Levant has often been noted; For example, on Greek traditions echoed in the Hebrew Bible, see Mathys 2012.

88 «Une fleur de lotus rappellent la représentation des momies égyptiennes» (Elayi 1988, p. 282).

89 Jiménez Flores 2010, p. 272, writing specifically about mortuary practices at the sites of Cadiz and Huelva in Spain, but citing Phoenician traditions from across the Mediterranean.

90 «El predominio de amuletos egipizantes alusivos a la regeneración (escarabeos) o a la fertilidad (placas con representación de Hathor, diosas de la fecundidad), la decoración del ajuar con palmetas, árboles de la Vida, flores de loto, o el color rojo casi dominante en los vasos aluden a la vida más que a la muerte, la nueva vida del difunto pero también la vida que ha de propiciar éste desde el Más Allá para restablecer la pérdida sufrida por la familia» (Jiménez Flores 2010, p. 273 writing to contextualize mortuary practices at the sites of Cadiz and Huelva in Spain).

91 Kulgefaß (Freijeiro – Sanchez 1981, p. 241).

92 López Rosendo 2005, p. 672; Mustafa 2015b, p. 220.

93 «Les objets portés par les défunts sont une illustration en quelque sorte du réseau des contacts établis à travers le bassin méditerranéen à une époque où l’aristocratie phénicienne était particulièrement touchée par le goût des “choses grecques” [...]. Au-delà du langage funéraire égyptien, s’insère en Phénicie un nouvel ordre du savoir et les personnages représentés sur les sarcophages tenant une fleur, une couronne, un fruit ou un alabastron apparaissent en quelque sorte “héroïsés” illustrant, dans le sillon de l’ancienne idéologie cananéenne, les influences réciproques à travers le bassin de la Méditerranée orientale au 5ème–4ème siècle avant J.-C.» (Doumet Serhal 1996, p. 16).

94 Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2010, p. 390.

95 Here it is good to be reminded that we cannot know the specific meaning that any particular rendition of a symbol like the flower, fruit, crown, or bottle had for its artist or commissioner (moreover, this kind of question can be misleading). It is clear that a limited set of items were selected for use in the funerary art of the sarcophagi, though this limited repertoire might have had as much to do with artisan preferences or limitations as religious ideas. However, once the symbol-set for Phoenician anthropoid sarcoph-



FIG. 9. Female sarcophagus from Sicily with detail of oil bottle; Palermo Archaeological Museum I N 5630 (photo by the author).

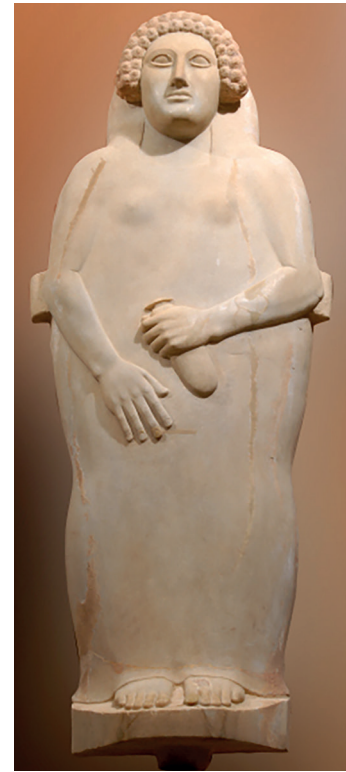


FIG. 10. Female sarcophagus from the Archaeological Museum of Cadiz (object number not available; image courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of Cadiz).

can be a scholarly endeavor of limited value. And third, interrelated, in that the limited number of workshops for these sarcophagi seem to indicate that the choice of symbols probably indicates a range of compatible ideas, rather than competing religious, political, or crafts-based ideologies. Though evidence is accumulating rapidly (and our picture may change in response), what we know now indicates that Phoenician Levantine elite culture probably did ascribe to a basic shared set of what we would today call religious values or ideas, and these seem consistent with the scant impression we have of ideas held by the lower-class as well. It is in light of these methodological points that further analysis of the oil-bottle sarcophagi can proceed.

The three sarcophagi that are carved to show the deceased holding an oil bottle include two female specimens (FIGS. 8-9) and one broken, but probably male, figure (FIG. 11).⁹⁶ Each holds the oil bottle in

agi had been established, it does seem reasonable to assume that these must have had significance within the various ideas held by Phoenicians about death, dying, and burial, though the symbols may well have been interpreted differently according to community origin, personal whim, and inclination. Still, these individual idiosyncrasies in interpretation remain largely beyond the grasp of the historian of the Mediterranean Iron Age.

⁹⁶ These sarcophagi are gendered according to the presence of breasts or beards (though their absence may not be significant in the less detailed versions), or the appearance of carved hair tendrils that extend onto the shoulders or chest (these specimens with longer hair are generally assumed to be female, though note the sarcophagus fragment in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen [Inv. 431], which features both long hair tendrils and the Egyptian false beard). The Louvre Museum, holder of the broken sarcophagus depicting an oil bottle, describes the sarcophagus in question as male, but note that Gubel 1994 identifies as female a sarcophagus

its left hand. To this collection of three examples from marble anthropoid sarcophagi, we might add the oil bottle depicted as hanging from the left wrist of the male figure sculpted in high relief from the central pillar of Tomb 7 at the *Sulky* Punic necropolis (dated to the last decades of the fifth century BCE, at what is today Sant’Antioco, Sardinia), which the excavator interprets as an idealized depiction of the deceased.⁹⁷

Among the anthropoid sarcophagi examples, the two female sarcophagi each feature a slightly bent left arm, so that the oil bottle is held over the midsection or abdomen of the figure. The broken, probably-male sarcophagus, dressed with a cloak (*chlamydos*) over the left shoulder,⁹⁸ holds both arms extended along the side of the body, such that the oil bottle is angled slightly downward near the left thigh. The oldest of these sarcophagi (FIG. 9; ca. late 6th or early 5th century BCE, found at Portella di Mare, Sicily) seems to be carved to indicate a stopper closing the top of the oil bottle. The sarcophagus from Cadiz (FIG. 10; ca. 475-460 BCE) also appears to indicate a slight mound or dome atop the flanged rim of its oil bottle relief, perhaps indicating closure with wax. The broken sarcophagus from Magharat Tabloun (FIG. 11) shows a flanged rim bottle with a longer, narrower neck than the others, which is slightly rounded at its top, though perhaps not decisively indicating the bottle as either open or closed by a stopper.



FIG. 11. Broken sarcophagus in Paris with detail of oil bottle; Louvre Museum AO 4970 (photo by the author).

FIG. 12. Persian period *alabastra* found in the rock-cut tombs of ‘Atlit, excavated in the early 1930s. Height given as 12.8 cm. IAA 1932-548 (negative B-373968; photo by M. Suchowolski).



head fragment from the private antiquities market that might belong to the Louvre piece. Mustafa 2015b, pp. 216-217 also leans toward an identification of the Louvre example as female based on traces of the garment.

97 Bernardini 2004, pp. 174-178; 2007, pp. 142-144; 2010, pp. 1260-1261 and pl. I: 2. This individual was buried in a nearby wooden coffin with its top carved in anthropomorphic relief (now largely deteriorated). See Bernardini 2007, pp. 144-145 for more on the ritual burning that may have taken place around this wooden coffin, including the lamp (for scented oils?) with its own stand found underneath.

98 Gubel 2002, p. 104.

If the artist intentionally depicted the carved bottles as closed, they probably do not represent libations to a god – at least not pouring oil in active ritual use. When examined in conjunction with the other held objects depicted on anthropoid sarcophagi, it seems likely that the bottle was selected to signify the changed status of the deceased (from living to dead).⁹⁹ I propose that the oil bottle had become a metonym for the integrity of the burial – a critical ingredient or feature of a ritual process that symbolically assured the preservation of the tomb as an undisturbed resting place for the dead. Interpretation of the ritual ramifications of actual oil bottles found in Phoenician Levantine burials, at sites contemporaneous to the use of the anthropoid sarcophagi (for example, nearly identical alabaster from Persian-period rock-cut tombs at Atlit; FIG. 12), might therefore be reexamined in light of this proposal and the possible symbolic role played by the oil bottle in the iconographic repertoire.

5. THE GIFT OF OIL

In general terms, oil from various sources and with a broad range of additives was traded widely across the Iron Age Mediterranean and used for perfume, medicines, cosmetics, cooking, and other purposes.¹⁰⁰ Inscribed alabaster from the Iron Age II and Persian period (ca. 1000-300 BCE) indicate the designation of standardized sizes, prices, qualities, contents (often simply a key ingredient), producer/supplier, or royal recipients.¹⁰¹ For example, one of several alabaster jars found in a palace of Esarhaddon at Assur, at least some of which had been taken from the palace of king Abdimilkuti of Sidon,¹⁰² is inscribed “amphora [*naḥbaṣu*-vessel] filled with princely oil”.¹⁰³ According to biblical texts, perfumed oils could be highly specialized and closely regulated, dedicated to the use of certain cults, priesthoods, or purposes.¹⁰⁴ Relevant to but beyond the scope of this study are the Egyptian alabaster vases found in Spain, likely diplomatic gifts of perfume or oil which were reused by Phoenician colonists or Punic elites for cremation burial vessels.¹⁰⁵ There is a wealth of scholarly work on the production, trade, and consumption of infused or perfumed oils, resins, and their respective containers throughout the Mediterranean; a brief overview concerned only with those narrow-necked vessels buried with the dead must suffice.

The appearance of oil vessels in tombs is a wide-ranging phenomenon across the ancient Mediterranean,¹⁰⁶ and several theories have been proposed to explain the appearance of these vessels (and their contents¹⁰⁷), namely that they were intended:

99 Here again, I exclude the curious scepters which have no known parallel in Phoenician art.

100 See, for example, Frère – Hugot 2010.

101 Finkel – Reade 2002.

102 One of the jars features an Akkadian inscription attesting to its having been pillaged thus, ca. 677 BCE. This alabaster jar probably originated as a diplomatic gift from Egypt to Sidon (Istanbul Archaeological Museum, Ass. 136, C. 4620): Preusser 1955, pp. 21-22 (*Vase “a”*); see also Culican 1970b, pp. 29-31.

103 Istanbul Archaeological Museum, Ass. 187, VA Ass. 2258; Preusser 1955, pp. 22-23, *Vase “e”*; López Castro 2006, pp. 81-82.

104 «[...] the Bible refers to an active cult whose members are anointed and light incense twice daily and whose high priest brings incense into the innermost sanctum of the Temple on the Day of Atonement. As such, the priestly literature [NB: the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Chronicles are especially highlighted] goes to great lengths to stress that this perfume and incense are categorically different from other scented oils and fumigants and must remain solely under the purview of the priestly caste» (Green 2011, p. 65).

105 See Torres Ortiz 1999 and Lopez Castro 2006.

106 For example, see the analysis of perfume bottles found in Second Temple Jewish burials: Green 2008.

107 Early studies also considered the possibility that the bottles may have been used to collect the tears of mourners (calling them *lacrimaria*) or perhaps to contain alcohol for toasting the dead.

- as a grave good – one of the possessions of the deceased in life;
- as a grave good – symbolic of daily life or representative of the deceased’s social roles in life;
- as a grave good or offering for the deceased – for use in an afterlife;
- as an offering or libation for a divine being on behalf of the deceased;
- as an offering or libation for ancestor worship conducted at the graveside;
- to mask the scent of the decomposing corpse.

Of course, several of these explanations might be in play for one culture, regional community, or even simultaneously in the mind of each ritual actor. A potential plurality of meanings should be accepted as basic to understanding the role of the oil bottle in Phoenician (and more broadly Near Eastern) contexts.¹⁰⁸

The prevalence of perfume containers (in ceramic, various types of stone, or glass) in Phoenician Levantine burials has been somewhat obscured by the wide variety of terminology used to describe them (sometimes incorrectly, given current classical conventions). Looking just at English-language vocabulary, terms such as “alabastron”, “amphoriskos”, “ampulla”, “aryballos”, “balsamarium”, “bottle”, “jar”, “jug”, “juglet”, “lacrimarium”, “lekythos”, “oenochoe”, “unguentarium” and “vase” are all in play, and often used idiosyncratically (especially in early publications), without clear definition.¹⁰⁹ Mustafa has recently begun the work of quantifying the appearance of oil bottles of the type in question,¹¹⁰ though a site-by-site accounting including variations in liquid volume, vessel shape, placement in the tomb, and other features is far from complete for cross-site comparative purposes. Still, initial studies make it clear that in the Iron Age II and Persian periods (ca. 1000-300 BCE), where grave goods are included with the deceased, there is a consistent preference in Phoenician Levantine burials for interment with one or more narrow-necked vessels.

Many burials containing some type of sarcophagus are accompanied by oil bottles – sometimes dozens of them – as the only grave goods not directly adorning the corpse.¹¹¹ Oil bottles also accompany elite burials with broader arrays of grave goods, including those containing anthropoid sarcophagi. When it was discovered in 1861, the broken sarcophagus from Magharat Tabloun (FIG. 11) discussed above was described as having 20 red-painted terracotta bottles laid out around its head,¹¹² though later it was suggested these may have been the result of tomb reuse.¹¹³ One of the most recent anthropoid sarcophagi to be discovered is a basalt example from a *dromos* tomb in the Ras el-Shagry area of Tartus, Syria, near Amrit (where 32 anthropoid sarcophagi have been exhumed as of 2013).¹¹⁴ Though the lid had been displaced by looters, the sarcophagus still contained three “alabastra”, flat-bottomed specimens about 9 cm in height. Mustafa, one of the excavators of the tomb, suggests that the three vessels may have contained different types of oils or

108 Here I paraphrase Moorey (2003, p. 9), on terracotta figurines. Elsewhere, he writes: «...anthropologically or ethnographically based inquiries have increasingly emphasized that no single interpretation is likely to cover all the facts and features of any particular category of terracottas. Attributes reflecting their use and disposal, often those least well observed and recorded even in the best conducted excavations, are critically important in assigning terracottas to functional categories» (Moorey 2000, p. 481).

109 An early exception may be found in Culican 1970a.

110 Mustafa 2015b.

111 For an example from Kition, see Yon 1990, p. 181.

112 In the entry for January 22, 1861: «Dans ce sable nous trouvons une vingtaine de petits vases dits lacrymatoires en terre cuite. Quelques-uns de ces vases sont brisés près de l’ouverture; le plus grand nombre est coloré sur plusieurs points de la surface par une peinture ocreuse, rouge, et l’un d’eux présente encore dans sa cavité des traces d’une matière terreuse, blanche, ressemblant à de la chaux. Tous ces vases étaient rangés autour de la tête» (Renan 1864, p. 438).

113 Gubel (2002, p. 104) argues that these bottles may have been from later use of the tomb, citing a date of the 3rd-2nd century BCE for the bottle forms based on parallels from Tell Keisan.

114 The tomb was discovered in 2009 and published in Mustafa 2013; 2015a; and Mustafa and Abbas 2015. Also found in the sarcophagus with the alabastra were a skull, some bone fragments, and two small gold sheet elements – one in a leaf shape, the other a 16-petalled flower with two perforations (Mustafa 2013, pp. 116-117).

perfumes (due to the slight variations in, for example, neck width and slope).¹¹⁵ Though the sarcophagus had been disturbed, the remaining grave goods echo earlier excavators' descriptions of oil bottles found inside sarcophagi at Sidon, including those whose remains were thought to bear evidence of preservative actions in the form of oleo-resins, oily liquid, or preserved soft tissue. The carved oil bottles on the three extant sarcophagus lids therefore evidently did not symbolically replace actual perfume bottles in the tomb or even inside the sarcophagus itself.

Elsewhere Mustafa notes the appearance of oil bottles in Levantine Phoenician cremation graves as well as inhumation burials. This pattern seems to increase quantitatively as inhumation becomes the normative form of burial over the course of the Persian period (ca. 500-300 BCE):

«Along the coasts and islands of the eastern Mediterranean, especially in Cyprus, [...] during the 6th-4th centuries B.C., the use of alabstra is not only maintained despite the ritual shift from cremation to inhumation, it in fact multiplied. Although the contextual provenance of the majority of alabstra is unknown, some were deposited as part of the burial ritual, found inside sarcophagi. This ritual presence is attested by several anthropoid or anthropomorphic sarcophagi (Frede 2002). Their [i.e., the alabstra's] formal features are quite common and coincide with most of the oldest known specimens: always small in size, 8-12 cm high, with a rounded base, flattened flanged rim, and narrow neck, with or without lateral appendages.

The examples of alabstra with archaeological contexts in this second chronological phase, the mid-first millennium B.C., were recorded in sarcophagi from city necropoleis, in isolated tombs, and in small necropoleis alike».¹¹⁶

Mustafa's characterization of the most common bottle forms (8-12 cm high with a rounded base) shows that there seems to have been a visually important element to this part of the burial ritual in Phoenician sites throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Since bottles with the same shape and dimensions are seen in exemplars recovered from domestic, street, and other non-burial contexts, it is unclear what precisely governed selection for the burial ritual. Perhaps recognizable bottle shapes indicated a particular kind of oil or additive (in a pattern we might today call "branding"). Perhaps individual mourners or family members selected their own favorites. In any case, the round-bottomed oil bottle that fits in the hand seems, at least by the Persian period, to have become meaningful in the symbolic as well as enacted and embodied ritual actions of the Levantine Phoenician elite. It is remarkable that, when commissioning or purchasing an anthropoid sarcophagus, at least a few elite Phoenicians selected a single oil bottle – ostensibly a common item from daily life – as the singular, iconic object to be held in their idealized stone portraits. This artistic choice appears to duplicate, symbolically, the actual oil and oil bottles used in the deposition of the body in the sarcophagus, and must reflect a pivotal piece of the ritual dedication of the deceased to eternal rest, enacted through the closing of the tomb.

115 Mustafa 2015a, p. 40.

116 «En las costas e islas del Mediterráneo oriental, sobre todo en Chipre, [...] durante los siglos VI-IV a.C., el uso de los ungüentarios de alabastro no sólo se mantiene, a pesar del cambio de ritual de la incineración a la inhumación, si no que se multiplica su presencia. Aunque se desconoce la procedencia contextual de la mayoría de ellos, no obstante algunos han sido recogidos formando parte del ritual funerario, encontrados en el interior de sarcófagos de inhumación. Esta presencia ritual se atestigua en varios sarcófagos antropoides o antropomorfos (Frede 2002). Sus características formales son bastante comunes y coincidentes con la mayoría de los ejemplares conocidos más antiguos: siempre de pequeño tamaño, entre ocho y doce centímetros de altura, de base redondeada, labio de ala aplanado y cuello estrangulado, con o sin apéndices laterales. Los ejemplares de ungüentarios de alabastro contextualizados en esta segunda fase cronológica, mediados del primer milenio, fueron registrados en sarcófagos procedentes de necrópolis ciudadanas, en tumbas más o menos aisladas o en pequeñas necrópolis» (Mustafa 2015b, p. 216).

6. SYMBOLIC MUMMIFICATION

Several elements suggest that ritualized actions were performed to symbolically evoke the preservation of a burial or tomb (but which only sometimes produced preserved human remains), constituting an important aspect of Iron Age mortuary ritual in the Phoenician Levant. I propose that the following elements should be interpreted as constituting forms of “symbolic mummification”:

- the frequent appearance of small vessels for perfumed oil or unguents among grave goods;
- the metonymic appearance of the oil bottle in depictions of the dead; and
- details from Phoenician mortuary inscriptions and physical human remains that indicate the application of oils, unguents, or resins to human remains in preparation for or during burial.

These preservative actions do not seem to have been consistently conducted in order to attain a particular physical result, as opposed to the processes of mummification practiced in Egypt. In fact, Phoenician embalming seems more similar to the earliest stages of Egyptian mummification, where treatment of high energy expenditure burials¹¹⁷ involved primarily «textile wrappings impregnated with “resin” (*sensu lato*), which is regarded as the main component of early Pharaonic attempts at corporeal preservation before the later introduction (ca. 2500 BCE) of a desiccant (natron) and evisceration».¹¹⁸ Phoenician embalming probably never involved specialized preparations in the interior of the corpse (e.g., removal or manipulation of organs). But the superficial application of oils and resins attested by the burial record may have been, in a sense, intentional. Phoenician attempts at preserving the soft tissue of the deceased seem indeed to have been only one part of a larger concern for the eternal sealing of the tomb. The addition of oil, resin, or other substances with known preservative properties may in this context be read as a kind of symbolic mummification, a transformative process that was consistent with a repeatedly enacted desire for tomb permanence but that did not require an elaborate, multi-stage professional preparation of the corpse or long-term physical effects to be deemed efficacious.

With regard to ancient ritual specialists, the Phoenician evidence is laconic but allows several observations. Rather than picturing mortuary priests whose abilities were simply inferior to their Egyptian counterparts, we could imagine the substances used in Phoenician burials as effective transformers in themselves, and not dependent on the secret and specialized training of adept professionals. While our knowledge of religious functionaries in Levantine Phoenician urban centers is extremely sparse, it seems clear that – at least during the Persian period – Phoenician kings and other royal family members (including royal women) could hold the title *khm* (priest), though not all of them did.¹¹⁹ At some Phoenician burial sites exhibiting

117 The term “energy expenditure” has long been used in anthropological literature on mortuary behavior to describe features such as burial size, elaborateness of a burial, methods of handling the corpse, number and type of grave goods, and other elements that tend to correspond with social rank, socio-economic status, and other characteristics of the deceased or the deceased’s family (utilized and defended already in Tainter 1975 and 1978).

118 Jones *et al.* 2014, 1. This groundbreaking study provided the first chemical investigation of pre-Pharaonic bodies (utilizing securely provenanced Badarian and Predynastic period tombs, ca. 4500-3350 BCE). Surprisingly, the composition of the testable materials was consistent with Herodotus’ 5th century BCE description: «these recipes consist of a plant oil or animal fat “base” constituting the bulk of the “balms”, with far lesser amounts of a conifer resin and an aromatic plant extract/“balsam”, and minor amounts of a wax and a plant gum/sugar. [...] Both the antibacterial properties of some of the ingredients and the similarity of the recipes to those embalming agents utilized at the height of body preservation in ancient Egypt strongly suggest that these “resin”-impregnated textiles and the localized soft-tissue preservation they would have afforded, are the true antecedents of Egyptian mummification, practiced in some form for 5000 years» (Jones *et al.* 2014, p. 12).

119 The Levantine Phoenician evidence comes from Sidon and Byblos: Tabnit’s sarcophagus (KAI 13; ca. 490 BCE) refers to both Tabnit and his father Eshmunazar as *khm šrtt* (priest of Ashtart) and to his mother Amotashstart as *khmt* (priestess) of the same

specialized, relatively homogenous mortuary practices (e.g., Tyre al-Bass, where cremations were conducted within a limited repertoire of variation for ca. 300 years; or the high energy expenditure Sidonian hypogeal and chamber tombs), it is likely that ritual specialists were involved – priests or other mortuary professionals familiar with the fuel and environmental demands of the incineration process. But given the social aspects of Iron Age Levantine burial practices, along with their high variability even within individual Phoenician sites, it is possible that many inhumation burials were conducted by family (from treating or dressing the corpse to placement in the tomb). This would explain the range of possible methods for including oils or resins in burials (including, perhaps, the interment of unopened bottles of oil), which would have been accomplished by a range of attendants, including non-specialist ritual actors (e.g., the family of the deceased or other mourners).

It has been interesting to note that recent studies have picked up other potential threads of Egyptian ritual behavior associated with mortuary practice that was adopted and adapted by Phoenicians for their own purposes. Most notable is the intriguing study by Gómez Peña and Carranza Peco¹²⁰ who offer analysis of objects and iconography relating to what they call a Phoenician-Punic “opening of the mouth” ritual. While an argument for direct adoption of Egyptian mummification or mortuary practices by Levantine Phoenician communities in the Persian period has been taken up again by some in the past 25 years,¹²¹ this causal link regarding embalming techniques does not seem necessary – nor, I would argue, particularly likely – to explain the Phoenician evidence as part of a spectrum of preservative acts meant to ensure the undisturbed nature of the burial – either actually, through deliberate corpse conservation, or symbolically, as I suggest was most common. Oils and unguents used in association with death and burial throughout the first millennium BCE Mediterranean world carry multiple associations, with sustenance, preservation, adornment, pampering, and the divine. Our most detailed textual insights into this set of practices or beliefs come from the Greek and Roman spheres, where mythical and literary texts indicate the transformative nature of these kinds of preparations or ingredients. Clements, in a piece on *Divine Scents and Presence*, offers an evocative characterization:

«So it is that ambrosia, whose name means “immortality” (it is formed from ἄμβροτος (*ambrotos*), “not-mortal”), not only provides the gods with their solid food (*Odyssey* V 93-94), but also the divine unguent that when rubbed into the skin replenishes their appearance and beautifies them with its divine “breath” (*Iliad* XIV 170-77; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 61-63; ambrosia’s sweet “breath”: *Odyssey* IV 446). It is this stuff that Demeter uses to immortalize the mortal baby Demophon by repeatedly anointing him with the oil-like substance that Thetis sprinkles into the nostrils of the dead Patroklos to ensure that his corpse will not decay (*Iliad* XIX 38-39; cfr. *Iliad* XXIII 186-87). For in all these guises – as a solid, a liquid and a smell – its unique power is to negate the effects of temporality, to collapse time».¹²²

I am not arguing for a direct Phoenician borrowing from Greek literature or mortuary practice; for example, there is no evidence that the Greeks used myrrh in their preparation of the dead.¹²³ But these Greek texts indicate that ideas about the transformative (some might say magical) properties of certain

goddess. The Batnoam sarcophagus (KAI 11; ca. 400-375 BCE) refers to King Azbaal’s father as *khn b’lt* (priest of the [divine] lady), though the father was not, apparently, also a king.

120 Gómez Peña – Carranza Peco 2021.

121 E.g., Gubel 1994; Nitschke 2007, pp. 71-72.

122 Clements 2015, p. 51, citing Sissa – Detienne 2000, p. 80. See also Shelmerdine (1985, p. 127): «In *Odyssey* 24, 67-68, Achilles’ body is said to be burned in oil and honey.... This may be another allusion to the embalming effect of anointing, especially since honey is often used in embalming. However, it may equally well be a distorted reference to *Iliad* 18, where jars of oil and honey are given as offerings on Patroklos’ pyre».

123 Van Alfen 2002, p. 38.

oil- or resin-based substances, as associated with immortality, renewal, or preservation, were held outside of Egypt, across the Mediterranean world. As far as we can reconstruct, elite Phoenician mortuary practice of the Persian period was primarily concerned with the integrity of the burial – ensuring each tomb remained undisturbed, arranged in accordance with social mores or expectations, and protected from the effects of time. The application of myrrh, bdellium, and other perfumed oils may well have been central to the enactment of the interment, even if it does not appear to have become a highly specialized, formalized process as it did in Egypt.

I suggest that the constellation of Phoenician ideas about death and burial allowed for a spectrum of preservative actions involving the materials we today associate with embalming or the preservation of soft tissue. In this understanding, sprinkling certain oils around the tomb, pouring oil over the body of the deceased, using solid resins in the treatment of the body – all were acceptable ways of enacting the stopping of time and the permanent fixing of the tomb. The appearance of the oil bottle in the hands of the idealized deceased further evoked the power of the oil to ensure perpetual rest. In other words, though we may not be able to tell the difference between the anointing of a corpse with oil, pouring oil over a body, or perhaps even filling a sarcophagus with perfumed oils, these differences may only have mattered as markers of energy expenditure – not as conflicting ideas or behaviors with different physical results in mind.

Indeed, this interest in ensuring the integrity or long-term preservation of the tomb might not have been limited to inhumations. Bénichou-Safar, in her 1978 work re-analyzing the resinous material retrieved from Delattre’s excavations in the Carthaginian necropolis, explored possible Egyptian practices and evidence that might inform a theory of Punic embalming. However, she noted that one of the burials that contained resin was an adult cremation, which she saw as a serious impediment to any interpretation based on embalming.¹²⁴ Because both cremations and inhumations seem to be accompanied by the same preservative substance, she concluded that the practices at Carthage may be interpreted as either summary or superficial embalming on the one hand, or ritual libation on the other,¹²⁵ though it was impossible to distinguish between the two given the state of the evidence. Unfortunately, no similar analysis has been possible at Tyre al-Bass, the largest cremation cemetery from the Iron Age Phoenician Levant (with 320 cremation urns uncovered as of 2010). This is not surprising, since cremation was conducted at an unknown site and was often followed by an in-situ fire after the incinerated remains, in urns, were placed in the grave (as Aubet put it, «it could be said that mortuary practices in Tyre began and ended with fire»¹²⁶). Analysis of the contents of the two jugs that often accompanied the Tyrian burials has also not proved conclusive.¹²⁷

But the observations made during the early excavation and analysis of the Carthaginian necropoleis might have been recently reinforced by Mustafa’s analysis of alabastra or oil bottles included with both cremation and inhumation burials at Phoenician sites:

«The alabastron was first associated with the cinerary urn, and, later, with the anthropomorphic sarcophagus. This passage through different ritual treatments of the corpse indicates its special character, since it

124 «Il n’en reste pas moins que toute solution basée sur l’embaumement se heurte à une sérieuse objection: dans l’une des sépultures pourvues de résine, les ossements, nous l’avons dit, avaient subi la crémation» (Bénichou-Safar 1978, p. 138), citing Delattre’s 1902 discussion of cremated remains in a small stone ossuary, accompanied by «une masse résineuse» (Bénichou-Safar 1978, p. 134, fn. 8). The sample Bénichou-Safar had tested revealed it was made not of resin but of “Chio turpentine” from trees on Chios.

125 Bénichou-Safar 1978, p. 138. Here too, she argues that Egyptian influence may be at play: «On a décelé, en effet, dans plusieurs hypogées d’époque pharaonique, les traces d’une libation de résine liquide ou visqueuse sur la momie, son cercueil, voire les deux à la fois, ou sur les viscères au fond des vases canopes. [...] D’ailleurs, la libation égyptienne se pratique avec des quantités très variables de résine: on en a retrouvé des plaques minces aussi bien que de gros blocs et l’on retrouve ainsi l’une des constatations faites dans les hypogées puniques».

126 Aubet 2010, p. 154.

127 The jugs come from a sand stratum that often came into contact with the water table (Aubet 2010, p. 154).

is one of the few objects that accompany the containers of human remains – whether urns or sarcophagi, ashes or mummified cadavers – thus conserving its value as a symbolic part of some earlier ritual in the treatment of the corpse, before its cremation or mummification. In both cases [the alabastron] continues to retain its symbolic value [...].¹²⁸

Though I do not see convincing reasons to suggest that death was considered the specific purview of Ashtar in the Levantine Phoenician cities, as Mustafa argues elsewhere in the same piece,¹²⁹ or that the cult of this goddess necessarily determined the religious symbols at play in the anthropoid sarcophagi, I agree that, by the Persian period, the oil bottle had become a cypher for a constellation of ideas that likely revolved around ensuring the preservation of the tomb (not the body in its inhumed form, since cremation burials appear side-by-side with inhumations in Phoenician Levantine cemeteries).

The suggestion offered in this paper would place the Persian-period Levantine Phoenicians in good company. Like the unnamed Neo-Assyrian king who placed his father's dead body to rest "in kingly oil" (Ī.GIŠ LUGAL), sealing "the entrance to the sarcophagus, his resting-place" (*ta-aš-lil-t[ī]-šū*),¹³⁰ or like Nabonidus who buried his mother and father "in sweet oil" (Ī.GIŠ DÜG),¹³¹ Phoenician elites seem to have valued the oil bottle and its contents as a critical component of the burial ritual in Sidon, Byblos, Tyre, and the like. But, in these coastal Levantine urban communities, a variety of symbolically preservative actions seem to have been acceptable as ways of ensuring the long-term integrity of the burial. It is possible that both intact inhumation burials and cremations were treated in similar ways, including oil bottles as grave goods, and perhaps using oils and resins in compatible ritual patterns, to close a grave or otherwise place the deceased 'in eternity.' This hypothesis supports recent contentions that inhumation and cremation among Levantine Phoenicians should not be seen as competing or opposing practices,¹³² but rather as multiple and varied expressions of a shared continuum of ideas.

128 «El ungüentario se relacionó primero con una urna cineraria y, posteriormente, con sarcófagos antropomorfos. Este paso a través de diferentes ritos de tratamiento de los cadáveres nos indica su carácter especial, ya que es uno de los pocos objetos que acompañan a los contenedores de restos humanos, sean urnas o sarcófagos, cenizas o cadáver momificado, conservando así su valor como símbolo de una parte del rito previo en el acto del tratamiento del cadáver antes de su incineración o momificación. En ambos casos sigue conservando el valor simbólico [...]» (Mustafa 2015b, pp. 220-221).

129 See Ribichini 1987 and 2001 for foundational work on Phoenician deities associated with death and the afterlife. Though it was published too recently to be incorporated into this study, Garbati 2022 promises to offer a thorough study of the multiple gods who are evoked in Phoenician and Punic mortuary practice and relevant texts.

130 The text in question is British Museum K. 786 + K. 6323, as published in McGinnis 1987. McGinnis dates the text to the reigns of either Esarhaddon (r. 681-669 BCE) or Ashurbanipal (r. 668-ca. 627 BCE) on the basis of specific Neo-Assyrian terms for garments, as well as its composite use of dialects: «The very specific detailing of the lists must mean that they record the actual grave-goods from a particular (royal) burial – and the way they are written leaves no doubt that this was in Assyria – but the question remains as to whether the literary passages were composed for the occasion (in which case it would be expected that the scribe used Babylonian) or whether they were older works, perhaps chanted at the grave-side, incorporated in this description of a specific funeral» (McGinnis 1987, p. 7).

131 This noun phrase occurs in relation to a corpse in two inscriptions of Nabonidus: Gadd 1958, p. 52, H1, B iii.15 and Langdon 1912, p. 294, iii.28. See McGinnis (1987, fn. 16) for discussion of the texts. Unfortunately, in both instances where it occurs, the accompanying verb is broken. For K. 7856 + K. 6323, McGinnis reconstructs: «The father my begetter in kingly oil I gently laid [in] that secret tomb» (McGinnis 1987, p. 4; citing Meissner), though he grants that both anointing in oil and immersion in oil are worthy of consideration given archaeological and textual evidence (pp. 8-9).

132 Aubert 2013. See also Rebay-Salisbury 2015 on the complex range of behaviors subsumed under the reductive label "cremation".

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