Across Frontiers

Etruscans, Greeks, Phoenicians & Cypriots

Studies in honour of David Ridgway & Francesca Romana Serra Ridgway

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Burial, symbols and mortuary practices in a Phoenician tomb

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Three seasons of archaeological excavation in the necropolis at Tyre, in 1997, 1999 and 2002, have led to the recovery of more than 80 cremation burials (Aubet 1999; 2003; Aubet *et alii* 1998). To judge by the finds and by various surveys carried out in the area, this necropolis covered a considerable area with a high density of burials, so it could have been the principal burial area of the city throughout the 9th–7th centuries BC.

The necropolis, discovered by chance in 1990 (Seeden 1991: Sader 1991; 1992), is situated in the Al-Bass district close to the ancient coastline and on the mainland, facing the ancient island of Tyre which lies some two kilometres away. The cinerary urns were deposited in pits cut into a layer of sand lying three metres below the present surface of the land and 1–2 metres above sea level. This layer consists of sands containing silts and clays of continental origin, as well as organic material connected with an ancient lake. Microfaunal and palaeobotanical analyses of the sediments in this layer reflect a Mediterranean environment, in which terrestrial species and vegetation characteristic of continental and swampy waters coexisted with marine species typical of beaches and coastal sands. Altogether, it reflects a landscape that combined the coastal and lakeside environments, both cut off from marine influence by the string of coastal dunes. Radiometric analyses show that the necropolis was situated at the edge of an ancient lake which had silted up around 4000 BC.

Compared with the rest of the known Iron Age cemeteries in the region, that at Al-Bass at present constitutes the most homogeneous assemblage in terms of the form and typology of the burials, the ceremonial and mortuary practices, and the morphology and locations of the grave goods. Particularly striking are the absolute predominance of cremation of the corpse and the exceptional funerary record. Due to the excellent preservation of the tomb assemblages the site offers a huge amount of potential information for the study of Phoenician funerary practices in the period of the colonial expansion to the West.

The type of burial most characteristic of the Al-Bass necropolis is the tomb consisting of a pair of urns accompanied by recurring sets of offerings. These consist of the standard association of funerary items well known in the cemeteries in the colonies: a trefoil-rim jug with a conical neck and globular body, a mushroom-rim jug and a flat or hemispherical bowl for drinking. These three elements, which form the complete furniture of each tomb, are found in association for the first time around 760 BC and appear regularly in the cemeteries of the second half of the 8th century, the period to which the majority of the burials at Al-Bass date.

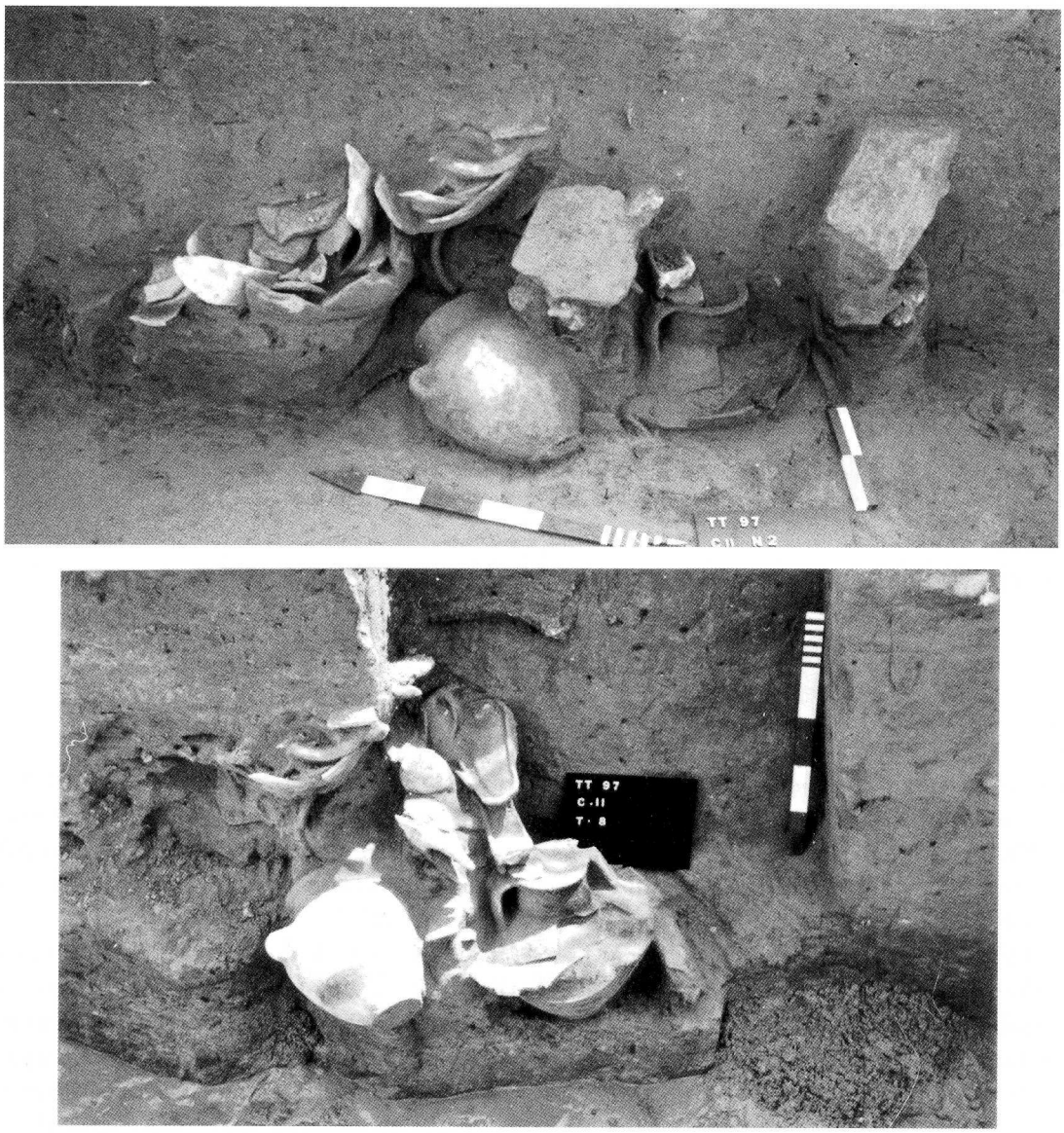


Fig. 1 Tyre-Al Bass: Tomb no. 8 during excavation

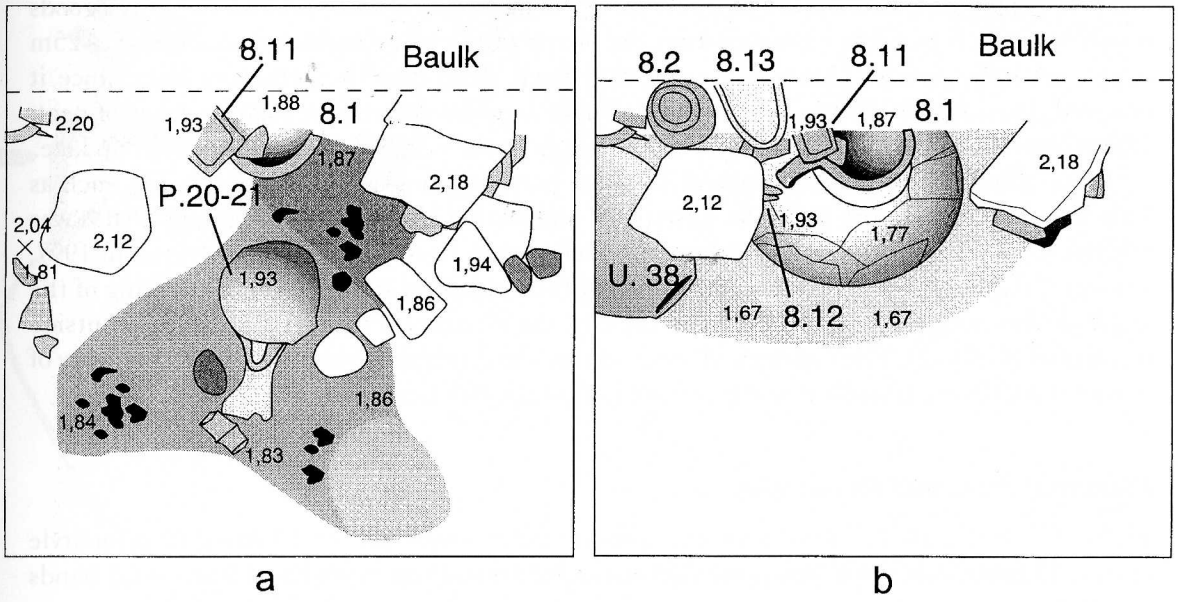
The finding *in situ* of stone funerary stelae, some with symbols and engraved inscriptions, provides definitive confirmation of the association between stelae and cremation tombs in this cemetery. One of the anthropomorphic stelae appeared to be directly covering Urn no. 39, which has been dated to the middle of the 8th century BC.

The funerary furnishings reflect a population with little social differentiation, in which significant differences in wealth are not observed. However, Urn no. 8 stands out because of the volume and social value of some of its burial gifts (fig. 1). Although the tomb was incompletely excavated, part of it lying beyond the limit of excavation, it probably contained a pair of urns. Its structure, and especially its 'stratigraphy', make it an excellent point of reference for the reconstruction of important aspects of the ceremony followed in burials of this type, and for the analysis of the social and ideological significance of some of the grave goods.

Urn no. 8 reveals a complex and relatively prolonged ceremony. The funeral that would have accompanied the burial of the deceased would have consisted of the following stages:

Construction of the grave

The grave appeared not far below the surface of the sand layer and reached almost to the bottom of the layer (fig. 2). Of the grave itself very few traces remained in the sand, although



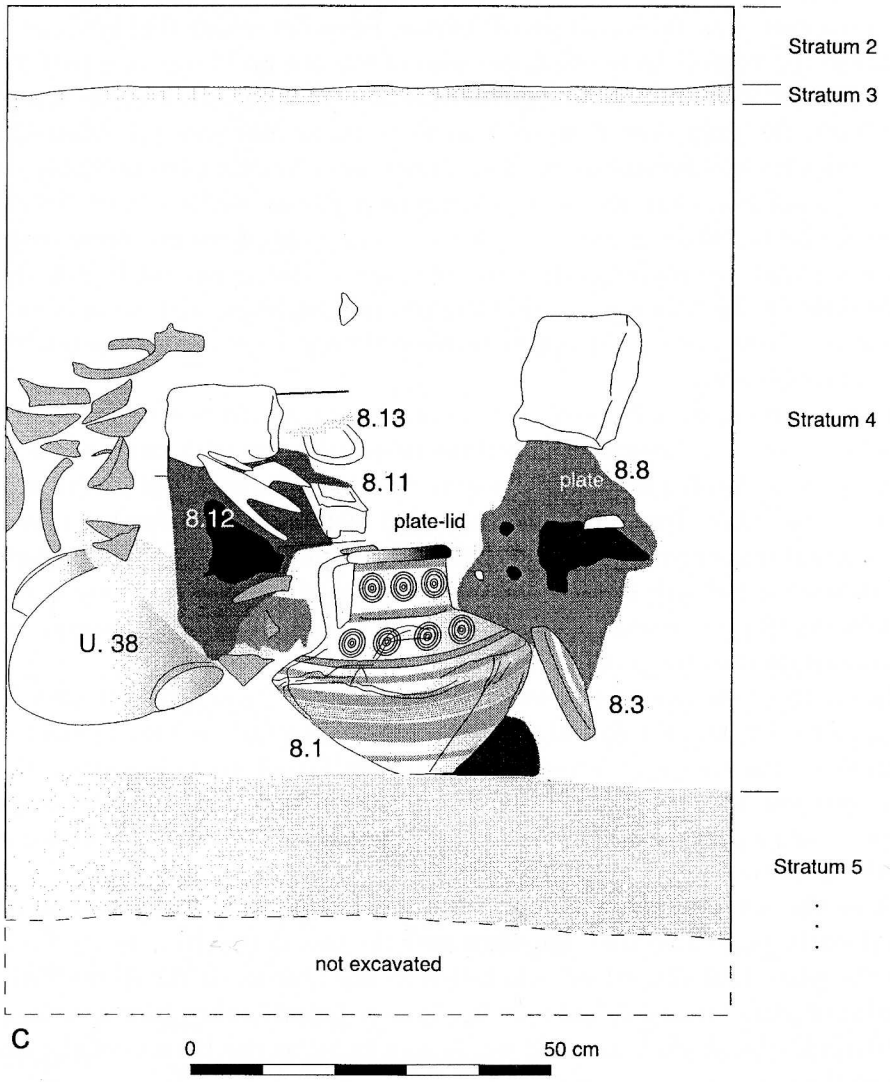


Fig. 2 Plans and section of Tomb no. 8

some imprints and the location of many pieces of carbonised material and the grave goods inside it made it possible to reconstruct the shape of the pit: roughly quadrangular, 1.25m deep and 1.3m across. This was a grave dug fairly deep into the cemetery layer since it reached down to the bottom of the sand layer so as to lie directly on top of a layer of peat, 1.67m above sea level; this peat layer corresponds to the edge of the ancient silted up lake.

When digging the grave to deposit the urn, many other urns buried previously, such as Urn 38, were moved and partially destroyed, suggesting that the deposition of Urn 8 was relatively late. Indeed it is one of the most recent urns from the sector excavated in 1997, since it is dated between the late 7th and early 6th centuries. In any case, the digging of the grave deliberately destroyed a sector of burials, the remains of which were piled up outside tomb no.8 (figs 1–2). The typological study of these assemblages reveals that the majority of the urns had been deposited in the second half of the 8th century BC.

Placing the urn and its contents

The urn, placed at the bottom of the quadrangular grave pit, is a luxury, Cypriot-style crater, 37.5cm high, with bichrome decoration of concentric circles and horizontal bands (no. 8–1; fig. 3).

The urn contained very few remains of human bones, only some 40 charred fragments in total, precluding an accurate determination of the sex and age of the deceased. All we know is that the remains are those of an adult, like all the individuals so far identified in the necropolis. Nor did it contain the classic Egyptian scarab that is found in almost all the burials in the necropolis in the upper part of the urn and lying on top of the bone remains. This is a kind of amulet intended to accompany the deceased into the afterlife.

In fact, the urns served as containers to house not just the charred remains of the deceased, who had previously been cremated on a funeral pyre probably situated near the funerary enclosure, but also small objects of personal use, like beads from a necklace and scarab-amulets. Some of these objects show no sign of having been subjected to fire, so they must have been put in after the cremation. In the case of Urn 8, these grave goods would probably have been placed in the second urn, along with most of the remains of the individual's bones, and could not be retrieved because the urn lay outside the boundaries of the excavation area.

The microfaunal analyses carried out on sieved earth from inside Urn 8, revealed remains of molluscs which we assume entered the vessel together with sand sediments from outside. Mixed with the human bone remains were the charred remains of bovine and ovicaprid teeth as well as two claws from either a tawny or a little owl (*Strix aluco*). A close examination of these faunal remains revealed that, before being placed in the fire, they had been cooked or boiled. So we are clearly dealing with the remains of a meal or offering that had been placed on the funeral pyre together with the body of the deceased and subsequently buried in the urn, mixed up with the human bone.

As for the presence of two owl claws, we do not know whether they have any special significance. In various cultural traditions, the tawny owl, as a nocturnal raptor, symbolises night, death and the great beyond. In Homer and Greek mythology it was the chief attribute of the goddess Athene, representing intelligence and energy, symbolised in the penetrating brilliance of its gaze. But it had a sinister significance too, as the child of darkness, funerals and the underworld.

Once the urn and all its contents had been deposited at the bottom of the pit, it was closed with a plate placed upside down over the mouth (no. 8–5; fig. 3). Excavation revealed that the plate had slipped off and fallen to the bottom of the grave. Other fragmentary remains of plates (nos 8–8 and 8–9; fig. 3) were found broken round the urn, and part of an East Greek type *skyphos* (no. 8–4; fig. 3) was found at the bottom of the grave close to the base of the urn.

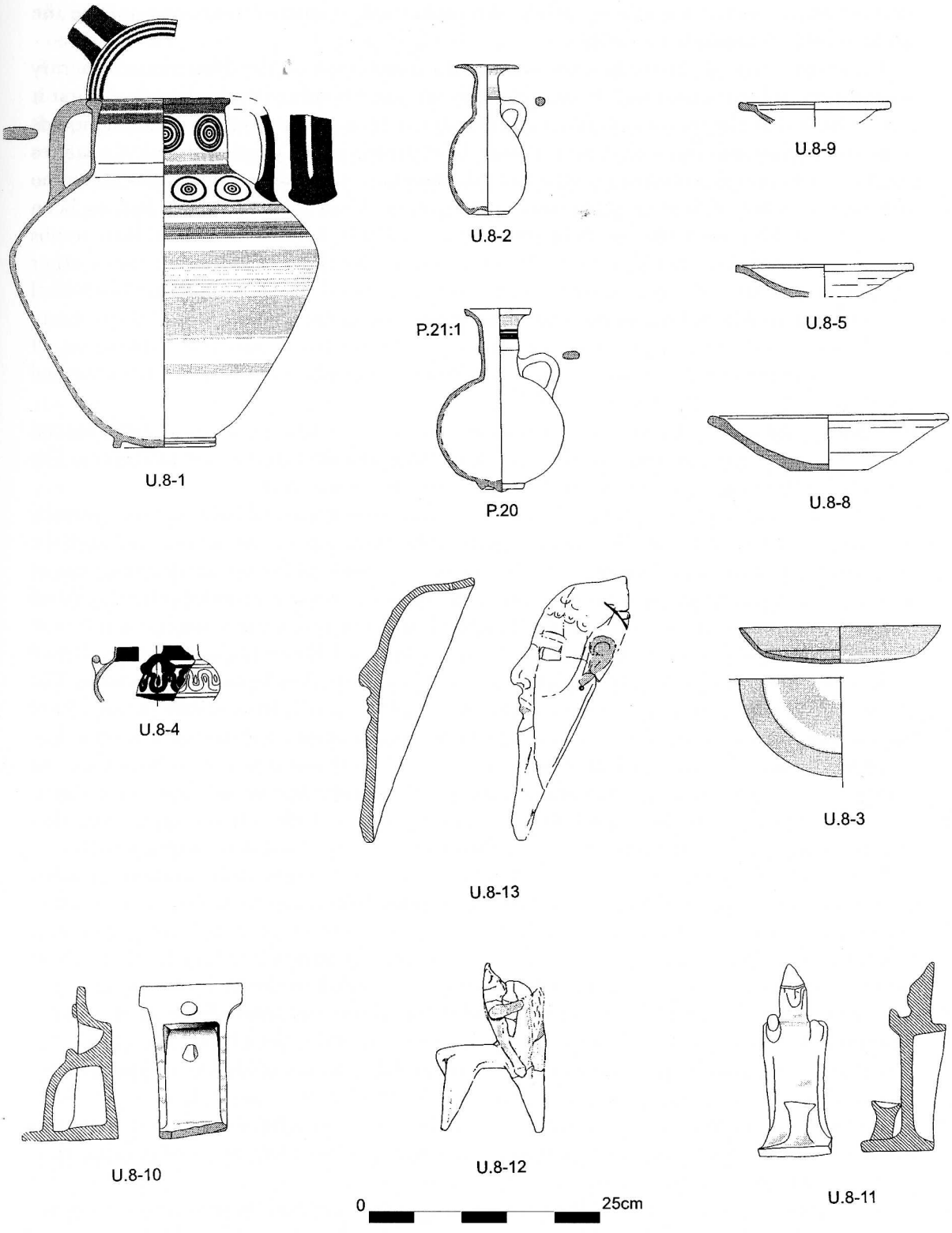


Fig. 3 Funerary furniture of Tomb no. 8

Burial gifts outside the urn

After the urn had been deposited and closed, the most representative of the grave goods were placed around it. A red-slip bowl was placed upside down against the shoulder of the urn (8–3; fig. 2c). This thin-walled bowl belongs to the Fine Ware type (formerly known as

Samaria Ware) and is one of the earliest 8th century BC imported items known from the colonies (Maass-Lindemann 1990)

This type of bowl constitutes the standard concomitant of the Phoenician funerary furniture in Al-Bass, invariably accompanied by two jugs standing beside the urn. At first it was thought that the bowl made the perfect complement to the two jugs containing liquids and that its function had been to contain solid food. However, the physico-chemical analyses carried out so far on bowls of this type from Al-Bass have yielded no firm results and in no case have remains of food been identified inside them. Their function seems to have been that of a drinking bowl (Briese & Docter 1991: 27; 1998). In some of the Al-Bass tombs they also served to cover or protect another receptacle, like the mushroom-rim jug or other receptacles placed at the foot of some of the urns. In general, however, the Fine Ware bowl was usually found in Al-Bass tombs placed upside down against the shoulder of the cinerary urn. It is inferred from all this that this luxury vessel was used as part of a drinking set, of which the two jugs found beside the cinerary urn and probably the crater-urn itself formed a part.

It was possible to retrieve only one of the two characteristic jugs, the mushroom rim jug (8–2; fig. 3), that was found at the bottom of the grave next to the base of the urn. The second, the trefoil-rim jug, must still lie outside the area excavated.

From the second quarter of the 8th century BC, the pottery assemblage characteristically accompanying the urns at Al-Bass was invariably made up of the trefoil-rim and the mushroom-rim jugs, placed together or else one on either side of the urn and leaning against it. Their regular presence in a great many of the burials obviously reflects well established ceremonies. The contents were probably prized and the pot shapes suggest they were designed to contain two very different substances. The trefoil-rim jug is perfectly adapted for pouring and the shape of the lip suggests it held a fairly thin liquid, such as wine. The physico-chemical analyses performed so far on samples of earth from inside the jugs have not given satisfactory results. The mushroom-rim jug suggests a different function. The shape of the lip is perfectly adapted to contents which were not destined to be poured but to be perfectly protected against spillage. Analysis of samples from inside one of these jugs yielded remains of wax. We do not know whether the wax derived from the stopper that sealed the jug, or from the contents. If the latter, then honey could have been present.

In any case, the presence in the majority of the tombs of a jug probably containing quality wine – the trefoil jug – and another containing perfumed oils, honey or hydromel (a mixture of honey and water) – the mushroom-rim jug – is not out of keeping with these mortuary contexts. Wine and hydromel are drinks that were much prized in funerary contexts across various parts of the ancient world. The treatment accorded to this pair of funerary jugs, moreover, suggests they had distinct social value. In all the examples where an element of protection has been preserved, for covering or protecting these jugs inside the graves, the trefoil jugs were usually protected merely by re-used fragments of pottery or storage jars. By contrast, all those mushroom jugs whose mouths had been protected, were invariably protected by a Fine Ware bowl, considered to be the luxury ceramic of the period. From this it is inferred that the contents of the mushroom rim jug enjoyed higher social prestige than those of the trefoil jug.

The accessory pots in the Al-Bass tombs are located separately from objects for the deceased's personal use. This table ware undoubtedly evokes the practice of the *symposium* or funerary banquet described by Homer. The frequent presence of such pots implies that these rituals of drinking and eating were commonly part of funerary ceremonies in the Mediterranean world, albeit generally restricted to those of the aristocracy (cf. Morris 1987; Bartoloni 2002). In the necropolis at Tyre, this ceremonial drinking – of wine in particular – during the funeral rites of the deceased, became common in the first half of the 8th century BC and reached every stratum of society.

In the Near East and the Mediterranean, wine occupied pride of place in the funerary banquet, symbolising the exaltation and prolongation of the habits of everyday life beyond

the grave. In this context, the use of unguents and perfumed oils to anoint the body in the course of the *symposium* is of the same social import as the act of drinking – if not more so. This finds expression in the middle of the 8th century BC in the Biblical prophecy of Amos (Amos 6: 4–6), aimed at curbing the excesses of foreign – for which read Phoenician – influence on the customs of the people of Israel:

> "[those] that lie upon beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches and eat the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall. . . that drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the chief ointments"

The fire ritual

Subsequently, and before closing the grave, a fire was lit inside the trench in tomb no. 8. Stems and leaves of reeds, white poplar, fig, vine and olive trees were used and must have burnt fiercely since traces of carbonised material and charred stems remain throughout the trench, even affecting the outside of the urn and plates and bowls deposited inside the grave; these have clear signs of having been subjected to fire (fig. 2). The place where the fire was probably lit can be observed on the shoulder of the urn where the layer of carbon is thickest. Once kindled, burning fragments must have fallen to the bottom of the grave, charring most of the grave goods.

In other tombs in the necropolis, the same ritual has been observed, that of lighting fires inside and outside the urn after it had been deposited with its grave goods. In every case, the material used as fuel is the same and reflects a careful and uniform selection of plant and tree species, generally quite light herbaceous and woody plants that burn very fast. Chief among the species selected are reeds that kindle rapidly and flare up immediately; there are also branches of olive, lime and pine, which produce a lot of aromatic smoke, while oak and nettletree (Celtis sp.) help to nourish the fire and keep it going for a long time. Thus purifying fire and the production of aromatic smoke seem to be the purposes of these bonfires, in what would be the start of the ceremony of the closing of the tomb. Furthermore, the great variety of species identified and the total absence of cedar, Scots pine and cypress show that it was mainly branches and leaves of the different plant and tree species from the immediate surroundings and not from the mountains of the interior that were used as fuel.

The religious component

In the trench of Urn 8, the layer of carbonised material and embers reached up to the level of the lip of the cinerary vessel. Everything seems to indicate that, before the fire was completely put out and when the embers were still smoking, a large rectangular wooden box was placed on top of the urn; its charred outline can be perfectly detected at the top of the urn and 5cm above the lip of the vessel (fig. 2c). The box contained four terracotta models that were found piled on top of each other, the most striking of which was a large mask of a male, placed face downwards and resting on two architectural terracottas and the effigy of a horseman (fig. 4). Unlike the wooden box, the terracotta models were almost unaffected by the fire, so they must have been placed at the top of the grave when the fire was virtually out. Analysis of the charred wood showed that the box had been carved from *Pinus pinnea*. The four terracotta models clearly form a unit; this is based mainly on the manufacturing technique, since the clays they are made of indicate that they come from the same workshop.

It is not easy to determine the real meaning of these terracotta models, so popular in the funerary deposits of the Phoenician and Cypriot world in the Iron Age. The presence of a life-size male mask with traces of polychrome decoration might suggest that we have here the burial of a man. The mask is an eminently funerary emblem and from the necropolis at Akhziv, notable for its affinity with Al-Bass, we have another example of a bearded male

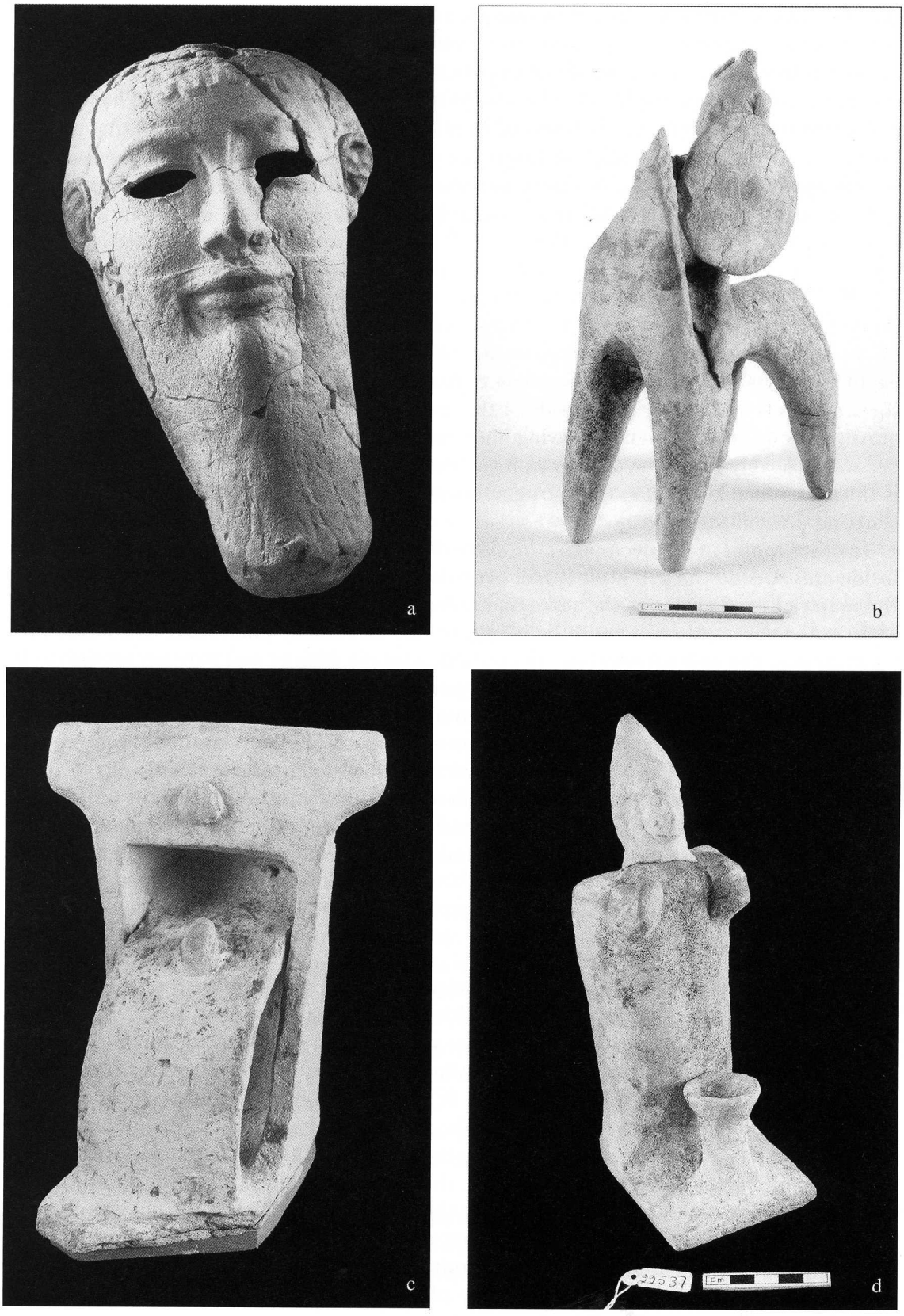


Fig. 4 The terracottas from Tomb no. 8

mask in terracotta, also with polychrome traces (Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem). It comes from the excavations undertaken by Prausnitz in 1960 and came to light in association with inhumations and cremations found inside a monumental chambered tomb of the 9th–8th centuries, re-used in the 6th century BC (Prausnitz 1962: 405, plate XLIVb; Culican

1975–76: 55, fig. 10; Smith *et al.* 1993: 65–68, figs. 20–21). Both masks, the one from Tyre and the one from Akhziv, have many elements in common with other bearded terracotta masks, probably also from the VIth century, that were found in the sanctuary of Aphrodite in Amathus (Hermary 2000: 1050, figs. 6–7). The excavations at Khaldé, Beirut, Sarepta and Kition have yielded other analogous examples (Markoe 1990: 14, figs. 1–4; Badre 1997: 88, fig. 47). The fact that in Cyprus masks of this type are found associated with places of worship suggests that we are looking at funerary items of a religious nature.

As to the terracotta representation of a horseman with a shield, it also has striking similarities with examples found in the South cemetery at Akhziv. The latter appear in a single shaft tomb of the 8th–6th centuries BC, cut into the rock, which has been called the "Tomb of the Horseman" (Smith, Mazar *et al.* 1993: 59, fig. 6; cf. Mazar 2001: figs. 55–56). In the example from Tyre, the horseman is wearing a sharp-pointed helmet on which the remains of a horn have been preserved on the right hand side. This element is significant because in Cyprus and the Levant, the horned helmet is the prerogative of deities. In the case of the terracotta figure from Urn 8, we do not know what deity it may represent.

Lastly, the presence of two schematic models of sanctuaries reasserts the importance of the religious element in these last funerary offerings to be deposited in the burial. Both belong to the type called "architectural models", well known from the Late Bronze Age in sanctuaries in the Levant (Metzger 1993). One of the two examples with polychrome traces (no. 8–10), is a schematic representation of a sanctuary or sacred edifice with all its architectural elements: at the back it has an arched plaque – probably the flight of steps or ramp – with a kind of truncated column at the top, and a projecting "roofing plate" on the obverse, representing a one-room shrine. A small sphere on the reverse probably represents the disc of the sun or moon. The Al-Bass model has an almost identical parallel in the necropolis of Akhziv (Culican 1976; Dayagi-Mendels 2002: fig. 7.25) and they both imitate shrines of gods or one-room temples in miniature, intended to accommodate an image of the god El or Baal. In the example from Tyre, the symbols of the divinity, the solar emblem and the truncated column or stela-betylos, are included inside it (Metzger 2003). This is a grave gift expressing the donor's reverence for the deity present in the temple. With it, the dead person places himself under the protection of the god to whom the model is dedicated, probably the same god represented in the image of the horseman.

The second architectural model (no. 8–11) is an anthropomorphic shrine-model, in which a figure appears in front of a sacrificial stand with arms raised in a gesture of benediction. Although it has no divine attributes, it probably represents a deity, which means that the deceased identified himself with a worshipper or a god and is directly connected with the place of worship.

It is obvious that the definitive closure of the grave was associated with an important religious offering by means of which the deceased identified himself with a male deity and made certain of his protection after death.

Closure ceremony and symbolic destruction

At the time when the box containing the terracotta models was deposited, the funeral trench was closed by raising two large stones to mark the entrance to the pit (figs 1–2). These stones were placed directly above the terracotta models, and probably while the embers were still smoking since the base of the two stones, as well as a few remains of plates, were slightly charred.

Once the burial was closed, one or two jugs (P. 20–21; fig. 3) were apparently overturned and deliberately broken around the entrance to the grave. Although the best preserved jug, of mushroom-rim type, was resting on top of the carbonised material, it showed no signs of burning, so it, together with various plates and bowls that had fallen to the bottom of the grave (nos 8–8 and 8–9; fig. 3), must have been thrown on to the grave once the fire was completely out. In that case, the act of throwing the jug and other receptacles on

to the grave coincided with the definitive closure of the tomb and the end of the funeral ceremonies in honour of the deceased.

In reality the whole of the funeral process seems to have had as its aim the destruction of personal possessions by fire. The final stage of the funeral practices thus reproduced the initial phase of the funeral, which also consisted of destruction by fire – of the body of the deceased.

The presence of pottery, deliberately destroyed on the grave – plates and a jug containing probably perfume or aromatic oils – is a habitual practice in many other tombs in this necropolis. These ritual practices, in which symbolic destruction or purification is related to death and to the final closure of a grave, must have been fairly extensive in the sphere of Phoenician funerals, although they may at times have passed unnoticed. Thus, something similar is seen in the cemetery at Khaldé, where the presence of pottery intentionally broken on tomb no. 166 (Saidah 1966: 76) is documented; in Akhziv, where a pottery offering had been broken on the roof of a chambered tomb (Prausnitz 1982: 37); in 'Atlit, where broken vessels were found deliberately smashed on the cremations (Johns 1938: 122–4) and also in the colonies, as shown by tomb no. 4 at Trayamar, from the end of the 7th century BC, in which a great many red burnished plates, deliberately broken, had been deposited in the approaches to the grave and outside the chambered tomb, once the latter had been definitively closed after the last burial (Niemeyer & Schubart 1975: 85–86, Taf. 21–23).

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