



Fig. 18. The painted chamber and sarcophagus, prepared for conservation, restoration, and documentation

The town of Bayt Ras, located in northern Jordan, stands on the site of ancient Capitolias, one of the ten cities of the Decapolis League founded during the Hellenistic period. In November 2016, municipal work to expand a waste-water network led to the accidental discovery of a Roman-period tomb next to a boys' school (see Fig. 19). Scholars have related this structure with another burial chamber, discovered in 1973 underneath the school. The newly discovered tomb is a hypogeal structure with two burial chambers. The larger contains a large basalt sarcophagus which holds human remains (Fig 18). The most significant features of this tomb are the well-preserved paintings and inscriptions on the walls and the ceiling of the largest chamber, covering an area of approximately 62 m². Based on the inscriptions and wall paintings, the hypogeum was probably constructed and painted in the 2nd century A.D.

The original tomb entrance was apparently intact and blocked in antiquity. It was possible to investigate the tomb through the hole created during the accidental discovery, made in an area where the wall paintings had already collapsed. The Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DOA), in partnership with the Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project (USAID SCHEP), implemented by the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR), Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), l'Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA), and Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro (ISCR), have been conducting cleaning, conservation, geological survey, and documentation

BAYT RAS

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of the tomb since April 2017. The authors acknowledge the contributions of Giuseppe Delmonaco (ISPRA team coordinator) and Giovanna De Palma (ISCR team leader) to these activities.

The walls of the painted chamber are without loculi. The basalt sarcophagus is adorned with two lion heads and an uninscribed tabula ansata, intended to bear the name of the tomb owner. Reused carved stones protect the lower part of the coffin. There is evidence of successive phases of use in the tomb, including access post-dating the Roman period. A lead pipe coming from the entrance wall continues in the southeast corner, at the height of a rock bench. A passage in the northeast corner leads to a vestibule. From there, a small wall opening leads to a space where bodies of the dead rested. The one-meter high and uninterrupted frieze running on three walls includes close to 230 figures, 62 tagged by inscriptions in Greek letters. On the south side appear a banquet scene, an enclosure wall, a long grape scroll, rural daily life scenes, and buildings. Towards the east, stands a central scene of prime importance: Zeus Kapitoliος enthroned is flanked by Tyches (Fortunes of the city and of Caesarea Maritima). Three Graces as well as a libation scene underline the god's authority. On the left side, workers are busy around tree trunks (see cover image for part of scene); on the right, are depicted in detail building activities requiring animal transport (camels). This theme continues on the north wall, which on its right side changes themes (libation scene, grouping of deities).

Many ancestral Greek deities intervene in circumstantial aspects: they banquet, they stand together, and they remind the viewer of the religious context of the activities conducted by the different corporations of workers for the Capitolias city inhabitants. The entrance wall presents two mythological tall figures, of which only the Nile River figure is preserved. The magnificent polychromy of the ceiling depicts five Nereids overlapping sea monsters in the company of cupids, around a compartmentalized composition (zodiac signs and planets). The central medallion reveals part of a quadriga (perhaps for Helios?). A painted rock cutting allowed for an object to hang. The open passage at the northeast corner has one tall figure holding objects, while above is a Nilotic scene.

The coexistence of Greek and Aramaic is rare, here enhanced by the workers tagged with words written in the Aramaic language, but transcribed in Greek. Gathered in a hypogeum, three main thematic elements—the landscape (myth foundation), the seascape (Nereids), and the astrological composition (zodiac)—make the Bayt Ras discovery unique.



Fig. 19. Urban Bayt Ras context of the discovery (ancient East Capitolias necropolis)