Bayt Ras

Jehad Haron
ACOR
jehad.schep@acorjordan.org

Nizar Al Adarbeh
ACOR
cop.schep@acorjordan.org

Ahmad Lash
Department of Antiquities of Jordan
ahmadlash@yahoo.com

The town of Bayt (Beit) Ras, located in northern Jordan, stands on top of ancient Capitolias, one of the ten cities of the Decapolis League founded during the Hellenistic period and listed by Pliny the Elder (Lenzen 1988). In 2016, a Roman-era hypogeum was discovered by accident in the area, with lavishly painted walls and a prominent basalt sarcophagus indicating the importance of the find. Funded by USAID SCHEP (Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project), the Bayt Ras Tomb Project started in 2017 (Haron and Vibert-Guigue 2018) in association with the Department of Antiquities and a consortium of other national and international organizations (the American Center of Oriental Research [ACOR], USAID SCHEP, the Institute français Proche-Orient [Ifpo], Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro [ISCR], Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale [ISPRA], and the French National Center for Scientific Research [CNRS]). In 2017 the project's work had focused on documentation, survey, and first aid conservation to secure the tomb and its internal conditions; in 2018–2019, direct interventions such as excavation, conservation, and digital documentation were implemented. Two seasons of excavations revealed the tomb's physical plan (Fig. 1) and cleared the burial chambers and the basalt sarcophagus. The initial phases of analysis resulting from the excavation (Fig. 2) could be summarized as follows:

Phase I: Banquet room with frescoes

The hewing started by the main entrance, which has maintained its original dimensions. Workers cut the rock from the ceiling to the floor and have followed a horizontal crack to make the ceiling as stable and regular as possible. The two rooms and the niche of the main room were hewn in the same phase, as shown by the continuity of the mortar and frescoes on the walls.

Phase II: Tomb with sarcophagus

During the second phase, the benches were dismantled in room 1, leaving the bedrock apparent at the bottom of the north and south walls. The first course of the west bench was conserved to be used as a small podium on which a huge sarcophagus of basalt was placed, across from the entrance. The doorframe was made with ashlars of a local limestone, badly dressed with the help of several chips of basalt used as wedges.

Phase III: Partitioning of the tomb

A wall of ashlars was built in front of the sarcophagus. From the edge of the previous bench/podium, it reached the ceiling, where traces of the mortar are clearly visible.

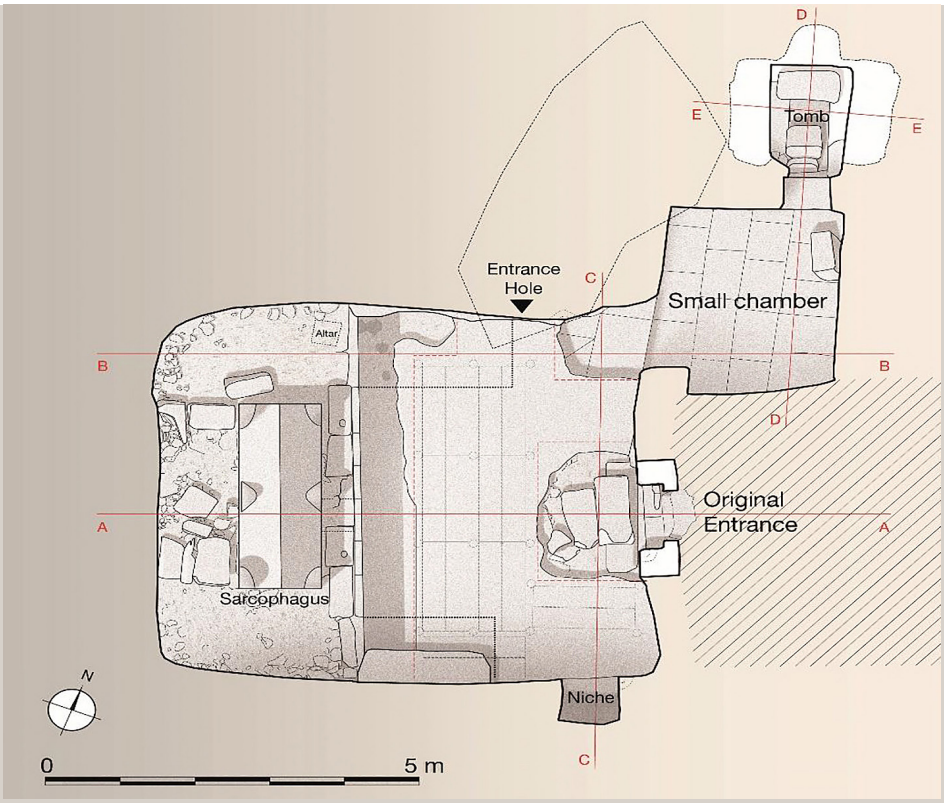

Fig. 1. Plan of the hypogeum. (Image courtesy of Ifpo.)

For other phases of research, which are still ongoing, fifteen human bone samples were sent for radiocarbon dating. The results are in line with the hypotheses that were previously proposed, indicating that the tomb was in use from the 1st century AD to the 5th century AD.

Alongside the excavation team, the conservation team members were present during the daily excavation work to ensure proper intervention and avoid any impacts on the mural paintings. Many mural painting fragments were saved and documented by the conservation experts. The conservation team also conducted stabilization work through filling and injecting special materials in some parts of the mural painting in order to avoid degradation. Monitoring the microenvironment inside the hypogeum is fundamental, especially controlling the humidity, so monitoring devices were installed to read temperature and humidity. The readings are reviewed regularly.

The documentation activities utilized different approaches to document the mural paintings, which feature 250 scenes from daily life and about 65 inscriptions that have been identified: three Greek and 62 written in the local Aramaic dialect using the Greek alphabet. The documentation team used hand drawing, photogrammetry, and digital analysis through iconography, which provided us with high-resolution photos and in-depth analysis of the paintings and the possibility of understanding the different techniques used to produce them.

Geological stabilization was conducted by installing crack monitoring devices inside the hypogeum. With these devices, we have determined that the tomb has remained stable until

now due to mitigation measures that were taken, such as closing the school gate directly behind the site and halting the movement of any machinery in the western part of the site. Scaffolding was also installed inside the tomb in 2017 to aid in stabilization.

Hands-on training courses in various topics were held concurrently with these activities, such as first-aid conservation of wall paintings, Roman pottery analysis, and documentation. Most of the trainees were employees of the Department of Antiquities, as well as of the Petra Development and Tourism Region Authority, and many were graduate students.

References

Al Adarbeh, Nizar, Jehad Haron, and Barbara A. Porter. 2017. "USAID SCHEP Update: The Bayt Ras Tomb Project." *ACOR Newsletter* 29 (2): 5–6.

Haron, Jehad and Claude Vibert-Guigue. 2018. "Bayt Ras." *Archaeology in Jordan* [1] 2016–2017: 21–2.

Lenzen, C. J., and A. M. McQuitty. 1988. "The 1984 Survey of the Irbid/ Beit Ras Region." *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 32: 265–74.

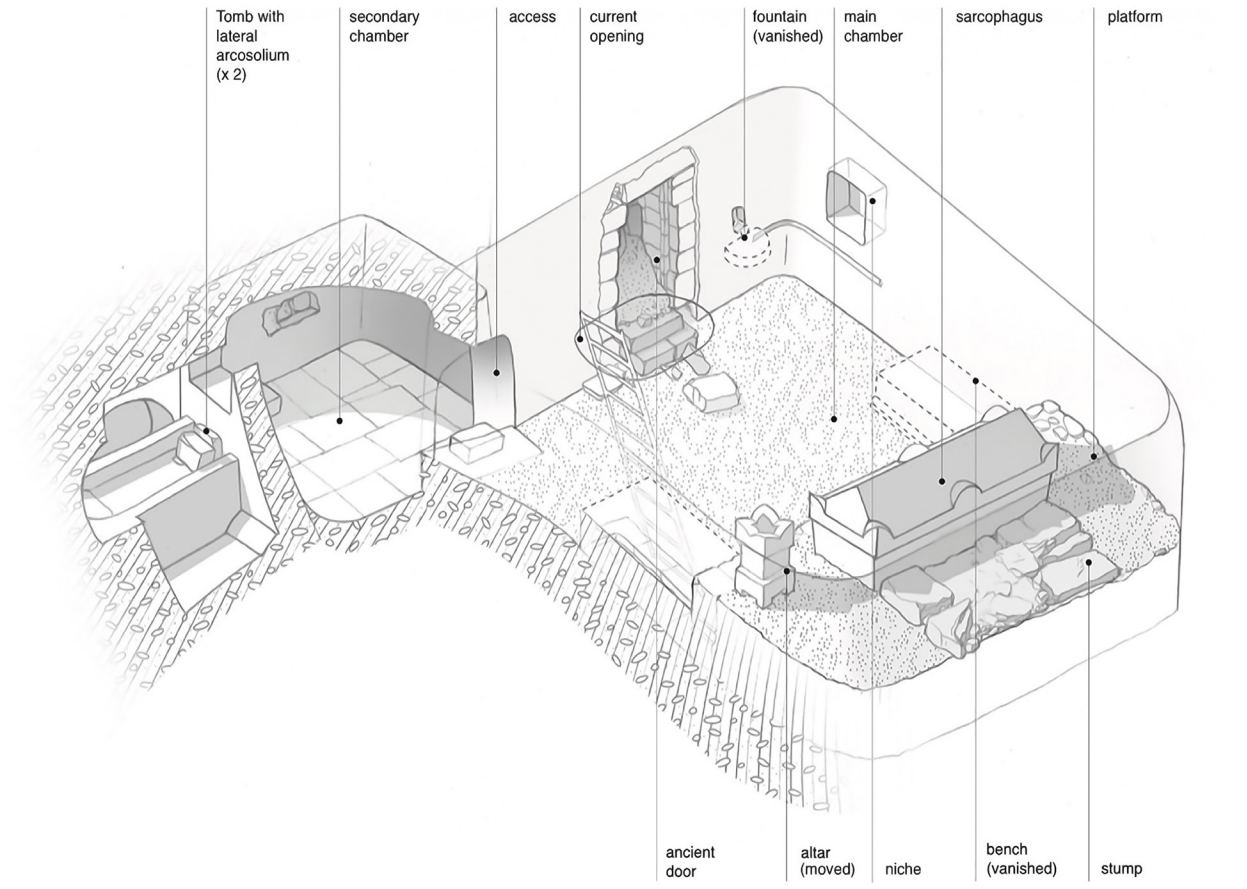

Fig. 2. Isometric plan of the hypogeum. (Images courtesy of Ifpo.)