Bayt Ras Tomb Project

Claude Vibert-Guigue
Archéologie et Philologie d'Orient et d'Occident (AOrOc), Centre national de la recherche scientifique-École normale supérieure PSL, Paris
claude.vibert-guigue@ens.psl.eu

Jean Humbert
American Center of Research
jhumbert.po@gmail.com

The discovery by the Department of Antiquities of a painted hypogeum at Bayt Ras (Capitolias) in November 2016 was a major event for the study of Decapolis necropolises. Missions conducted on site from April 2017 within the framework of the Bayt Ras Tomb Project led by J. Haron and N. al-Adarbeh (both American Center of Research) and A. Lash (Department of Antiquities) confirmed the urgency of documenting this important and fragile testimony of cultural heritage. This was done between 2017 and 2019 by a Centre national de la recherche scientifique-École normale supérieure PSL, Paris, mission. The objective was to establish iconographic and epigraphic documentation in context, with the aim of vectorizing the 16.50 m-long frieze (Fig. 1). Beginning in 2018 with the sixty-five inscriptions, the project found its full dimensions thanks to an agreement with the American Center of Research's USAID-funded Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project (SCHEP), which financed the vectorization of the hundred or so scenes of deities, workers, scholars, animals, vegetation, construction scenes, libation, and so forth. The challenge was to reproduce the colorful rhythm of this composition in a way that not only presented all its originality in a scientific manner but also conceived of it as a working tool for future studies (e.g., description, analysis, comparison, interpretation).

The vectorization work, entrusted to Jean Humbert, began in October 2019, continued during the coronavirus containment period, and was completed in October 2021. A coordination was set up remotely between Humbert in Cyprus, the laboratory in Paris (Archéologie et Philologie d'Orient et d'Occident; CNRS-AOrOc), and the American Center in Amman. The pictures were rectified and processed to match the line drawings made from the orthographies of the walls by the architect S. Bechetoille-Kaczorowski (Institut français du Proche-Orient). Then, a model file was elaborated from a vectorization drawing software, so that each element of a scene appears on a separate layer. Next, these "scene files" were assembled into "wall files" (south, east, north), always taking into account the archaeological state of the decor, since a layer reproduced alterations. This approach requires rigor, patience, and multiple adjustments, given the inclination of the walls, the bumpy surfaces, and a great wealth of motifs. It offers a better reading of the pictorial compositions alongside the reference photographs and a numbered cartography of the decorations. Its aids the iconographic research by making clear the appearance of the divinities, in particular Zeus Kapitolios flanked by the Tyches of Caesarea (Maritima) and Capitolias (identified by the epigraphists in Lyon [CNRS-Laboratoire HiSoMA (Histoire et Sources des Mondes

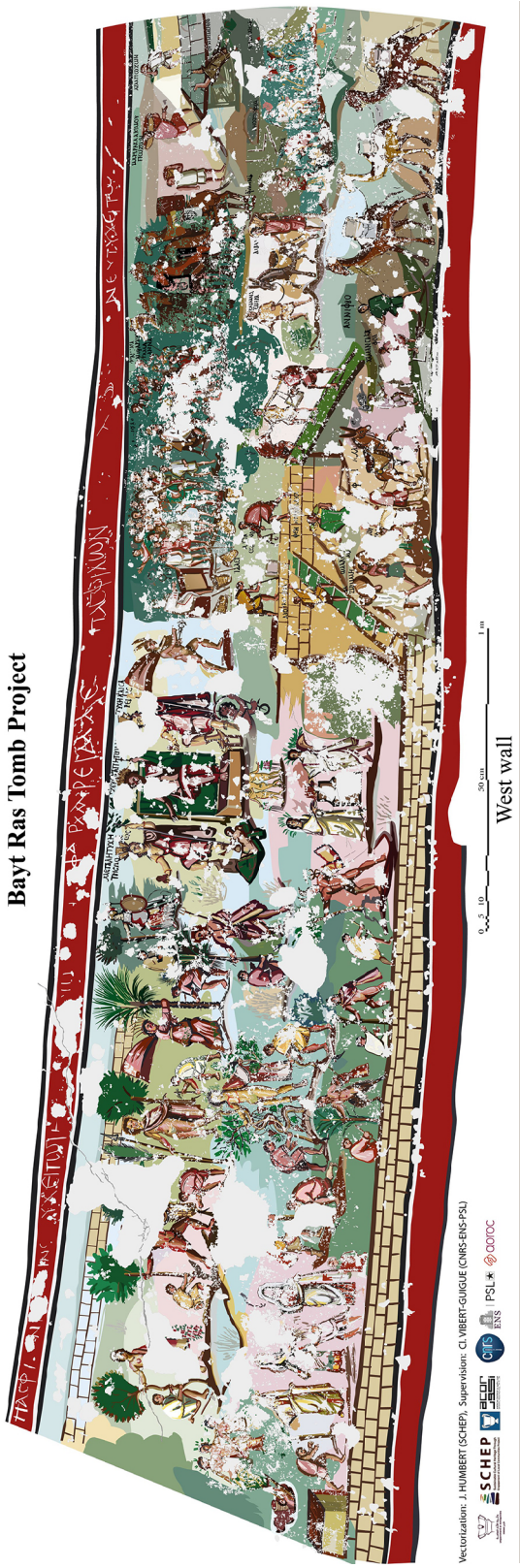

Fig. 1. Part of the vectorized Bayt Ras frieze on the west wall. (Vectorization by J. Humbert; supervisor Cl. Vibert-Guigue [CNRS-ENS, PSL].)

Antiques)]), the constructions (enclosed monuments, building site), and vegetation. An infinite number of combinations are possible, with the workers of earth and stone, and their donkeys, camels, and tools. This rich pictorial heritage has allowed for the first time the testing of the vectorization technique on a large scale, with promising results in terms of archaeological documentation and iconographic analysis (Fig. 2). This project proved that it is possible to work and communicate at a distance, provided that the field recordings were treated as a priority.

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Fig. 2. Home and remote work during COVID-19 pandemic containment.
(Photo by Cl. Vibert-Guigue.)