Bert de Vries, "'Be of good cheer! No one on earth is immortal' : Religious Symbolism in Tomb Architecture and Epitaphs at the Umm el-Jimal and Tall Hisban

Cemet¡ries," in Douglas   R. Clark et al, ed. *The Madaba Plains Project: Forty*

Years of Archaeological Research in Jordan's Past. Equinox, 2011: 196-215.

16 "Be of good cheer! No one on earth is immortal"

Religious Symbolism in Tomb Architecture and Epitaphs at the Umm el-Jimal and Tall Hisban Cemeteries

Bert de Vries

Introduction: Religion and the Archaeology of Death and Dying

This article is a subset of a larger study, "Religion and Society at Umm el-Jimal," being undertaken in the publication program of the Umm el-Jimal Project. The objective is to examine the archaeological data as a source for the religious history of the Umm el-Jimal community in the late pagan, Christian, and Islamic historical phases. This task would be easy if, as has been done traditionally, it were limited to presenting the remnants of overtly sacred religious practices, which at Umm el-Jimal would be several pagan altars of the 1st–3rd centuries AD (de Vries 2009) and the 15 churches of the 5th–9th centuries. It is assumed, however, that ancient pre-modern religion is pervasive in all cultural aspects of a society (cf. Lincoln 2006: 1-8, 51-61).

This point is necessary, because, unlike altars, temples, and churches, the symbolism of the tombs involved is not overtly religious. The tombs in question were constructed and put to primary use from the 1st–4th centuries AD and are therefore included in the general study of the late pagan phase. However, as will be seen, the diversity of tomb types is not geographically restricted, and the reusable chamber tomb in particular continued in use when religion changed from pagan to Christian. Clues to the specific religious meaning of these archaeological remains have to be derived from the larger contexts—other cultural remains on the site, the Hauran, the Levant, and the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean.

This study is therefore not about cemeteries as such, but what the cemeteries may tell us about the religion of the late pagan society that constructed the tombs and buried their dead in them. My first familiarity with tombs came from my role as architect on the Hisban Project, which involved the drawing of numerous tombs in the four seasons of cemetery investigation

from 1971 to 1976. Familiarity with the tombs of Umm el-Jimal began with the mapping of that site in the 1970s and continued with four seasons of cemetery excavations between 1984 and 1989. While the tombs at Tall Hisban were textually "silent," those at Umm el-Jimal are associated with numerous inscriptions. Analysis of these texts helps make this study specific and interesting. And it is hoped that the "voices" of Umm el-Jimal's tombs will help dispel the muteness of the Hisban tombs!

Tombs at Hisban and Umm el-Jimal

Architecture of Contemporary Cemeteries

Exploration and excavation of cemeteries was a stated strategy of the Hisban project, and tombs were located and excavated during the 1971, 1973, 1974, and 1976 seasons. The results were published in preliminary reports (Waterhouse 1973; Beegle 1975; Stirling 1976, 1978; Davis 1978) and a synthetic final report (Waterhouse 1998), which included a useful comparative catalogue of contemporary cemeteries at other Jordanian sites (Krug 1998), not including Umm el-Jimal. This work included mostly large chamber tombs, and a few smaller shaft and cist tombs.

Many monumental tombs at Umm el-Jimal were exposed since antiquity, but their architecture survived fairly intact until modern resettlement and the deliberate plundering of their masonry in the early 1980s. Their architecture was mapped during the Princeton University Expedition to Southern Syria in 1905 and 1909 and published with fine plans and sections by H. C. Butler (1913). Further analysis and excavation of the cemeteries was a component of the Umm el-Jimal project during the 1984, 1993, 1994, 1996, and 1998 field seasons. Preliminary reports have been published (de Vries 1993: 443-445; Brashler 1995, 2009a, 2009b; Brasher *et al.* 2009; Cheyney 1995, 2009). This work included a few already-disturbed large chamber tombs and many cist tombs.

While there is great similarity in tomb types, a major structural difference was predetermined by the disparate geological characteristics of the two places. The bedrock of the Hisban environment is soft limestone riddled with natural cavities in hilly terrain. It was therefore relatively easy to expand and shape existing cavities or excavate entirely new ones by digging down vertically from the surface or horizontally from slopes. The tombs are therefore entirely below the surface, cut into the existing bedrock, with architectural shapes the result of the sculpting of the cavities to create chambers, acrosolia alcoves, loculus partitions, and shafts. At Umm el-Jimal the bedrock is composed of relatively horizontal basalt lava flows. While there are fissures enabling quarrying from the surface, the stone is much too hard for efficient excavation of underground cavities. Chamber tombs were therefore created by quarrying from the surface and then building chamber tombs using basalt ashlar masonry, so that at least the entry façade and all the interior architecture consisted of well-dressed stacked masonry. While the occasional shaft tomb was cut into bedrock, the numerous single-cavity cist and pit tombs were excavated into the caliche-rich hard soils immediately above the basalt bedrock.

While the chamber tombs at Hisban are restricted by ceiling height to one tier of loculi (with arcosolia above in exceptional cases), those at Umm el-Jimal were constructed with two or more tiers of loculi. Thus, especially when three or four tiers were constructed, the earth-covered roof would protrude well above ground, with the lintel over the entry door a convenient surface for a dedicatory-memorial inscription.
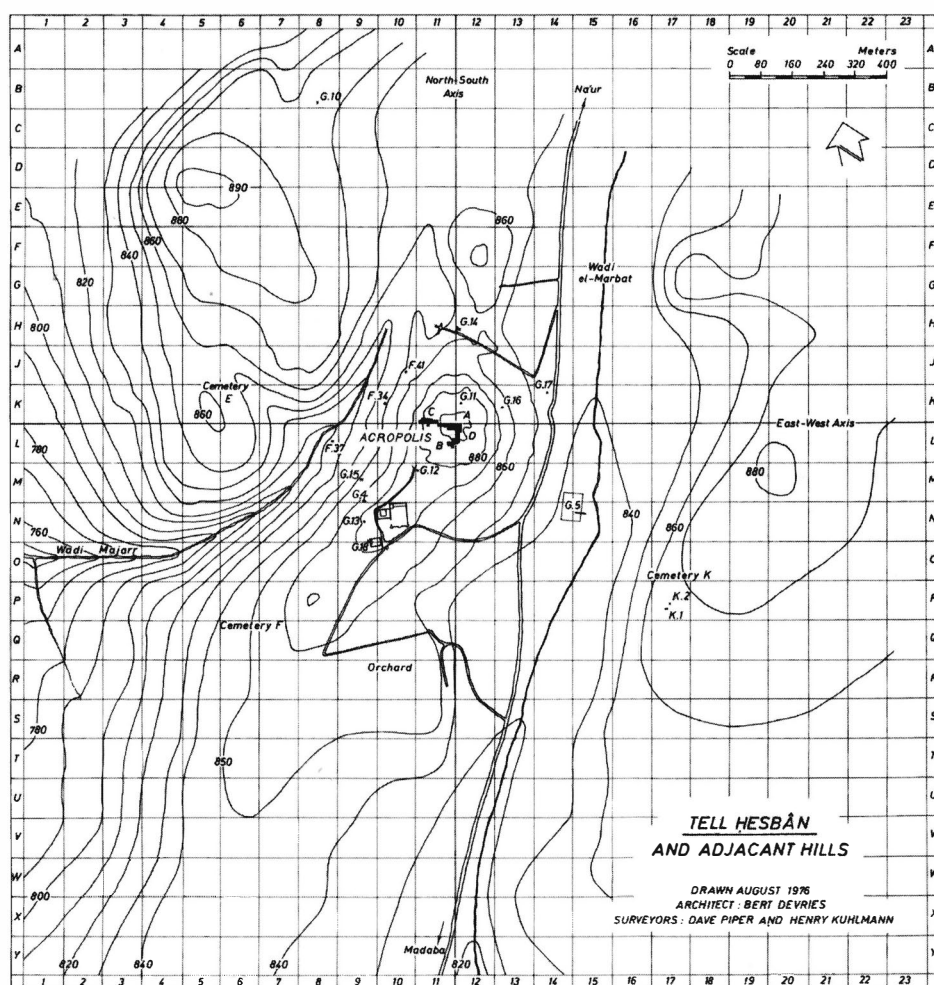
Figure 1. Map of Hesban and adjacent cemeteries
(Boraas and Geraty 1976: 16).

That the tombs at Umm el-Jimal are less hidden and appear more monumental seems, therefore, to follow from the logic of the differing environmental situations rather than from differing social and economic levels. In fact, when examined in the larger context, the tomb architecture of Greater Syria (Sartre-Fauriat 1989), the two sets of cemeteries begin to appear quite similar to each other. At the one extreme is the Amman Airport cemetery, where the numerous tombs are restricted to the cist type (Ibrahim and Gordon 1987). At the other are the monumental tower tombs and mortuary temples of Palmyra (Schmidt-Colinet 1989) and the great rock-cut tomb-temples of Petra (Wenning 2003). At such larger, monumental sites even the underground chamber tombs are huge, cavernous multi-chambered affairs with majestic arcosolia (e.g., North Dana in northern Syria [Sartre-Fauriat 1989: 428, Fig. 128b]) or many dozens of loculi (e.g., Palmyra [Schmidt-Colinet 1989: 451, Fig. 144]).
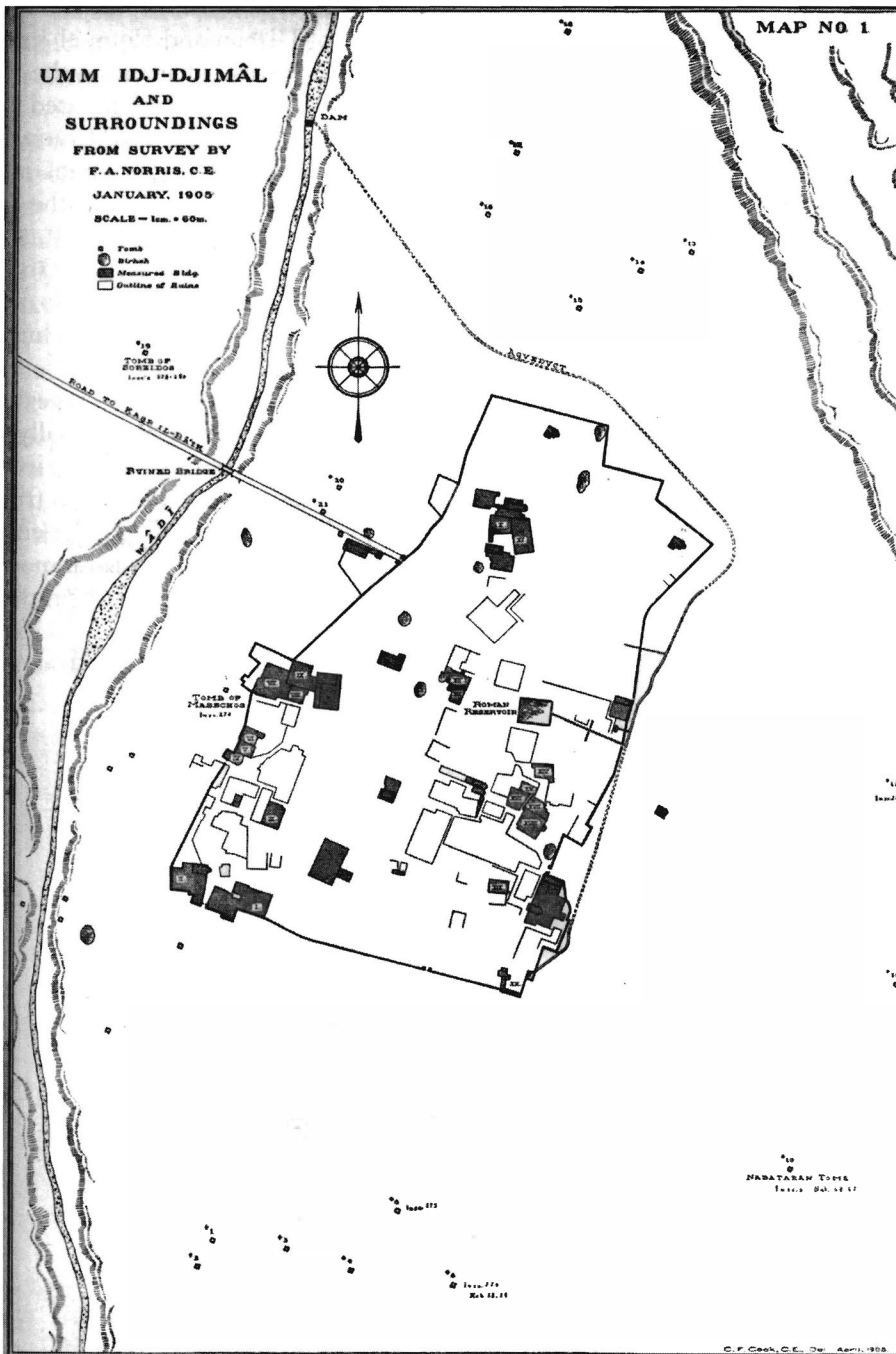
Figure 2. Map of Umm el-Jimal and adjacent cemeteries
(Butler 1913: Map No. 1).

Therefore, between the nomadic character of Queen Alia International Airport and the elite character of central city cemeteries, the tomb architecture of Hisban and Umm el-Jimal are similar in their reflection of the social milieu of countryside towns. That this is the typical architecture of such a milieu across southern Syria was beautifully demonstrated in the comprehensive catalogue of cemeteries in the closing chapter of Hesban 10, "Comparative Roman-Byzantine Tombs in Transjordan" (Krug 1998). While simple cist tombs may be considered ubiquitous across the Mediterranean world, the various versions of the square underground chamber tombs with loculi or arcosolia (Waterhouse 1998: Types I, III, and IV) appear to be indigenous to the east Mediterranean, where they are common in the southern Levant (cf. Krug 1998). Similar and larger, more monumentally executed versions also occur at Dura Europos and at Palmyra (Toynbee 1971: 219-234). Those at Palmyra were so huge and elaborate that they are considered a separate category (Ball 2001: 367-370).

A comparison of tomb locations on the Hisban and Umm el-Jimal site maps reveals their essential geographic similarities (figs. 1 and 2). Though neither community has formally established urban boundaries, it is clear that in both places burials were done outside these informal town limits, and in both cases they were scattered in clusters located in all directions from the town. At both Hisban and Umm el-Jimal this description fits equally well for the chamber tombs described above. At Umm el-Jimal the incidence of such burials begins immediately outside the domestic perimeter, both for monumental chamber tombs and the simpler cist which were found almost wherever the subsurface was probed (Areas Z, AA, and CC). To complete the comparison, several chamber tombs from each site are presented and illustrated here.
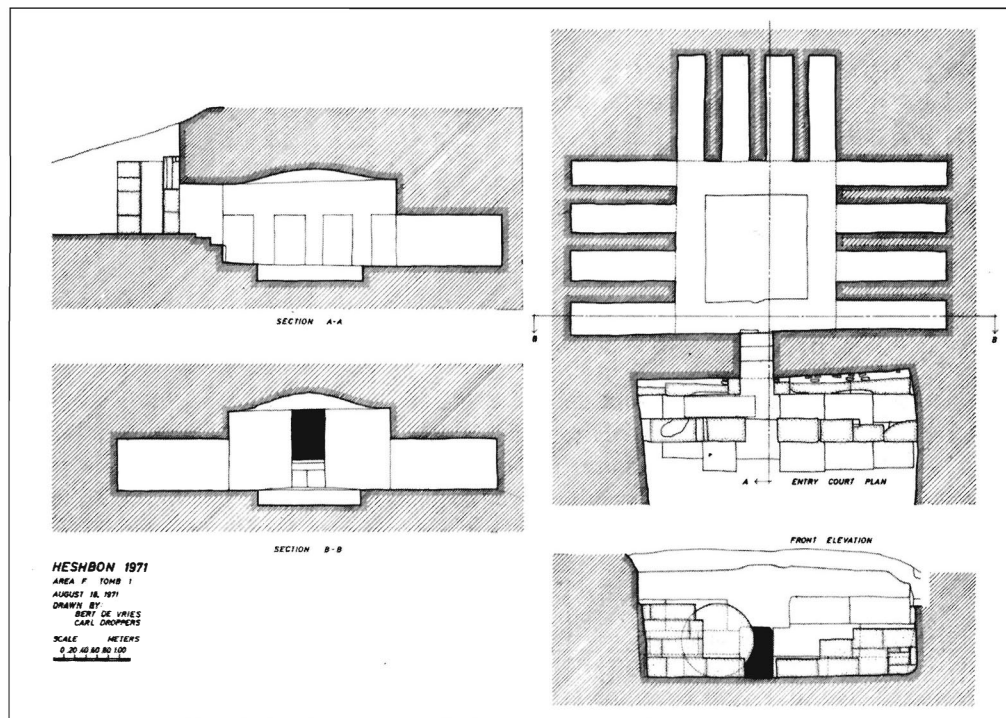

Figure 3. Rolling-Stone Tomb F. 1 at Hisban
(Waterhouse 1971: 119).

Both Hisban and Umm el-Jimal have an extensive repertoire of chamber tombs, of both loculus and arcasolia type. Their essential similarity is illustrated by one representative example from each, the so-called 'rolling-stone' tomb (Area F.1), which like all Hisban chamber tombs was a cavity carved out of the limestone bedrock, accessed through a typical square-cut doorway, but with a distinctive rolling-stone closure and exterior courtyard (fig. 3). Typical for such rock-cut chambers, this tomb had one tier of loculi, four on each of the three sides without the doorway.

At Umm el-Jimal, a representative example is the so-called "Stelae Tomb" (Butler 1913: 209-210). Like at Hisban, a small doorway opens onto a square chamber, with four loculi on the two sides and two in the wall opposite the doorway (fig. 4). However, while the plan is similar, the construction is very different. The tomb is entirely built of beautifully quadrated basalt building blocks in a depression created by quarrying the basalt bedrock. Not limited by the bedrock roof, the structure includes four tiers of loculi, with the first below ground level, but the upper three above ground. Thus, while the plan appears similar to that of the rolling-stone tomb at Hisban, the structure is actually much more elaborate. Inside, while the plan shows 13 loculi, the total is actually four times that, 52, so that the burial capacity is 4.5 times greater than that of the Hisban tomb. On the outside the doorway was placed at the second tier, above ground level, and the entire structure gives the appearance of a significant above-ground square structure, a substantial mausoleum.
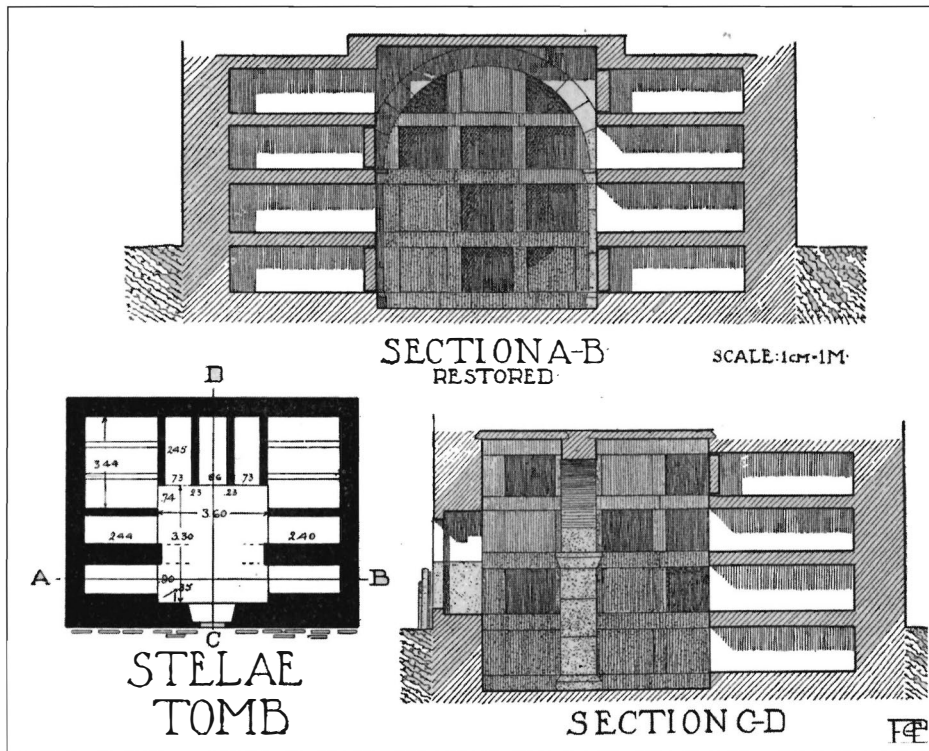

Figure 4. Stelae Tomb at Umm el-Jimal.
Note funeral stelae flanking entry in plan (Butler 1913: 209, ill. 190).

When compared to the much more monumental chamber tombs of Palmyra and Petra, the chamber tombs of Hisban and Umm el-Jimal appear more like each other, given the different materials available and the varying design possibilities those represent. In sum, while their construction and maintenance would require considerable family resources, they both appear modest in scale, with an architectural simplicity, and scant decoration. One would conclude that both represent rural, mid-level, elite members of the society of Greater Syria, those of the late Roman-era local cultures of the Madaba Plain and those of the Southern Hauran, respectively.

One of those differences is evident in the large incidence of cist and pit tombs at Umm el-Jimal and their relative paucity at Hisban. The numerous cist tombs at Umm el-Jimal represent an aspect of burial culture virtually missing at Hisban (fig. 5).

The best parallel for these numerous cist tombs is the Queen Alia International Airport cemetery. Comparison of the interpretation of these two sets of burials reveals their essential cultural similarity (Ibrahim and Gordon 1987: 35-41; Cheney 1997: 100-115). This similarity appears to indicate that the cist-burial-population group at Umm el-Jimal has a similar desert fringe nomadic background as the Queen Alia burial population. It appears, therefore, that burials at Umm el-Jimal reflect the coexistence of two culture groups, one the builders of chamber tombs, who share the general culture of urban-rural Syria enjoyed by sedentary mid-level society with the population of Hesban. The other, the users of cist and pit burials, share the less materialist nomadic heritage of transitional populations (between Syria and Arabia), the owners of the tombs in the Queen Alia cemetery. The key distinction between these two groups is not necessarily wealth-based but related to cultural economy: urban-agrarian vs. village-nomadic.

Figure 5. Typical cist burial at Umm el-Jimal, Area AA cemetery
(photo by Bert de Vries).

A major difference between burial cultures at Hisban and Umm el-Jimal is that the latter has a record of hundreds of funerary stelae with epitaphs, while Hesban has none. This may be an accident of preservation. While some of the Umm el-Jimal stelae were discovered *in situ*, most were recycled as spoils in the construction of the later Byzantine town, where they have survived in standing walls and the collapse debris. Because the basalt material of the Umm el-Jimal stelae has a near-zero decay rate, most of these epitaphs are as legible today as they were at the time of their creation. If the situation at Hisban were similar, the accident of preservation is that none of the stelae nor their epitaphs survived subsequent spoiling and plundering. It may be that such funerary monuments never existed there. Regardless, the prevalence of the stelae and epitaphs at Umm el-Jimal gives us a significant indicator of the culture of death in Greater Syria not available to us from Hisban. Given the coexistence of the two peoples in the same general culture sphere (indicated by shared chamber tomb architecture), analysis of the funerary epitaphs at Umm el-Jimal will give at least an indirect sense of the mortuary belief structure of the people of Hisban and the rest of Greater Syria.

The next section of the paper deals with the funerary epitaphs at Umm el-Jimal and neighboring sites.

Tombstones and Epitaphs

Tombstones as "nephesh"
While most stelae are found in secondary reuse, a significant number were still lined up at the entrances of two chamber tombs, the Nabataean Tomb and the Stelae Tomb. When the Nabataean Tomb was studied by Butler and Littmann during the 1905 Princeton expedition visit, many of the stelae were *in situ*, lining the sides of the *dromos* (exterior steps down to the entrance), as indicated in Butler's section drawing (fig. 6) and photograph (Butler 1913: 206-207; ill. 186). Littmann published the Nabataean stelae inscriptions as a group and demonstrated that two families are represented, including possibly four generations buried over the course of a century from the 1st–2nd centuries AD (Littmann 1914: 52-55, nos. 60-67).

Similarly, Tomb no. 16, the so-called "Stelae" Tomb, is shown with its stelae lining the front wall on both sides of the doorway in the plan (fig. 4) and photograph (Butler 1913: 206, ill. 186; 209-210). The 17 Greek inscribed stelae show orthographic similarity, but Littmann makes no effort to interrelate this group as he did those named at the Nabataean Tomb (1913: 216-222, nos. 494-516).

If the other chamber tombs had had similar stelae collections representing those buried inside, a large number of the known stelae would be accounted for. This may mean that funeral stelae with epitaphs were not used in conjunction with cist and pit burials, and none have actually been found, for example at the head of cists. Because the stelae range in quality of stone carving, writing style, and grammar from excellent to poor, it might seem that the better ones were placed at chamber tomb entrances, and the lower quality ones at cist/pit graves. However, a comparison of the quality of the Nabataean-inscribed stelae at the Nabataean Tomb and the Greek-inscribed ones at the Stelae Tomb does not support this idea. Those at the Nabataean Tomb are typically much more monumental and finely dressed, while those at the Stelae Tomb are relatively unfinished, with some appearing as roughly rectangular, undressed basalt stones in Littmann's published drawings. (Cf. the sets of Littmann inscriptions sited in the paragraph above.) It is therefore better to see these variations in quality as a reflection of the variety of status among the portion of society using chamber tombs, while the cist tombs

reflect the burial customs of a different sector of society for whom stelae with epitaphs had no significance (like those at the Amman cemetery).

The epitaph data from the stelae of these two tombs is further complicated by the ethnic-linguistic nature of the names of those buried. While the names in Nabataean (Nabataean Tomb) are all Arabic/Aramaic, e.g., Zabud, Masik, 'Asnum (Littmann 1914: 55), those in Greek (Stelae Tomb) range from Arabic/Aramaic (e.g., Asad, Zabda, 'Asnum) to Hellenized, e.g., Philippos, Heracles, Cassianos (Littmann 1913: 216-222), though all appear to be part of the same family associated with the patriarchal name Ya'mar (216, Inscr. 494 and others). Thus, the use of chamber tombs and associated stelae with memorial epitaphs runs the gamut of linguistic and onomastic preferences as well as a range of social and economic status and means (notwithstanding the fact that fairly substantial economic resources would be necessary to build a chamber tomb in the first place). One may conclude that this apparently diverse group (sedentists?) chose chamber tombs while another major segment of society (nomads?) chose cist and pit burials.

Though many epitaphs are written in Greek, far fewer are in Nabataean. Does this mean that Nabataean was significant only for the elites, whereas the ordinary people had access only to Greek (in their own "class," among stone cutters? Did Nabataean only retain meaning for the educated elites, descended from Nabataean hegemony, whereas the local Arab population serving the Roman overlords only had a need for Greek to survive in the post-106 power structure? While one would surmise that Nabataean was more popular when Nabataean kings held sway, there is good evidence to suggest that the two languages and scripts were used simultaneously, not only indicated by the occurrence of bilingual inscriptions like the one on the altar dedicated to Dushara Arra, but also by the apparent practice of using the two languages in parallel in funeral epitaphs.
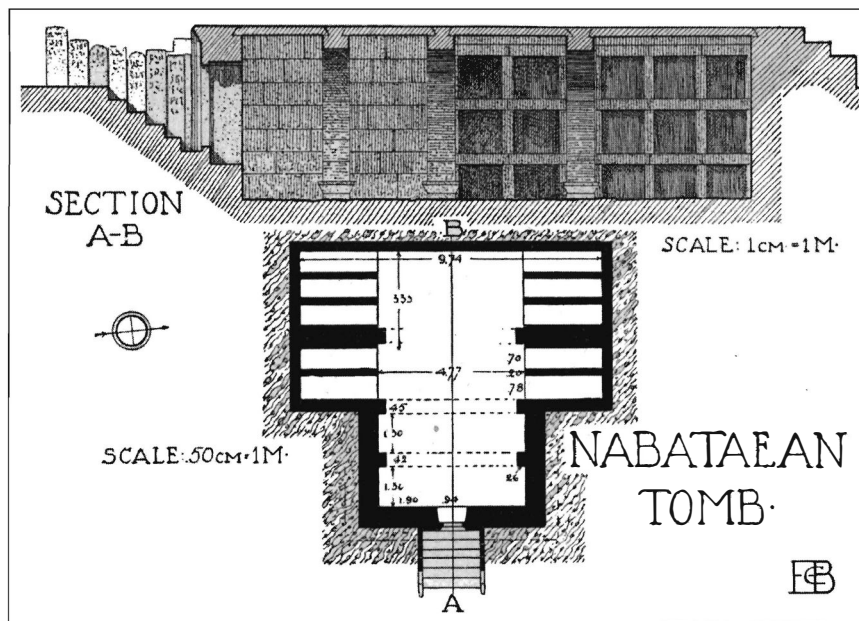

Figure 6. Plan and section of Nabataean Tomb. Note funeral *stele* lining stairway in section A-B (Butler 1913: 206-207; ill. 186).

Littmann discusses the case of two tombstones with identical names, one set in Nabataean, lining the *dromos* of the Nabataean Tomb, and their Greek counterparts found in the ruins.

> 1914: no. 65 = P. E. III no. 489 and 1914, no. 66 = P. E. III, no. 320
> No. 65: "'Asnum, daughter of Yātūr"
> No. 489: *Asnome Iatourou et ob'*
> No. 66: "Shāmit, son of Zabūd"
> No. 320: *Samethos Zaboudou 'et(wn) lg'*

Littmann surmises that the tomb *dromos* had the Nabataean Tomb stones lining one side (fig. 6), and their Greek counterparts the other side, from which they were removed for reuse in the Byzantine town construction. A problem is that a tomb *stele* was considered the *nephesh*, soul, of the person. How could one soul be represented by two stones, one in Nabataean and the other in Greek? He thinks this religious tradition is trumped by the factor of status among the elite class buried in this tomb. "However, among the higher classes this belief may have died out;...then it would have been a sign of great wealth and education, if...each person had a Greek and a Nabataean stele" (Littman 1914: 54).

The equation of the Nabataean *nephesh* with Greek *stele* occurs at Umm el-Jimal in the parallel Nabataean and Greek versions of the epitaph memorializing Fihr, the teacher of Gadhima, dated to the late 3rd century AD, both the orthography and the known career of Gadhima (Littmann 1914: 37, no . 41; 1913: 138, no 238). The Nabataean phrase, *dnh nfshw fhrw*, and the Greek, *'h stéle auté Ferou*, clearly equate *nefesh* and *stele*. Because the two stones are not in the shape of the typical Umm el-Jimal *stele* and are not *in situ*, the exact meaning intended for these terms here is not clear. *Nephesh* is alternatively translated as "soul" or "tomb," and it could be that the Greek rendering uses the term *stele* to mean "tomb" in this one instance (cf. Littmann 1914: 40).

However, Maurice Sartre confirms, using examples from Suweida and Irbid, that the *nephesh-stele* represents an above-ground monumental representation of the deceased, while the tomb below-ground contains the decayed version:

> Cette pratique semble avoir été répandue en Syrie du Sud. Comme en Emésène où les stèles portentent parfois des bustes ou des statues assises ou en pied des défunts. Elle permaittait de remplacer l'inscription sur la porte et de mettre en évidence la stèle (*néphesh*) considérée comme plus importante que le tombeau lui-même. Le développement de la stèle peut d'ailleurs conduire à lui donner un aspect architectural monumental, tandis que la sepulture proprement dite, restée souterraine, conserve un aspect fruste (Sartre-Fauriat 1989: 430-431).

Butler adopted the functional term "name tablet" to describe the *stele* erected outside the Nabataean and Stelae Tombs at Umm el-Jimal to indicate that these stones were representations of those buried within rather than simply memorial inscriptions (1913: 207, 210).

In summary, the above revealed the following. The numerous tomb stelae at Umm el-Jimal were used outside the chamber tombs to name those buried inside, rather than as markers for cist or pit burials. While the tomb loculi contained the decaying physical remains, the *stele* carried the name, and represented the essential existence, or soul (*nephesh*) of the deceased. Though there is not room to discuss this here, it seems plausible to the author that the stelae perpetuated the Nabataean practice of representing the essential personalities of both deities and deceased persons with stone pillars, as in the case of the Obelisk Tomb outside the Siq at Petra.

Epitaphs at Umm el-Jimal: Funerary inscriptions.

Although the various epitaphs neither relate to cultic sites nor refer to cultic practices, it is possible to make general inferences about their significance in the overall religious aspects of the pre-Christian culture of Umm el-Jimal. The preponderance of the epitaphs—hundreds—simply identifies the person buried and his/her father. Some of these preface the name with the phrase "Here lies…" A few have versions of the formula, "Be of good cheer, no one is immortal." Each of these will be presented and interpreted in this section followed by examples of other epitaphs from contemporary cemeteries elsewhere in the Hauran.

The name formula. The vast majority of tombstones give simply the name of the person and his or her father. Example: "Machos, (son of) Mathios, aged thirty" (fig. 7). See also the examples given above in both Greek and Nabataean. The names of women are common among these, and there seems to be no particular preferential treatment in epitaphs featuring males. The same is true for children.

Figure 7. *Stele* with typical epitaph: "Machos, (son of) Mathios, aged thirty."
Umm el-Jimal, from collapse debris of House 36 (photo by Bert de Vries).

Rarely, slightly more elaborate ones will add a description of the person. Two interesting examples follow. The first is: "Masechos, also called Soemos, (son of) Rawah. All his years (were) 40" (fig. 8). The nickname formula—*ho kai Soemos*—is rare, and may be thought necessary here because this person was so much better known as Su'eim than by his given name Māsik. Also, Māsik is very common at Umm el-Jimal, as is Rawah, which is also the eponymous name of tribal ancestry. The object, therefore, is to preserve the distinct name and personality of this individual on the *stele* displayed at the tomb of the Rawah family.
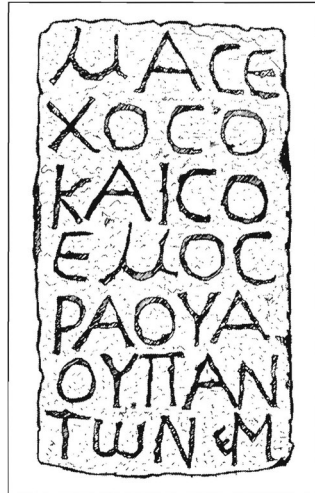
Figure 8. Epitaph, found in Umm el-Jimal Hse 97 collapse debris. "Masechos, also called Soemos, (son of) Rawah. All his years (were) 40" (drawn by Randa Sayegh).
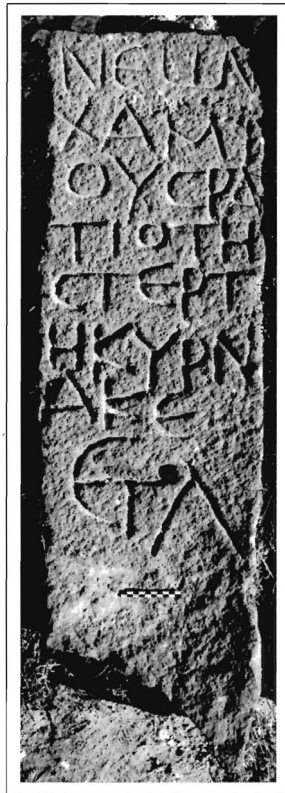

Figure 9. Epitaph, found at Umm el-Jimal outside Hse 53. "Neōn, son of Kamih, soldier in the Third Cyrenaica (legion), age 30" (photo by Bert de Vries).

The second inscription is a unique biographical reference, specifying the career (fig. 9): "Neōn, son of Kamih, soldier in the Third Cyrenaica (legion), age 30" (fig. 9; Littmann 1913: 177, 178-179, inscr. 349). The occurrence of Hellenized names like Neōn is fairly common, but service in the Third Cyrenaica Legion at Bostra by a "local boy" was unusual, for the Romans stationed troops from elsewhere—North Africa in the case of this legion—and used only local recruits when they became desperate. Thus Neōn's service in the local legion may have been the distinctly memorable feature of his persona.

Rarely, the name of the deceased is prefaced with the "*enthade keite*" (here lies) formula. One misspelled instance is: "Here lies Yakhlud…": "*Entātha kīte Ialoudos Ot[ai]mou. Etōv na*" (Littmann 1913: 163, no. 285). One has to assume, given the economy of words in Umm-el-Jimal epitaphs, that this is a standard part of the formula simply understood but not written 99% of the time.

Thus the standard epitaph is social and establishes family identity, but gives little else about the person, and omits overt religious allusions. Though women are extended equality of space and attention in epitaph and tomb, the social structure is clearly patriarchal, with identity connected to the father—with very rare exceptions in which his name is omitted—but never to the mother. As noted above, where epitaphs can be connected to the same chamber tomb, it is possible to interconnect individual name tablets into larger family groups. Given the prominence of the chamber tombs in the landscape surrounding the town, this made the society of the deceased coextensive with the society of the living. Jan Assmann calls this "constellative embedding"; he concluded that with such burial practices (applied by him to pre-Christian Egypt) "one intended to secure for the individual, for all time, a place in the social, geographical, and cultural space of the group. The tomb served life, not death…" (Assmann 2005: 12-13).

This conclusion, "the tomb served life," serves nicely for the late pagan funerary culture of Umm el-Jimal, where any overt mention of afterlife is absent from the epitaphs. Not only are the chamber tombs architectural monuments in the community, the dedication inscriptions over the doorways credit the builder, usually a close relative of those laid within. The Sareidos Tomb, one of several such, gives a modest example: Sarīd, son of Awīdh, made it" (Littmann 1913: 159, inscr. 279). That Sarīd Awīdh is also the dedicator of an altar to the God Solmos punctuates the pagan context (Littmann 1913: 139, inscr. 239; de Vries 2009). However, a tomb dedication at Salkhad in the Hauran explicitly connects the "served life" aspect to the monument with its role as dwelling of the dead: "This far-famed tomb, at once a great boast for the living and a place of repose for the departed, was completed by leaders of the people…" (AD 419; Littmann 1910: 95, no. 160).

The "Tharsi" *formula. Tharsi* is the common epigraphic spelling for *tharsei*, reflecting the late Roman-era Hauran practice to elide *epsilon-iota* to *iota*. Its literal meaning is "Be of good cheer!" (Littmann's consistent rendering) or "Have courage!" A free translation, "Don't be afraid!" can apply when the expected outcome induces trepidation. It is used with these same meanings in sources ranging from classical to late antique. At Umm el-Jimal it introduces the funerary formula *Thársei, 'oudeìs 'athánatos*! "Be of good cheer! No one is immortal." '*Athanatos*, literally means "undying," "deathless," but is usually translated more freely as "immortal." The formula originates in pagan contexts all across the Mediterranean (Lattimore 1962: 253-254) but continued in use in Christian and Jewish contexts of the late Roman and late antique periods (Simon 1981: 64). The formula may occur in its full form, or abbreviated

to the single code word *tharsi*. A catalogue of instances at Umm el-Jimal published by Littmann follows. Several others, still to be published, were found by the Umm el-Jimal Project.

On regular tomb stelae at Umm el-Jimal the stock formula is used once (fig. 10): *Thársi, 'oudeìs 'athánatos! Aedos. Et(ôn) Xi*. "Be of good cheer! Ā'idh. Age 60" (Littmann 1913a: 185-186, no. 374). In this case the name of the deceased is given in the nominative. *Thársi* alone as the code word for the entire phrase occurs six times in Littmann's catalogue (Littmann 1913a: 180-181, nos. 356, 357; 185-186, no. 375; 196, no. 420; 201-202, no. 441; 221-222, no. 517). In these, the name of the deceased occurs more commonly in the vocative, as in no. 375: *Thársi Bachrathe* "Be of good cheer, Bakrat!" In all of these except one only the name of the deceased, without the father's name, is given. One wonders, therefore, if this formula could be a special consolation for anyone whose father was unknown. In the following examples, however, the father's name is given.
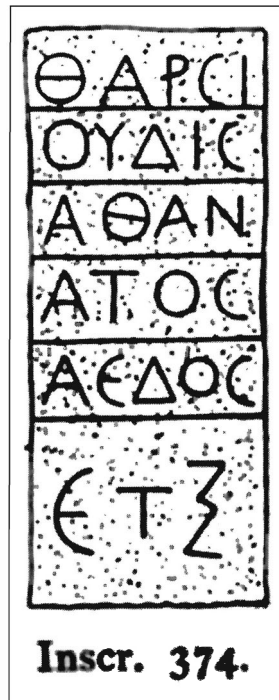

Figure 10. Inscription on *stele*, .75 × .32 cm, reused as a stairway tread in an Umm el-Jiaml
house to the east of the Barracks, "Be of good cheer, no one is immortal. Aedos, age 7"
(Littmann 1913: 185, no. 374).

A more elaborate epitaph puts *thársi* at the end: *Souēros Márkou etôn l'. Phíle pántōn, thársi*. "Severus, son of Marcus, aged 30. O friend of all, be of good cheer!" (Littmann 1913a: 187-188, no. 386). In this case Severus' pleasant personality appears to illicit the consoling encouragement.

The Tomb of Sareidos, a fine chamber tomb which was destroyed in 1981, had two interesting versions of the *thársi* formula. These are not on stelae, but inscribed on stones above the loculi in which the named deceased were buried.

1. The first is: "Radnat, daughter of Sharīd, (aged) 44 years, 2 months, Be of good cheer, mother, no one (is) immortal. I, Sharīd, (her) son, made it" (fig. 11). The key phrase is *Thársi mētēr, ʻoudeis ʻathánatos* (Littmann 1913a: 180-181, no. 280); Sharīd is also the builder of the tomb (see below).

2. The second is painted in red on two stones above the loculus across the entrance, commemorating Semat and Leontis, daughter and son of Taim, and Alexandros and Bu'aisat, son and daughter of Ba's. It ends with the phrase *Thársi, ʻoudeis aipi gē ʻathánatos*, "Be of good cheer, no one on earth is immortal!" (Littmann 1913a: 160, nos. 281, 282). A more correctly written version of this expanded formula occurs at Tisiyeh, a village 12 km north of Umm el-Jimal: "Be of good cheer, Sophia, no one on earth (*ʻepì gês*) is immortal!" (Littmann 1910: 76, no. 104). Adding "on earth" punctuates the irreversible universality of the already absolute, "no one." Deathlessness is not attainable by any human anywhere. M. Simon reports "among all living" and "in the kosmos" as alternatives to "on earth" used in the *thársi* formula elsewhere in the Mediterranean (1981: 69).
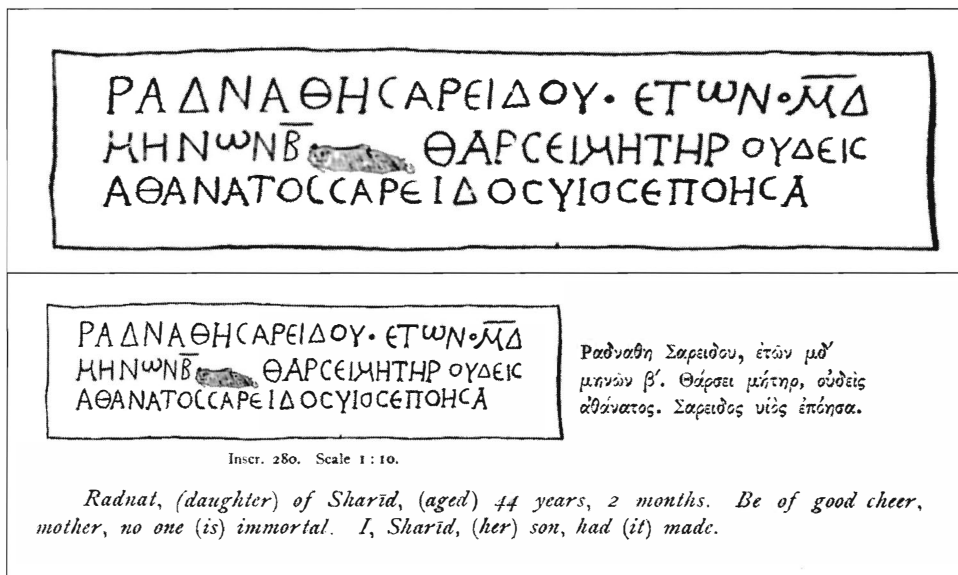

Figure 11. Inscription above loculus inside Sareidos Tomb at Umm el-Jimal commemorating Radnat, the daughter of Sareidos, "Be of good cheer, mother, no one is immortal" (Littmann 1913: 160, no. 280).

It is tempting to read a lot of theology into this formula. (Simon [1981] gives full discussion of the meanings, with stress on the Christian adaptation of the pagan phrase.) Its meaning without context appears to be a consolation for those who might think that being singled out for death is an unusual deprivation or punishment. In this sense it means, "Don't think you're being picked on; everybody goes through it eventually!" The presence of the saying on the tombstone leads to the apparent assumption that the deceased, present in body, is also still aware in spirit.

This means that he or she is being consoled in the *transition* from life to death; a transition that recalls the classic and Near Eastern traditions of such passage, especially notable in Greek and Near Eastern literature. One thinks immediately of crossing the river to Hades. Prominent in my mind is the Sumero-Mesopotamian myth of the passage of Inanna-Ishtar from this world into the next, in the course of which she is systematically stripped of all her bodily possessions as she passes through the seven gates to arrive naked and aggrieved before her sister, the queen of the netherworld ("The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld"). A funeral inscription on a tomb altar from Jarash, possibly 4th century, states, "But just when the ninth month came to me, after two years, (my) father Klaydianos, saw me embarked for the hateful land" (Littmann 1907: 19), presumably Hades.

Given the shocking nature of such passage from life to death, the saying could mean, "Don't be afraid, be strong, every living human faces this hard passage!" An epitaph at Smad, 15 km north of Umm el-Jimal and dated AD 385 issues this farewell, "Good luck to you!" (*Eutúchē sú* [Littmann: 1910: 61, no. 62]). All this is in stark contrast to a later Christian epitaph from Salkhad: "This gate is the Lord's; (the) righteous shall enter in it…" (AD 497 [Littmann 1910: 96, no. 161]).

In a longer epitaph, a Homeric epigram, from the Jewish cemetery at Beth She'arim in Palestine, the connection of Hades with the *thársi* formula actually occurs:

> I, the son of Leonitus, lie dead, Justus, the son of Sappho,
> Who, having plucked the fruit of all wisdom,
> left the light, my poor parents in endless mourning,
> and my brothers too, alas in my Beth She'arim
> And having gone to Hades, I, Justus, lie here
> with many of my kindred since mighty fate so willed.
> Be of good courage, Justus, no-one is immortal (van der Horst 1991: 151).

Given the Jewish context, P. W. van der Horst rightly equates Hades with Sheol, the Hebrew netherworld of the Old Testament. In a good discussion of the *thársi* formula in the Jewish context, he speculates that the phrase may have had an optimistic bent for those Jews who believed in a more glorious reward-based afterlife. His argument includes the interesting analogous use of the word by Jesus, who, in a 5th-century manuscript variation of Matthew 23:43, said to the thief on the cross, "Take courage (*thársei*), today you will be with me in paradise" (van der Horst 1991: 120-122).

It may be true that by the 3rd–4th century AD there was a variety of notions of the afterlife including visions of heaven and hell in paganism, Judaism, and Christianity. I do not agree, however, that the meaning of the formula was essentially adjusted to include the new doctrines of paradisal existence based on a final judgment. The Homeric epigram just discussed, for example, has no hint of Judaic theology, but instead represents the purely formulaic language of traditional classical-pagan funeral epitaphs. The notion of the survival of the traditional concept of Hades into this period was well represented by Franz Cumont, who devoted a lecture to the survival of the general belief in the "common existence of the dead in the depths of the earth" in the context of the plethora of after-life doctrines swarming the Mediterranean in the pagan, Christian, and Judaic spheres of late Roman culture (Cumont 1922: 70-90).

While Pharaonic Egypt tended to be unique in the vision of the afterlife as passage through selective judgment in one sense, in another sense it shared with the rest of the eastern

Mediterranean—Greek, Hebrew, and Mesopotamian cultures' notion of the abode of the dead, the netherworld beyond the grave, as a neutral place where everyone went regardless of stature or behavior in this life (Assmann 2005: 1-20)—a place very much like the Hades in which Justus of Beth She'arim and his kindred found themselves.

This abode of the dead where everyone goes is a pale reflection of this life. It is the place where Enkidu, the hero, ate mud and drank sewer water, a knowledge Gilgamesh took to heart to celebrate the life he still had by living it to the fullest (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet XII). As Jan Assmann notes, this bleak view of the afterlife points up the preciousness of the present life (2005: 11-14). In this way the funerary cultures of Umm el-Jimal and Hisban are continuous with those of the Near Eastern pagan past. Burial rites, tombs, and epitaphs were not about heavenly rewards or the punishments of hell, they were part of the "culture of life." The *thársi* formula addresses the living of pagan Umm el-Jimal as much as it does its dead.

I found this same sentiment expressed by an intellectual hero of the 20th century, Maxime Rodinson. When asked late in life how he, the paramount rationalist, imagined human finitude, his answer reached back to the *thársi* formula:

> Il faut se résigner à ce qui est inévitable, c'est la nature, on finit tous comme cela. À Beyrouth, j'avais au-dessus de mon bureau le buste d'une belle Palmyréenne. Sous le buste de cette très belle femme, on pouvait lire cette inscription en grec: *Tharsei Matrona* (elle s'appelait Matrona), *oudeis athanatos—Courage, Matrona, personne n'est immortel.* C'est la finalité de ma morale de vie, je ne cherche pas autre chose pour la justifier. Tout ce qui se passe après la mort est en dehors de mon atteinte, je souhaite seulement que mes enfants et ma famille ne souffrent pas (Khoury 2004: 223).

Strikingly, both Justus of ancient Palestine and Maxime of modern France took the grief of their surviving relatives as their own primary concern, while they accepted their deaths as just that: death.

The survival of funerary customs as an aspect of the "culture of life" into the late Roman period is punctuated by the popularity of another epitaph found in the environs of Umm el-Jimal. This type of epitaph is not a consolation addressed by the living to the dead, but another common ploy (Parks 2001), advice addressed by the dead to the passerby. An instance in which I was personally engaged involved an epitaph inscribed in a Roman cartouche in the masonry of the North Mausoleum at Umm Qays:

> To you I say, passerby:
> "As you are, I was; as I am you will be.
> Use life as a mortal."
> Work of Arabios, the artist. Year 418=355–356 A.D. (de Vries and Zayedine 1973: 78, 143).

I used to see such epitaphs as the words of sophisticated elites, flippant, cynical, or Epicurean, but I now see them more as indications of folk views of death and dying, popular reflections of the long, high culture traditions preserved in the diverse literatures of Greece and the Near East, including the Old Testament. Unsophisticated, rural people like those at Umm el-Jimal probably had no theology of death beyond these sayings; even those who did, like the Jewish family of Justus at Beth She'arim, still used such traditional expressions for the consoling comfort they had given since time immemorial. Then again, we see a modern humanist intellectual like Maxime Rodinson return for his own comfort in dying to one of these sayings—the old Palmyrene *thársi* text stored under his desk in Beirut.

Conclusions

Whatever religiosity may be represented by the archaeology of death at Hisban and Umm el-Jimal lies outside the formal remains of cultic activities, which at Hisban includes a possible Roman temple and at Umm el-Jimal several altars. One must therefore look for a broader sense of religiosity, better covered by a term like "funerary culture" than "funerary cult." This broader connection is evident from the placement of tombs and cemeteries outside the bounds of the domestic community and the public spaces where sacred festivities took place. This means that popular, routine religious observances were a regular part of life.

As we saw, the tomb and its epitaphs created for the dead nevertheless have a significant place in the society of the living. Chamber tombs especially are visible, carefully constructed monuments for which the builders took proud credit. The deceased of both genders were identified with their families through patriarchal lineage. Being buried outside the domestic perimeter did not mean exile, but affirmation of familiarity of the dead with the living.

Thus the dead were "there," nearby in the tomb and more remote in Hades. The epitaphs at Umm el-Jimal included addresses from the living to the dead and examples from elsewhere of addresses from the dead to the living. These "conversations" presupposed the continued connection between the deceased and their surviving loved ones as surely as ancients like Gilgamesh, Saul, and Ulysses were known to have conversed with their deceased associates, Enkidu, Samuel, and Achilles, respectively. We can assume these associations included the sharing of food on designated days in the calendar. The absence of banquet halls like the *triclinia* of Petra reflects the rural, small-town character of our sites. One imagines a family with a picnic basket in the little courtyard in front of Hisban's Rolling Stone Tomb or on the steps leading down to Umm el-Jimal's Nabataean Tomb.

Amazingly, these late pagan mortuary beliefs and practices are continuous with a known 3000-year tradition. The *thársi* formula reverberates with the same consoling advice Gilgamesh, trembling with fear of death, received from the beer-goddess: "When the gods created mankind, death for mankind they set aside, life in their own hands retaining" (Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet X).

We also saw that epitaphs reflecting this clearly pagan *thanatology* continued in use in the early Christian and Jewish funerary cultures. Rather than resorting to convoluted theological rationalizations, it is better to see the practice in the light of this millennia-long weight of tradition. Such epitaphs were both formulaic and sporadic, the personal choice of a family patriarch like Sarīd at Umm el-Jimal. One sees the same thing in the continuation of pagan motifs in the mosaics of churches, and even in the revival of late pagan tomb architecture in the predominantly Christian cemeteries of Victorian-era America.

The prevalence of cist tombs at Umm el-Jimal and their absence at Hisban may reflect a difference in geographic location. Umm el-Jimal is on the edge of the desert, where contact with nomadic culture is ordinary, ongoing, and visible in many ways. Whereas the chamber tombs may be the funerary monuments of town dwellers, the cist graves may reflect the more ephemeral funerary architecture of a mobile cultural heritage. Hisban, on the other hand, is located inside the fertile Madaba Plain, where an agrarian-commercial town culture was predominant and cist burials not in the cultural repertoire.

Finally, the fundamental religious tenet learned from this is that funerary culture was geared to recognize the normality of death in the culture of life. Assmann called it the "constellative embedding" of the dead among the living, but gave an even deeper significance to this recognition of the reality of death, namely, that "death is a culture generator" (2005: 2). At Hisban and Umm el-Jimal one cannot understand the culture of life without having done the archaeology of death.

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