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RURAL FUNERARY LANDSCAPES ON THE SYRIAN COAST DURING THE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS: ARCHITECTURE, EPIGRAPHY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This paper investigates the funerary landscapes of rural settlements along the Syrian coast during the Roman and Byzantine periods. Spanning the 1st–6th centuries CE, lebanit examines how burial forms and mortuary rituals reflected broader transformations in social, religious, and cultural identity. Drawing on epigraphic evidence (Aliquot, 2010; Gatier, 2005), national archaeological surveys (Badawi 2010, 2015, 2016-2019), and the author’s own field documentation in the Jableh hinterland, the study develops a typology of rural tombs. It situates them in relation to settlements, agricultural installations, and sacred sites. Case studies from Khirbet al-Mirdesiya, Bishman, Barsoomah, Arab al-Milk, and al-Rahbiyya highlight the predominance of rock-cut tombs, the selective use of Greek funerary inscriptions by rural elites, and the gradual Christianization of mortuary space. By comparing these practices with funerary traditions in Lebanon and the Syrian Limestone Massif, the paper demonstrates both regional continuities and unique coastal developments. The analysis highlights how burial spaces were not passive residues, but rather active social and symbolic constructs. They

encoded kinship, memory, and belief into the physical landscape, thereby offering a valuable lens into the cultural identity of rural communities in Late Antiquity.

Keywords:

Roman–Byzantine Syria, Rural Archaeology, Funerary Practices, Epigraphy, Sacred Landscapes, Hypogeum

Introduction

By studying the social, religious, and cultural dynamics of ancient societies through their funerary customs and funeral ceremonies, we can gain a deeper understanding of how identity and ideology were expressed in different ways. In this study, *cultural identity* refers to the ways communities articulated shared values, memory practices, and religious affiliations through the design, placement, and inscription of their tombs. However, despite their potential to shed light on these alternative expressions, rural areas in the Roman and Byzantine Near East have received much less attention than their metropolitan centers—a pattern noted broadly in wider studies of provincial Syria (Sartre, 2001). One notable burial record, which has not been thoroughly integrated into broader studies of late antique mortuary landscapes, is preserved in the upland villages of the Syrian coastal area, particularly in the hinterland of ancient Gabala (now Jableh).

Most previous research has centered on large urban cemeteries or imposing tombs, leaving us with a limited understanding of how rural communities handled death and remembrance. The countryside of Jableh, with its scattered rock-cut tombs, communal burial chambers, and engraved stones, offers valuable evidence for reconstructing regional customs that differ from, yet intersect with, urban funeral traditions. Between the first and sixth centuries CE, these sites allow us to examine the tangible expressions of memory, family, and religious growth in rural settings. In discussing rural commemorative practices, the term *rural elite* is used to refer to landowning families and local notables whose literacy and economic standing enabled them to adopt selected urban cultural practices—such as Greek funerary epigraphy—while remaining embedded within agrarian village society.

The present study aims to explore the funerary culture of Syria's rural coastal region through a combination of field observations, epigraphic data, and archaeological evidence. The dataset includes funerary sites documented by the Jableh Directorate of Antiquities, such as Khirbet al-Mirdesiya, Bishman, Barsoomah, Arab al-Mulk, Beit al-Fi, al-Rahbiyya, and Ajlaniya. The author visited these locations to verify their preservation state, spatial context, and architectural features. Sites were selected based on the presence of identifiable funerary architecture, documentation in the regional archaeological register, and the practicality of field verification. The dataset comprises seven rural funerary sites in the Jableh hinterland, preserving roughly fifteen rock-cut tombs and hypogea recorded by the Jableh Directorate of Antiquities. Since many tombs remain unexcavated or only partially preserved, precise architectural measurements are unavailable; thus, the study depends on typological and contextual characteristics rather than exact dimensions. Field observations from these visits are

incorporated into the analytical sections. The combined archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggests that rural communities did not merely replicate urban funerary customs but selectively adopted and adapted them—borrowing certain architectural forms and epigraphic conventions while embedding them within locally rooted burial landscapes and ritual practices. (de Jong, 2017, pp. 175–182)

The central research question guiding this paper is: How did the funerary practices of rural communities in the Jableh region reflect broader transformations in social identity and religious affiliation during the Roman and Byzantine periods? To situate these practices within a broader provincial framework, the study includes a comparative discussion of funerary traditions in coastal Lebanon and the Syrian Limestone Massif, highlighting both shared patterns and distinct local developments. The article's contribution to the study of provincial mortuary landscapes is significant, as it addresses a major gap in the literature. Furthermore, it offers novel insights into how rural communities negotiated cultural continuity and religious change in Late Antiquity.

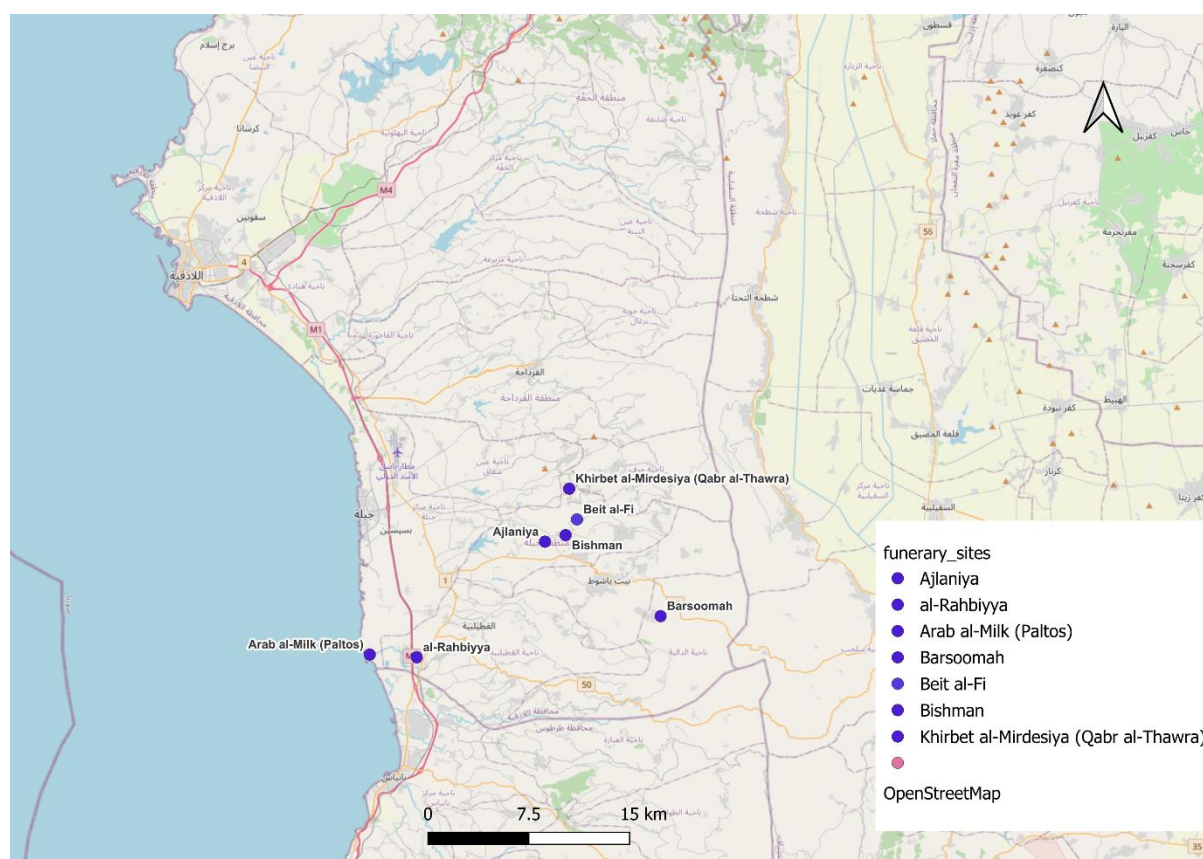


Figure 1. *Map of the Funerary Sites in the Jableh Hinterland*

Typologies of Rural Tombs in the Syrian Coastal Hinterland

The funerary record in the rural Syrian coastal hinterland, particularly in the mountainous zones of ancient Gabala, presents a notable variety of tomb types. These reflect a variety of social structures, architectural traditions, and evolving ritual practices from the Roman through the Byzantine periods. While many sites exhibit limited archaeological exposure and remain only partially documented, emerging patterns allow for a provisional typological classification. Field visits conducted by the author contributed additional observations regarding the preservation state, spatial context, and visibility of these installations, complementing the published archaeological reports.

The most prevalent of these are rock-cut tombs, which are characterised by their direct carving into limestone cliffs or bedrock formations. In many cases, these artefacts are the most archaeologically visible, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in villages such as Bishman, Barsoomah and Khirbet al-Mirdesiya (Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 16-18). Moreover, the landscape comprises collective or mass burial installations, which are often found in clusters or recut chambers. This second category is distinguished by multi-chambered hypogea designed for collective deposition, frequently expanded or modified over time, with shared entrances and internal arrangements that indicate repeated use across generations, as exemplified at al-Rahbiyya (Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 21). Their morphology and communal function differentiate them from both single-chamber rock-cut tombs and the later ecclesiastical-associated burials.

A third type comprises tombs associated with ecclesiastical structures, either integrated into or adjacent to rural churches or shrines. Here, Christian symbols or burial orientations signal new theological sensibilities, particularly in the later Byzantine period.

In certain cases, funerary inscriptions offer an alternative classification axis. Bilingual or Greek-inscribed stelae, such as those found at El-Khorba and Bishman, have been shown to reveal linguistic and cultural affiliations, as well as the social identities of landowning families or local elites (Aliquot, 2010, pp. 1-4; Gatier, 2005, pp. 153-154). Furthermore, the presence of tombs embedded within or adjacent to reused domestic or agricultural buildings adds another dimension to the study, indicating a degree of funerary integration into inhabited spaces. This phenomenon is, however, still understudied in Syrian provincial archaeology.

The present section commences its typological and interpretive analysis with rock-cut tombs, a decision that is made for two principal reasons. Firstly, these monuments are frequent in the region. Secondly, they exhibit considerable morphological variability, architectural complexity, and a broad chronological range. The ubiquity of these monuments

renders them an ideal point of departure for exploring the intersection between burial architecture, topography, and evolving religious and social meanings.

Because most of the rural tombs discussed here remain unexcavated or only partially preserved, precise architectural measurements are unavailable. Accordingly, the comparative table focuses on typological, contextual, and morphological criteria rather than on dimensional data.

Table 1. *Summarises the Main Characteristics of the Funerary Sites Examined in this Study*

Site	Tomb Type	Chambers / Loculi	Distinctive Features	Inscriptions	Christian Symbols	Contextual Notes
Khirbet al-Mirdesiya	Rock-cut multi-chamber tomb	Multiple chambers (N/A)	Benches; assemblage of pottery, lamps, bronze items	Greek inscription on bracelet	None	Carved into bedrock; long-term use; field inspection confirmed chamber layout
Bishman	Rock-cut chamber tombs	Two chambers	Large open chambers carved into rock	Greek inscription of Zenodoros & Dionysia	None	Elevated position; highly visible; field visit confirmed access points
Barsoomah	Shared rock-cut tombs	N/A	One tomb marked with a carved cross	None	Carved cross	Communal use; reused across periods; located at settlement margin
Arab al-Mulk (Paltos)	Hypogeum with loculi	Twelve loculi; terracotta sarcophagi	Funeral stele found nearby	Greek inscription naming Noumenios	None	Accidental discovery; mixed elite & communal features

Beit al-Fi	Single-chamber rock-cut tomb	One chamber	Very plain; no decoration	None	None	Adjacent rock-cut well; simple rural burial form
al-Rahbiyya	Collective recut chamber	N/A	Pottery from Late Roman–Byzantine periods	None	None	Evidence of long-term reuse; limited architectural visibility
Ajlaniya	Three-chamber rock-cut tomb	Three chambers with loculi	Close proximity to agricultural press	None	None	Suggests interaction between productive and funerary landscapes

Rock-Cut Tombs: Architectural and Contextual Features

Rock-cut tombs represent one of the most prevalent burial forms in the rural Syrian coastal region during the Roman and Byzantine periods, particularly in the hilly and upland villages situated in Jableh. The tombs under consideration here range in scale from single interment niches to more complex burial chambers featuring carved benches or multiple recesses. They have been carved directly into limestone outcrops, cliff faces or reused structural remains. (Badawi, 2010, pp. 265-275).

These architectural structures demonstrate a remarkable ability to adapt to their environment. The use of local limestone not only addresses practical requirements but also alludes to a more profound symbolic association between the tombs and the surrounding landscape. Many of these structures are constructed on high or prominent sites that overlook valleys or fields, raising questions about the intersection of topography and ritual in terms of visibility. These tombs usually appear in scattered, irregular patterns, often located on the outskirts of towns or within farm terraces, rather than being part of a structured, urban-style necropolis. (Badawi, 2010, pp. 265-275).

From an architectural perspective, the variety is striking: some tombs are simple rock-cut shafts, while others feature internal elements like carved benches, multiple burial chambers, or open chambers that resemble small hypaethral sanctuaries—as seen, for example, at Bishman and Barsoomah. In rare cases, symbols such as engraved crosses appear above

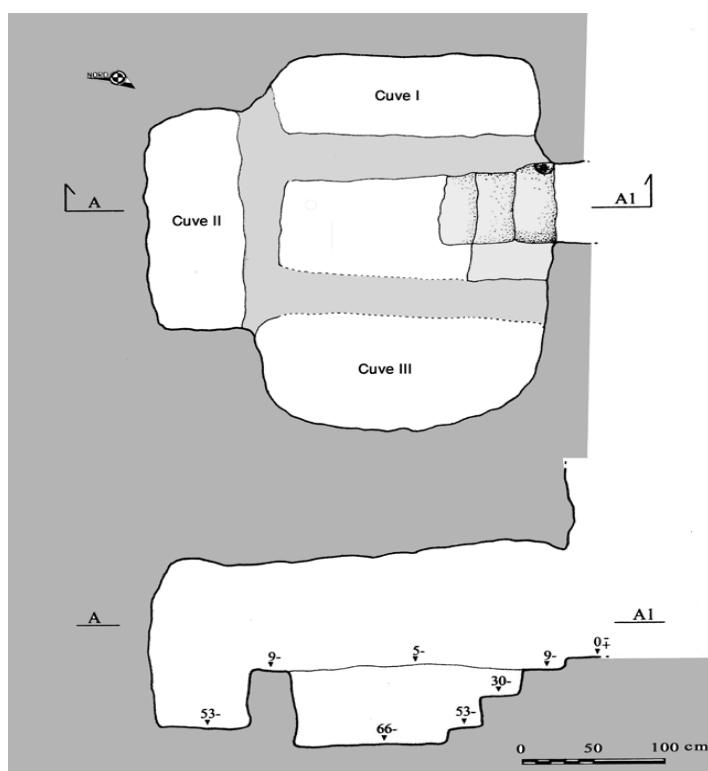
entrances, possibly indicating a shift in ritual significance and the increasing Christian influence on burial spaces during the later Byzantine period. (Aliquot, 2010, pp. 1- 4).

The intricacies of the materials and layouts employed in the construction of these tombs are such that they compel a more thorough examination. The question of ownership is therefore raised: were the tombs the property of extended families or clans, or were they used as community burial grounds? The proximity of these sites to later shrines and sacred sites gives rise to questions regarding the continuity of the sacred landscape and the practices of memory. Furthermore, variations in architectural features, symbolic marks, and grave goods may serve as indicators of differing social status or alterations in burial customs across temporal periods.

Rather than viewing these tombs as inert archaeological structures, this study approaches them as socially embedded artifacts that encode patterns of land use, lineage, memory, and religious affiliation. The following case studies illustrate these dynamics.

Khirbet al-Mirdesiya (Qabr al-Thawra)

Khirbet al-Mirdesiya, also known locally as Qabr al-Thawra, features a carved entrance that leads into a tomb with multiple chambers (Figure 2), which is dug directly into the bedrock. The excavation revealed a varied assemblage of funerary items, like bronze bracelets, ceramic jars with Greek designs, a spindle whorl, fifth-century clay lamps, beads, and bits of polished glass. A Greek inscription on one bracelet demonstrates how Hellenistic



epigraphic traditions persisted in a rural Byzantine setting (Badawi, 2010, pp. 256-275). The tomb suggests a family burial site with a history spanning several generations, firmly rooted in local customs but also influenced by broader late antique cultural trends.

Figure 2. *Plan and section of the tomb of al-Thawra. (Badawi,2010)*

Bishman

Located east of Zama, the Bishman site features two large rock-cut burial chambers (Figure 3), with a Greek inscription from between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. The inscription honors Zenodoros, son of Diogenes, and his wife Dionysia, highlighting how elite rural families used Hellenistic commemoration practices (Aliquot, 2010, pp1-4 ; Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 16). The size of the chambers and the inscription suggest social status and cultural significance in a rural

setting.

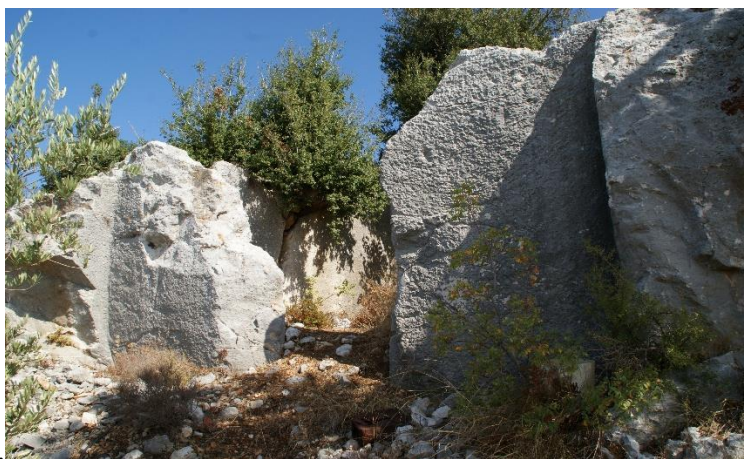


Figure 3. *General view of the rock-cut tomb complex at Bishman (author's field survey, 2023)*

Beit al-Fi:

Researchers found a simple rock-cut single-chamber tomb in Beit al-Fi, which did not have any inscriptions or decorations. This plain style was typical of non-elite rural burial practices. A nearby rock-cut well might indicate ritual purification ceremonies tied to burial, but its purpose is still unclear. Overall, the tomb reflects a modest, non-elite burial tradition characteristic of rural communities. (Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 17)

Barsoomah

The site of Barsoomah features multiple rock-cut tombs, some of which are shared, and one of these is marked by a carved cross above its entrance (Figure 4). This element illustrates the process of Christianization of rural funerary spaces during the Byzantine era, as evidenced by the pottery unearthed on site, which indicates long-term use and reuse (Badawi, 2016–2019,

pp. 18). The communal setup is in stark contrast to elite tombs such as Bishman, thereby underscoring the diversity in burial practices and customs.



Figure 4 . *Rock-cut tomb at Barsoomah with a carved cross above the entrance (Badawi, 2015)*

Arab al-Mulk (Paltos)

The rock-cut tomb at Arab al-Mulk was discovered accidentally in 2012 and was found to contain twelve loculi and terracotta sarcophagi (Figure 5). A displaced funerary stele with a Greek inscription naming Noumenios was found in the vicinity, suggesting both

communal and elite commemorative practices within the same funerary landscape (Aliquot,



2010, pp.1-4).

Figure 5. *Interior view of the collective rock-cut tomb at Arab al-Mulk, showing multiple loculi (burial recesses) arranged along the chamber walls (Badawi, 2015)*

Al-Rahbiyya

Researchers excavating a collapsed rock-cut tomb in al-Rahbiyya have uncovered pieces of Late Roman and Byzantine ceramics, including red slip ware and glass. The absence of inscriptions or Christian symbols suggests that traditional practices persisted among rural communities (Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 21).

Ajlaniya

At Ajlaniya, a rock-cut tomb with three chambers and loculi was found near a rural press. Pieces of ceramic artifacts suggest the site was used during the Byzantine period. The fact that production-related features are close to the funerary structures suggests a connection between the economic and mortuary landscapes (Badawi, 2016–2019, pp. 19).

Epigraphic and Symbolic Dimensions: Funerary Inscriptions from the Jableh Countryside

Funerary inscriptions found in rural areas of Jableh, located along the Syrian coast, provide a valuable glimpse into the social and symbolic systems of local communities during the Roman and Byzantine eras. By analyzing three key inscriptions from Bishman, El-Khorba,

and Jableh, we can identify basic patterns of cultural identity, religious expression, and the shift from pagan to Christian funeral customs.

In Bishman, located east of the village of Zama, at a distance of approximately 20 kilometres from Jableh.(Figure 7).

The Bishman inscription provides a clear example of the rural funerary character of the Jableh region during the Roman period. The text is inscribed directly onto a rock face situated between two open rock chambers that bear a resemblance to carved burial chambers. The inscription in Greek bears the name of the deceased, Xenodorus son of Diongnis, and reads: 'Xenodorus son of Dionysius ... The monument was erected by the individual in question on behalf of both himself and his wife, Dionysia. Original text: “Ζηνόδορος Διογένους

...

ἑαυτῷ καὶ Διονυσία

τῇ γυναικί.” (Gatier, 2005, pp. 154)

The abridged wording suggests that Xenodorus constructed this monument as the head of the family, with the intention of securing a family burial place for himself and his wife Dionysia. The purely Greek names (Zenodoros, Diogenes, Dionysia) reflect a Hellenized rural family in the Jablah countryside that adopted the Hellenic funerary and epigraphic customs common in Syria during the first and third centuries AD. The absence of any Christian symbols or formulas indicates that the funerary function of the inscription predates the spread of Christian rituals in the coastal countryside. (Aliquot, 2010, pp.1-4; Gatier, 2005, pp.154)

In El-Khorba, an area belonging to the village of Qalaat Bani Qahtan, southeast of Jableh (Figure 8), the El-Khorba inscription represents one of the most important funerary monuments discovered in the southeastern countryside of Jableh, due to its linguistic and cultural elements uncommon in Syrian inscriptions. The monument, found in the village of El-Khorba, dates back to the period between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, and its Greek inscription is clear and well-preserved. The text identifies the deceased as Charmedes, son of Lysimachus, and states: "Charmedes, son of Lysimachus, while alive and of sound mind, erected this tomb and this monument for himself."

Original text: “Χαρμίδης Λυσιμάχου ὦν ζῶν καὶ φρονῶν ἐποίησεν τόνδε τὸν τύμβον καὶ τὴν στήλην ἑαυτῷ”. (Gatier, 2005, pp.153)

The significance of this inscription lies in its use of the word τύμβος (tomb), a term more commonly used in funerary poetry than in prose inscriptions in Syria. The formula ὦν ζῶν καὶ φρονῶν (“alive and fully conscious”) is very rare in Syrian funerary inscriptions,

indicating a level of self-awareness and the individual's concern for preparing their grave during their lifetime. Similarly, the personal names Charmidēs and Lysimachos are distinctly Greek, reflecting a local environment culturally influenced by Hellenism within the Roman countryside of Jableh. (Gatier, 2005).

The funerary monument discovered in 2010 in the Al-Fakhura area, northwest of Arab al-Mulk (Figure 9), is one of the most important coastal funerary monuments in the Jableh countryside. Made of dressed sandstone, the monument stands 157 cm tall and features a complete niscus facade consisting of two Ionic columns surmounted by a cornice and a triangular pediment. In the central space between the columns, a standing woman wearing a long dress is carved, her right hand resting on her breast while her left hangs, holding an indistinct object due to erosion. The funerary inscription, located within the triangular pediment, simply reads: “Νουμήνιον,” meaning “Tomb of Numenius” (Aliquot, 2010, pp.1-4; Badawi, 2015, p. 79).

The architectural features of the facade, the sculptural style, and the nature of the inscription suggest that this monument was originally part of a funerary complex located north of the village before being moved to its current site of discovery. The presence of an architectural facade built over the headstone represents a continuation of the Roman tradition of transforming tombs into structures visible in the landscape, combining social expression with funerary symbolism. Compared to similar headstones on the Syrian coast, the monument dates to the period between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE (Badawi, 2015, pp.78-79). Collectively, these three inscriptions underscore the pervasive and enduring preeminence of the Greek language as the medium of choice for funerary expression across the Syrian coastal countryside. The use of names such as Zenodoros and Theodora emphasises the social and religious identities of the individuals in question, suggesting dynamic interactions between the local rural elites and the broader cultural networks of Roman Syria. Furthermore, these inscriptions evince a subtle yet steady evolution in funerary symbolism, whereby Christian forms were gradually accommodated without the aesthetic and linguistic norms of the classical tradition being entirely abandoned, a pattern also noted in broader analyses of mortuary change in the Roman East (Destephen, 2023, pp. 239–240).

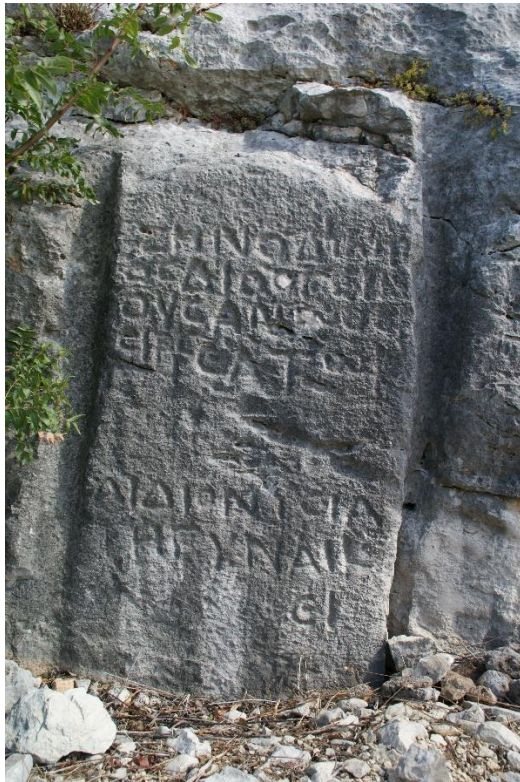


Figure 6 . *Greek funerary inscription from Bishman commemorating Zenodoros and Dionysia (Gatier, 2005)*

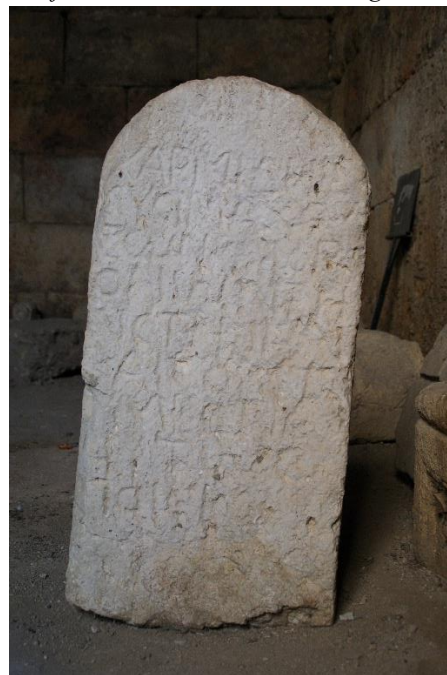


Figure 7. *Greek funerary inscription from El-Khorba, mentioning Theodora, reflecting the diffusion of Christian naming practices in rural Syria (Gatier, 2005)*



Figure 8. Roman milestone from Jableh reused in later construction, with a Greek inscription that may have had a commemorative or funerary role (Badawi, 2015)

Regional Comparisons

When considered within a broader regional framework, the funerary record of the Jableh countryside reveals both parallels and divergences with neighbouring rural zones of the Levant. In the Dead Cities of northern Syria, rock-cut chamber tombs and multi-generational mausolea also dominate the mortuary landscape. However, they are frequently associated with monumental façades and urban-style planning (Foss, 1997, pp. 213–220; Rey, 1866).

In contrast, the Jableh region exhibits more modest installations, frequently lacking the intricate architectural articulation that is characteristic of the limestone massif. In the hinterland of Apamea, collective burial chambers and funerary inscriptions attest to a comparable continuity of Roman practices well into Late Antiquity. However, epigraphic evidence in this region is more abundant and often linked to urban elites (Foss, 1997, pp. 145–152).

In the southernmost region along the Lebanese coast, rural necropoleis such as those in the vicinity of Byblos and Tripoli exhibit closer affinities to the Syrian coastal examples, characterised by modest rock-cut tombs, occasional inscribed stelae, and a gradual Christianisation of burial spaces without the erasure of earlier traditions (Aliquot, 2009, pp. 87–94; Gatier, 2005, pp. 152).

These comparisons highlight the hybrid nature of the Jableh hinterland, which is characterised by its affiliation with a broader eastern Mediterranean mortuary culture, while also being influenced by local topographies, economies, and religious dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper examines the funeral landscape of Roman and Byzantine rural villages along the Syrian coast, focusing on burial architecture, epigraphic artifacts, and symbolic expressions within a specific geographic and historical context. From simple cave tombs to more complex rock-cut chamber tombs, several case studies show the variety and continuity of burial traditions, from Bishman to Arab al-Mulk.

The spatial organization of tombs in proximity to agricultural lands, roads, or settlement centres suggests a deliberate integration of the dead into the rhythms of daily life. The recurrence of features such as carved steps, burial niches, and modest architectural façades reveals a shared technical and symbolic vocabulary across rural communities. The utilisation of Greek funerary inscriptions and Christian iconography, as evidenced in Bishman and El-Khorba, signifies the gradual adoption of imperial religious discourse and eschatological motifs within local contexts, without the obliteration of prior cultural strata.

Instead of uniformity, the funerary evidence from the Syrian coastal countryside indicates a localised negotiation of identity, memory, and belief, where social status, religious transition, and regional traditions intersected in tangible forms. Despite the archaeological record being fragmentary and often shaped by surface documentation, the materials presented in this paper invite a more grounded understanding of how death was architecturally and symbolically managed within the rural fabric.

Future research should prioritize systematic excavation of selected rural hypogea, more detailed architectural recording, and expanded epigraphic surveys in the Jableh hinterland. Such work would refine the chronological framework and deepen our understanding of social and religious dynamics in rural mortuary landscapes.

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