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## A Painted Tomb Depicted with Naked Youths, Ashkelon

The wall paintings of the tomb discovered at Migdal Ashkelon, Israel<sup>1</sup> present a series of five naked male figures, each holding an object or an animal. To the best of my knowledge no similar depiction is known from elsewhere. Many questions regarding the identification and meaning of the figures arise from this unique program. Although the patrons of the tomb appear to have been pagan, as suggested mainly by the nakedness of the figures, a thorough analysis of each individual motif is required in order to verify this attribution and obtain an overall iconographic program of the tomb. Such stylistic analysis will help to locate the tomb within the overall Roman paintings around the Mediterranean basin in general, and in Israel in particular, and enable their dating and a determination of the different phases of the work.

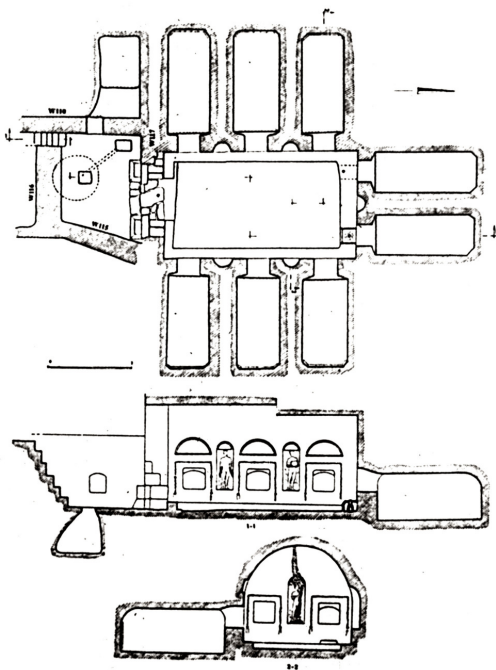
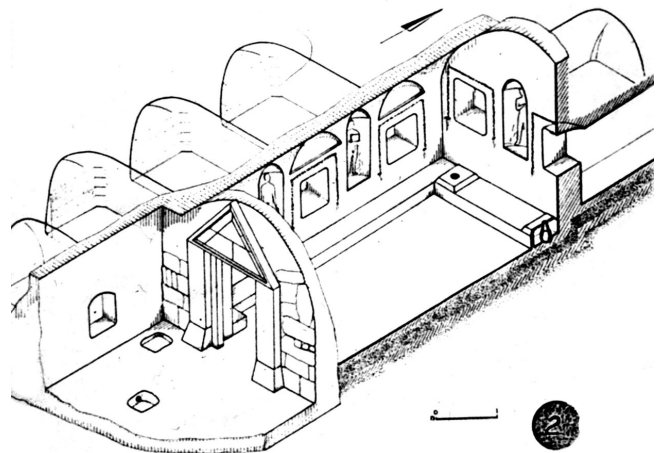


Fig. 1a-b - Plan, Section and Isometric reconstruction (after KOGAN-ZEHAVY, 1999, figs. 1, 2).

### *Description* (fig. 1 a-b)

The walls were originally plastered and painted. The paintings appear on three foci: (a) the five deep niches between the burial *loculi*; (b) the surface around each opening to the *loculi*; and (c) the lunette-shaped shallow niches



<sup>1</sup> KOGAN-ZEHAVI 1999, 181-209; English summary, 179\*-180\*.



Fig. 2 - Garlands around the third *loculus*, eastern wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).



Fig. 3 - Bird and vegetation, the shallow painted niche above the third *loculus*, eastern wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

above the *loculi* of the eastern and western walls (of which only very faded remnants have survived above the northern *loculus* on the eastern wall). There is a possibility that the upper part of the northern wall was also painted, but nothing remains to verify such an assumption. Although the vault was plastered, its shards reveal no painting whatsoever.

The wall around each *loculus* is painted with three leafy and schematic garlands (fig. 2): one horizontal, above the *loculus*, and two vertical at the sides, ending in short green ribbons. They are painted as green and red segments in free brush strokes with no contours. The remnants of the painted shallow niche (fig. 3) on the eastern wall reveal a ground line with the lower part of a bird's red legs. A rounded brown-gray stain could be identified as its belly. At each of its sides are the remnants of what might have been some kind of vegetation.

The main program appears on the five elongated niches placed between the *loculi*, two on each the eastern and western walls and one on the northern wall. A naked standing athletic youth is portrayed on each, in a chiastic (*contraposto*) posture. All five figures have a rounded face with very short hair that follows the outline of the head, and a high forehead. Read from the eastern wall anticlockwise, they



Fig. 4a-b - A naked youth, first niche, eastern wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority) and detail, a youth holding a peacock, upper part.



Fig. 5a-c – A naked youth, second niche, eastern wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority); detail, left hand holding a bowl of figs and detail, right hand holding two ducks or geese.

hold, respectively: (1) a large peacock in both hands (fig. 4 a-b); (2) a bowl of figs in the left hand and two (hunted) dead ducks or geese in the right hand held down to the sides (fig. 5a-c); (3) on the northern wall, a very awkward figure with heavy-set legs drawn to attention and bent arms. The object once held no longer exists (fig. 6a-b); (4) on the western wall is a youth holding a tray whose contents are no longer visible; his body is damaged but his legs survive from below the knees (fig. 7a-b); and (5) a youth holding a wine jug in his right hand and possibly a wreath in his left (fig. 8a-c). All five figures are surrounded by red unidentifiable elongated flowers atop short green stalks, floating in the air.

### **Iconography**

A series of naked youths carrying objects in their hands is not known from any other Roman painted tomb. In the absence of similar programs I examine them here from the following aspects: the objects they hold and the meanings of these objects, identification of the figures and their possible context, depictions of naked figures in funerary art and within niches, and the identification of the surrounding background.



Fig. 6a-b - A naked youth, third niche, northern wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority) and detail, upper part.



Fig. 7a-b - A naked youth holding a tray, upper part, fourth niche, western wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority) and detail, lower part with legs.



Fig. 8a-c - A naked youth, fifth niche, western wall (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority); detail, upper part with a jug and wreath; detail, head.

### ***The objects held by the youths***

#### ***Peacock***

The first male holds a large peacock in both hands. Peacocks are identified with Juno, and were raised in her sanctuary in Samos. Their magnificent tails were compared to the stars in the sky (Ovid *Met.* XV, 385), and thus might be understood as signifying the eternal blessed abode of the deceased. The loss of

the peacock's feathers in winter and their renewal in spring (Pliny *NH* XXII, 43-4) also identify it with (symbolic) death and rebirth. To these could be added Juno's roles in marriage and birth, and thus her attribute (the peacock) could symbolize the entire life cycle.

Perhaps due to the common belief that the peacock's flesh does not decay (Augustine *De Civ. Dei* XXI, 4) they appear in numerous funerary monuments, as can be seen in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-c. CE Attic sarcophagus<sup>2</sup> and in Roman painted tombs in Abila<sup>3</sup>. They can appear in pairs, singly, frontal or in profile, but the only case known to me in which a peacock is depicted being held by a human being, is that of the present tomb.

### *Geese or Ducks*

The second figure holds a pair of geese or ducks, apparently dead, in his right hand<sup>4</sup>. Both ducks and geese are usually associated with the winter season, when they are hunted (Ausonius *Epist.* XVIII [III], 7-16), and therefore the hunted animal (usually a duck) becomes an attribute of this season<sup>5</sup>. And indeed, in different depictions of the seasons the personification of winter is often shown holding a pair of ducks or geese<sup>6</sup>. They appear similarly in many "season" sarcophagi<sup>7</sup>. However, the figure holding them in those cases is always partly or wholly dressed.

### *Bowl of figs*

The second figure holds a bowl of figs in his bent left hand (bent at the elbow). The fruit are large, ripe and succulent. According to Ovid (*Fasti*, I, 185-8) they are the offerings preferred by Janus (together with dates and honey jars) at the beginning of the year. A Hadrianic inscription indicates that it was customary to exchange such sweet fruits as part of the beginning of the year festival offerings (*strenae*)<sup>8</sup>, and they also appear depicted on lamps given on this occasion<sup>9</sup>. In Greece and Rome seasonal fruits were given as funerary offerings, as in the case of the Gracchi (Plutarch *Tiberius and Caius Gracchus*, 39 [18]). Several funerary steles reflect this custom, showing the deceased being offered baskets of fruit by his wife and daughters<sup>10</sup>. Of interest to our case is the bowl of fruit that includes figs placed on a table next to the winter season depiction in a mosaic from Antioch<sup>11</sup>, or perhaps the month of January's *strena* in another winter mosaic from El Djem, Tunis<sup>12</sup>. The depiction of figs is frequent in the region, and Ashkelon in particular was known for its figs<sup>13</sup>. The very naturalistic rendering of the figs in the present tomb (as well as the ducks) reinforces the contention that the artist was familiar with this fruit.

### *Holding a tray*

The fourth figure (on the western wall) holds a tray whose contents is no longer visible. The figure can be compared to the frontal and isolated figure of the patron of the games in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-c. CE mosaic from Smirat, Tunis<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1971, III, 21.

<sup>3</sup> BARBET and VIBERT-GUIGUE 1988, 2, Pls. 67:c, 102, 104:b.

<sup>4</sup> If they are ducks – they could be identified as *Anser anser* species, and if they are geese – they resembles the *Alopocher aegyptiacus*. The identification was done by Ms. Liora Kolska-Horwitz from the Israel Antiquities Authority.

<sup>5</sup> PARRISH 1984, 39–40; see also STERN 1953, 237–8.

<sup>6</sup> TOYNBEE 1982, 261–4, 273.

<sup>7</sup> HANFMANN 1971, 2: Ills. 33, 39, etc.

<sup>8</sup> *CIL* VI, 3385; see also MAYNIAL 1911, 1530–2.

<sup>9</sup> BAILEY 1980: 186–7, Pls. 21, 35, 39.

<sup>10</sup> BIANCHI BANDINELLI 1971, 216, III, 200.

<sup>11</sup> PARRISH 1984, Pl. 12:1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Pl. 12:1; see also STERN 1953, 171–8, Pl. 3:1.

<sup>13</sup> SWARTZ 1986, 158.

<sup>14</sup> PICARD 1984, 48, fig. 15:1; and is different from servants holding trays, usually depicted in movement as that from a pagan tomb in Viminacium, Serbia, holding an oval tray with bread, see: KORAC 1993, 114–7, figs. 5, 8, 10.

### A wine jug

The fifth figure seems to be holding in his right hand an elongated jug (fig. 8d), possibly for pouring wine. The production and drinking of wine have always been connected to the mystery rites, especially those in honour of Dionysus, expressing the god's rebirth and the triumph of his believers. The wine expresses the joy of life, intoxication of the senses, sacrifice and the pouring of libations – all of which can be considered as relating to death and revival<sup>15</sup>. According to the ancient writings the strongest sensation of the deceased is that of thirst. Propertius (*Eleg.*, IV: 5,2) describes the soul's thirst, and Servius (*In Verg. Car.*, III: 68) states that the only element able to satisfy the deceased's hunger and thirst is blood, since a soul cannot exist without blood<sup>16</sup>. And indeed, blood was the preferred offering on the graves, as known for example, from the rites executed by Aeneas at his father's tomb. It is recorded that he went to the burial place accompanied by his friends, and poured wine, milk and two cups of blood, and placed red flowers (*Verg. Aen.*, V: 77-9). Thus it can be concluded that blood and wine were interchangeable. Whereas vines and the grape harvest are frequently depicted in funerary art, an "iconic" figure holding of a wine jug is rather rare<sup>17</sup>.

Ashkelon was famous for its vines and had a highly developed wine export commerce (*Expositio totius mundi*, 29), as confirmed by papyri from Oxirinchos that mention the maritime commerce of wine jugs from Ashkelon to Egypt<sup>18</sup>. The large amphorae workshop discovered in the 1990s in Ashkelon adds further support to the ancient sources<sup>19</sup>.

### Wreath

The fifth figure holds in his left hand a rounded object which I tentatively identify as a wreath. The funerary meanings of wreaths are derived from other domains. Thus, triumph both in war and in a sportive context was also understood as triumph over death<sup>20</sup>. Wreaths were put on the deceased or placed in the tomb or on the steles (*Lucian On Funerals*, 11, 12, 19). Wreaths are requested as funerary offerings by the deceased in their epitaphs<sup>21</sup>. Because of their symbolic meanings, wreaths were frequently depicted on sepulchral monuments, as in a tomb from Smyrna<sup>22</sup>, in a painted vault from Abila<sup>23</sup>, and surrounding the deceased's portrait as well as inscription as in the tomb of Aelia Arisuth<sup>24</sup>. The wreath is also one of the

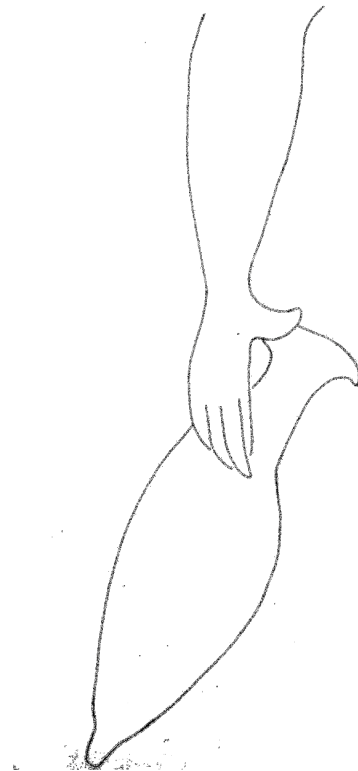


Fig. 8d - A naked youth, fifth niche, western wall; detail, drawing of the jug (courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

<sup>15</sup> CUMONT 1973, 491 and N. 5.

<sup>16</sup> It is also confirmed by Lucretius *De rer. nat.*, III, 43; 916–7.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, servants are occasionally depicted holding a jug during serving as in the painted tomb at Silistra, see DIMITROV 1962, fig. 1; and in funerary meals as in the tomb of Costanza, see *Au royaume des ombres* 1998, 109, cat. 55.

<sup>18</sup> DAN 1984, 184–5 and N. 3.

<sup>19</sup> ISRAEL 1993, 91–3; 1994, 119–32.

<sup>20</sup> EGGER, FOURNIER 1887, 1526, 1529–31.

<sup>21</sup> *CIL* VIII, 9052; see also CUMONT 1949, 53, N. 6; and compare to Petronius *Sat.*, 71, 6–12.

<sup>22</sup> EGGER, FOURNIER 1887, fig. 2001.

<sup>23</sup> BARBET, VIBERT-GUIGUE, Pls. 70:1, 71:a.

<sup>24</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1970, 263–4, Ill. 242.

symbols of apotheosis and thus held by a Victory such as the one crowing the emperor Caracalla<sup>25</sup>, as well as above the “ordinary” deceased, as in a stele from Varna, Bulgaria<sup>26</sup>.

In the same manner as in the discussed tomb, athletes are rendered holding their winner's crowns<sup>27</sup> and, according to Pindar (*Ol.*, XIV, 24; *Pyth.*, LX, 133-5), success in sport granted the wreath psychopompic powers, like that of Nike's wings. Moreover, when Porphyry (*On the Cave of the Nymphs*, 33) describes the athlete's wreaths he relates to the athletes as winning in the race of life, and Lucian (*Anacharsis*, 7-10) compares the winning athletes to gods. The common use of wreaths in a funerary context is further emphasized by Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.*, II, 72-3), who objected to the custom of placing them on tombs, claiming that it was a pagan practice.

### *Garlands*

All the *loculi* are surrounded by garlands thereby adorning the entire tomb. Garlands are in fact unbound wreaths<sup>28</sup> and are usually considered as enframing a sacred compound<sup>29</sup>. Based on Athenaeus (*Deipnos.*, XV, 670d) they are also considered as honouring an edifice when enframing its doors. The painted tomb of Tyre shows both garlands framing the *loculi* and others painted around the walls<sup>30</sup>.

### *Red Flowers*

All five figures are surrounded by scattered unidentified red flowers. Several specific red flowers are known to be Persephone's attribute as well as that of her mother, Demeter (*Hom. Hymn* “To Demeter” (2), 2, 11; Ovid *Met.*, V, 385; *Fasti*, V, 335-68). Other red flowers are also considered to have sprouted from the blood of heroes who had met an untimely death, like Adonis (Ovid *Met.*, X, 752; *Fasti*, V, 226; Apoll. *Lib.*, III: 14, 3-4; Hyg. *Fab.*, LVII) and Attis (Ovid *Fasti*, IV, 221-46; V, 226). Red flowers were also one of the substitutes for blood as can be understood from Virgil, and specifically from Servius, who interpreted these flowers as imitating the colour of blood, which is also the soul's abode (Servius *In Verg. Car.*, V, 79; VI, 21). In funerary epitaphs the deceased often requests that his ashes will turn into roses and violets<sup>31</sup>. When depicted in painted tombs these flowers should be considered as representing the flora of Elysium, as in the Aelia Arisuth tomb<sup>32</sup>, the tomb of Vibia in Rome<sup>33</sup>, and the tomb of Octavia Paulina in Rome<sup>34</sup>.

### **Figures carrying objects**

Figures carrying objects are generally identified either with servants or with giving offerings. They are dressed appropriately, and when representing servants their hands may sometimes be covered and they are rendered in movement, as in the tomb of Silistra<sup>35</sup>, and the tomb of Viminacium<sup>36</sup>. When the tomb patrons are holding objects they are also appropriately dressed, but depicted frontal and motionless, as in the mosaic from Smirat<sup>37</sup>, and in two steles from Germany, where the deceased are depicted carrying bowls of fruit<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1971, III, 18.

<sup>26</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1971, III, 284.

<sup>27</sup> OLIVOVA 1984, fig. on 118.

<sup>28</sup> SAGLIO 1887, 1537, fig. 2015.

<sup>29</sup> TURCAN 1971, 103-4, 108-11.

<sup>30</sup> DUNAND 1965, Pls. 4, 5, 9, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *CIL* IX, 3184; see also VI, 10248; VIII, 9052.

<sup>32</sup> *Supra*, N. 24.

<sup>33</sup> GRABAR 1967, III, 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Au royaume des ombres*, fig. on 107, Cat. 54.

<sup>35</sup> DIMITROV 1962, fig. 17.

<sup>36</sup> See KORAC, *supra*, N. 14.

<sup>37</sup> OLIVOVA 1984, fig. on 190.

## **Naked figures**

In Greek art athletes, warriors and heroes are usually depicted naked. This heroic nakedness expresses the masculine aristocratic aesthetic ideals of courage and excellence (*arete*)<sup>39</sup>. According to Lucian (*Anacharsis*, 14, 36), nakedness distinguishes the Greeks from Barbarians as well as from women and slaves. The Romans reserved their depiction of naked figures mainly for the Greek heroes such as Achilles<sup>40</sup> and Meleager<sup>41</sup>. However, Ashkelon had always preserved its Hellenistic character, and was also known for its wrestlers (*luctatores*) (*Expositio totius mundi*, 32). In painted tombs Heracles and Hermes, both possessing deep funerary meanings, were rendered naked, as in the painted tomb of Tyre<sup>42</sup>, and the (Christian) catacomb of Via Latina, Rome<sup>43</sup>. Although none of the figures in the present tomb represents a known Greek hero or god, whoever they are, they seem to be intended to be compared to such figures.

## **Figures within niches**

Figures of gods and rulers are often represented in niches as three-dimensional (free-standing or in relief). This manner of representation was probably copied in tombs such as in the mausoleum in Capua<sup>44</sup>, and in the relief on the Haterii monument<sup>45</sup>. Since painted figures are not common within niches, it is plausible that the artist had transferred a three-dimensional model to a two-dimensional one.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the above analysis, I believe that the monumental, iconic, almost frontal, representative figures allow us to identify them as the patrons of the tomb. Their nakedness indicates their connection to the Hellenistic heroic world as well as to the rendering of gods, and therefore might indicate that the deceased wished to resemble such figures. The objects they are holding represent the continuity of existence after death, and therefore the wish of the deceased to dwell in the eternal blessed afterworld. Combined with the Hellenistic meanings of nakedness, this might also indicate their wish to resemble the heroes of Antiquity, and thus suggest some kind of personal apotheosis. In parallel, the different objects might indicate the actual rites that were conducted at the tomb, like the funerary meal, the pouring of wine, placing of wreaths and scattering of red flowers.

Based on stylistic considerations, such as the excellent proportions and chiasmic posture of the figures, their non-linear, almost illusionistic treatment and the sophisticated use of real and illusory space on the one hand, and their rendering against a neutral white background, together with the lack of any facial expression and the hairstyle on the other hand, lead me to date the paintings on the eastern and western walls to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE. The rigid figure on the northern wall lacks all these characteristics and was thus added somewhat later – perhaps the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, and certainly painted by a far less talented artist, as is also confirmed by archaeological evidence<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1970, Ills. 151–2.

<sup>39</sup> BONFANTE 1990, 30–5.

<sup>40</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1971, Ill. 39.

<sup>41</sup> BIANCHI-BANDINELLI 1970, Ill. 48.

<sup>42</sup> DUNAND 1965, Pls. 7, 9:2, 10, 11:1, 14:1, 2.

<sup>43</sup> FERRUA 1991, fig. 125.

<sup>44</sup> WARD-PERKINS 1981, fig. 98.

<sup>45</sup> STRONG 1980, fig. 76.

<sup>46</sup> KOGAN-ZEHAVY 1999, 180.



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