

THE CITY OF THE DEAD*

A visitor coming to Palmyra today meets first some rather derelict funerary towers of the South-West necropolis, standing to his left beside the highway from Damascus. Much more impressive was the sight awaiting the travellers until mid-20th century, when they usually arrived through a passage between the western hills, called Valley of the Tombs (Wadi el-Qubur). Standing towers and heaps of carved stones marking the sites of other tombs make up a unique landscape marked with melancholy and abandonment (Fig. 1). In Antiquity, when the buildings were complete, it was a real city with high-rise towers and sumptuous palaces along the main thoroughfare coming in from Emesa (today Homs). A small rocky outcrop in the middle of the valley, known locally as Umm Belqis (to commemorate the Queen of Sheba, for whom Palmyra was allegedly built by Solomon), bears at mid-height a ring of towers (Fig. 2). The ancient road bifurcated around this hillock and entered the town as two streets of the earliest quarters that developed on a plateau south of the present ruins.¹ A rampart built under the Tetrarchy has not only condemned this part of the town, but also separated the western necropolis from its natural extension around the northern limit of the living city, using on its course some tombs incorporated as bastions, while some others remained inside the late defenses. This northern necropolis is today extremely dilapidated, but was once as dense and rich as the Valley of the Tombs itself.

There are two other sepulchral areas in evidence, both south of the oasis: to the west, the already mentioned cluster of tombs along the present road, and at some distance to the east, a group mostly notable today by its excavated underground funerary galleries. A poorer cemetery consisting of individual graves existed under the modern town, but only some tombstones in the museum can be seen today.

Nearly all overground tombs have been mapped and numbered by the Wiegand expedition at the beginning of the 20th century.² A monography on the funerary monuments in Palmyra was published many years later; quite recently, a dissertation on funerary towers treated this particular class of tombs in more detail.³ Besides, there exists a range of excavation reports covering mainly underground tombs.

The eldest tomb known in Palmyra has been discovered by the Swiss mission in the sanctuary of Baalshamin.⁴ It goes back to the second century BC and appears to have been closed and purified in AD 11 in relation with the founding of the sanctuary. Other archaic monuments are towers standing in the Valley of the Tombs and on the bordering hills; they belong to the first century BC. During the first century AD and the first quarter of the next more towers filled the Valley, especially along its northern track and on the slope of Umm Belqis looking toward the city. Later on, several underground galleries and funerary caves found their place

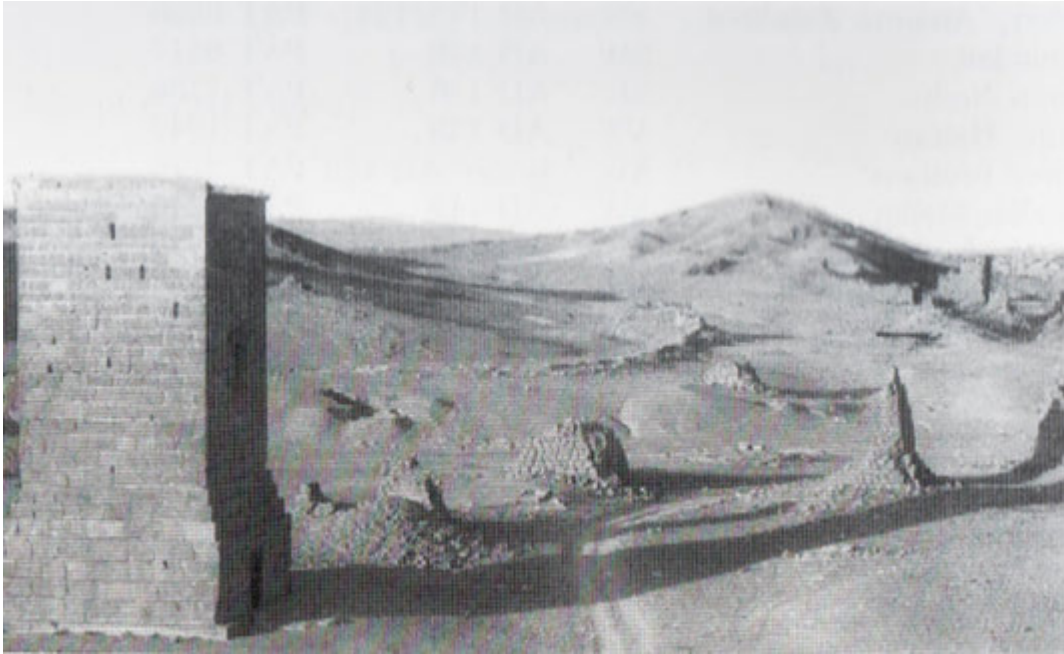
* The City of the Dead, in: *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers*, ed. Eleonora Cussini, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 44–59.

¹ Current excavations of A. Schmidt-Colinet.

² Watzinger, Wulzinger 1932; on topography, Gawlikowski 1970a, pp. 147–166.

³ Henning 2001.

⁴ Fellmann 1970.



1. A view of the Valley of the Tombs from the West. In the foreground, the tower of Elahbel



2. The towers on Umm Belqis hillock, early 20th century (after Wiegand)

there, along with the so-called funerary temples. Of the latter, one has been recently excavated and comprehensively published.⁵

The southwest necropolis includes towers of the first century AD and many hypogea of the second century, of which about fifty have been excavated. Their inscriptions show the constant use of the underground tombs down to the end of the third century. The south-east necropolis seems to have been started at the very end of the first century. Several tombs have been excavated by Syrian, and more recently by Japanese archaeologists.⁶

The development of the funerary architecture in Palmyra starts in the late Hellenistic period and covers all three centuries of prosperity until the demise of the city after Zenobia. It is

⁵ Schmidt-Colinet 1992.

⁶ Higuchi, Saito 1998.

governed from the beginning by two constant principles: the use of loculi and the marking of the burial by an upright monument. Each can be traced back to a different tradition.

The perpendicular slots in the walls of underground chambers and galleries, flat, arched or gabled on top, seem to be of Alexandrine origin. In the Levant, the first known examples were found in Marissa, a Sidonian colony in southern Palestine, but such loculi became soon a standard form of burial throughout Syria and Palestine,⁷ and remained so in Palmyra until the end of the third century, both those hollowed out in the rock or built in masonry. On the other hand, raised tombstones and funerary stelae can be found in Syria from very early times, but the Arab migrations brought apparently with them the notion of the deceased being in some way present in the stone set up over the tomb and called for that reason *nefesh* or “soul”.⁸ Inscriptions prove this usage to be well established among the Nabataeans, Ituraeans and in other areas where nomads have settled in the later Hellenistic period, including Palmyra, where the *nefesh* took the form of a small arched stela, often with the standing figure of the dead in relief, to be set up on the grave and sometimes removed later to an underground tomb. More surprisingly, the term of *nefesh* applies occasionally to funerary towers. At the beginning, these were just masonry pillars built over a socle containing loculi burials, and could thus be conceived as collective monuments apt to house the souls of the deceased. Soon, the primitive notion faded away in the urban milieu, even more easily as the burials started to be installed in the higher part of the towers, becoming thus tombs and memorials in the same time.

The earliest known tomb, found behind the temple of Baalshamin, consisted originally of a mudbrick squarish socle 4,5 through 5 m with a grave pit in the middle containing the bones of a woman buried in mid-second century BC. The mudbrick structure was later extended to envelope a low corridor with lateral loculi, partly hollowed out in the bedrock, partly built in rough stones. All this was certainly surmounted by a standing monument in brick levelled by the founders of the sanctuary in the early first century AD.

Early funerary towers are found mostly on the hills right and left of the Emesa road. They are built in broken stone set in mortar around the central rubble core. Each has a square stepped socle 5 to 7 m each side in which there are reserved deep loculi, in some cases only four of them on two opposite sides, but sometimes up to twenty, opening on all four sides and on two levels (nos. 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 24, 29, 52). Above, the tower proper contains a winding stair-case around the central core in which a few additional internal loculi are sometimes reserved. Tapering on the outside, these towers are never preserved up to the top. Apparently, they served as lofty stelae above the graves contained in the socle. Three such towers (nos. 25–27), lined up with smoothed stone revetment, are apparently solid. Standing on a high ridge north of the Valley of the Tombs, they probably mark burials underneath.

Similar towers can be found at several sites on the Euphrates: Dura-Europos, Halabiyya, Baghuz. Unlike those of Palmyra, they are often adorned with plastered half-columns and pilasters. The dating is uncertain, but most are probably late Hellenistic.⁹

Only in Palmyra, however, appeared a device to install loculi inside the tower. There are two monuments containing narrow corridors with the lateral loculi (nos. 53 and 71a) and one containing a vaulted chamber with loculi above the socle which harbours other burials accessible from outside (no. 5). All three are neighbours on the southern slope of Umm Belqis. They should be considered as first attempts at increasing the number of loculi burials, the tendency that explains all subsequent development of funerary towers.

⁷ Peters, Thiersch 1905. For Alexandria, see already Thiersch 1904; Pagenstecher 1919.

⁸ Cf. Gawlikowski 1972.

⁹ Cf. Will 1945/49 and Will 1945/49bis.

Soon, there appear towers containing several chambers one above the other, all linked by a winding staircase between them and the outer walls (e.g. nos. 11, 95, 170). The chambers are distinctly narrower on top than at floor level, their walls being strongly inclined inwards in order to reduce the width of horizontal slabs used for ceiling. On their long walls four loculi open each side (or eight on two levels), while the entrance is placed alternatively in a long or a short side of the chamber. Some isolated loculi are to be found on the staircase itself.

The earliest dated tower (Figs. 3–4, Tower of ‘Atenatan), built in 9 BC by two sons of ‘Atenatan Kohailu (no. 7)¹⁰ displays two entrances on opposite sides, leading into two independent chambers contained in the socle one above the other. Each has lateral loculi set symmetrically on two levels. The upper chamber contains the beginning of stairs going up toward four superposed smaller chambers with irregular loculi, and toward single loculi still higher up, where there was a decorative frame inserted in the façade above a cornice running around the tower. The top of the tower is not preserved and we do not know whether the stairs ended blind or led to some sort of terrace. All together there were over 40 loculi, walled and plastered one by one when used. Those situated in the higher part of the tower have usually a slit to the outside, apparently left open after the burial. However, an intact burial (the only one discovered in a funerary tower in recorded excavations) was found entirely closed.

It seems sensible to admit that most towers with a less developed communication system, and even more those with external loculi, are older than the ‘Atenatan tower, though some archaic looking tombs might be actually contemporary with more advanced forms. While typology cannot provide exact dating which can rest safely only on dated inscriptions, there is a good chance that most if not all archaic-looking towers go back to the first century BC, and some are possibly even earlier. On the other hand, among the towers similar to ‘Atenatan’s there are two monuments dated respectively to AD 33 (Hairan, no. 67) and AD 40 (Kitot, no. 44). Both display two opposite entrances, a winding staircase, and chambers with lateral loculi.

The tower of Hairan, situated on the steep northern slope of Umm Belqis, has even a third intermediary chamber in its socle, with an independent lateral entrance, while the ground floor extends into the bedrock with a hewn corridor provided with lateral loculi. All chambers are extremely narrow, and contain vertical slots, each once divided into four loculi by means of ceramic plates.

The Kitot tower (Fig. 5) is larger. It stands at the foot of a hill on the opposite side of the Valley of the Tombs, and contains in its higher tapering part, above the regular chambers with lateral slots, two smaller rooms with built-in sarcophagi. At the far end of the ground floor there are steps leading down toward an underground gallery which could not be excavated. The tower apparently ended in a flat terrace. Its most conspicuous feature is an arcade adorned with vinescroll opening on the third floor in the side facing the town, containing a banqueting group of Kitot and his family (Fig. 6).¹¹

Neither this or other contemporary and earlier towers, however, contain rooms apt to receive a family gathering at a funerary meal. In spite of cramped space the towers were visited by relatives, who burned frankincense in little round plaster altars on the floor in front of some loculi. The burials were usually marked simply with inscriptions traced in wet plaster closing the loculi.

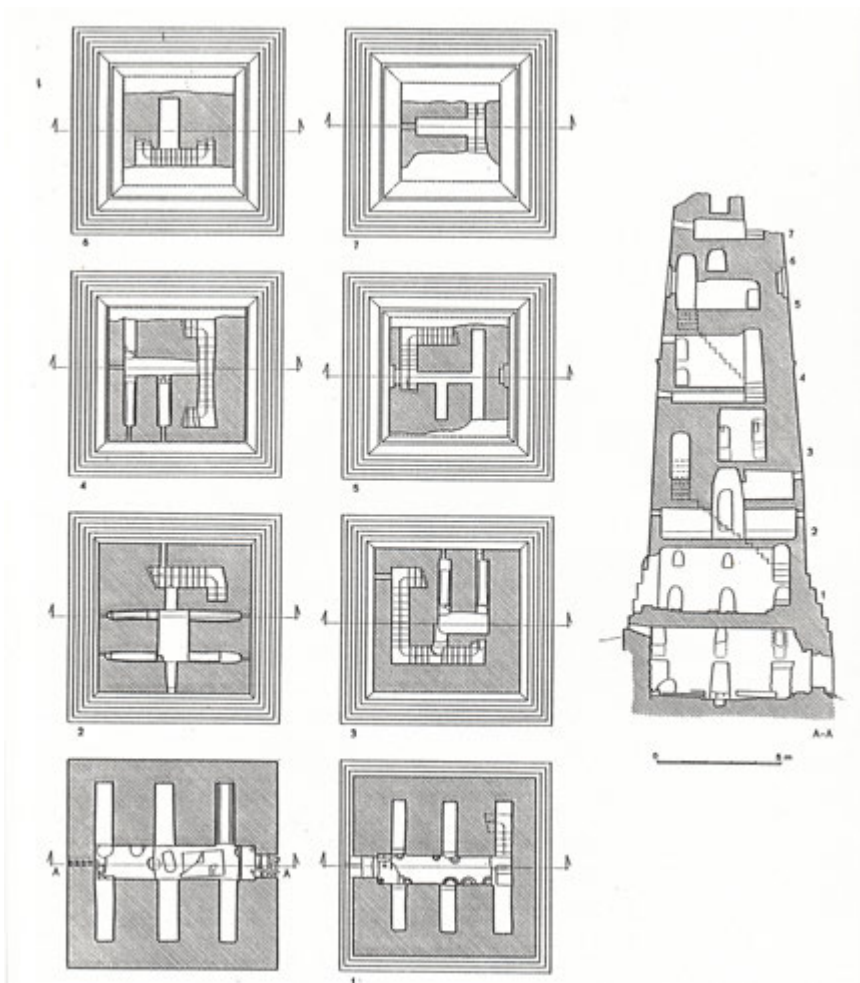
There is a gap in epigraphical record between AD 40 and 79 (the date of the tower no. 63). In the meantime a new device was introduced, which shall mark all later towers up to the last one dated in AD 128. The staircase of the later towers is built in one of the corners and consists of two parallel tracts between storeys. It takes thus much less place than the winding

¹⁰ Witecka 1994.

¹¹ Will 1950.



3. The tower of 'Atenatan (7 BC) and, behind, the tower of Elahbel (AD 103)



4. 'Atenatan tower. Plan of storeys and section (M. Barański)



5. The tower of Kitot (AD 40) on the left, the sectioned tower no. 45 in the middle



6. Kitot banqueting with his family. The relief in the niche of his tower

variety and makes possible bigger chambers, while the towers themselves are usually not larger than before. The chambers became identical in plan, so that the loculi slots are now uniform from foot to top of the tower, being divided only by slabs forming the loculi (e.g. tower no. 45, center of Fig. 5).

Soon, the rough and austere masonry of early towers was replaced by ashlar, the internal walls made vertical and often decorated with pilasters. We can find these fineries for the first time in the tower of Jamblichus (no. 51), built in AD 83 on the northern slope of Umm Belqis (far right on Fig. 2). The monument preserved five storeys of identical plan up to the height of 26 m, but there was originally one more storey. The façade displays over the main entrance a tympanon and higher up an elaborate niche supported by two winged Victories, which most probably framed a banquet relief. Inside, Corinthian pilasters on the ground floor and simpler ornaments on higher storeys frame numerous symmetrical loculi reserved in the long walls. There are however small square rooms on two of the higher storeys replacing two slots each and intended for sculptures representing members of the family reclining on banqueting couches.

Similar is the tower of Elahbel and his brothers (no. 13), completed in AD 103 (Fig. 1). It is now most often visited and provides from its terrace a splendid panorama of the Valley of the Tombs. The main difference from the Jamblichus tower consists in the presence of a vaulted crypt accessible from the back, being yet another chamber with lateral loculi. The far end wall on the ground floor above (Fig. 7) was decorated between pilasters with aligned half-figures of the family members alive at the time of the building and with a banqueting scene (now lost). In an arcade over the main entrance there still remains a slab with a couch in relief, but the family group having rested on it is gone.

The dead were wrapped in cloth, usually cut from discarded garments and soaked with resins. In the very stable and dry conditions which prevail inside towers the bodies could be well preserved, but unfortunately the looters have missed very few of them. They have, however, left behind many textile fragments which form today an astonishingly rich collection.¹²

The vertical loculi slots of later towers allowed for closing the burials not merely in masonry and plaster, as it was done earlier, but with rectangular plates bearing the image of the deceased in high relief. Typically, they represent half-figures from the waist up, with hands held close to the body. Men are usually draped in Greek fashion, some wear the cylindrical priestly hat and hold sacrifice vessels, others are bareheaded and hold often a scroll or a folded document, sometimes a palm or the pommel of a sword. The veil of ladies is always moved aside in order to show the face and the attributes of domestic virtues, such as spindle or a bunch of keys, later on increasingly a rich assortment of jewels. Sometimes, young children accompany their mother, either standing behind her shoulder or being nursed on her lap.

The oldest known funerary bust is dated in AD 65/66 and represents a lady whose name is lost.¹³ One apparently later sculpture of a lady and her child was found in the archaic tower of 'Atenatan,¹⁴ but only broken fragments survived in some other towers throughout the site. However, a dated inscription from a tower with hypogeum of AD 56/57 found recently at the far end of the Valley of the Tombs shows that an arched stele of a couple in the British Museum cannot be much younger.¹⁵

The development of the funerary tower in Palmyra can be described as a search to increase as much as possible the number of burial places: starting as an upright monument raised upon

¹² Schmidt-Colinet et al. 2000.

¹³ Ingholt 1930a; Hvidberg-Hansen-Plough 1993, p. 42 (only the head is preserved).

¹⁴ Witecka 1994, pp. 85–80, pl. 12, 3.

¹⁵ Gawlikowski 1998 (in this volume, pp. 145–151).

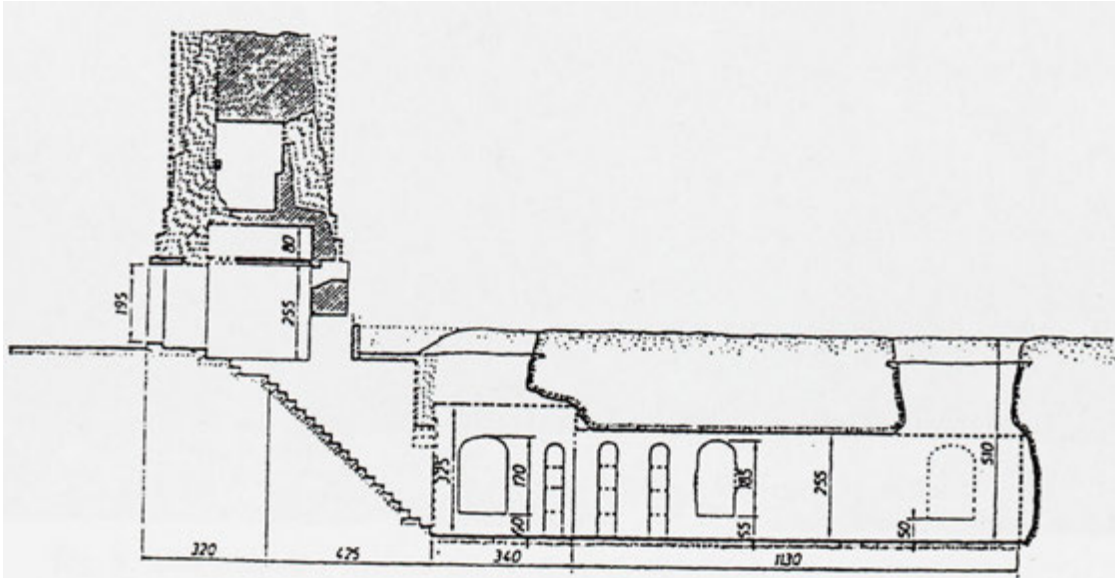


7. The interior of the ground floor of the Elahbel tower

a socle with several individual loculi opening to the outside, the tower first received chambers with lateral loculi, then a real staircase and larger chambers with more loculi. While the tower of 'Atenatan was apt to receive about fifty burials, there was up to three hundred places in that of Elahbel. All towers were conceived as family tombs, but fashion and prosperity led often to build new monuments while the old ones still contained much free space. Apparently, no tower was ever fully used, even more so that many were provided with underground extensions. Galleries with lateral loculi hollowed out in the desert subsoil were usually supported by vaults in plaster. The access was by a staircase starting from the ground floor of some towers (e.g. no. 19, Figs. 8–9), or beneath smaller structures of which only faint traces remain here and there in the Valley of the Tombs.

Towers built on a slope could be provided with caves extending into the rock on level with the ground floor chamber. Such is the case of the Hairan tower (AD 33) and some of its neighbours, while a similar grotto on the hill opposite was surmounted with an independent tower-like square monument.¹⁶ Up to the end of the first century AD no underground tomb is known to exist without a surface monument, while many such monuments contained burials only within their stone structure and had no subterranean extension.

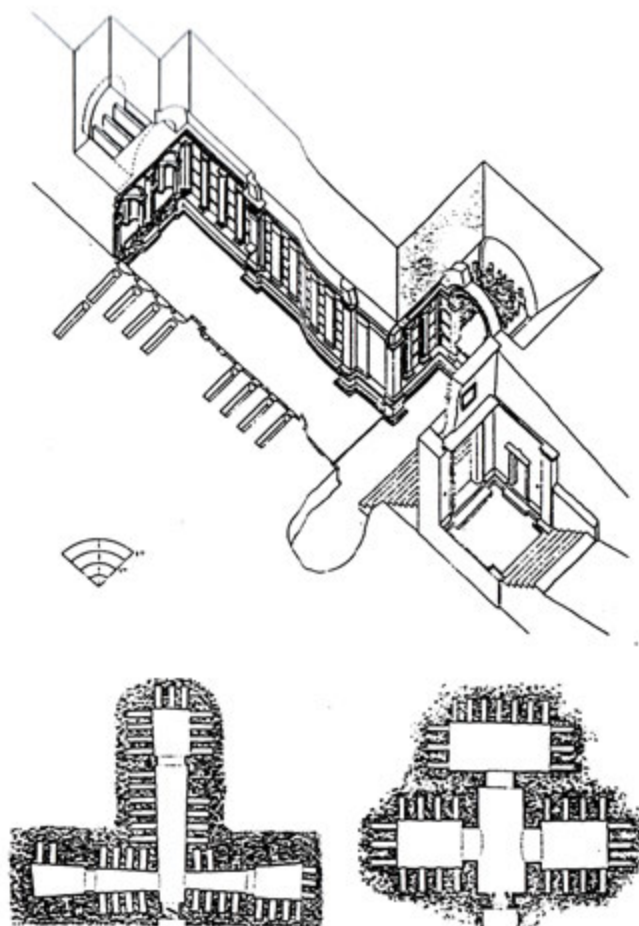
¹⁶ Sadurska 1976.



8. A section through the tower no. 19 and its hypogeum



9. A view of the hypogeum under the tower no. 19 during exploration (H. Romanowski)



10. A restored section through a typical hypogeum (Yarhai, AD 108) and plans of two others (Lishamsh and Nasrallat)

From the end of the first century, however, there appear independent hypogea apparently not marked by any standing structure (Fig. 10). The earliest one known is dated in AD 87, while the dates of over twenty others cover the whole span of Palmyrene civilisation, most of them founded during the second century. Some fifty such tombs were investigated in the 1930s in the SW necropolis, but published incompletely or not at all.¹⁷ Many more can be located on surface but were never opened, especially in the northern necropolis, while only a few received the deserved attention. The excavation of underground tombs may be painstaking and sometimes dangerous, but they present the only chance of finding burials and funerary sculptures in place, undisturbed by robbers.¹⁸

Most of these tombs were hollowed out of the limestone strata which make up the subsoil of the desert plain. As this formation has often a loose structure, the ceilings had to be supported by arches and vaults made of plaster, sometimes with stone revetment. The entrance was always closed by a stone wall in which a stone door with one or two wings was set. This façade wall was built in an open trench provided with steps, either simply carved in the rock or covered with harder stone. The façade displayed usually foundation inscriptions on door-lintels or stone plates inserted above, and sometimes apotropaic figures like a magnificent Satyr head found

¹⁷ Ingholt 1935; also Ingholt 1932; Ingholt 1938; 1962; 1966; 1970; 1974.

¹⁸ E.g. Seyrig, Amy 1936; Abdul-Hak 1952; Bounni, Saliby 1957; al-As'ad, Taha 1965; al-As'ad, Taha 1968.