

Palmyrene Tomb Paintings in Context

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Introduction

This paper presents some findings from the Danish excavations at Palmyra during the 1920s by Harald Ingholt. It aims to give a short overview of the paintings, their motifs, dates and tomb contexts and to present new research results made within the framework of the *Palmyra Portrait Project* and the many activities associated with it. In this contribution, these results primarily concern the Tomb of Hairan.

The necropoleis of Palmyra were placed around the city in all directions, but they are primarily situated along the main roads leading in and out of the city – towards Damascus, Doura and other important cities. The mural paintings are mainly found preserved in the hypogea, seven of which are situated in the South West Necropolis.

A brief introduction to the stuccoed and painted walls in the city and tower tombs will be followed by a discussion on some painted decorative elements in hypogea of the South West Necropolis.

Wall paintings in houses

Wall paintings are found in some Roman houses from Palmyra and are primarily used in a combination of stucco and wall painting. Examples are two private houses east of the Bel Temple from the mid second to mid third century AD. A photograph from one of the houses is reproduced by Colledge in his 1976 monograph.¹ Here the walls were very well preserved and decorated from the floor and up with paintings alluding to marbling and, according to Colledge, geomet-

ric designs.² The walls here were covered with a thick layer of plaster which was then painted.

Another example from a Roman house has recently been published and stems from the Syrian-German-Austrian excavations directed by Schmidt-Colinet and Al-As'ad, in collaboration between the DGAM, German Archaeological Institute and the University of Vienna, in the “Hellenistic” part of the town.³ Here it became clear that at least the colours yellow, black, red, Egyptian blue and green were in use.⁴ In the house of Sondage 2 stucco and wall painting have, just as the house near the Bel temple, been found combined on the same walls.⁵ The colours of the painting in the private house near the Bel temple are not mentioned by Colledge, but if we consider the paintings recently published by Tober from Sondage 2 of the Syrian-German-Austrian excavation, there might have been many colours in use. It should be noted that the size of the house in Sondage 2 is rather impressive in comparison with many other buildings in the city (*fig. 1*). Painted and unpainted stucco has been found in several other places in the city, and other specimens of good quality have been found in a building at the Efqa-spring.⁶ This building may have had religious connotations according to the publication.⁷

The Sondage 2 house represents various building phases. It was built around an open space and the

1. Colledge 1976, 105, fig. 137.

2. Colledge 1976, 105.

3. Schmidt-Colinet and Al-As'Ad 2013.

4. Tober 2013, 170-252.

5. Tober 2013, 239-246, fig. 226-227.

6. Allag, Blanc and Parlasca 2010.

7. Allag, Blanc and Parlasca 2010, 191.



Fig. 1: Map of Palmyra (after Schnädelbach 2010, courtesy of K. Schnädelbach).

wall paintings stem from one of the last phases of the house, i.e. mid second to the beginning of the third century AD.⁸ Most of the rooms in the house were decorated and represent a variety of different motifs – ornaments, human figures and fauna.⁹ The walls were painted with many colours and some of the stucco fragments even have traces of gold leaf.¹⁰ On the large panels with medallions known as System A, scientific tests have revealed the use of Egyptian blue.¹¹ In comparison, Egyptian blue has not been found on the Beauty of Palmyra which has been analysed as part of the project Tracking Colour at the Ny Carls-

berg Glyptotek.¹² More than four thousand fragments of wall paintings were recovered during the excavation of Sondage 2.¹³ The painting technique used was *al secco* in which an unknown binder had been used and painted on a dry mortar surface.¹⁴

Tower Tombs

We have now had a brief overview of the few preserved and excavated wall paintings from the city. Paintings did, however, also adorn a few walls in the realm of the dead – the tower tombs and hypogea. Not only were wall paintings found in the tombs.

8. Ertel and Ployer 2013, 159.

9. Tober 2013, 170-249.

10. Tober 2013, 215.

11. Tober 2013, 215.

12. Sargent and Therkildsen 2010, 14.

13. Tober 2013, 170.

14. Tober 2013, 237; Winkels 2013, 264.

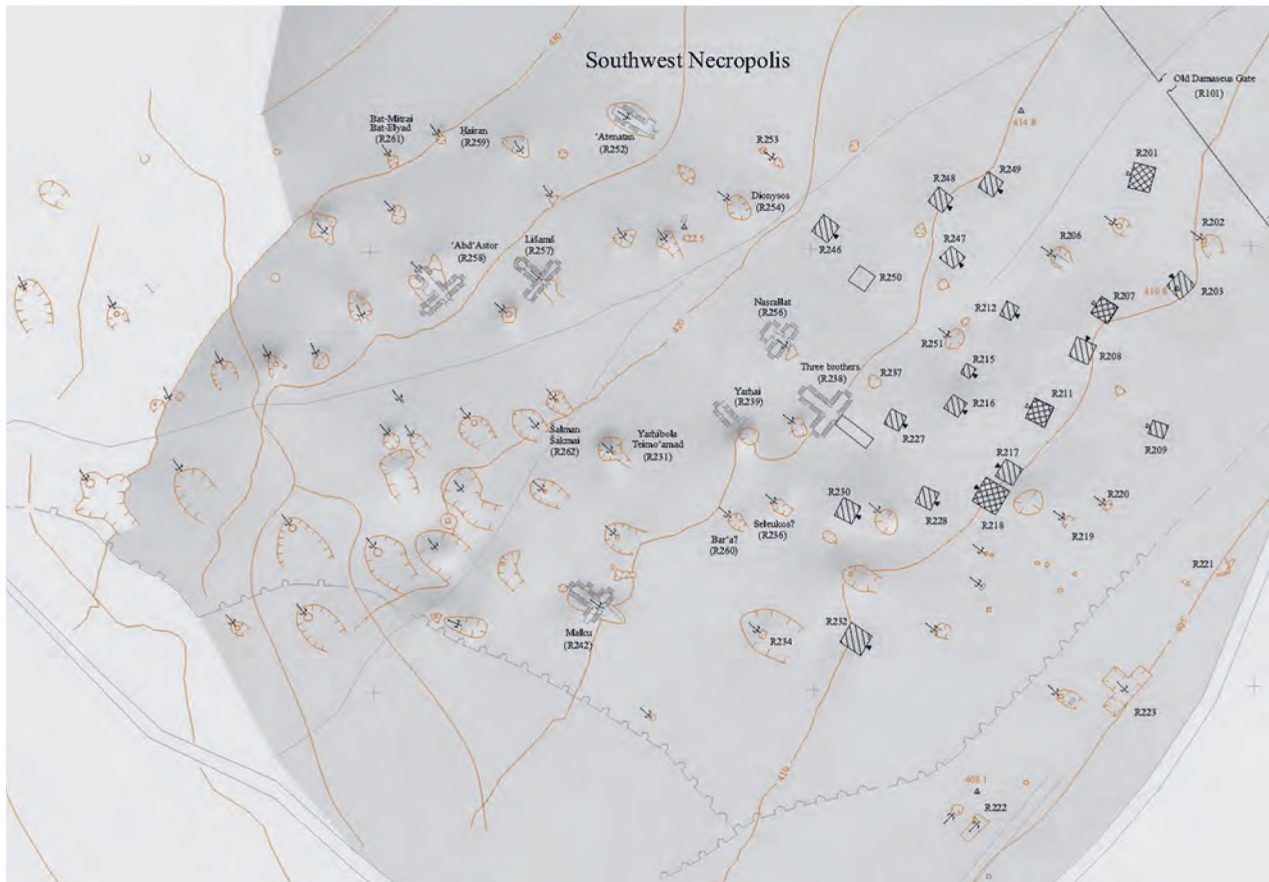


Fig. 2: Map of South West Necropolis (after Schnädelbach 2010, courtesy of K. Schnädelbach).

Some were even decorated with painted architectonic stucco just as in the houses, and in some instances the wall paintings also represented architectural elements which are, among other places, seen in the most famous paintings of the Tomb of the Three Brothers.¹⁵

Stucco and painted sculpture

Some or perhaps all tomb sculpture was originally painted with more or less durable pigments. On the tower tomb of Kitôt a foundation relief combines sculpture, stucco and paint.¹⁶

The ceiling in the entrance chamber of the tomb of Iamliku dated to AD 83 is stuccoed and painted with human busts, eagles and winged figures.¹⁷ In the reconstruction of the ceiling in the publication of Casas from the late 19th century, many details are visible and most probably heavily reconstructed.¹⁸

In the well-known tomb of Elahbel (AD 103) situated in the Valley of the Tombs (Tomb Q271 in the most recent map by Schnädelbach) is a painted stucco ceiling which has traces of red and blue colour. Casas also reproduced a drawing of the ceiling in this tomb in which all the faces on the busts in the stuccoed ceiling are depicted.¹⁹ When the Danish archae-

15. Kraeling 1962, pl. V, VI, XIV; Eristov, Sarkis and Vibert-Guigue 2006.

16. Colledge 1976, 83.

17. Colledge 1976, 83

18. Casas 1798-99, no. 110.

19. Casas 1798-1799, no. 125.



Fig. 3: Hairan, Tomb of Hairan (water colour by Charles Christensen after Ingholt 1932, courtesy of *Acta Arch.*).



Fig. 4: Female figure, Tomb of Hairan (water colour by Charles Christensen after Ingholt 1932, courtesy of *Acta Arch.*).

ologist Harald Ingholt first visited the tomb in 1924, he noted that the faces in the ceiling were destroyed.²⁰

The tower tomb 19 or Q262 was erected in the first century AD and according to Colledge it has a painted ceiling in the vestibule with imitations of coffers.²¹

20. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt 1924 diary, 25: “Loftsfigurer, ansigter ej bevarede. Baggrund bl.a, chlamys som bleget blæk, andet rødt.” Translated (by H. Flegal): “Figures on ceiling, faces not preserved. Background blue, chlamys like faded ink, other elements red.”

21. Colledge 1976, 84 fig. 47.

Within these “coffers” human masks and floral motifs are rendered.²²

According to Colledge, the colours in the tower tombs were used in the vestibule – the entrances of the tombs – and most often the colours were painted on a combined stucco and relief sculpture.²³ A few other tombs are mentioned by Colledge as having a few garlands between loculi or other floral designs around the loculus.²⁴

22. Colledge 1976, 84 fig. 47.

23. Colledge 1976, 83.

24. Colledge 1976, 83; Cf. also the descriptions by Wiegand



Fig. 5: Eagle, Tomb of Ḥairan (water colour by Charles Christensen after Ingholt 1932, courtesy of *Acta Arch.*).

Hypogea

If we move into the hypogea of the South West Necropolis, at least seven have yielded paintings in parts of the tomb (*fig. 2*). These are: 1. Tomb of Ḥairan, 2. Tomb of the Three Brothers, 3. A tomb described by orientalist Johannes Østrup (location uncertain), 4. Tomb of Atenatan and the Tomb of Maqqai, 5. Tomb of Dionysos, 6. The tomb of Abd'Astor with stucco and painted decoration and 7. a hypogaeum excavated in 2007.²⁵

Tomb of Ḥairan

The oldest of the tomb paintings originate from the Tomb of Ḥairan, which has been securely dated to AD 106-107 from a foundation inscription on the lintel.²⁶

1932, p. 55 no. 62.

25. I owe this information to K. Saito who has kindly shared his knowledge of this tomb with me. The tomb was excavated by the Palmyra Museum in 2007. The tomb and its paintings will not be discussed in this paper.

26. Ingholt 1932, 1-2; Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary Tomb A-AK, 58.

The paintings were published in 1932, eight years after their excavation by Harald Ingholt and date to AD 149-50.²⁷ The primary paintings show Ḥairan, the son of Taimarzû in full figure (145cm in height) and a nameless female figure (*fig. 3-4*). She has no accompanying inscription, but it may be assumed that she was the wife of Ḥairan. Above the head of Ḥairan is the painted inscription stating his name and the date of the painting (AD 149-50).²⁸ Judging by the date of the inscription, Ḥairan was the son or grand-son of the founder of the tomb.²⁹ The tomb plan has never been published but in the publication of the paintings Ingholt noted that the paintings are situated in an exedra of the tomb.³⁰ This fact is visible from a photograph published by Starcky in 1941 (*fig. 7*).³¹ The water colour reproductions of the paintings were made by the Danish architect Charles Christensen and published in 1932 without a tomb plan to fully understand the context of

27. Ingholt 1932, 4.

28. Ingholt 1932, 4.

29. Ingholt 1932, 4.

30. Ingholt 1932, 3.

31. Starcky 1941, fig. 23.



Fig. 6: Portrait medallion, Tomb of Ḥairan (water colour by Charles Christensen after Ingholt 1932, courtesy of *Acta Arch.*).

the paintings. From Starcky's photograph we do, however, get a good idea of the position of the paintings in the exedra. A large eagle with its wings outstretched (*fig. 5*) is guarding the entrance from the ceiling of a very small exedra. Hairan is portrayed on the visible short side and a medallion flanked by two winged youths with an unnamed figure is painted in the exedra ceiling (*fig. 6*). According to Ingholt, the full figure female faced Ḥairan on the opposite short side.³²

Within the framework of the *Palmyra Portrait Project*, the handwritten diaries of Harald Ingholt's three excavation campaigns in Palmyra 1924, 1925, 1928 have been digitized and are forthcoming in print.³³ The diaries have proved a valuable source of information and have provided us with the possibility to contextualize several artefacts.³⁴ During the excavations of the 1920's, Harald Ingholt employed several excavation teams of local workers and in some instances he used several names for the same tomb.

The Tomb of Ḥairan was first described as number 49 and K³⁵ then as Tomb 20³⁶ and lastly also as the

Tajjār-tomb.³⁷ In the large collective diary presumably written after the 1928 campaign the tomb is described as Tomb K and no. 20.³⁸ In 1925 the tomb is mentioned as Tajjārah³⁹ and in the 1928 diary the tomb is again mentioned as "K".⁴⁰ The names for the tomb are thus several, but it has by means of the description of the exedras and the number of niches as well as the "K" in the upper left corner and the "Tajjārah" written upside down in the 1925 sketch book on page 31, been possible to identify Ingholt's pencil drawn sketch of the Tomb of Ḥairan (*fig. 8*).⁴¹ A minor mistake was made by Ingholt in the amount of niches/loculi in the painted exedra as he only noted three on the sketch rather than the four mentioned in the diary.⁴² As it has already been demonstrated by Starcky's 1941 photograph, the depth of the exedra was minimal and four niches may be noted in the back wall of the exedra. The paintings are thus placed in an exedra most probably specially cut out for the purpose of being decorated with the provided paintings. From the tomb sketch the original plan of the tomb can be discerned – it consists of a central chamber, two side chambers – apparently constructed off-axis, a central exedra in the back of the central corridor and two secondary constructed exedras. The painted exedra measured according to the sketch 2.7-2.8 m in length and the full length of the tomb was c. 17 m according to the pencil sketch (*fig. 8*). To demonstrate the position of the paintings in the tomb, a contextualising picture has been made (*fig. 9*).

The Tomb of the Three Brothers

The Tomb of the Three Brothers is one of the most famous tombs in Palmyra and has been frequently described and plans published several times.⁴³ All the

32. Ingholt 1932, 4.

33. Raja and Yon 2015a.

34. Raja and Sørensen, (forthcoming); Raja and Sørensen 2015a.

35. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1924, 29.

36. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1924, 90, 125.

37. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1924, 126-127.

38. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1924; Ingholt diary Tomb A-AK, 56-59.

39. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1925 and 1928, 33.

40. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1928, 11.

41. Raja and Sørensen 2015a, 38-39.

42. Raja and Yon (forthcoming), Ingholt diary 1924, 126.

43. Strzygowski 1901, 11-19; Kraeling 1961-62; CIS 2.3.1

Fig. 7: Painted exedra in the Tomb of Hairan (photo after Starcky 1941, courtesy of *MelBeyrouth*).



tomb paintings are executed in the eastern end of the tomb in an exedra most probably created for this purpose. The earliest inscription in the tomb dates it to AD 142-43.⁴⁴ The paintings were most probably made contemporary with the tomb construction or slightly

later,⁴⁵ but no dated inscription exists in relation to these. The variety of motifs is larger than in any of the other tombs: a mythological scene showing Achilles at the court of Lycomedes and flanked by Odysseus and Diomedes, portrait busts painted in medallions held by winged Niké figures, full figure paintings and architectural renderings. The use of the medallion as an ornament with painted portraits is known from

4171-4175; Farmakowski 1903; Colledge 1976, 84-85; Ruprechtsberger (ed.) 1987, 48 col. pls. 14-18 and back cover; Eristov, Sarkis and Vibert-Guigue 2006.

44. Cantineau 1936, 355; PAT 2776.

45. Kraeling 1961-62, 16; Colledge 1976, 86.

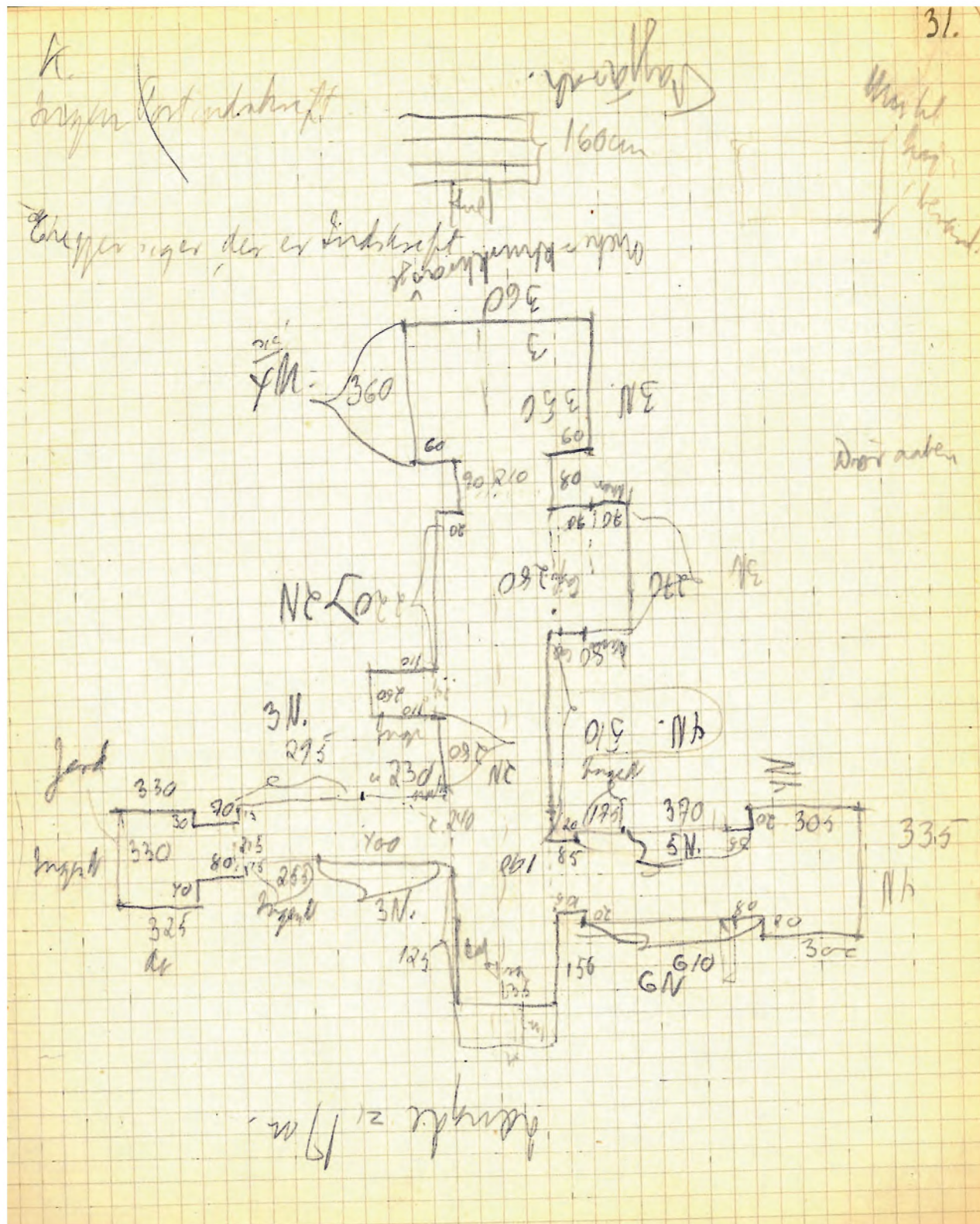


Fig. 8: Pencil sketch by Harald Ingholt (after Raja and Yon, forthcoming, Ingholt diary, sketchbook 1925, p. 31)

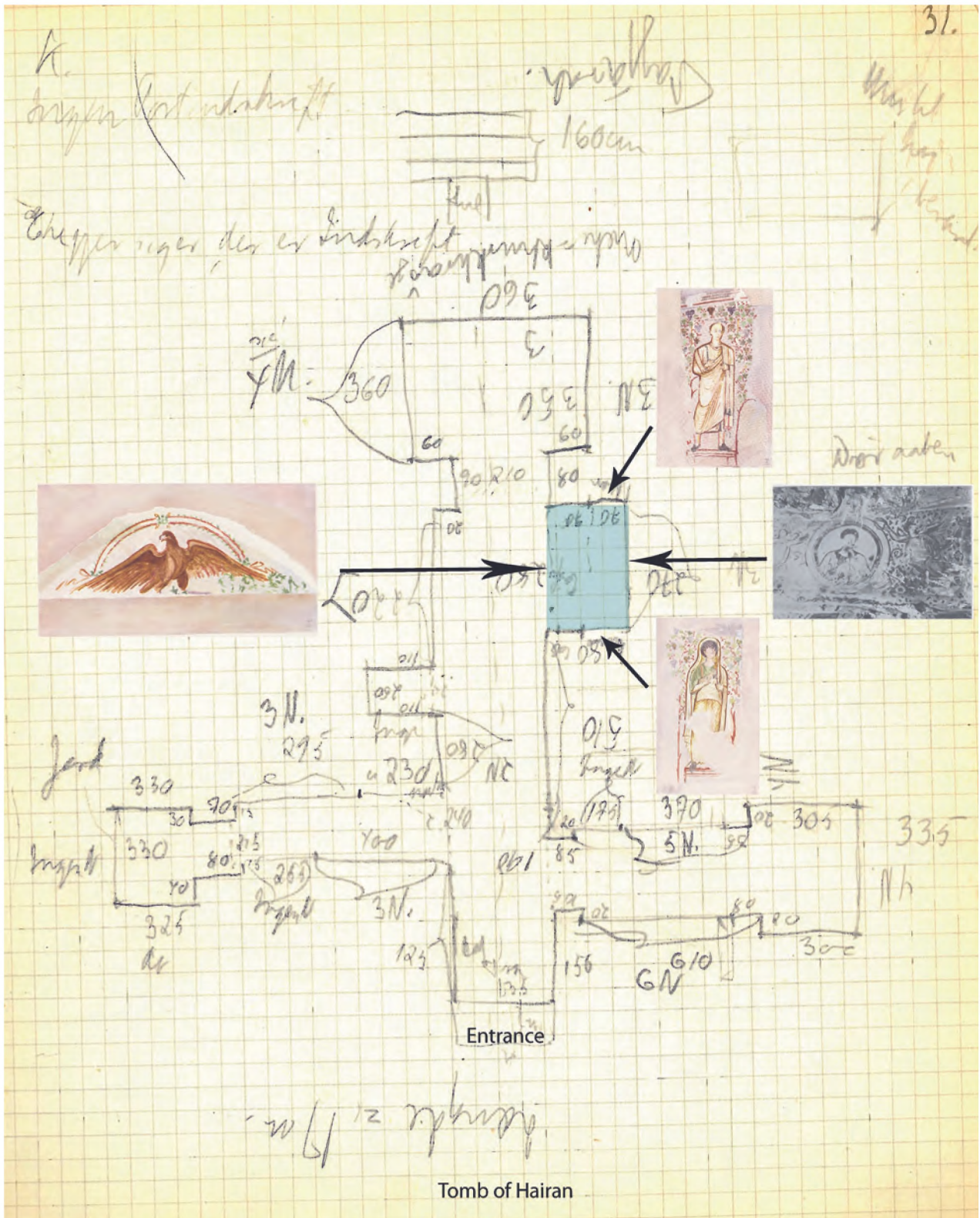


Fig. 9: Pencil sketch by Harald Ingholt combined with tomb paintings (modified by author from Raja and Yon, forthcoming, Ingholt diary, sketchbook 1925, p. 31 and *Acta Arch.* 1932)

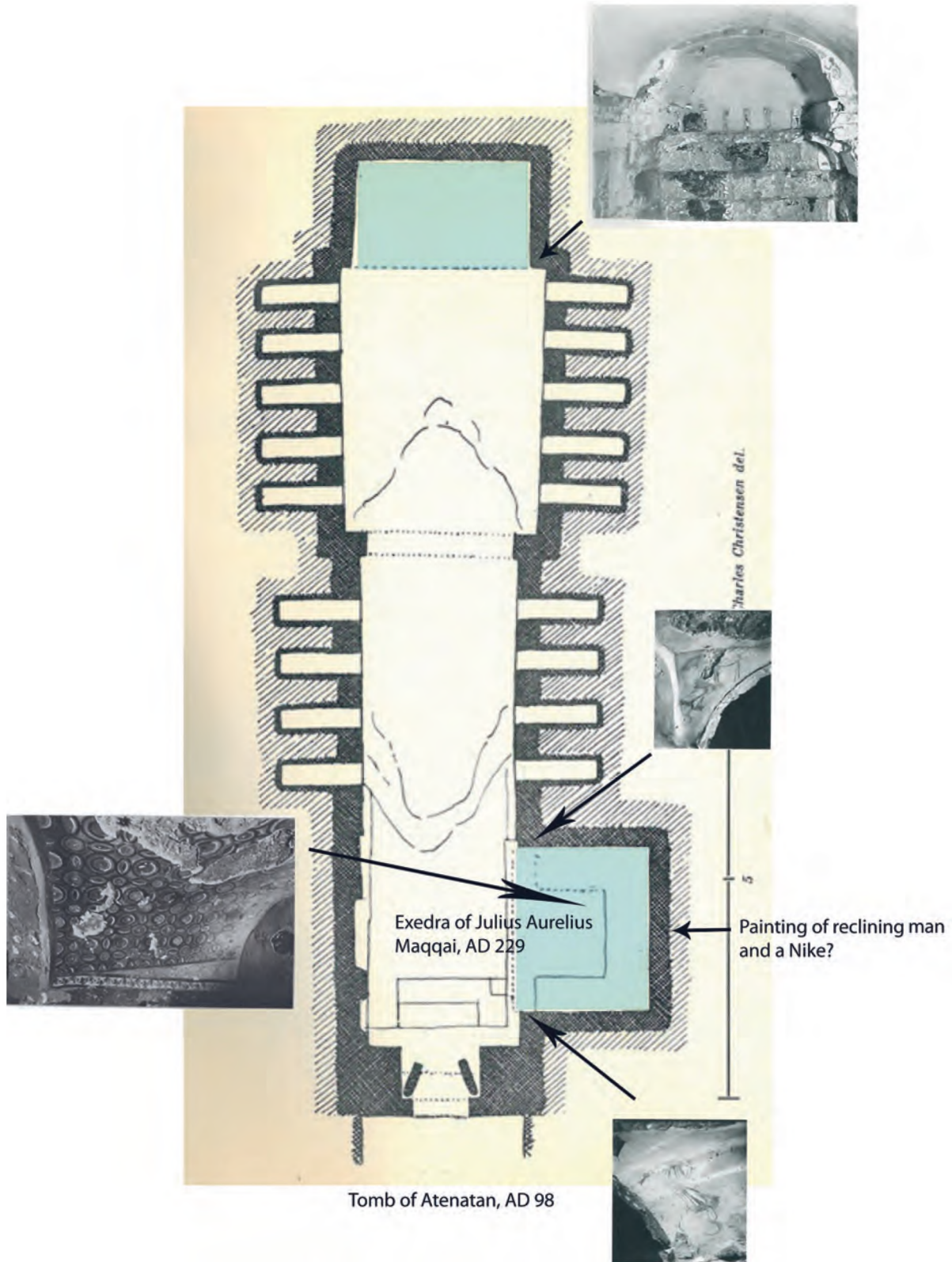


Fig. 10: Tomb of Atenatan (modified by author from Ingholt 1935).

Doura,⁴⁶ the tombs of Abila⁴⁷ as well as the Tomb of Hairan, the Østrup Tomb and the fragmentary medallions in Sondage 2.⁴⁸ Reliefs from sarcophagi and elsewhere in the tombs of Palmyra likewise reveal representations of portrait busts in medallions and also attest to the phenomenon in a different media in the same setting.⁴⁹ The mythological scene with Achilles at the court of Lycomedes is also known from a mosaic in a house in Palmyra.⁵⁰ Recent analyses have underlined the status of this tomb decoration as it has been established that a very rare pigment, mimetite, was applied to the cloak of Ulysses. Furthermore Egyptian blue was likewise in use.⁵¹

Special features which reappear in more than one of the painted tombs are the winged Niké on a globe and the eagle, the representation of Zeus/Jupiter.⁵² Eagles are found in many instances in Palmyra and a parallel to the painted eagle in a medallion from the region may be found in Tomb Q12 of unknown date in Abila, northern Jordan.⁵³

The Østrup Tomb

The Østrup Tomb is a painted tomb described by the Danish orientalist Johannes Østrup in two reports on his journey through the Syrian Desert in the latter part of the 19th century. The exact location of the tomb was not noted,⁵⁴ but the tomb has on more than one occasion been associated with The Tomb of the Three Brothers because of its lavish paintings.⁵⁵ I have, in a recent study, discussed the possibility of the Østrup

Tomb being a now lost tomb rather than the Tomb of the Three Brothers, and argued that there seem to be too many features diverging from Østrup's description and drawing and the features in The Tomb of the Three Brothers for them to be identical. Furthermore, Østrup's tomb displayed many features which also occur in other Palmyrene tombs.⁵⁶ Such features include the tomb shape - a central chamber with two side chambers, painted portraits in medallions, and a triclinium of sarcophagi set up in one of the side chambers.⁵⁷

Tomb of Atenatan - exedra of Maqqai

The next tomb is the Tomb of Atenatan which was founded in AD 98.⁵⁸ The tomb was excavated and published by Ingholt.⁵⁹ In the diaries from Ingholt's excavation, it is known as Tomb 47.⁶⁰ The tomb differs from others as it does not have any side chambers, but instead at the end of the main chamber an exedra or niche is decorated at the opening with two flying Nikés on globes framing a floral garland on the soffit. In AD 229 a large exedra was added to the main chamber on the right side of the entrance by Julius Aurelius Maqqai.⁶¹ It is worth noting that this addition was made more than a century after the foundation of the tomb. Here again the soffit is decorated with red painted winged Niké's on blue globes. The vaulted ceiling in the exedra is decorated with circular and oval ornaments.⁶² On the two facing walls wedge shaped "pediments" were painted with figural motifs described in Ingholt's diaries (*fig. 10*).⁶³ No loculi existed in the exedra but along the three walls were placed three relief-decorated sarcophagi.

46. Rostovtzeff 1938, 83, pl. 15.1; Brody and Hoffman, 2011, pl.

49. House of the Scribes, Yale University - ceiling tile, 3rd cent. AD

47. Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1994, Tomb Q13 mid. 2nd century AD.

48. Tober 2013, Abb. 205-208.

49. E.g. Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 169, cat. 227, fig. 225.

50. Stern 1977; Colledge 1976, pl. 140; Yon 2012, 276-277 no. 332.

51. Buisson et al. 2014.

52. LIMC VIII "Nike (in peripheria orientali)" no. 20.

53. Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1994, pl. 90b.

54. Østrup 1894; 1895.

55. Strzykowski 1901: 13 n. 2; Kraeling 1961-62, 14.

56. Sørensen 2014.

57. Sørensen 2014, fig. 1.

58. Ingholt 1932, 13 fig. 6; Ingholt 1935, 59.

59. Ingholt 1935.

60. Raja and Yon, forthcoming, Ingholt diary 1924, 123, Tomb 47.

61. Ingholt 1935, 60.

62. Ingholt 1932, 13, fig. 6; Ingholt 1935, 62-63, pl. XXV.1.

63. Raja and Yon, forthcoming, diary 1924, 88, 123-124; diary Tombs A-AK, 76a. Primarily jumping animals.



Fig. 11: Ceiling from Tomb of Abd'Astor (Ingholt Archive Palmyra Portrait Project).

The winged Niké is a very common motif in Palmyrene sculpture and, as we have seen, also in the paintings of the tombs. Furthermore a tempera painting on wood is known from the door in the shrine of the Palmyrene gods in Doura Europos.⁶⁴ Within the exedra of Maqqai three large sarcophagi were placed and in Ingholt's publication of the tomb in 1938 he described the blue and red colour traces on the reliefs of these sarcophagi.⁶⁵ As part of the *Palmyra Portrait Project* the photographic Ingholt Archive has been digitized and revealed new insights into the painted sarcophagi in the exedra of Maqqai.⁶⁶

64. Brody and Hofmann 2011, pl. 2.

65. Ingholt 1935, 63-64.

66. Raja and Sørensen 2015, 52-53.

Tomb of Dionysos

Another tomb decorated with paintings is the Tomb of Dionysos which is estimated to date to the third century.⁶⁷ The tomb was excavated by Harald Ingholt and named Tomb 55 and Tomb of Dionysos in his diaries.⁶⁸ The painting within the tomb was published by Ingholt alongside the paintings from the Tomb of Hairan, but again without a tomb plan. In the description of the tomb, Ingholt notes that it has a central chamber and two side chambers. He further notes that not many loculi had been dug out for funerary practice, and this fact led him to conclude that the tomb must have been built in the third century prior

67. Ingholt 1932, 16-18.

68. Raja and Yon, forthcoming, diary Tombs A-AK, 15-24; diary 1924, 81, 83, 102-103, 128-129.

Fig. 12: Ceiling from Tomb of Abd'Astor (Ingholt Archive Palmyra Portrait Project).



to the destruction of the city.⁶⁹ Two inscriptions within the tomb are, however, dated to the fourth century AD.⁷⁰ A photograph of the exterior of the tomb as well

69. Ingholt 1932, 16-18; one graffiti in the tomb has been published by Yon 2012, 394 no. 528.

70. Ingholt 1932, 16-17.

as one of the interior has been published.⁷¹ Yet no photograph with the exact position of the wall painting has to my knowledge been published thus far. According to Ingholt the painting of Dionysos reclining measures 1x1.2 m and was painted on one of the walls

71. Ingholt 1932, 15, fig. 7; Starcky 1941, fig. 24.

in the main chamber to the right,⁷² but otherwise not much is known about the tomb and the position of the painting. The god is depicted reclining with a divine nimbus and with a vine growing from a krater and encircling him. The painting is a sketchy rendering in red and yellowish-brown and was analysed in Paris and found to be of *al secco* technique.⁷³

Tomb of Abd' Astor

The last tomb which will be discussed here is the Tomb of Abd' Astor which was founded in AD 98 and in use until the third century when an exedra was added in the main chamber to the left.⁷⁴ The tomb was excavated by Ingholt in 1924 and revisited in 1937.⁷⁵ In the diaries it is described as Tomb H.⁷⁶ Based on the stylistic dates of the sarcophagi in the exedra, Ingholt dated its construction to the third century. The decoration of the soffit and vaulted ceiling in the tomb is a combination of stucco and painted background. The background of the stuccoed vine and vine leaves is rendered light red and the soffit is blue (*figs. 11-12*).⁷⁷ According to Ingholt birds pecking at the grapes were also depicted.⁷⁸ On the back wall of the exedra Ingholt describes the painted remains of a portrait medallion held by two winged figures.⁷⁹ The original photographs which were used in the publication have been located within the photographic Ingholt Archive (*figs. 11-12*).

Conclusions

Within the framework of the *Palmyra Portrait Project* I have been able to contextualize some of the most important paintings known from the Palmyrene tombs.

72. Ingholt 1932, 14-15.

73. Ingholt 1932, 18.

74. Ingholt 1938, 121.

75. Ingholt 1938, 119-120.

76. Raja and Yon, forthcoming, diary Tombs A-AK, 36-38; diary 1924, 34.

77. Ingholt 1938, 139-140.

78. Ingholt 1938, 139.

79. Ingholt 1938, 139.

It has been possible to locate a sketch of the Tomb of Hairan and through this to gain more insight into the layout of Palmyrene tombs and the position of the paintings within them.

Some painted motifs in the hypogea are known from other media and in some cases from the realm of the living – in others, like the eagle and Ganymede, and the abduction of Ganymede by Zeus – such motifs are allegories seen in tomb contexts within the Roman Empire.

The elaborate wall paintings primarily date to the second half of the second century and the beginning of the third – that is from the second half of the time span of the hypogea and thus not in the first phase of the hypogea, which fits very well with the paintings recovered from the houses in the city. The painted stucco decoration in the tower tombs may have appeared earlier, but from the scarce material published it seems the town houses and hypogea were painted during the later phase of the city's existence. The presented paintings and painted stucco decorations have primarily been painted in exedras added later to the general layout of the tombs. One exception is the Tomb of Dionysos which seems to have been laid out during the latest phase of the city's existence and this may thus explain why the painting was located in the main chamber and not in a later added exedra.

The primary motifs of the paintings are floral ornaments – notably the grapevine, as well as mythological creatures and scenes, architectural elements and allegories (Niké on the globe – holding a portrait medallion or crowning a portrait; the eagle – spreading its wings marking the exedra entrance or abducting Ganymede) and portraits of people – busts in medallions or full figure portraits. All these motifs are well known in the funerary sculpture as well as in the house paintings and public sculpture. The wall paintings do not as such lend us a new iconographic perspective of the world of Palmyra but they do add a new medium in the tombs from the second half of the second century onwards.

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