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et Nada SARKIS (dir.), *Le tombeau des Trois Frères à  
Palmyre (mission archéologique franco-syrienne  
2004-2009)*

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## REFERENCES

Hélène ERISTOV, Claude VIBERT-GUIGUE, Walîd AL-AS'AD et Nada SARKIS (dir.), *Le tombeau des Trois Frères à Palmyre (mission archéologique franco-syrienne 2004-2009)* [BAH 215], Beyrouth, Presses de l'ifpo, 2019, 27 × 38, 332 p., ISBN : 978-2-35159-753-8.

- 1 Timely. That is an understatement for the publication of this impressive folio with 105 plates that focusses on the painted decoration from the Tomb of the Three Brothers in the southwestern necropolis of Palmyra. Named after the founders Nama'in, Malê and Saedi that are mentioned in the inscription above its main entrance, the underground tomb was built shortly before 142/3 and used by the brothers and their descendants for about a century and a half. Ancient Tadmor or Palmyra is, of course, well-known for its abundance of sculpted funerary monuments dated to the first three centuries of the Common Era. The paintings from this underground tomb are, however, among the very few instances of painted decoration from the oasis. In fact, with the exception of the paintings from nearby Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, very few wall paintings were found in Roman Syria, which contributes even more to the importance of this monument. Although the tomb and its painted decoration have since its discovery in 1899 frequently been referred to in both scientific and popular publications, a scientific monograph on the monument was long wanting. Together with the impending danger

of the growing number of tourists visiting the tomb, this incited the Syrian authorities to ask a French-Syrian archaeological mission to investigate, conserve and publish the paintings. The multidisciplinary surveys of the tomb in five campaigns during the years 2004-2009 (topography, epigraphy, photographic and graphic documentation of the paintings, state of preservation, magnetic surveys, pigment analysis), are at the basis of the present publication. Just in time, for ISIS-followers molested the paintings in the spring of 2015.

- 2 After a general introduction which highlights the principal events in the history of the tomb, there are seven chapters of unequal length. About 2/3 of the text is written by the French directors of the rescue expedition, Hélène Eristov and Claude Vibert-Guigue, both specialists in ancient painted plaster. Contributions by a team of international specialists (cf. the list on p.21) supplement their work. Chapter I, entitled 'Historiographie', focusses on the work of Russian and German scholars who were the first to publish the tomb shortly after its discovery in 1899. Relevant passages from their publications are translated here in French for the first time. The chapter opens with the travelogue of Lydie Paschkoff, a Russian lady who visited Palmyra in 1872, long before the discovery of the tomb. This choice is a bit puzzling. Although it amply illustrates Russia's fascination with Palmyra in the past (and partly explains Russia's present interest in the archaeology of the oasis), they do not cover the entire historiography of the tomb. Later scholars such as Michael Rostovtzeff, Daniel Schlumberger and Malcolm Colledge, are sorely missed in this discussion. Chapter II, 'Construction des Connaissances', reconstructs the documented interventions in the interior as well as the exterior of the tomb. The chapter ends with a useful overview of the development of the paintings over more than a century, illustrated by photographs that were taken over the years (pls. 32-37). Particularly noteworthy is the rapid deterioration of the portraits of the deceased.
- 3 The third and most extensive chapter focusses on the archaeology of the tomb. After a short discussion of the southwestern necropolis and the architecture of the tomb, Eristov and Vibert-Guigue give an extensive description and analysis of the iconographic program (p. 96-133). The paintings are confined to the western exedra of the T-shaped building, in line with the main entrance of the tomb. Whereas the sculpted funerary busts from Palmyra are commonly considered oriental or locally Palmyrene, both the subjects and the style of these paintings that date to the second half of the second and the beginning of the third century, are Graeco-Roman in character. On the nine pilasters between the deep and narrow niches that once contained about 60 loculi graves, we see figures of large winged Victories standing on globes, holding a medallion with the bust of the deceased above their heads. They are placed upon a decorative panel imitating *opus sectile*, with smaller panels picturing animals below. In the lunette of the upper part of the back-wall, Achilles is pictured as he is discovered at Skyros. And in the medallion in the centre of the barrel vault covered by a cassette pattern, Ganymede is carried off by the eagle Zeus. The inside of the arch at the entrance of the exedra is decorated with a network of intersecting circles. The two pilasters on either side contain large full-length female figures, one of which is carrying a child. A vine scroll decorates the front face of these pilasters, that have a *fascinum* (medallion with the motif of animals and weapons attacking an evil eye) painted below the arch.

- 4 Ultra-red analysis of the painting of Achilles at Skyros, brought to light decoration on the clothing of the figures and previously unnoticed details in the background. The present reviewer is less convinced by the identification of local or oriental elements in these predominantly Graeco-Roman paintings. The comparison of one of the veiled women in the background with the well-known shrouded women in the so-called 'procession relief' from the Temple of Bel (p. 120) is not credible, if only because the woman in the painting is only partly veiled. I suspect these and similar attempts to find 'local' elements in the paintings, are the result of an effort to uphold the much-cherished local character of Palmyrene art. The chapter ends with an extensive discussion on the 44 Aramaic inscriptions and dipinti from this tomb by Jean-Baptiste Yon. Among the most surprising discoveries made during the project are the relics of Aramaic names, identifying the figures in the painting of Achilles at Skyros. In a Palmyrene mosaic from a private dwelling illustrating the same topic, these figures are identified in Greek. The editors reason (p. 195) that the dipinti were not noticed earlier because researchers did not connect Aramaic captions with Greek topics. In my view, this shows how well-integrated Greek subjects were in Palmyrene culture.
- 5 In the very short chapter IV, Vibert-Guigue compares the layout of the tomb with that of other hypogaea in Palmyra, such as the hypogaeum of 'Atenatan, and several unpublished tombs. He concludes the arrangement with the painted exedra on the same axe as the entrance is highly unusual. Chapter V, entitled 'Antiquités syriennes', consists of five contributions by Syrian scholars on various aspects related to the tomb. Walîd al-As'ad comments upon the recently constructed new access to the tomb, whereas Houmam Saad discusses the sculpted decoration and relates this to a typology of the hypogaea in Palmyra. Next, Saad and Vibert-Guigue attempt to catalogue 34 underground tombs with stucco and painted decoration out of the total of 150 known tombs (cf. the overview of the ground plans on pls. 84-85, with the useful *tableau synoptique* on pl. 86). Komait Abdallah proposes to interpret the iconographic program along neo-Platonic lines, in line with what Janine Balty proposed for a number of mosaics from Palmyra and elsewhere in Syria. Since the paintings are dated earlier than the mosaics and originate from a tomb owned by a fairly modest family (p. 323), I am not convinced by his interpretation. The chapter is concluded by a short paragraph on the newly found paintings in the tomb of Zabd'ateh and Nesha, discovered in 2007 and only briefly published by al-As'ad. The description and colour photographs (pl. 78) published in the present volume are therefore invaluable. Chapter VI presents a technical report of the paintings and their restauration, that is no doubt of great interest to specialists. Of special note is the discovery of a very rare type of yellow paint. The concluding chapter VII provides a short description of the condition of the tomb after it was shortly occupied by ISIS-soldiers in 2015, who built an interior wall and whitewashed the paintings.
- 6 As is clear from the summary above, the focal point of this publication is on the wall paintings; architecture and other archaeological factors are only discussed in as much as they provide a context for these images. In order to manage the readers' expectations, it would have been reasonable to include the tomb's painted decoration in the title of the book. For readers not yet acquainted with the monument, the organisation of the contents of the book will probably be confusing, since the topic is not well introduced and the tomb and its paintings are only described properly in chapter III. With the technical analysis of the paintings in chapter VI, this chapter is at

the core of the present publication. Together, they provide the starting point for further study of this monument, and for topics that are hardly touched upon or not even mentioned in the present publication. It would, for example, be interesting to study the relationship with the sculpted funerary monuments from Palmyra, and the relationship of these paintings with other painted monuments from Roman Syria (such as the paintings from Dura-Europos), and establish their meaning for the valuation of Palmyrene art and culture. This does not, however, alter the fact that it has been a matter of sheer luck that the paintings were investigated and documented by a group of very capable scholars shortly before being molested by ISIS-followers. At the time of writing this review, the whitewashed paintings are not yet cleaned and it is unknown whether they were deliberately damaged before they were covered. Whatever appears from below these layers in the future, the present detailed and thorough publication will turn out to be invaluable.

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## AUTHORS

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