

A Roman tomb at Abila of the Decapolis

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During the 1996 season in the necropolis at Abila of the Decapolis, an ornate late-Roman tomb was discovered. This note is intended to provide some preliminary information and illustrations of the well-preserved sculptures, frescoes and other remains for the benefit of art historians and others interested in the funerary art and architecture of the Roman Near East.

The tomb is located north of the urban center on the E side of Wadi Qualibah in a hillside honeycombed with *hypogea* which range from simple shaft graves to large *polyandria* (this part of the necropolis is designated area H by our project).¹ The sides of the wadi rise for about 90 m at an angle of about 45°. Other ornate tombs are known hereabouts but they tend to be concentrated at the crest of the wadi and along natural ledges of the limestone bedrock. This particular tomb (designated H60), on the other hand, was located about one-third of the way up the slope. Today it is reached by steep paths but in antiquity there would have been paths and stairs providing a convenient route for family members to the courtyards and funerary gardens associated with family and communal *polyandria*.

The courtyard (fig. 1 no 1) in front of tomb H60 had been cut back into the hillside until a broad rectangular face of bedrock was exposed. The tomb is cut into the soft eocene bedrock which lies beneath a bed of chert about 20 cm thick. The courtyard has not yet been excavated but probes indicate a rectangle roughly 70 m square. On the uphill side of the courtyard and adjacent to the tomb's entrance the courtyard is covered by a depth of about 7 m of stones and soil, resulting from the deliberate sealing of the tomb and from subsequent tumble and hill wash. This deep overburden thwarted two earlier attempts to rob the tomb and one very recent effort.

The tomb's entrance was found blocked with large boulders and cut blocks. A Byzantine oil lamp decorated with a cross on its nozzle was found amidst the heap of blocking stones and probably points to activity hereabouts in that period. From the threshold (no. 2) one steps down (no. 3) into a rectangular central chamber (c.4 x 5 m). The wall of the central chamber flanking the door was plastered but no evidence of decoration remains. The central chamber (no. 4) was found cluttered with limestone boulders that had collapsed from the ceiling as well as with materials from the tomb that had been scattered by ancient tomb robbers. Despite this robbing, however, many frescoes and sculptures in the tomb have survived in good condition.

To the left, the NW wall of the central chamber is punctuated by a small *arcosolium* (no. 6) and three *loculi* (nos. 7-9). The *arcosolium* is suitable for a short adult. It is recessed within a rectangular niche c.1 m wide which extends from floor to ceiling. In this burial place were found two early 4th-c. coins. The rectangular burial niches next to the *arcosolium* are cut at two levels. On the lower level a short *loculus* (no. 8), suitable in length for a sub-adult, was found closed off by a cut block. This *loculus* contained the bones of about 20 individuals, chiefly those of very young children. The grave goods present included numerous small iron and bronze bracelets, beads, perforated seashells, and perforated bronze coins. This *loculus* appears to have been in secondary use for these remains, and they should be examined to see if they might be the victims of an epidemic. The two upper-level *loculi*, cut for the interment of single adults, were originally walled up with small boulders and then plastered over. The *loculus* (no. 7) nearest the *arcosolium* was found crudely closed off by two cut stones. Inside lay an articulated, though decaying, adult male skeleton superimposed on a lower skeleton, which in turn lay upon

1 For a plan of the site see W. H. Mare, "Abila AE 84," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 33 (1986) on p.208. For further information on this necropolis, see preliminary reports in *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 37-65; 28 (1984) 39-54; 29 (1985) 221-37; 31 (1987) 205-19; in the *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletins* 17-44 passim; and in *Archaeology of Jordan* vol. 2, *Field reports* (Akkadica supplementum VIII, 1989) 472-86.