

## A ROMAN FAMILY TOMB

### AT ES - SALT

by

Adnan Hadidi

This tomb was discovered accidentally at the end of April, 1978, while workmen were leveling ground for a new sewerage plant in the Wadi Shu'eib, 3 km. west of the city of es-Salt, situated in the Transjordanian tableland east of the Jordan Rift Valley at a latitude of about 30°03' N and a longitude of about 35°42' E.<sup>1</sup> The find was reported immediately, and the Department of Antiquities took over excavation of the tomb and its adjacent vicinity; twenty labourers were employed to lift and carry, and the actual clearance and recording was done by Mr. Ali Sa'idi, Inspector of Antiquities of the Balka Governate of which es-Salt is the center of administration.<sup>2</sup> The plans and sections partly done by Miss Madiha Hafez, were checked, perfected, redrawn with the necessary profiles by Prof. H. Kalayan, to whom the writer wishes to express sincere thanks and appreciation.

The tomb and its contents were found in perfect state of preservation; stones fallen when the bulldozer struck a wall have been marked and reconstructed, and the sewerage plant structure was modified to make room for this new acquisition in Jordan's open-air archaeological museum.

#### Description of the tomb:

1. *Archaeological Map of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Sheet 1*, Amman, Scale 1 : 250,000, Department of Lands and Surveys of Jordan, 1949.
2. The excavation team also included: Hussein Qandil, Sa'd Hadidi, Madiha Hafez, architect and draughtsman, B. Darakidjian and Salem Da'ja,

The tomb complex consists of a main square hall, approximately 3.50 x 3.50 m., with a narrow doorway in the south with the stone door still in position (Fig. 1; Pls XLVII, XLVIII). The lintel and jambs of the door had a simple moulding. Centered above the lintel is a square stone cut through in the "Whirling wheel" motif, 0.50m. in diameter, apparently to allow for ventilation, but may also have a religious significance with an apotropaic purpose.<sup>3</sup> On each of the remaining three sides of the main hall is an arched chamber, approximately 2.35 x 1.80 m. Contained within are three sarcophagi in addition to six burial chambers beneath the floor of the main hall (Figs. 1.2 & 3; Pls. XLIX, L,LI). The main hall, sarcophagi and burial chambers contained many objects including pottery, glass bottles and bracelets, jet beads and metal bracelets, jewelry and coins. Particularly unusual features of the sepulchre are the two-story arrangement of the graves, six in all with covering slabs, and the stone-carved relief of a man in the main north chamber, who must have been the *pater familias* or head of the household buried there (Fig. 2; Pl XLIX). Above the sculpture is a carved *tabula ansata* 0.60 x 0.25 m., left without inscription. It has a simple moulding and indeed an unusual shape for this

Photographers. Mrs. Hanan Kurdi-Bisha did the classification, preliminary description and registration of the objects. The writer wishes to thank all of them for their fine performance.

3. Cf. Avi-Yonah, "Oriental Elements in Palestinian Art", *QDAP*, Vol. XIV, p. 73.

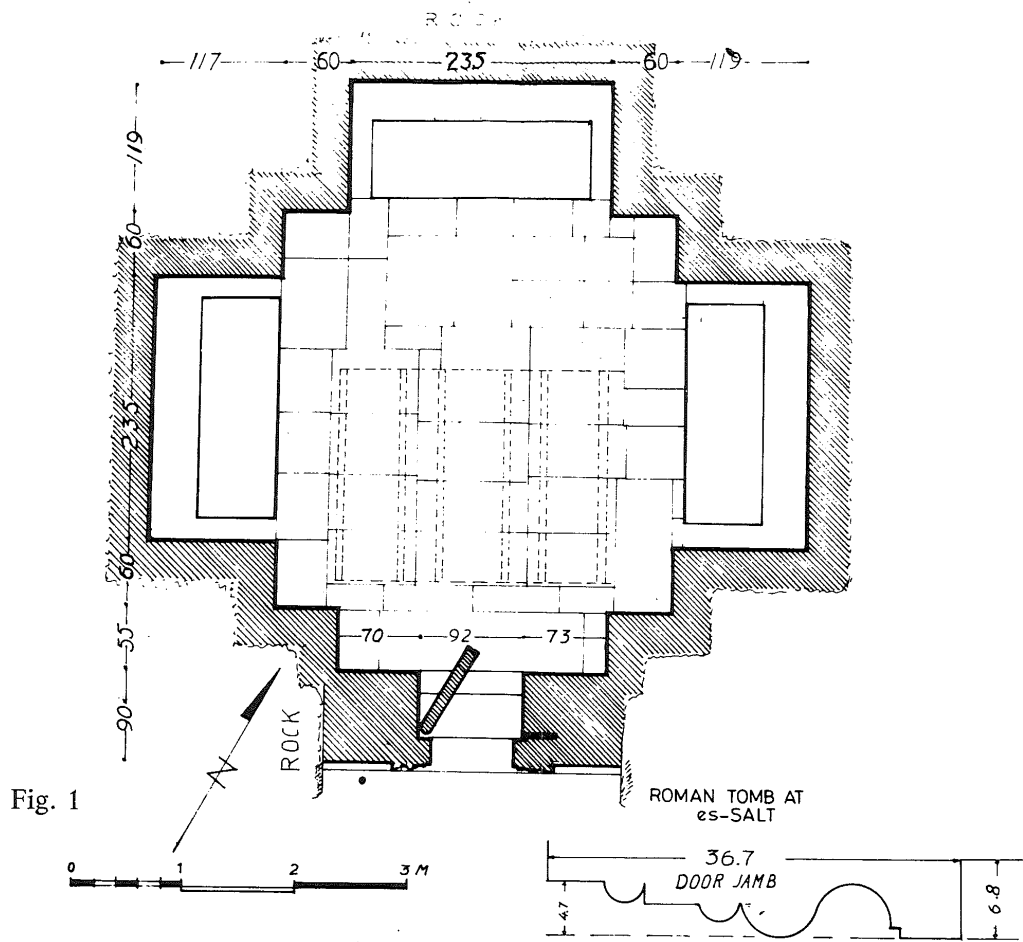


Fig. 1

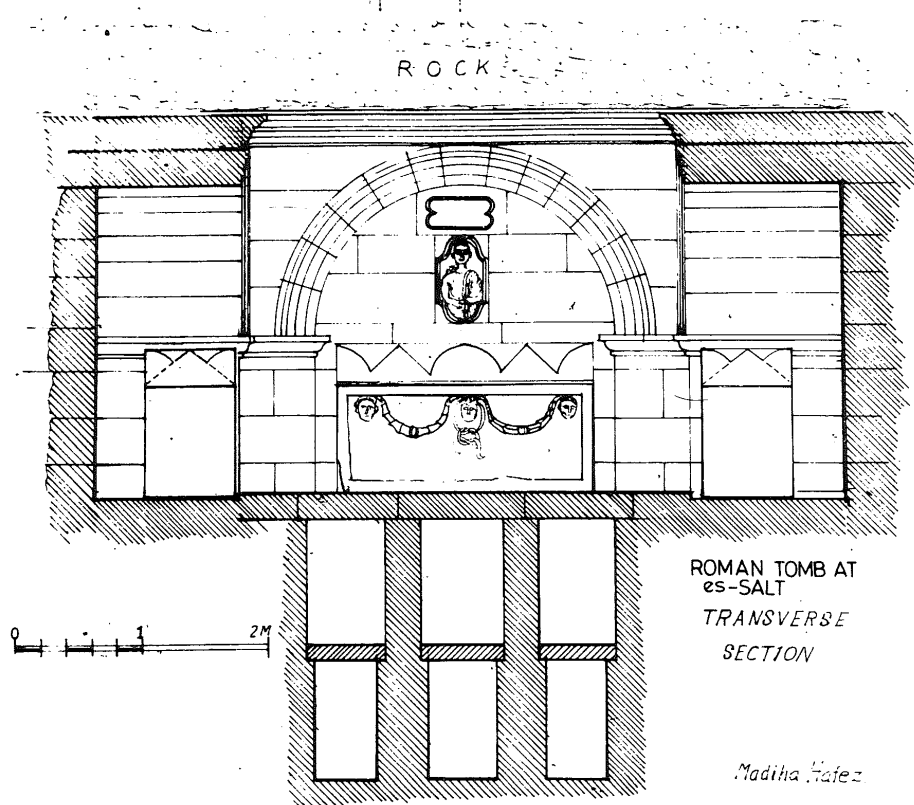


Fig. 2

period. The sculptured relief (Pl. XLIX) has a rectangular frame 0.40 x 0.66m., with simple moulding, arched on the top and below and two straight sides. The image itself represents a middle age man in frontal position, half draped and holding a scroll in his left hand. His face is clean-shaven except for a thin moustache and narrow thin beard. The eyes and mouth have been emphasized by deep narrow chiseling. The ears are not worked in detail, the hands and fingers are placed unsymmetrically, giving a coarse and slightly sinister expression. This sculpture is a typical provincial version of a treatment commonly to be seen in imperial busts of the first half of the third century, and which first appeared in portrait sculpture under the successors of Septimius Severus.<sup>4</sup>

The whole tomb complex appears to have been originally a natural cave, which had been prepared by chiseling before the various chambers, walls and arches were built up with very well dressed masonry, carefully worked to shape and laid dry. Judging from the style and technique of the tomb and its contents, it must have been in use during the third and fourth centuries A.D. One bronze coin was found in the tomb. It belongs to Constantine I ( 307-324 A.D )<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Condition of the contents, Mainhall.**

As mentioned above the tomb and its contents were found in perfect state of preservation. The main hall which was covered with debris and fallen stones as a result of the damage caused by the bulldozer to the south arch over the doorway of the tomb was cleared and restored. At the corner between the main

north chamber and the west chamber was found a collection of pottery objects carefully laid down on the floor. It consisted of a carinated tall flask with a broken base, a globular ribbed cooking-pot and a fragment of a water jar (Pl. LIII). The floor was paved with carefully shaped rectangular slabs (Pl. XLIX). The stone door 0.70 x 0.80 m. on the south end of the main hall was slightly ajar, and there was no trace of the wooden bolt which originally closed it from the outside (Pls, XLVII, XLVIII). The arch with simple mouldings over the doorway on the south side of the main hall is integral with the structure and carried on piers.

**The side chambers.** The three vaulted masonry chambers flanking the main hall on the north, east and west (Fig. 1), were found to contain three stone sarcophagi, each measuring 2 x 0.70 x 0.80 m. Each of the lids which are similarly decorated with pedimental arrangement, consisting of carved triangles and half circles, measures 2 x 0.70 x 0.30 m. (Pls. XLIX&L). The southern long side of the sarcophagus in the main north chamber is ornamented with three frontal male masks between suspended stylized garlands (Fig. 2; Pl. XLIX). Inside the coffin were found two intact skeletons of a male and female, but disintegrated and crumbled away as soon as they were touched. A signet ring (Pl. LIV), a pair of gold earrings and a pendant were also discovered.

The second sarcophagus in the east chamber has its west long side ornamented in relief with four columns surmounted by a pediment and flanked on each side by a two-handled jar

4. Cf. E. Strong, *La scultura romana da Augusto a Costantino*, Firenze, 1923-6, p. 398.

5. Cf. A. Spijkerman, *Cafarnao III*, p. 67, pl. 3: 1-5.

For similar tombs of the same period cf. QDAP, II, 4 pp. 182f; 170f, 175f.; VI, 1, pp. 54f.; VIII, 1&2, p. 38f.; p. 45f., p.64f.; XIV, p. 81ff.

placed on an altar stone, and connected to the outer columns of the façade with suspended stylized garlands (Fig. 3; Pl. L). It contained one skeleton, several soft gold leaves and seventeen black semi-precious diamond shaped stones (Pl. LV).

The third sarcophagus in the west chamber has its east long side ornamented in relief with two suspended stylized garlands interlaced in the center (Pl. L). Inside this coffin was found a signet rings, pottery lamp and a small ribbed juglet (see inventory below).

**The graves.** Six graves were sunk into the floor of the main hall and vertically superimposed, the cover-stones of the lower three forming the floor of the upper. They are totally built of carefully shaped masonry. The lower three graves have smaller dimensions than the upper.

For practical purposes, they are referred to in the plan from east to west as 1B, 2B, 3B (Fig. 1). The middle grave, 2B is 1 x 0.50 x 0.90m., while each of the outer graves, 1B and 3B, is 1 x 0.46 x 0.90 m. All three graves contained bones of adults and children mixed together without any consistent orientation. In grave 2B, about 49 skulls were counted. Numerous objects of ornament were also found and are described in the following inventory below.

The upper three graves are also numbered from east to west, 1A, 2A and 3A. Grave 2A measures 1.20 x 0.66 x 1.10m. Each of the outer graves is 1.20 x 0.60 x 1.10m. All three graves contained two or more burials, disposed without consistent orientation (Fig. 2; Pl. LI). More bones from burials were found scattered in the main hall between the sarcophagi and the walls of the chambers.

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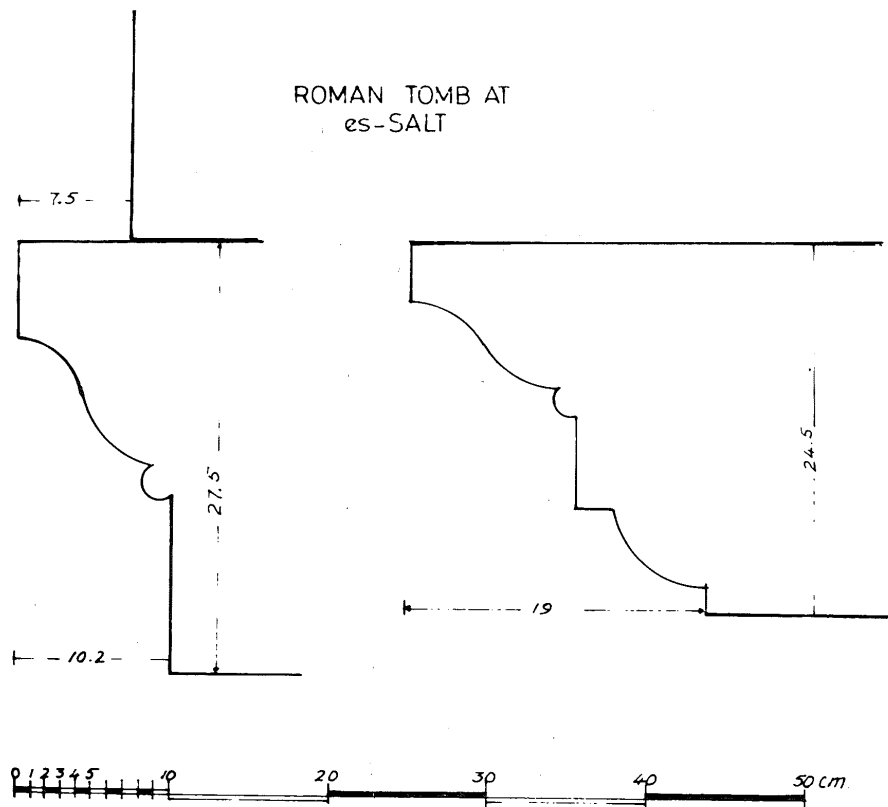
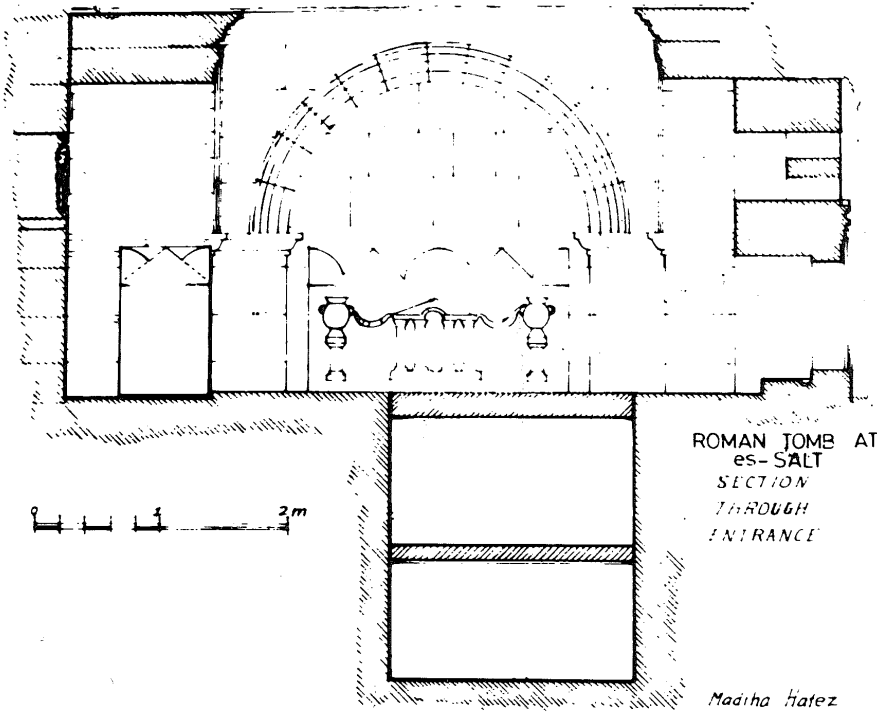


Fig. 3

## Inventory

Exc.No.	Plate	Description	Burial
47	LIII	Pottery flask, long neck, carinated, broken base and handle	Main hall
48	LIII	Pottery cooking-pot, two handles, ribbed globular body. Intact. Ht. 17cm. Diam. of rim 9.5 cm.	Main hall
46	LIII	Pottery juglet, high stump base, one handle, ribbed body. Ht. 6.5 cm.	West Sarcophagus
5-7	LIII	Three pottery lamps, pear-shape body, circular nozzle, wide filling hole; moulded and decorated with stylized floral design.	Main hall
8	LIII	Twin glass bottle, one top handle in addition to two side smaller handles. Probably used as Kuhl tube. Ht 10.5 cm. (see <i>QDAP</i> , IV 4, Pl. LXXXV, 3; VI, 1. Pl. VI).	East Sarcophagus
9	LIII	Small glass pot, several intertwined handles around shoulder. Ht.6.5 cm.	2 B
10	LIII	Small glass pot	2 B
59	LIV	Bronze coin of Constantine I, Obv. Laur. head of emperor, inscr. around 1. IMPCONSTANTINVS <b>PFAVG</b> Rev. Personification of the Sun, radiate and standing l., holding globe; inscr. around 1. SOLIINVICTOCOMITI; in ex. SC  (For similar types see: A. Spijkerman, <i>Cafarnao III</i> , P. 67, Pl. 3, 1-5)	Main hall

1	LV	Gold pendant with small chain; originally containing a piece of precious stone or coloured glass in a rope pattern frame; the four hanging wires probably had a glass or paste beads on them Diam. of central disc: 2 cm.	West Sarcophagus
21	LV	Pierced bone disc.	North Sarcophagus
2	LV	Pair of gold earring with gold wires projecting from either side of the frame: Diam. of disc: 1.8 cm.	North Sarcophagus
3	LV	Gold single ear-ring	West Sarcophagus
3	LV	Gold ring with precious stone in the bezel	West Sarcophagus
4	LV	Soft gold leaves and 17 diamond - or lozenge - shaped pieces of black glass	East Sarcophagus
16	LV	Two pairs of gold ear-rings. Daim. 1 cm.	1 B
17	LVI	Various types of beads (glass, bone, stone, mother-of-pearls); one in form of miniature pot.	1 B
31	Not illustrated	Black small beads	2 B
32	Not illustrated	Black glass, blue paste with brown sard amulet in center.	2 B
33	"	Green chalky stone in form of a miniature frog; pierced horizontally	2 B
11-12	"	Two bracelets of twisted bronze	1 B

13-15	LVI	Fragments of bracelets of twisted bronze	I B
18-20	Not illustrated	Bracelets and fragments of bracelets of twisted bronze and iron wire.	I A
37	"	Twisted bronze and iron wire bracelets	I B
39	LVII	Small bronze bracelets	3 A
40	LVII	Flattened bronze bracelet	3 B
41	LVII	Glass amulet in form of a human bust	3 B
26	Not illustrated	Fragments of corroded twisted bronze and iron wire bracelets	I B
43	Not illustrated	Two bronze child rings	3 A
44-45	LVII	Twisted bronze bracelets	3 A
21	Not illustrated	Fragments of corroded bronze & iron wire bracelets	I A
28	LVIII	Glass bracelets	2 B
29	LVIII	Twisted glass bracelet	2 B
30	Not illustrated	Twisted glass bracelets	2 B
22-24	"	Various beads	I A
36	LVIII	Fragments of jet beads (see <i>QDAP</i> , XIV, p. 95, Pl. XXXI).	2 B
42	LIV	Bronze ring with a carnelian engraved bezel in a hollow mount. The engraved scene represents an owl in the middle with two standing deities on the sides.	2 B



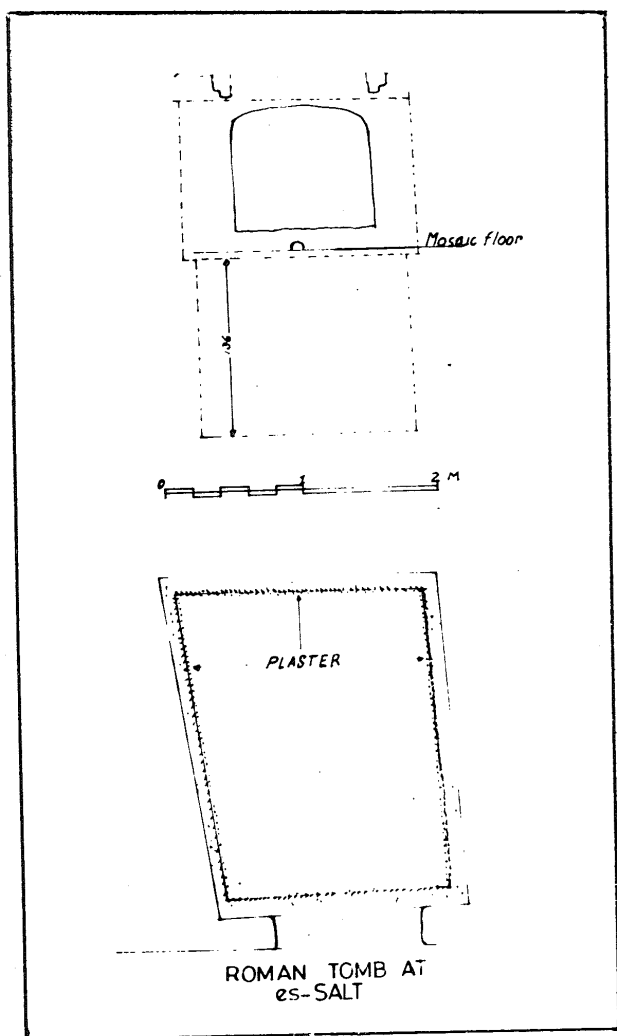


Fig. 4

### The olive press

An olive press adjacent to the tomb on the west side was also discovered during clearance work carried out at the site. It was located inside a natural cave which may have been originally used as a burial place (Pl. LII).

The cave had been prepared similarly by chiseling and excavating several loculi for burials before it was used as an olive press. Two olive crushers are situated in the main hall. Each one is made of a large carefully carved circular stone basin or mortarium (Pl. LI). Originally an axle penetrated the central hole of the orbes and was balanced on an upright support in the middle of the mortarium. This type of olive press was known by Roman agricultural writers as *trapetum*, an olive crushing machine using two crushing stones (orbes), matched in size and contained in a large, carefully carved stone basin (mortarium).<sup>6</sup>

### The water reservoir

A water reservoir was also discovered adjacent to the tomb on the east side (Fig. 4; Pls XLVII - LII).

The site was originally a natural cave which had been prepared by chiseling before the various walls were partly built with cherts and mortar. The walls were carefully plastered and the doorway on the south had three steps leading inside. On the right hand side of the doorway, are traces of a channel carved in the rock which led rain water from the slopes of the hill above. The whole area in front of the reservoir, the tomb and the olive press was originally paved with medium size plain white mosaic stones (Pl. XLVII).

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6. Cf. H.A. Forbes & L. Foxhall, "The Queen of all Trees", *Expedition*, University of Pennsylvania, vol. 21, No. 1 (1978). PP. 37ff. For a

similar type in Amman see: F. Zayadine, "Excavations on the Upper Citadel of Amman", *ADAJ*, P. 20 Pls. VII, 2; X,1.