

# ROMAN ANTIQUITIES FROM AL-QUNAYYAH, JORDAN

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## **1. The Ancient Site of al-Qunayyah (Romel Gharib)**

Al-Qunayyah (32.222116° N; 35.993929° E; alt. 490 m) is located in the communal district of Hashimiyya al-Jadida (Zarqa governorate). As the crow flies, it is some 10 km south-east of Jarash, the ancient city of Gerasa of the Decapolis, about 20 km north-west of Zarqā' and 30 km north of Amman, ancient Philadelphia (**Fig. 1**). The modern village nestles on both banks of Wādī Qunayyah, which runs from north to south until it enters a bend of the Zarqā river. The once-perennial flow of the river is today supplemented by the outlets of the Samra water plant. Only few kilometers to the east, the landscape quickly changes into the semi-arid fringes of the steppe and the desert.

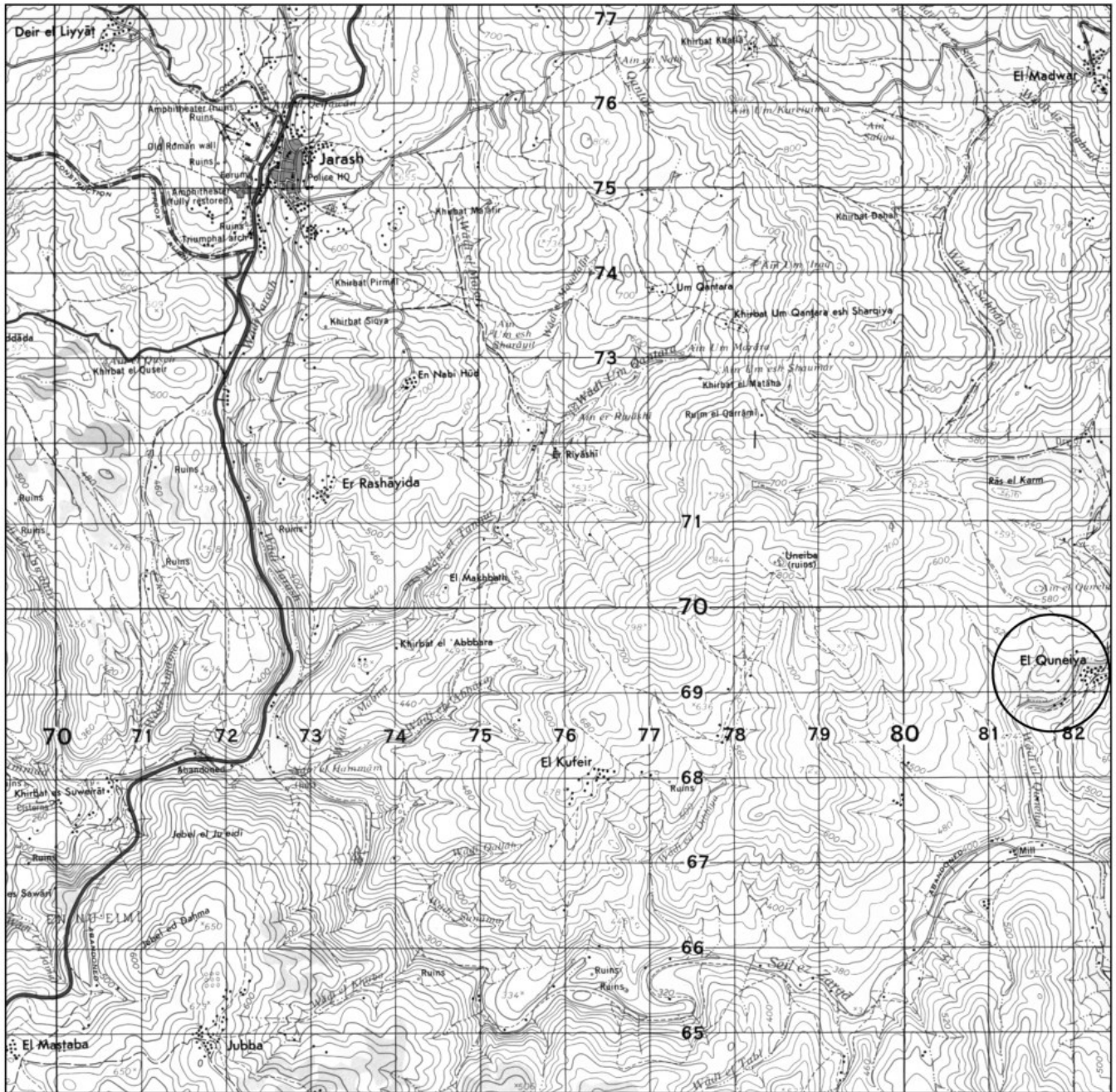
The ancient name of the site is unknown. Up to the present day, geological and climatic conditions have allowed relative prosperous agriculture through irrigation, which helps to explain the modern Arabic name of the village (Ar. "small canals"). Along the banks of Wadi Qunayyah, dissolution of the limestone has formed karst caves that were used as dwellings, cellars and tombs in antiquity. A number of ancient buildings and their foundation layers are visible on the eroded ground surface. Some of the older buildings in the village, dating back to the late 19th and 20th centuries, make use of solid limestone ashlar which might, on the basis of their appearance and workmanship, be Roman. This applies especially to the remnants of the aquaduct and tower of a ruined late Ottoman water mill, which are still to be seen

at a ford crossing the Qunayeh brook (**Fig. 2**) where today the modern asphalt main road passes from its southern to northern banks.

In 2007, two Roman stone monuments were found in the village within a kilometre of each other. They represent different types of porous limestones of local origin. They are both of great interest for the history of the site: one of them is a funerary stele which displays figural representations of human busts; the other is a votive altar inscribed in Greek that was dedicated by several priests in the late 3rd century AD. The votive altar was lying in the olive orchard and garden of a private owner, close to the Ottoman mill. The funerary stele was found ca 800 m further south on the slope of the east bank, in the neighbourhood of a modern farm. No surface traces are visible that might shed further light on the ancient architectural context of these two finds. Both monuments were removed from al-Qunayeh by the Zarqa office of the Department of Antiquities, to be protected and exhibited to the public in the newly restored Ottoman Qaşr Shabīb.

## **2. A Funerary Stele with Superimposed Busts (Thomas M. Weber-Karyotakis)**

This monument (**Fig. 3a-d**) consists of white limestone with yellow stains. It is covered in an extensive transparent ochre patina. The porous stone material, which includes a few fossils, seemingly erodes by flaking. The block, almost cuboid in shape, had a thin fissure in its lower rear part; this part broke off while workmen were moving it for photography.



1. Jarash, the Zarqa river and al-Qunayyah (1:50,000 topographic maps of Jordan [Jarash and Suwaylih sheets, nos 3154 I-II, 2nd edition, 1961]).

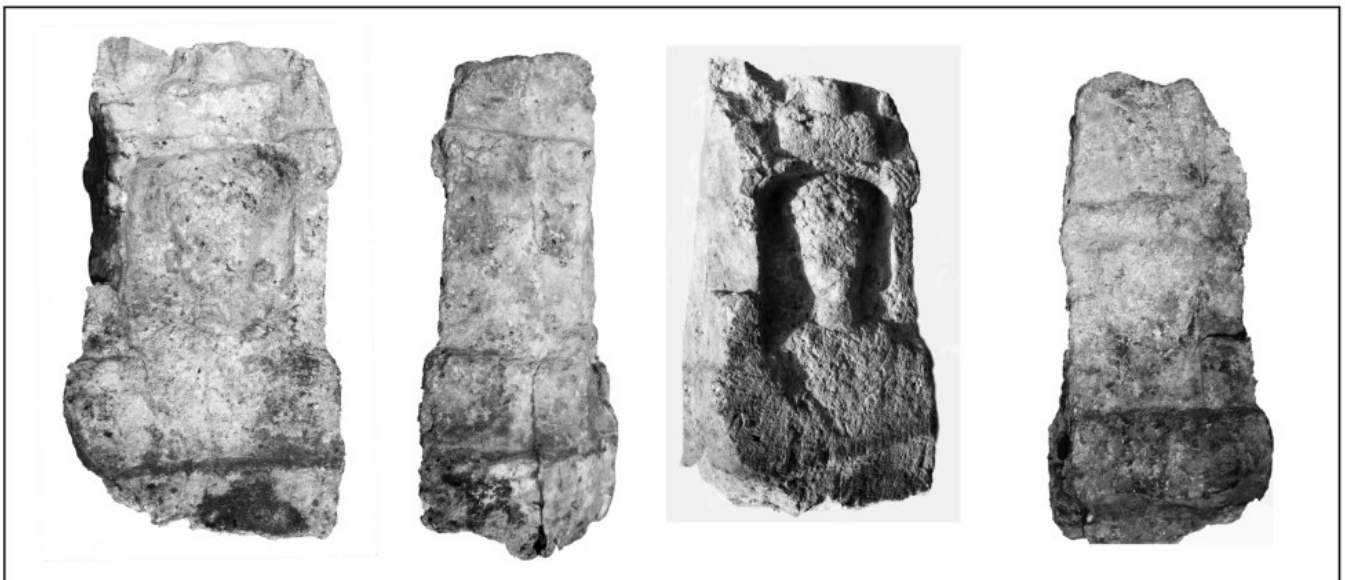
The monument was sculpted on its frontal and lateral sides; the rear displays only the rough dressing of quarry extraction. Faint traces of a pointed and a fine claw chisel are visible on the lateral sides. The dimensions of the block are 99 (h) x 44 (w) x 36 (d) cm.

The frontal view of the block displays two superimposed frontal human busts in an architectural framing that is broken at its upper and lower edges. The upper bust survives only

up to the neck; the head, including the pillar framing as well as the entablature and assumed pediment of the naiskos frame, are missing. This damage occurred in antiquity as the patina runs over the breaks. The preserved parts are much worn, by erosion rather than through deliberate damage or iconoclasm. The details of the busts and architectural frame are likely to have been emphasized in antiquity by colorpaint of which no trace remains. It is quite possible that the subjects



2. Remnants of a late Ottoman water mill at al-Qunayyah (photo Romel Gharib).



3a-d. Roman stele with superimposed busts from al-Qunayyah, now in the garden of Qaşr Şhabīb, Zarqa (photos Thomas M. Weber).

were named in a painted inscription under the lower bust, but if so this has entirely vanished.

Of the upper bust, only the vague contours of the shoulders, chest and solid neck survive. At its lower edge, it terminates in a straight line. No trace of clothing folds can be seen, which might indicate that the bust represents a male with a naked chest. This must however remain an assumption, as the surface is much weathered. A fragment of a somewhat similar stele, allegedly from Ḥayyan al-Mushrif and

presently on display at the entrance gate of the Mafraq office of the Department of Antiquities (**Fig. 4**), gives a suggestion of how the upper termination of the epitaph might have looked<sup>1</sup>. The Ḥayyan al-Mushrif fragment appears so congruent in style to the Qunayyah stele that both seem likely to have been produced in the same workshop at the same time. The lower bust of the Qunayyah stele is, however, placed in a niche crowned by a flat, segmented, curved arch and framed by smooth pillars terminating

1. Thanks to Mr Sulayman al-Sirhan, DoA Mafraq, for

information on this monument.



4. *Fragment of a limestone Roman funerary stele (upper part of a naiskos with head of a frontal bust [bearded male with wreath]) from Ḥayyan al-Mushrif, now at the entrance of the Department of Antiquities Mafraq office (photo Thomas M. Weber).*

in bulky capitals. Two oblique incised lines at the right pilaster capital point to a more precise modeling delineated by the original painting, probably in Corinthian acanthus style. This bust fragment is similar to the upper one, but terminates in a hanging curve at its lower edge. The folded texture of a garment, most likely a cloak, is depicted by curved, incised lines. The oval head sits on a broad, conical neck. The outline of the face with its rounded chin gets broader towards the temples, while the top of the head is delineated by the segmented arch of the niche. Hair consists of short, irregular locks. The forehead is covered by a diadem or wreath with a rounded gem in its centre. The facial features have entirely vanished, but ear lobes or earrings are indicated on both sides by circular incisions.

Representations of frontal busts are well known in the funerary art of the region (Figs. 5 - 6), especially in the Decapolis cities of Gadara (Weber 2002: 414-417, pl. 47-81), Abila (Weber 2002: 466-481, pl. 99-116) and Scythopolis, but also at Samaria (Skupińska-Løvset 1983; 1999: 262-264) and in Lebanon (Gatier 2005). The

common feature of all these busts is that they are carved in the round from locally available stone. Reliefs on steles, sarcophagi and lintels are rare, as are as full sized statues. Very few busts bear personal names incised on the base. Funerary busts in Jordan and Palestine do however display some regionalism, being concentrated at some urban centers and in their respective territories. The custom of placing busts in tombs was clearly not practiced at Capitolias (Bayt Rās) and Adraha (Dar‘a) (Fournet and Weber 2010: 189, Fig. 17), while only a few specimens are known from Gerasa (Jarash) and Philadelphia (Amman). An example of an early 2nd-century AD stele, chiseled in basalt relief, and showing the deceased soldier as a half-figure (Fig. 6), comes from Gadara (Weber 2002: 446, PL 101, pl. 60 D [cf. also 481, A 74, pl. 116 D-F for a female bust from Abila, with a tabula ansata below for the subject’s name in painted letters]). As well as these regional groups in the Levantine hinterland, funerary reliefs occur in great numbers and in different local styles in the Hauran (Sartre-Fauriat 2001, I: 243-279; Weber



5. Limestone funerary bust of a bearded man, probably from Umm Qays (ancient Gadara): Rihani collection, Amman (photo Thomas M. Weber).

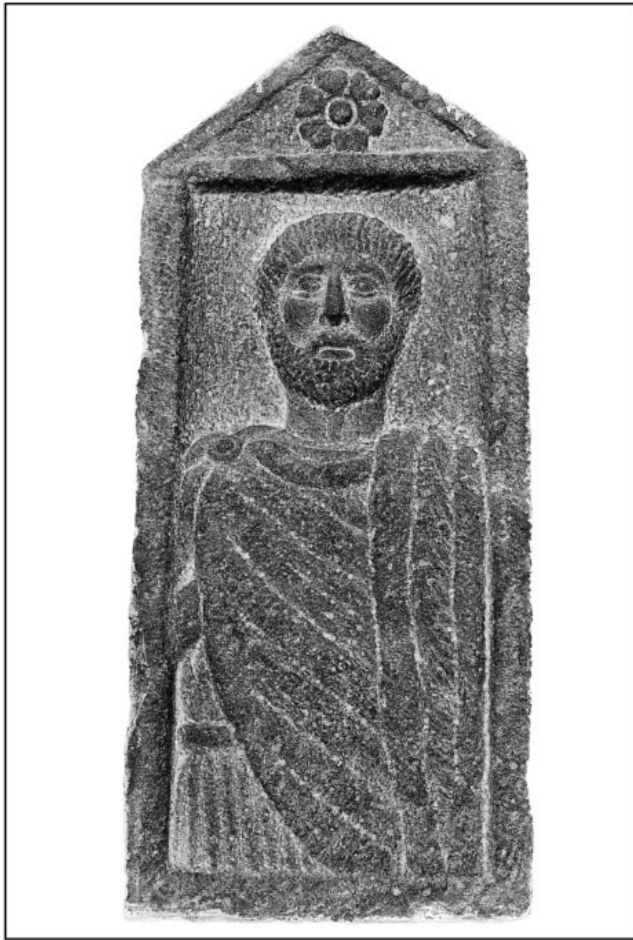
and al-Mohammed 2006: 40, nos 19-20, pl. 14 B-C; 50, no 37, pl. 28; 118, no 103, pl. 80 D; Weber 2015: 582), in the Palmyra oasis (Weber 2015: 583; cf. Kropp and Raja 2014: 393-408), in the cities along the Euphrates (Parlasca 1982: 14-16), and in south-western and north-eastern Arabia beyond the frontier of the Roman Empire.

Neither archaeological context nor epigraphic data shed light on the chronology of the Decapolitan busts, with the result that they can only be dated on the basis of details such as hairstyle and clothing. The origins of this kind of monument may be sought in late republican Roman Italy, where funerary bust galleries,

sometimes superimposed on registers (**Figs. 7 - 8**), were popular amongst freedmen (*liberti*) (Zanker 1975). To sum up, both the Qunayyah and Ḥayyan al-Mushrif monuments testify to a provincial group of tombstones on the north-western edge of the Jordanian steppe in the second half of the 2nd century AD. This group was strongly influenced by Roman funerary art and the Hellenised iconographic conventions of the neighbouring Decapolis communities.

### 3. A Greek Dedication on a Votive Alta (Julien Aliquot)

The second stone monument from al-Qunayyah



6. Basalt tombstone with a half-figure representation of a soldier, probably from Umm Qays (ancient Gadara): Bisharat collection, Amman (photo Thomas M. Weber).

is an inscribed votive altar 91 cm in height, 51 cm in width and 41 cm in depth (Fig. 9). It is possible that its upper part was recut. The shaft measurements are 34 cm in height, 37 cm in width and 34 cm in depth. The monument is made of hard, brownish limestone that includes some natural pebbles, sometimes of large size. The surface has other natural impurities of fossil character caused by the geology of the rock. It is also entirely covered with a dark yellow-brown patina, quite dense for the most part, and is battered or worn in places, making some letters difficult to read. The front face of the entablature was partially covered in baked earth or an encrustation that was mechanically removed by Jordanian specialists on 11 May 2015. On the upper surface of the block there

was a deep oval hole carved into the stone, presumably for the insertion of a cultic object.

The block has a protruding upper section with an alternating *torus - trochilus* profile. At the base, it terminates in a high, slightly protruding pedestal with a similar but inverted molding. The cubic shaft of the block is set slightly back from the entablature and plinth. The plinth is damaged at the lower right-hand edge of its front face. The rear part of the block has been roughly smoothed but is otherwise unworked.

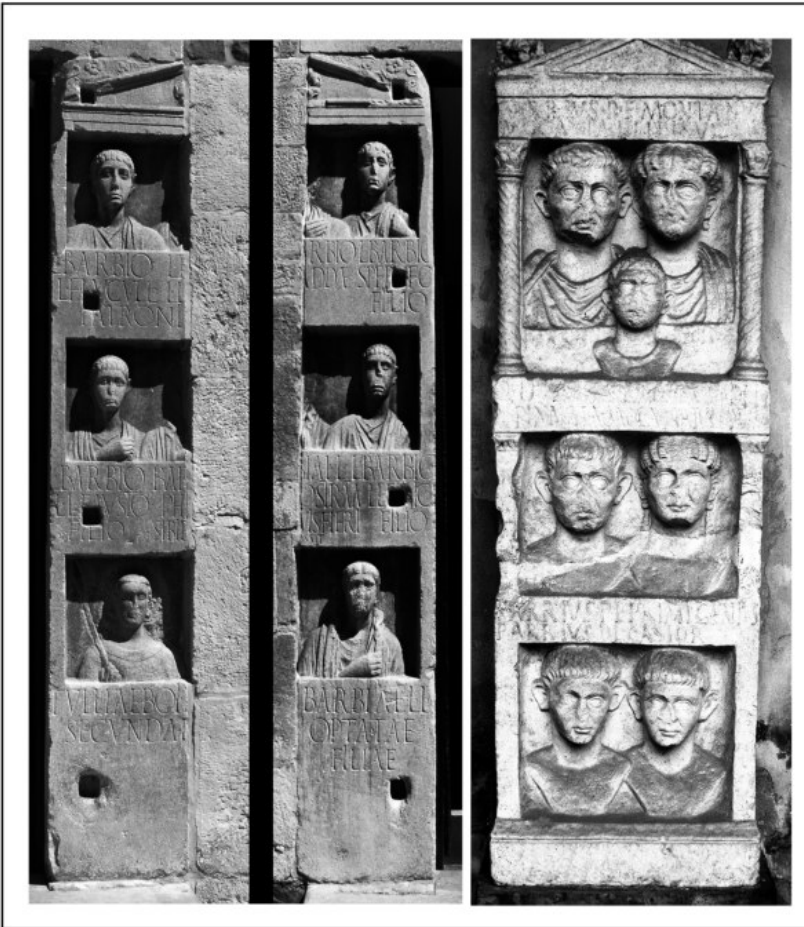
The three parts of the front face bear a Greek dedication in nine lines. The inscription is engraved in rounded letters, 3.5 to 6 cm high, and the writing is shallow and sloppy. The cruciform *upsilon* in line 2 is remarkable, as is the rounded shape of the *gamma* in line 4 and the straight short serifs on all *iotas*.

[- - -]ME[- - -]  
 Αὔκτου  
 καὶ Χαλ-  
 4 δης γυν-  
 νεκὸς  
 ἱερεῖς  
 ἀνεθήκ[αν]  
 8 [Ἔ]τ(ου)ς ζ[ε]λτ', Ὑπ[ε]ρ-  
 [β]ε[ρ]ε[τα]ίου].

Line 1 is badly damaged to the left and right; the upper parts of the letters that are still visible are missing: maybe two triangular letters or a M before ME and perhaps IA or ΓA after. At lines 4 - 5, γυνεκὸς is for γυναικὸς.

Translation: "... of Auktos and Chalde his wife, the priests dedicated (this altar) in the year 337, in the month of Hyperberetaios."

The donors were probably priests from a rural sanctuary at al-Qunayyah or in the surrounding area. Apparently they dedicated the altar on behalf of a married couple. The name of the husband Auktos is a Greek transliteration of the Latin *cognomen* Auctus. By contrast, the name of his wife is Semitic in spite of its Greek aspect

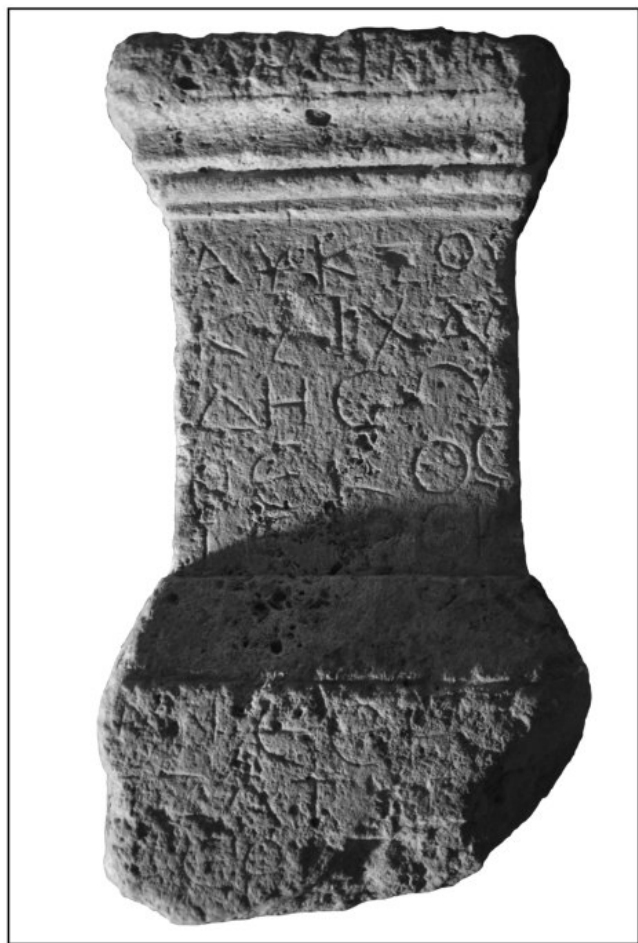


7. 8 Fragments of a late Republican Roman funerary stele with superimposed busts, late 1st century BC; probably from the necropolis of Tergestum, reused in the central gate of the mediaeval cathedral of San Giusto, Trieste, eastern Veneto, Italy (photo Thomas M. Weber). Tombstone of a group of Roman freedmen, 1st century AD: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Ravenna (photo Thomas M. Weber).

(reminding of the Chaldaeia, i.e. Babylonia). It has already been identified with the same spelling in a Greek epitaph from Qrayya in the Syrian Hauran (Waddington 1870: 471, no 1967: Χαλδη Σεουήρου). It is related to the more common spelling Αλδη and to a series of Semitic names derived from the root ḥld (Arabic ḥld, cf. masc. Khalid; fem. Khalida). It may be translated as: “One who remains young”. For onomastic parallels in different Semitic languages (Nabataean; Palmyrene Aramaic; Safaitic; Arabic) see Wuthnow (1930: 17 and 119), Harding (1971: 225-226), Sartre (1985: 173) and Negev (1991: 29).

The era of *Provincia Arabia*, beginning on 22 March 106 AD and used, for instance, in the

territory of Bostra, cannot be used to convert the date of the dedication to the Julian calendar. The result would be much too late (September / October 442 AD). The era adopted at al-Qunayyah was thus necessarily the Pompeian era with a 63 BC epoch, as in the neighbouring cities of Gerasa (Jarash) and Philadelphia (Amman). According to this chronology, the month of Hyperberetaios in the year 337 occurs in autumn 274 AD. This fits well with both the rather late script of the inscription and the pagan flavour of its dedication. The use of the Pompeian era and the location of al-Qunayyah north of the Zarqa river, closer to Gerasa than to Philadelphia, suggest that the site belonged to the civic territory of Gerasa in the Roman period.



9. Inscribed votive altar from al-Qunayeh, now in the garden of Qaşr Shabīb, Zarqa (photo Julien Aliquot).

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