

# THE COFFIN FROM TOMB I AT BYBLOS<sup>1</sup>

By Robert Schiestl

The ‘Royal Tombs’ discovered at Byblos in the 1920s<sup>2</sup> are a group of richly equipped Middle and Late Bronze Age chamber tombs for the local rulers, containing artefacts reflecting Levantine, Aegean and Egyptian traditions. Classifying objects from these tombs in one of the above mentioned categories is, however, at times difficult,<sup>3</sup> in particular when only working with published reports and not the original artefacts. Among the best known objects from tombs I and II are the obsidian cylinder jar and the small obsidian chest bearing names of Egyptian kings (*Amenemhet* III and IV of the late 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 1853–1799 B.C.) and generally considered Egyptian made.<sup>4</sup> The thus established synchronism has been long considered a chronological anchor for Levantine archaeology of the first half of the second millennium; however, it has been recently put into doubt.<sup>5</sup> Most of the material from these tombs has not been discussed since the original publication. Such analysis would be very worthwhile, as the site of Byblos to date remains unique in the Levant both for the amount and the depth of evidence for interaction with Egyptian culture. Thus we can hopefully move from focussing on singular objects to a discussion of

how Egyptian culture was understood, used and produced at Byblos.

This paper will discuss a group of small, hitherto unexplained, items found in the sarcophagus of tomb I. The owner of tomb I is not named in his tomb, but has been identified with *Abishemu*, the father of the owner of tomb II, *Ipshemuabi*.<sup>6</sup>

The sarcophagus in tomb I (Fig. 1) contained human bones of an adult male, animal bones (goat/sheep, cattle, bird and fish), two stone vases, metal dishes and jars, jewellery, a mirror, a pair of tweezers,<sup>7</sup> a scimitar, a pair of silver sandals and various smaller items and fragments,<sup>8</sup> whose original use or purpose could not be established with certainty. It is with some of these (Fig. 2) that this paper is concerned.

While the tomb does not seem to have been anciently robbed,<sup>9</sup> the contents of the sarcophagus had suffered severely from natural decay: all organic remains had disintegrated, and most of the metal objects were heavily corroded. The objects in the sarcophagus are described as lying in a dark, ashy layer,<sup>10</sup> which could very well have been the decomposed wood of a coffin. Inside the sarcophagus a group of flat, 3–5 mm thick faience objects of different shapes was found

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an excerpt from a talk titled „Überführungen von Bestattungsgedanken: Die Fürstengräber von Byblos als ägyptische Gräber?“ presented at the „Neue Forschungen“: *Bestattungen – Form und Bedeutung*, held at the „Arbeitsstelle Ägyptisches Wörterbuch“ of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, June 30, 2005. I thank Prof. S.J. Seidlmayer for the invitation to speak there.

<sup>2</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922 and MONTET 1928.

<sup>3</sup> LILYQUIST 1993, 41–44;

<sup>4</sup> MONTET 1928, No. 610 and 611; Beirut, General Direction of Antiquities, Inv. No. 17308 and 17299; for excellent photographs see *Liban, l'autre rive*, 72.

<sup>5</sup> LILYQUIST 1993, 44; See also the lecture delivered by Karin Kopetzky, SCIEEM 2000, Vienna, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ICAANE, 2002, in Paris (*“Stratigraphie comparée. Tell el-Dabʿa and the Royal Tombs I–III of Byblos, New Chronological Evidences”*). Based on, primarily, ceramic evidence, she suggested dating tombs I and II to MB IIB (equivalent

Tell el-Dabʿa str. E/3–2, appr. 1680–1620 BC), or about 130–200 years later than the conventional dating.

<sup>6</sup> MONTET 1928, 174–176, 202.

<sup>7</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922, fig. 5; MONTET 1928, Nr. 708, pl. LII; The object is described as a needle. However, I believe it is half of a pair of tweezers, an object found in Egyptian, Levantine and Aegean burials of the Middle Bronze Age (PHILIP 2006, 161–162). For a good parallel for the shape see Diospolis Parva, Tomb Y 176 (PETRIE 1901, pl. XXXII, 32).

<sup>8</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922, 281–289, and MONTET 1928, Nr. 610, 615, 621–624, 634, 640, 650, 652, 671, 684–687, 692, 708, 724, 726, 746, 748, 751–753, 785bis.

<sup>9</sup> MONTET 1928, 146; See, however, WARMENBOL 1996, who discusses modern plundering of the tomb. I thank Karin Kopetzky for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922, 281.

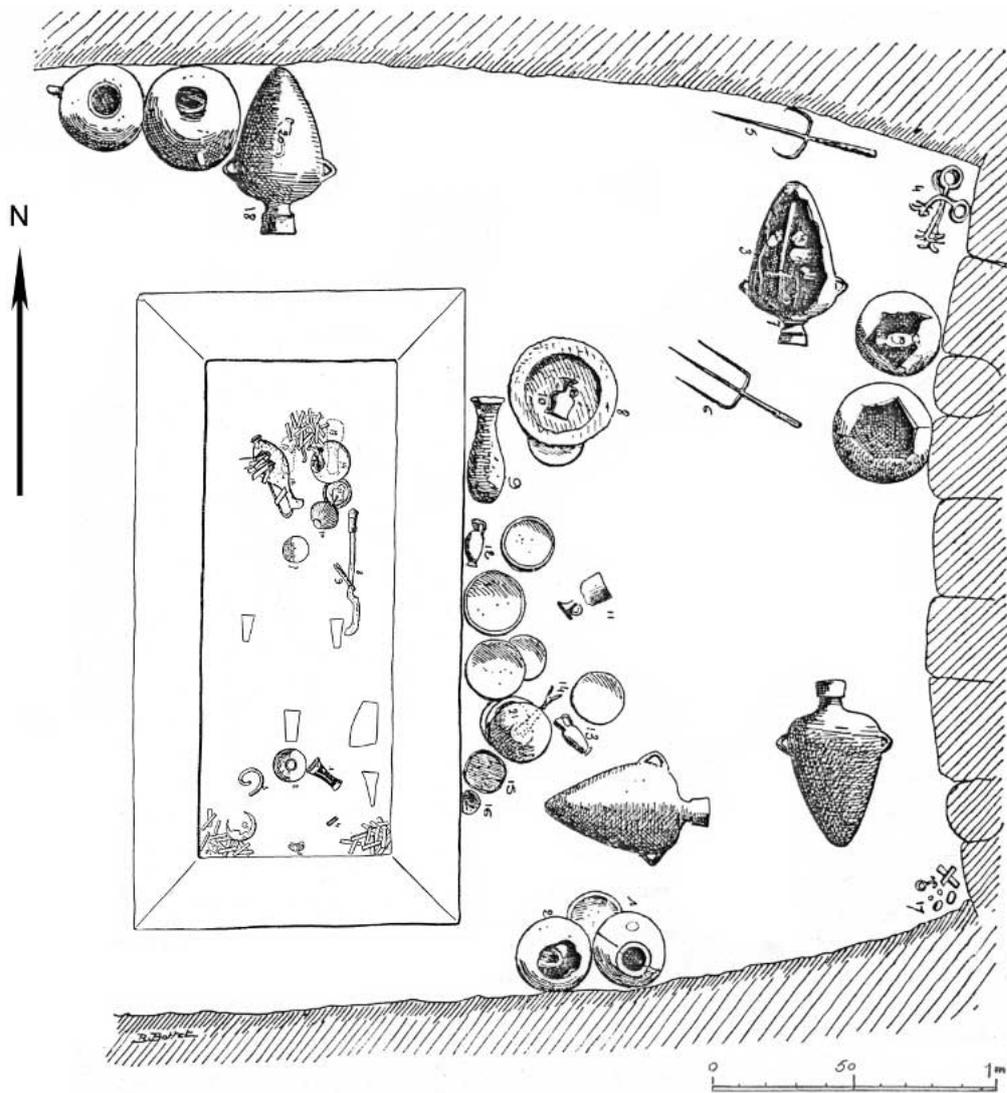


Fig. 1 Tomb I at Byblos. Combination of VIROLLEAUD 1922, fig. 2 (the tomb chamber) and VIROLLEAUD 1922, fig. 4 (the interior of the sarcophagus)

(Fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Most possess bevelled edges; their colour is described as mainly white or yellowish, rarely blue or green. While Virolleaud suggested their use as inlays of some sort, he could not make sense of the shapes, as his arrangement on his fig. 7 (here Fig. 2) shows. It is here suggested that the pieces in the lower middle (in the darker oval) be reassembled as a pair of *wedjat*-eyes (Fig. 3).<sup>12</sup> Such eyes are inlaid only on one Egyptian item, namely coffins, and I suggest that is what they were used for here as well. As they are shown inversely on Virolleaud's

figure, the pieces have been turned around to display them as they would have been seen from the front. The depiction of a pair of *wedjat*-eyes is a common feature on Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdom coffins, and these eyes can often be inlaid with faience pieces.<sup>13</sup> As the inlays are flat, they had been originally fitted in depressions on a rectangular coffin. The use of this type of coffin is common in the Middle Kingdom and continues into the Second Intermediate Period, in the course of which it is eventually replaced by the anthropoid coffin.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922, fig. 2, 288–289; MONTET 1928, 187, Nr. 726.

<sup>12</sup> For the crucial suggestion I am indebted to Anne Seiler.

<sup>13</sup> LACAU 1904, pl. IX and XIX, IDEM 1906, 77, 101–128.

<sup>14</sup> IKRAM and DODSON 1998, 196–206; BOURRIAU 2001, 17–20.

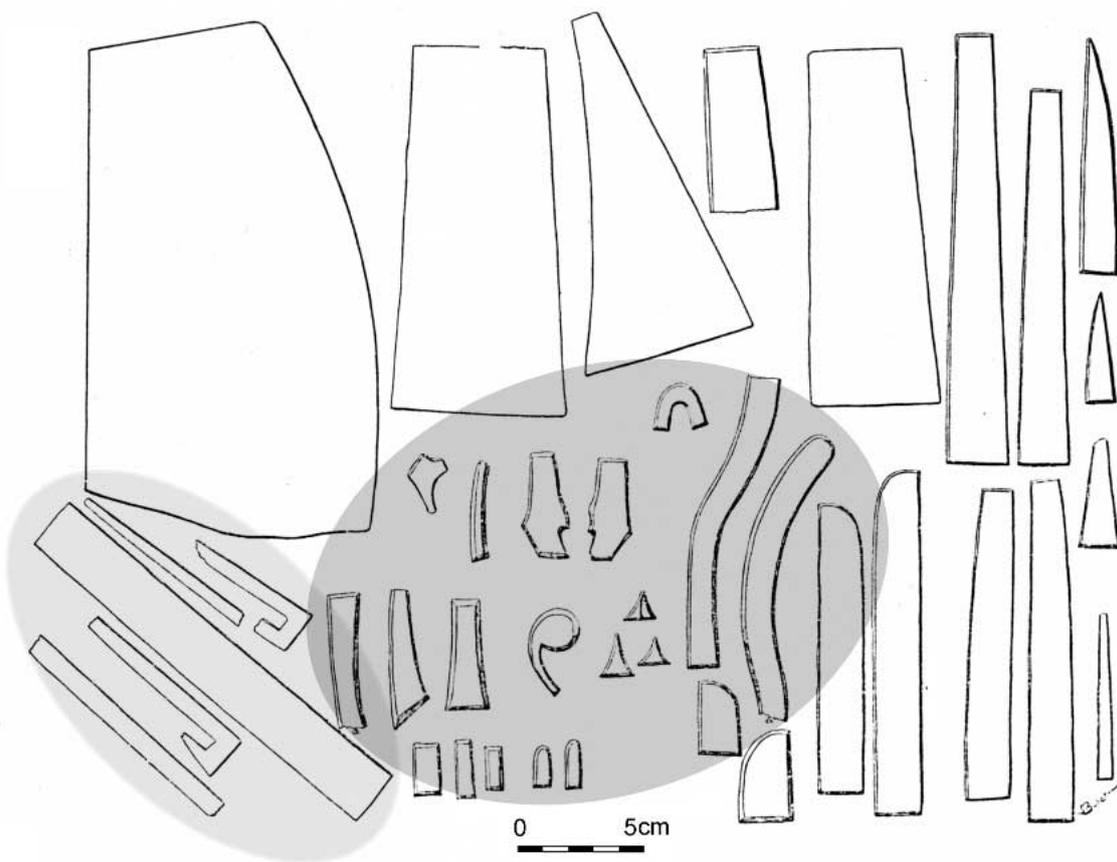


Fig. 2 Group of objects found in Byblos, tomb I, scale 1 to 3, reproduced after VIROLLEAUD 1922, fig. 7. The objects in the darker shaded oval in the middle are made of faience, in the lightly shaded oval on the left are of ivory

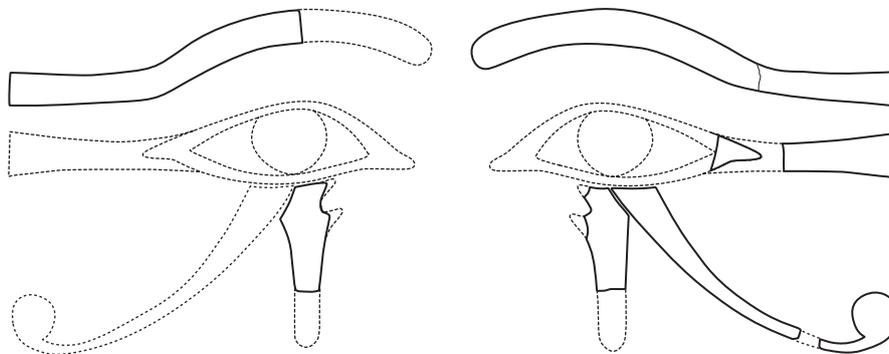


Fig. 3 Faience pieces found in the sarcophagus (see Fig. 2) reassembled as a pair of *wedjat*-eyes. Scale 1 to 3 (drawing by R. Schiestl)

On Egyptian coffins the eyes are often set in a frame or combined with a false door. Possibly some of the numerous further faience fragments (Virolleaud and Montet mention “hundreds”) formed part of additional coffin décor. Rectangu-

lar pieces of gold foil<sup>15</sup> were also found in the sarcophagus, which could have been used to decorate the edges of the coffin, as was the case in royal and elite Middle Kingdom examples from Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> VIROLLEAUD 1922, 287–288.

<sup>16</sup> DE MORGAN 1895, pl. XXXVI; IDEM 1903, 50, fig. 109.

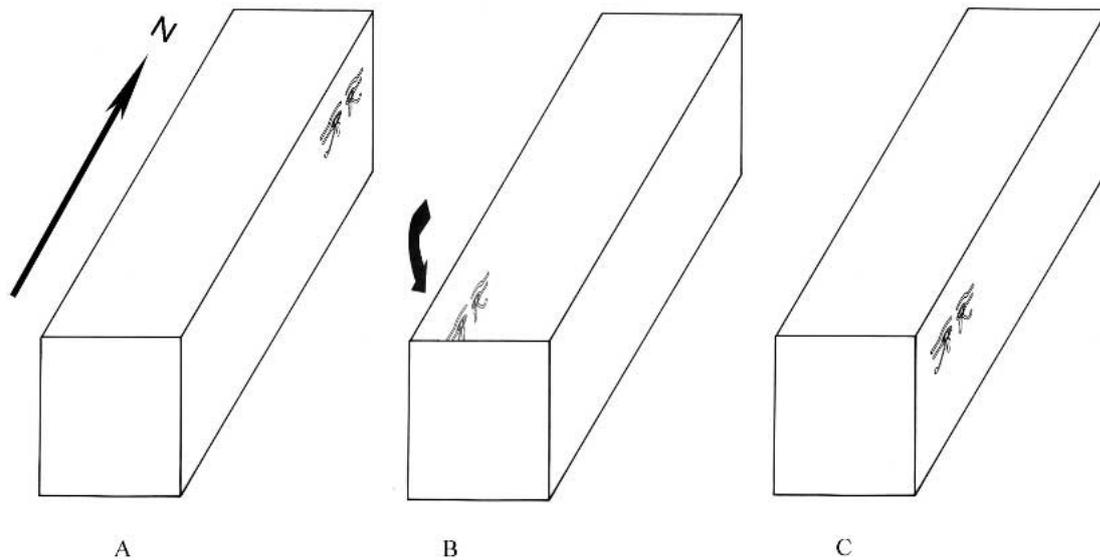


Fig. 4 The coffin from Byblos tomb I reconstructed. Placement of inlaid eyes on coffin. A: standard Egyptian, B: standard Egyptian turned 180°, C: eyes in the south, at the head, facing east. Scale 1:40 (illustration by R. Schiestl)

The group of ivory pieces (Fig. 2, bottom left, in the lightly shaded oval) do not belong to the coffin décor, but formed inlays on a separate small wooden box. Two such boxes found in the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty tomb of *Sit-hathor-yunet*, who was buried in the reign of *Amenemhet III* at Lahun, could be reconstructed (see Fig. 6 for one such box)<sup>17</sup> and help us understand what the Byblos-box might have looked like. The long rectangular panel is to be placed on the top of one side of such a box, either the short or the long end, the hook-like pieces are broken elements used to create a decorative façade with ‘niches’ (see Fig. 6). They are to be placed at a right angle to the horizontal panel. In the case of the depicted box the ‘niches’ alternate with flat ivory panels. Fig. 5 shows the recess in *Sit-hathor-yunet*’s tomb where the boxes were stored. The shaded areas indicate the fragmented pieces of façade panelling. When the long thin part breaks, characteristically “hooked” fragments remain, as found in the Byblos sarcophagus. The long rectangular slabs shown in the area of Box 1 and 2 represent the horizontal top panels. Not enough ivory fragments were published to be able to graphically reconstruct this small box. However, the coffin’s basic shape and size, based on the dimensions of the sarcophagus, can be estab-

lished (Fig. 4). No information is provided on the precise find spot of the pieces in question. The drawing of the sarcophagus’ contents shows three concentrations (see Fig. 1), two little heaps in the south, one in the north. While the body had disintegrated and the find spot of the few remaining bones was not recorded, the *in situ* documentation of certain significant items in the sarcophagus allows us to reconstruct the basic orientation of the burial (Fig. 1): The remains of a gold falcon-collar in the south indicate the location of the head, the feet, with the silver sandals, had been placed in the north. The scimitar was located in or near the right hand of the deceased. The sarcophagus was oriented precisely north-south, reproducing the elite Egyptian position in the Middle Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> However, in Egypt, the head would be in the north, the feet in the south, thus the body in tomb I was “standing on its head”, by Egyptian standards. This seems odd, unless the head was intended to be directed towards Egypt, but it is hard to verify such an idea. Obviously, Byblos lacks the ordering principle of the north-south flowing Nile. Where then should we place the eyes on the coffin?

In Egyptian coffins the eyes are always located at the head of the deceased, enabling him or

<sup>17</sup> BRUNTON 1920, pl. XII; WINLOCK 1934, pl. I.

<sup>18</sup> SEIDLMEYER 1990, 412–424; PODVIN 2000, 283–284.

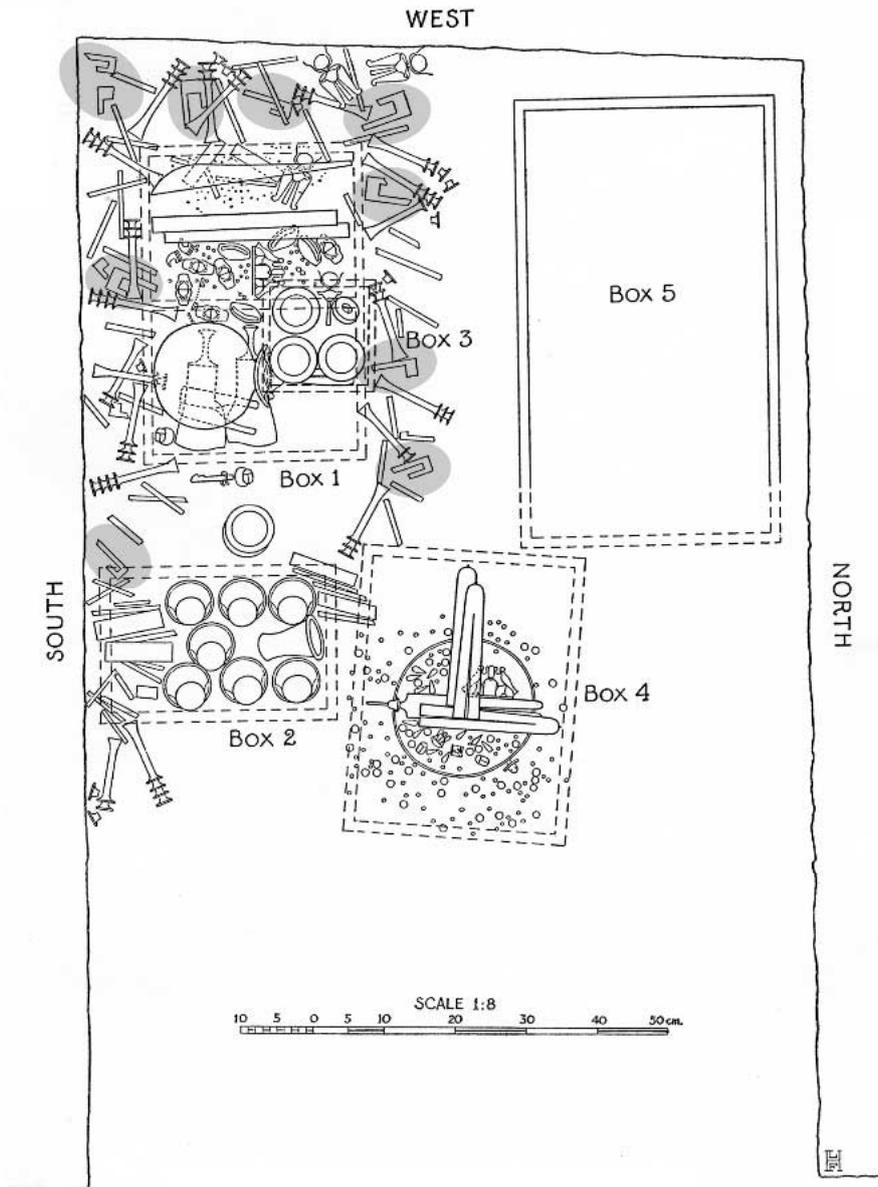


Fig. 5 Recess in chamber of tomb of princess *Sit-hathor-yunet*, at Lahun (after WINLOCK 1934, fig. 2). The shaded areas indicate the distribution of the distinctively fragmented ivory pieces of façade panelling. Reproduced with kind permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

her to “see” out of the coffin, establishing a connection to the offerings placed there and also to the rising sun.<sup>19</sup> In standard Egyptian coffins, oriented north-south, the eyes are on the northern end of the eastern side (Fig. 4 A). If such a position were maintained here, it would place the eyes at the feet, an unlikely scenario. Simply turning such a coffin by 180 degrees, as seems to have been the case for the body, would result in the eyes facing out of the chamber (Fig. 4 B), to

the west, away from the offerings heaped in front of sarcophagus. Placement of the eyes in the south (Fig. 4 C), facing east, would provide a connection between the head of the deceased and the offerings placed in front of the coffin, as well as an eastern orientation. This seems to me the most likely position. If accurate, it would represent a remarkable adaptation of the ultimate Egyptian object to specific local requirements.

<sup>19</sup> WILLEMS 1988, 47.

This is the first evidence for a wooden Egyptian style coffin in the Levant, and it is very fitting that it was found in the Lebanon. After all, the Byblite economy thrived on trading precisely the raw material for producing Egyptian coffins. Evidence in the Lebanon for the use of coffins is almost completely lacking. Organic materials are rarely preserved in Lebanese tombs. As an exception, charred remains of a box used for a burial of the early second millennium at Tell

‘Arqa, in the northern Lebanon, were able to be analysed. The wood proved, surprisingly, not to be cedar.<sup>20</sup>

In all likelihood the coffin from tomb I at Byblos was locally produced. The adaptation of this coffin to suit the local use emphasizes how steeped in and well versed in Egyptian culture the elite at Byblos was. They produced their own version of Egyptian culture, in which they lived, and chose to be surrounded with in death.



Fig. 6 One of *Sit-hathor-yunet's* boxes reconstructed (WINLOCK 1934, pl. I, A). Scale about 1:4. Reproduced with kind permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

<sup>20</sup> Information kindly provided by J.-P. Thalmann, director of the excavations at Tell ‘Arqa.

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