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Obálka / Cover

Motív „Zázračného dažďa" zo Stĺpa Marka Aurélia v Ríme. V okienku: kolok na rímskej tehle z neskoroantickej pevnosti Gerulata (podľa *Schmidtová – Mathédesz 2019*, obr. 4).

Motif of the „Miracle rain" from the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. In the window: brick with a fragment of stamp from the Late Roman fort Gerulata (after *Schmidtová – Mathédesz 2019*, fig. 4).

Grafické spracovanie obálky / Graphic elaboration cover   Mgr. Pavol Šima-Juríček

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Contents

The Rock-cut Tombs of Kharg Island:
Historical Insights and Connections to Characene

Ahmad Heidari – Lucia Nováková

Abstract: *The study provides insights into the funerary heritage of Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf. Throughout the Parthian and Sassanid eras, it served as a pivotal center for trade and religious activities. It is home to two noteworthy tombs, previously attributed to Palmyrene merchants, but recent evidence suggests that they actually belonged to local Iranian rulers. The Eastern tomb is strongly linked to Ananias, a merchant active in Spasinou Charax, who eventually became the ruler of Adiabene. The Southern tomb, dating back to the 2nd century AD, is believed to be the final resting place of Mithradates, a Parthian prince and ruler of Characene.*

Introduction

The Persian Gulf has been a significant waterway of great importance since the ancient times. References to this waterway can be found in inscriptions dating back to the third millennium BC. In Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian cuneiforms, the northern part was known as the High Sea, while the southern part was referred to as the Low Sea. During the second half of the third millennium BC, the chlorite stone was traded extensively in the eastern parts of the Persian Gulf, including Kerman, as well as remote areas like Central Asia (*Potts 1999*, 98–103). This trade coincided with the flourishing of various regions along the Persian Gulf Coast and the Oman Sea, giving rise to civilizations known as Mecca, Malawah, and Dilmon. An inscription on a seal attributed to Ashurbanipal states, "Dilmon, in the middle of the sea" (*Alster 1983*, 43). Some scholars suggest that Dilmon may have been the ancient name for Bahrain Island. However, the exact location of Dilmon is uncertain, as it could have been part of Bahrain and Qatar or situated along the eastern coast of Arabia (*Alster 1983*, 41–43).

In the first millennium BC, the name "Persian Gulf" became evident in inscriptions. Notably, an inscription referring to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon (604–562 BC), explicitly mentions the island of Icare (Failaka; *Potts 2009*, 37). Following the establishment of the Achaemenes government, the name "Persian Gulf" was consistently used in all historical sources and inscriptions. Unfortunately, the smaller islands of the Persian Gulf are relatively unknown and rarely mentioned by name. Instead, they are often referred to in more general terms, such as "pearl hunting." However, some of these islands are mentioned by name in the writings of classical authors, particularly Strabo and Arian (*Strab.* 16.3–4; *Arr. Ind.* 26.7). Archaeological evidence, including ancient inscriptions and seals, has helped identify certain names with specific islands. For instance, the name "Ikarus" has been linked to the present-day island of Failaka (*Potts 2009*, 37), while "Tylos" has been associated with the current island of Bahrain (*Seyrig 1941*, 254–255).

Daniel T. Potts conducted the most recent studies on historical documents, aiming to collect and analyze classical sources as well as contemporary scholars' studies in order to establish connections between the current names of the islands and historical records. In his comprehensive study, he concludes that the island of Hormuz corresponds to the historical sources of Organa (gr. Ὀργάνα), the island of Qeshm is identified as Oaracta (gr. Ὀάρακτα), the island of Faror corresponds to Pylora (gr. Ρύλωρα), the island of Kish is identified as Cataea

(gr. Καταία), and the island of Hindurabi is associated with Caicandrus (gr. Καΐκανδρος; *Potts 2019*, 382–385). These identifications are based on historical documents and sources.

Written sources and archaeology

The first report of the islands in the Persian Gulf was provided by Strabo. He named two islands, Ikaros (Ikare or Icare) and Oaracta, describing one of them as having valuable pearls. According to Strabo, Nearchus, Admiral of Alexander, who sailed from Sind to the Euphrates, did not mention an island called Kharg. Upon reaching their destination, he tasked Androsthenes, one of his companions, with further exploration of the Persian Gulf. Androsthenes ventured deeper into the gulf until he reached Ikaros Island. Nearchus also recounted encountering Mithropastes and Mazenes, the ruler of an island known as Oaracta. (*Strab*. 16.3). According to Nearchus's report, most scholars currently believe that the island of Oaracta, where the grave of Erythras (from whom the name Erythraean Sea was derived) was located, corresponds to the present-day island of Qeshm (*Goukowsky 1974*, 120). As for Ikare Island, Roman Ghirshman suggested that its modern name is Kharg Island (*Ghirshman 1958*, 262). Some experts speculate that Ikaros (or Icare) could be the ancient name for the island of Failaka. As for the Island of Bahrain, numerous documents indicate that its ancient name was Tylos (*Seyrig 1941*, 254–255).

It appears that the major Persian Gulf islands, including Qeshm, Failaka, and Bahrain, have received significant attention and been named due to their close proximity to the coast, at least until the Common Era. In contrast, smaller and more distant islands like Kharg have been less prominent and primarily described based on their unique characteristics. For instance, Strabo mentioned an island at the beginning of the Persian Gulf known for its valuable pearls (*Strab*.16.4). This description seems to be specifically referring to Kharg Island since it stands out in historical sources. It is worth noting that only Kharg and Bahrain islands were known for pearl hunting, and the name Tylos (Bahrain) was the one commonly mentioned in historical records. Thus, this description seems to specifically point to Kharg Island. The second author to mention the Persian Gulf Islands is Isidorus of Charax. According to him, there is an island in the Persian Gulf where numerous pearls are discovered. He describes the presence of reed rafts surrounding the island, from which divers plunge into the sea to depths of 20 fathoms (36 meters) to retrieve double-shelled oysters (*IsidChar* 20; *Ghirshman 1958*, 262; *Potts 2012*). However, Isidorus does not explicitly mention the name of the island.

During the Early Islamic period, the name of Kharg Island was mentioned by authors for the first time. Ibn Khordadbeh, in his work *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, which is one of the oldest sources of historical geography written between 847 and 885 AD, reported the following: "From Basra to Kharg Island, there is a distance of fifty parasangs (312 km), and these islands are one parasang (6,239 m) in size. They have agriculture, grapes, and palm trees" (*Ibn Khordadbeh*, 46). Furthermore, in the book *The Boundaries of The World from The East to the West*, written by an unknown author around 982–983 AD, there is a mention of the high quality of pearls and pearl hunting on Kharg Island (*Hudud al-Alam*, 20). Abu Ishaq Istakhri reported that Kharg served as a trading pier between the Indian and Basra trade routes (*Istakhri*, 34–35). In 1218 AD, Yaqut Hamavi visited Kharg Island and noted that the island's economy was based on trade, pearls, as well as fruit and date cultivation (*Yaqut Hamawi*, 112; *Wüstenfeld 1864*, 419).

Recent archaeological research indicates that the ports and islands of the Persian Gulf have been highly significant since the 1st century. They experienced prosperity due to the spice trade along the Mediterranean coast and the Roman and Indian territories. From that time until the Islamic era, numerous settlements were established on various islands of the Persian Gulf and along the coastal ports. Kharg Island, too, attracted merchants during this era. The first European traveler to visit Kharg, although without providing a description, was Francais Jean Thevenot, who went there in 1665. In 1760, Carsten Niebuhr gave the initial description of the island's pre-Islamic structures (*Niebuhr 1753*, 164). Captain R.W. Stiffe also offered a brief account of the
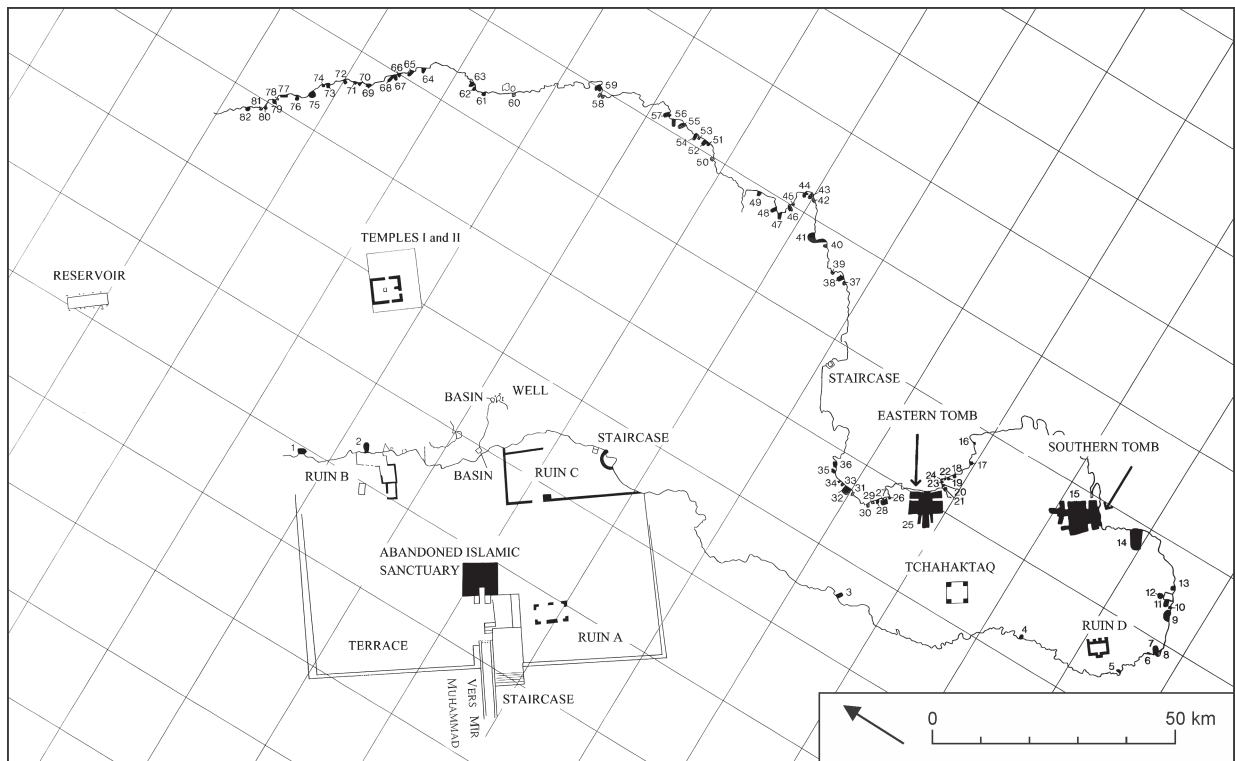
Fig. 1. *Ancient site on Kharg (after Steve 2003, pl. 4).*

archaeological site on Kharg (*Stiffe 1898*, 179–180), followed by Ernst Herzfeld and Friedrich Paul Theodor Sarre, who provided more detailed information on the monuments there (*Sarre – Herzfeld 1910*, 63–66; *Herzfeld 1935*, 103–105).

Roman Ghirshman conducted a survey of the island in 1958–1959, identifying the rock-cut tombs and the Nestorian Church (*Ghirshman 1959*, 108–120). Ahmad Eghtedari also provided descriptions of some of the island's monuments (*Eghtedari 1970*, 831–874). Wolfram Kleiss created a sketch of the Southern tomb and the tomb of Mirmohammad (*Kleiss 1973*, 78–80). The most comprehensive account of Kharg Island's monuments (Fig. 1), particularly the rock-cut tombs, was carried out by Marie-Joseph Steve and published as a monograph (*Steve 2003*). Daniel T. Potts wrote articles on Kharg Island, focusing on the collection and analysis of information (*Potts 1990; 1999; 2019*).

The rock-cut tombs on Kharg

Recent research has focused on rock-cut tombs, predominantly located on Qeshm and Kharg Islands in the Persian Gulf (*Khosruzadeh 2018*, 144). Among these islands, Kharg Island stands out with approximately 83 identified tombs. Situated about 58 kilometers from the Bushehr coast, Kharg Island spans around 10 kilometers in length and 5 kilometers in width. Notably, Marie-Joseph Steve's investigations have unveiled a distinct variant of rock-cut tombs situated across from Qeshm Island. These tombs are characterized by prevalent rock-cut niches or troughs, dating back to the period between the 1st and 7th centuries AD (*Steve 2003*, 47–99). They feature cross motifs on their facades, and in some instances, Syrian inscriptions can be observed, usually consisting of one or two words (Fig. 2).

Ernst Herzfeld, in his research, attributed approximately 60 Christian tombs on Kharg Island to around 250 AD (*Herzfeld 1935*, 103–104). However, Steve conducted a comparative analysis of the inscriptions and concluded that certain tombs, particularly tombs nr. 63 and 64, featured

Fig. 2. *Rock-cut tombs no. 37 and 38 with a Syriac inscription. The left tomb appears to be disturbed (after Steve 2003, pl. 34.3).*

inscriptions with two Aramaic-Syrian words dating back to the 7th or 8th century AD. Notably, some of the inscriptions found on Kharg Island bear resemblance to the recently discovered Syrian inscriptions in Khosravi, Salmas, which are dated to 697 and 698 AD (*Steve 2003*, 50). Furthermore, Steve also identified several other rock niches and troughs on Kharg Island, which are believed to belong to the (Late) Sassanid period.

Among the four types of tombs on Kharg Island, the Eastern and Southern tombs, commonly attributed to Palmyrene merchants, are the most renowned (*Haerinck 1975*; *Steve 2003*). The Southern tomb measures a depth of 13 meters, from the entry to the bottom wall, while the Eastern tomb reaches a depth of 9.9 meters. Both tombs are adorned with arches and columns that lead to the main chamber. Within the rock, twenty burial niches (*loculi*) have been incorporated. The analysis of these monuments (Fig. 3; 4) aims to explore their unique architectural style and possible connections with other historical landmarks. Extensive bibliographic research has been conducted to gather the necessary data, building upon and complementing a previous study published in 2020 (*Heidari 2020*, 103–124). By comparing the motifs and chronological elements found in these tombs, our objective is to establish links with contemporaneous structures and shedding light on the individuals associated with these tombs.

The reliefs discovered in the Southern tomb exhibit exceptional craftsmanship, indicating that they were likely created around the same time as the tomb's construction. These reliefs are believed to have belonged to the original owner of the tomb, suggesting their connection to someone of higher social status. On the other hand, the motifs found in the Eastern tomb show irregularities and lower quality. This suggests that they were either added to the monument later or that the owner of the Eastern tomb held a lower social status compared to the owner of the Southern tomb (*Heidari 2020*, 103–124). Notably, the entrance wall of the Southern tomb features a bas-relief depicting a reclining figure holding a cup in their left hand, further emphasizing the higher social status of the tomb's owner. This motif represents a funerary banquet scene, reminiscent of similar monuments found in Palmyra, Edessa, Dura-Europos, and Hatra (*Haerinck 1975*, 147–148).

Grande
Salle

Vestibule

پلان

0 5 m

A-A برش

B-B برش
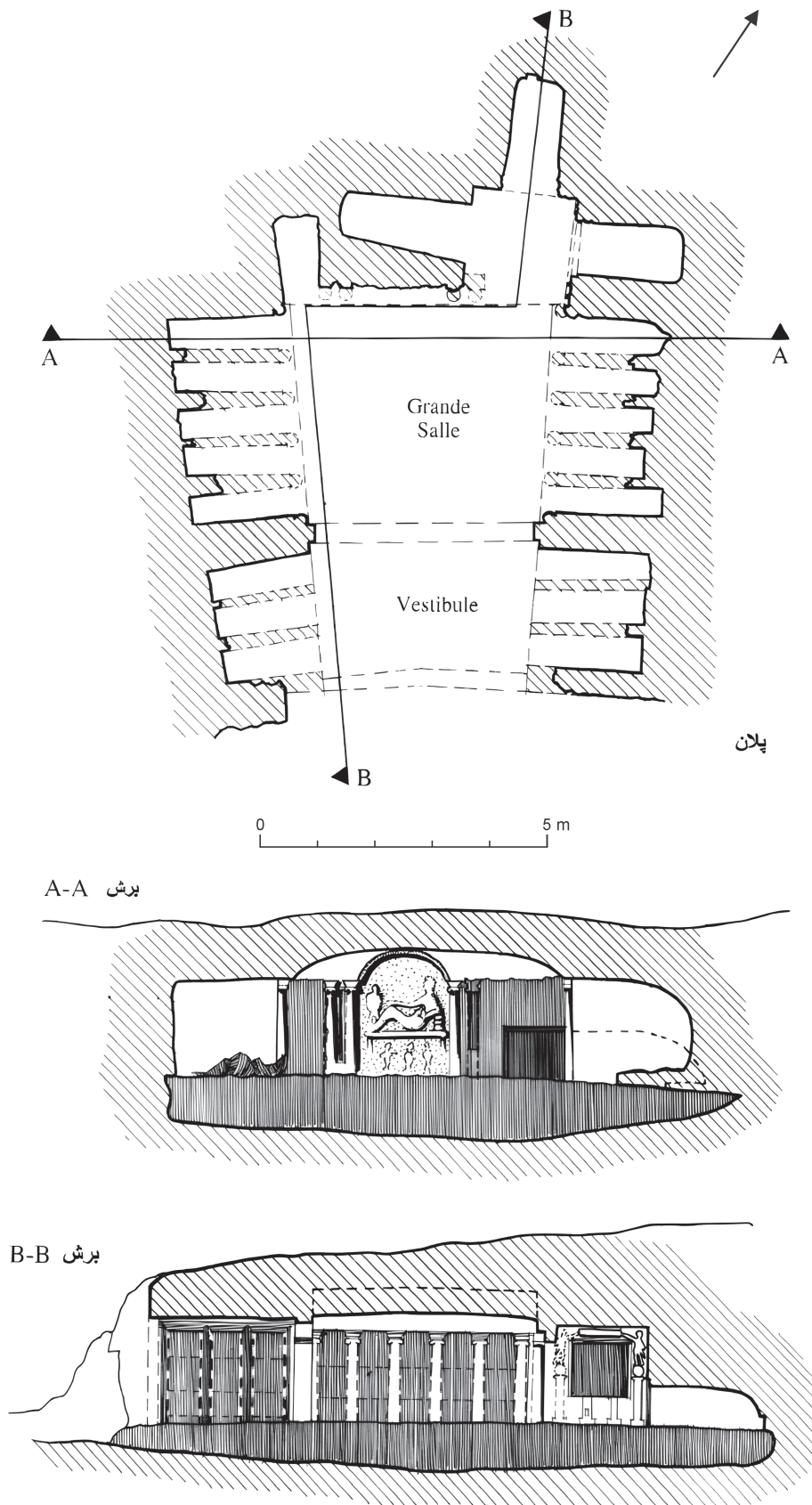
Fig. 3. *Plan and section of the Southern tomb (after Steve 2003, pl. 8).*
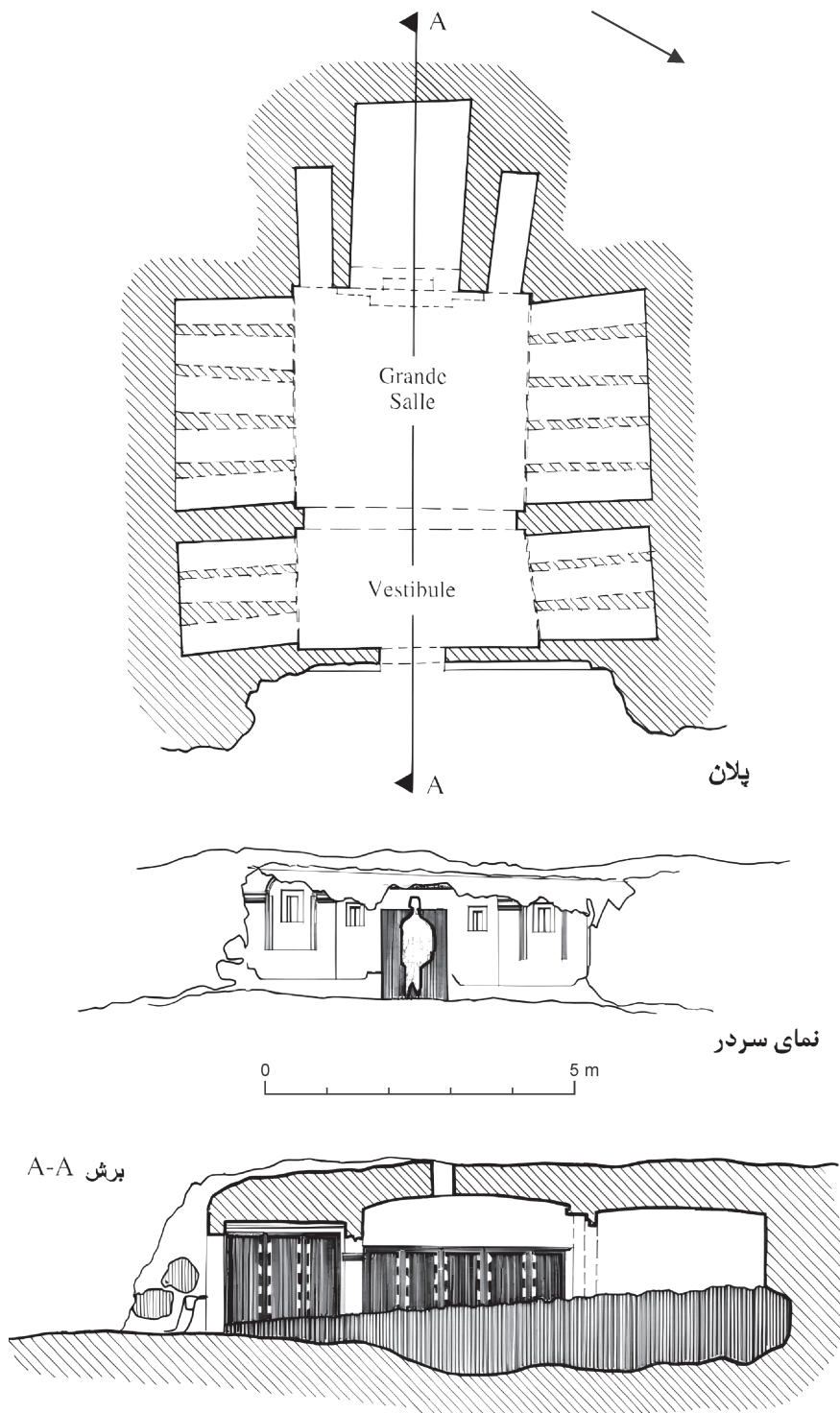
Fig. 4. *Plan and section of the Eastern tomb (after 2003, pl. 8).*

In these Palmyrene depictions, the feasting figure represents the deceased, portrayed lying individually on a bed with a cup in their left hand. Interestingly, other Elymais bas-reliefs, such as those found in Masjid Suleiman, Tang-e Sarvak, and Tina Mountain, do not feature the motif of the reclining Hercules (*Haerinck 1975*, 48). Steve has suggested that the similarity of the Southern Tomb plan to the Petra and the Nabataean burial architecture is greater than kind of Palmyrene (*Steve 1999*, 75–76). The second motif, poorly preserved, is the image of a winged figure (Nike?) standing on a sphere near the pilaster on the right side of the entrance to the

original *loculi* in the Southern Tomb. The left side of the entry is destroyed, so, it is not possible to attest that the second motif of Nike existed anymore (*Haerinck 1975*, 154). Ghirshman attributed both tombs to Palmyrene merchants (*Ghirshman 1958*, 267).

Dating and owners of the tombs

The tradition of engraving rock-cut tombs has a long history, dating back to the time of the Urartu, Phrygians, and possibly the Medes in eastern Anatolia and northwestern Iran (*Hertzfeld 1935*, 31–32). This ancient practice was later adopted by the Achaemenids and became widespread in Iran and the Anatolian regions. Even after the decline of the Achaemenid Empire, local rulers, such as in Commagene, continued to construct rock-cut tombs in certain areas of eastern Anatolia (*Dorner 2010*). During the 2nd century BC, the flourishing spice trade led to the emergence of caravan towns and state-cities like Palmyra, Dura-Europos, and Hatra. These urban centers heavily relied on the commercial exchange of goods between India, Rome, and Egypt.

Alongside the engraving of Nabataean rock-cut tombs, another style of tomb construction gained popularity. These crypt-shaped tombs were often adorned with wall paintings and featured prominent motifs inspired by Mithraism, particularly within the Palmyrene culture (*Butcher 2002*, 325; *Rostovtzeff 1938*, pl. XIII). The oldest rock-cut tombs in Petra can be found in Mada'in Saleh, also known as Al-Ḥijr. One of these tombs is carved directly into solid rock and features a burial chamber with an entrance. The local population refers to it as the "djinn" tomb. Over time, some of these tombs were repurposed and incorporated into their exterior decorations, resembling rows of castle-like structures with hollow spaces. The earliest examples of these tombs are believed to date back to the 2nd to the 1st century BC.

Ernie Haerinck and Marie-Joseph Steve date the Southern and Eastern tombs on Kharg, to the 1st century AD (*Haerinck 1975*, 137; *Steve 2003*, 66). Ghirshman, however, suggests that these monuments spanned from the 1st to the 2nd century AD. He also proposes that Kharg Island was settled by Palmyrene merchants who engaged in maritime trade with India. In the mid-1st century AD, sailors had acquired the skill to precisely interpret wind patterns in the Indian Ocean, enabling them to optimize their sailing routes (*Ghirshman 1991*, 278). Ghirshman attributed the Southern and Eastern tombs to Palmyrene merchants for several reasons. The presence of a bas-relief of a winged figure above a bed and a man lying on a bed with a cup in his hand from the Southern tomb is seen in many chamber tombs in Palmyra and Dura-Europos, demonstrating a scene of mourning rites. Additionally, the form of the interiors of the tombs is comparable to the burial spaces of the Palmyrene crypts. Furthermore, an Aramaic-Syrian inscription was found in the Southern tomb.

The prosperity of the caravan towns and the significant role played by Palmyra merchants in the trade routes connecting Rome and Egypt to India via the Persian Gulf harbors further supported his attribution. Based on these pieces of evidence, Ghirshman concluded that Kharg Island served as a Palmyrene trading station (*Ghirshman 1958*, 267). Haerinck's subsequent study of the tombs on Kharg Island supported Ghirshman's opinion. He found that the Southern and Eastern tombs were comparable to similar crypts in Palmyra, Edessa, and Dura-Europos (*Haerinck 1975*, 147–148).

Steve surveyed two districts on the island of Kharg and made interesting discoveries. In one location, he encountered 15 burial pits that had been meticulously dug into the rock. However, he noticed that the human bones in these pits were generally disturbed. Among the tombs in this group, one contained 24 skulls along with a coin from the reign of Honorius Flavius (395–423 AD), and a jeweler's item featuring a figure resembling the portrait of the Characenian ruler Attambelos III. The pottery found in the vicinity dated back to the Late Sassanid and Early Islamic periods (*Steve 1999*, 76).

Steve's study involved comparing the tombs on Kharg Island with the tombs of the Nabataeans in Petra. In his report (*Steve 1999*, 75), he presented compelling evidence of the Nestorian cross motif and Syrian or Pahlavi inscriptions found on their facades. He further

argues that the Eastern tomb shares remarkable similarities with the so-called Jason's tomb in Jerusalem, displaying intricate carved motifs such as the Menorah, rosette, boats, and inscriptions. This monument is believed to belong to a merchant named Ananias and was likely created around 31/30 AD (*Steve 1999*, 75; *Steve 2003*, 65; *Potts 2009*, 41). Ananias, who was active from approximately 15 to 30 AD, was likely of Greek origin but converted to Judaism and spread its teachings in Spasinou Charax, the capital of Characene. In the late 30s, he even became the ruler of Adiabene (*Steve 2003*, 66).

Steve's reasoning for linking the Eastern tomb of Kharg Island to Ananias is further supported by the tomb's architectural plans and burial spaces, which closely resemble those found in Palmyrene crypts. Additionally, the presence of a short Aramaic-Syrian inscription reinforces this association. Although Steve's reasoning seems plausible, recent excavations at Gelalak (*Rahbar 1989*, 1994) and Saleh-davood (*Rahbar 2012*) have raised questions about this conclusion. These excavations have uncovered Elymaean crypts that demonstrate burial practices similar to Palmyrene rites (Fig. 5). In the Gelalak crypts, a row of stairs leads to the burial chamber, with a corridor in the middle of the room and three platforms on the sides, often housing clay sarcophagi. Additionally, there is a niche in the wall near the entrance. The burial chambers contain loculi, pitchers, and a plaster figure of a woman (*Rahbar 1994*, 178). However, these findings do not provide precise dating (*Rahbar 1994*, 188–189). The excavator of Gelalak and Saleh-davood suggests that the Elymaean burial tradition is indigenous to Iran and has its origins in ancient Ilam (*Rahbar 1994*, 188–189; *Rahbar 2012*, 300–303).

The existence of similar burial practices in the Elymaean context, such as those found at Gelalak and Saleh-davood, challenges the notion that they are exclusively associated with the Palmyrene culture. These examples highlight the presence of comparable tombs in the Elymaean region, specifically in ancient Ilam. Haerinck and Steve propose that the Eastern tomb is associated with a Jewish individual, primarily based on the presence of an Aramaic-Syrian inscription in the tomb (Fig. 6; *Steve 2003*, 60). However, the content of such inscriptions cannot be solely attributed to the influence of religious minorities on Kharg Island. Furthermore, the execution of motifs such as the boat, rosette, and Menorah in the Eastern tomb appears to be of lower quality. This leads to speculation that they may have been carved at a later period (*Heidari 2020*, 103–124).
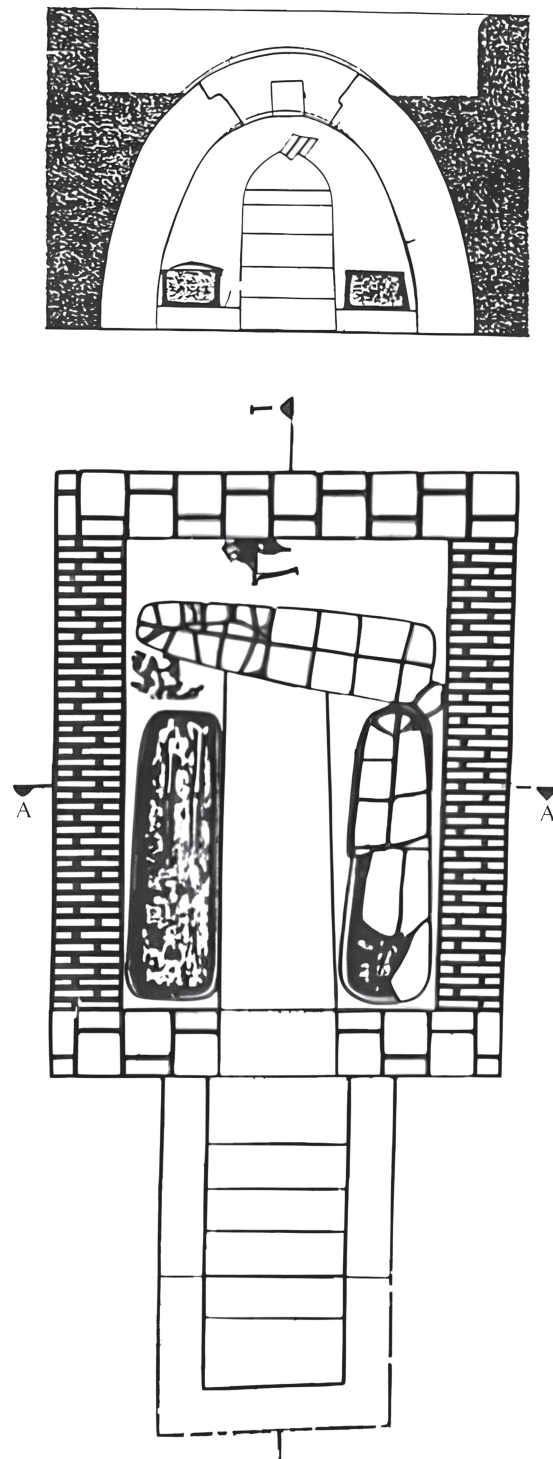
Fig. 5. *Plan and section of the third tomb in Gelalak (after Rahbar 1994, 200).*

Fig. 6. *Aramaic-Syriac inscription in the Eastern tomb (after Steve 2003, 63).*

It is worth noting that documents indicate the usage of Aramaic-Syrian script on Kharg Island from the 1st century AD to the 8th century AD. According to Steve's report, the non-dated tomb inscriptions on Kharg Island bear similarities to two recently discovered Syrian inscriptions in the Khosravi district of Salmas, which are dated 697 and 698 AD. He argued that tombs 37 and 38, which contain two Aramaic inscriptions, belong to the 7th and 8th centuries AD (*Steve 2003*, 50). Some of these tombs feature inscriptions, while others display a motif of the cross. The archaeological excavations have revealed the presence of a church dating from the 8th and 9th centuries AD (*Whitehouse – Williamson 1973, 42*), which suggests that the small-scale tombs could be attributed to Nestorian Christians. On the other hand, these small tombs and rock-troughs resemble the tombs in the Siraf district, which are dated between the Late Sassanid and the Early Islamic period (*Ball – Whitehouse 1976*, 149). The presence of a cross motif above the facades of certain Late Sassanid and Early Islamic tombs remains an enigma. Interestingly,

a similar cross motif has been observed near Istakhr as well (*Huff 1989*, 725, fig. 1a–b). It raises the question: do these tombs belong to Zoroastrians who, following the rise of Islam, felt compelled to incorporate the cross or Christian symbols to safeguard their tombs from destruction? Alternatively, could they be associated with a community of Iranian-Mesopotamian Nestorians seeking to reconcile Zoroastrian and Christian traditions? The exact motivations behind this phenomenon are still uncertain.

The assignment of the Eastern tomb to Ananias can be questioned due to his relocation from the Persian Gulf to become the ruler of Adiabene. Another widely accepted viewpoint, proposed by Ghirshman, suggests that both the

Fig. 7. *A view of the bas-relief of Jangeh in Izeh, depicting the king of Elymais, probably Orodes (likely from the 2nd century AD), lying on a bed and holding a cup in his left hand. In front of him stands a god holding a power ring, while on the left side, there is a Palmyrene winged figure on a ball (Heidari 1998, 219).*

Eastern and Southern tombs belong to Palmyrene merchants. Additional evidence supports this interpretation. In the Izeh district, a bas-relief found above the rock-cut tomb of Jangeh (Fig. 7) depicts a reclining figure holding a cup and a winged figure, possibly standing on a sphere. Similar motifs were commonly found in Palmyrene culture and prevalent throughout Mesopotamia from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD, including the Elymaean territory (*Heidari 1998*, 218). The Elymaean coinage records reveal that starting from 45 AD, the majority of Elymaean kings' names on the coins had Parthian origins. This suggests a significant influence of the Parthian government on the Elymais, indicating that Parthian princes might have had direct administrative control over the Elymaean and Characene governments. Consequently, the Elymaeans adopted Iranian customs and constructed their tombs in the form of rock-cut tombs, reflecting the prevailing burial practices of the region.

On the other hand, if the low-quality motifs in the Eastern tomb were created during the same period, it could provide support for the theory put forth by Haerinck and Steve, who propose that the Eastern tomb belonged to Ananias during the 1st half of the 1st century AD. The architectural style of the Eastern tomb bears similarities to the Kherbet Shemma rock-cut tombs in Jerusalem (Fig. 8; *Meyers et al. 1976*, 129), indicating that the craftsmen responsible for the Eastern tomb were likely Nabataean.

Characene and Mishan

The reliefs adorning the Southern tomb exhibit distinctive symbols, indicating a strong connection to Palmyrene artistic traditions. Historical evidence suggests that the tomb is likely associated with Mithradates, a well-known king of Characene during the 1st half of the 2nd century AD (*Heidari 2020*, 103–124). In this discussion, we will provide a brief introduction to the area, its connection to Kharg Island, and the aforementioned ruler. The ancient sources referring to the southern Mesopotamia mention two names: Characene and the Mesen kingdom. According to accounts by Pliny and Ptolemy, Characene was located in the southern part of Mesopotamia, with its capital city known as Spasinou Charax (*Gregoratti 2011*, 211). The city was built on the site of Alexandria on the Tigris, which had been reconstructed by Antiochus IV after a devastating flood in 166/5 BC.

Antiochus IV renamed the city Antiochia and appointed Hyspaosines, an individual with an Irano-Bactrian name, as the governor of Mesene. Following the defeat of Demetrius II's anti-Parthian coalition by the Parthians in 139 BC, Hyspaosines asserted his independence
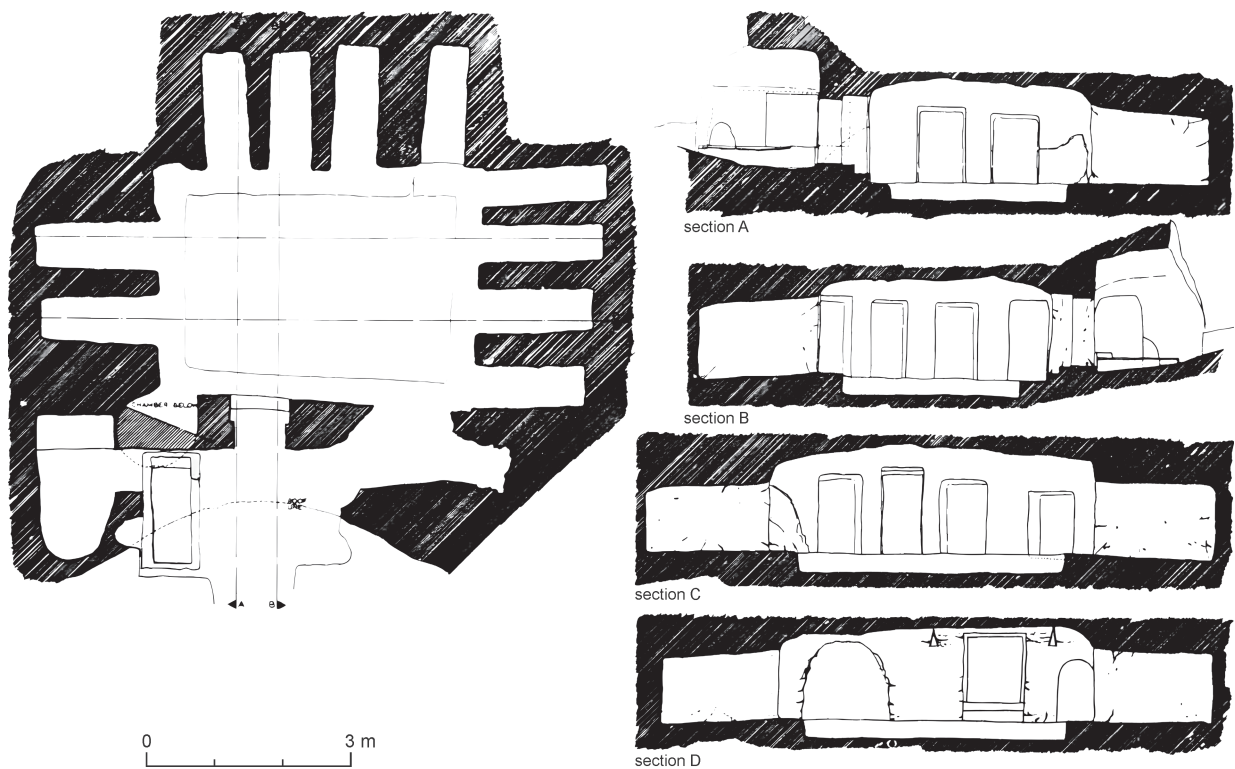
Fig. 8. *Plan and section of the rock-cut tomb in Kherebet Shemma (after Meyers et al. 1976, 129).*

and established a monarchy. Babylonian cuneiform documents make references to military operations led by Hyspaosines, and an administrative document dating back to 126/7 BC mentions the conquest of central Mesopotamia by a ruler who proclaimed himself the King of Characene. Archaeological evidence supports the occupation of other sites in the region, including Larsa, Uruk, and Tello (*Gregoratti 2011*, 212–213).

The site of Charax has been identified by John Hansman in Jabal-ol Kheibar, near the confluence of the Karun and Tigris rivers. According to the medieval scholar al-Tabari, the final ruler of Mishan was Bandawi, who was slain in battle by Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian Empire. As a result, Ardeshir ordered the town to be reconstructed and renamed it Kerkh of Mishan. The residents of Characene actively engaged in trade alongside the traders from Nabatea and Palmyra, who transported goods from India to the Persian Gulf (*Black 1984*, 230). Furthermore, the southern region of Mesopotamia, known as Misen or Mesen, encompassed the Characene kingdom and its territory along the Euphrates River, a portion of the Persian Gulf, and the Eulaions River (Karun; *Gregoratti 2011*, 212). The term "Mesen" is the Hellenistic rendition of the Aramaic name for Mishan. This name continued to be used until the Abbasid Caliphate adopted Mishan as a provincial designation in the Qarneh region. Presently, "Missan" refers to a state in modern-day Iraq, located between Qarneh to the south and Mandali.

There were two ancient geographers named Dionysius of Charax, who lived shortly before Pliny, and Isidorus of Charax, the author of the renowned book "The Parthian Stations," residing in Charax. Although both wrote in Greek, it appears that Isidorus primarily used Aramaic as his main language (*Nodelman 1960*, 108). The rulers of Characene, although established by the Hyspaosines dynasty, had diverse backgrounds, including Iranian, Mesopotamian, and Parthian origins (*Black 1984*, 231). During the 1st century AD, Characene held significant economic importance, particularly as a port. Characene played a vital role as a strategic hub for the Romans, facilitating the transportation of goods from the East. Caravans carrying valuable commodities would travel to Palmyra and Antioch, where these goods were then shipped to various regions across the Mediterranean. (*Potts 1996*, 275).

The Aramaic inscriptions discovered in the Qatif, Ed-dur, and Thaj areas indicate a prosperous relationship between Eastern Saudi Arabia and Mesen during the 1st century (*Potts 1984*, 116). Additionally, a considerable number of Characenian coins have been found along the Persian Gulf coast, including sites such as Ed-dur, Mleihah, and Failaka (*Haerinck 2003*, 199–200; *Haerinck 1998*; *Potts 1988*). In 1997, an inscription was discovered in the Shakhoura cemetery on the island of Bahrain, shedding light on the political influence of Characene. Written in Greek, the inscription mentions the names of King Hyspaosines, Queen Talassia, and the island of Tylos (present-day Bahrain). This significant find, dating back to around 120 BC during the height of Hyspaosines' reign, indicates his control over seaports in the Persian Gulf region (*Gatier et al. 2002*, 223–226). Hyspaosines, the son of Sagadonakes, bore a Parthian name that possibly had its origins in Bactria (*Bellinger 1942*, 54).

During the period from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, Characene retained a significant level of autonomy within the Parthian Empire (*Gregoratti 2011*, 215). Archaeological surveys have revealed the presence of Parthian Glazed Ware, which was characteristic of Arsacid Babylonia during the 1st century AD. These ceramics were produced in Seleucia, Susa, and Uruk-Warka. The discovery of these finds suggests economic relations between Characene and the ports located north of the Persian Gulf. Additionally, coins, particularly Elymaean and Parthian, found in sepulchral contexts, such as Jebel Kenzan, further support the existence of trade connections (*Boucharlat 1993*, 47–48). Furthermore, the ceramics discovered in the settlement of Ra's al Qal'at on Bahrain Island indicate contact with the Iranian world.

Recent research has proposed that Ed-Dur could be identified as the harbor of Ommana, mentioned as a Persian (Parthian) emporium in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a manuscript from the late 1st century AD (*Salles 1988*, 89–91; *Potts 1990*, 308–309). The Periplus, a valuable account of Indian Ocean trade in the second half of the 1st century AD, provides limited information about the Persian Gulf routes. According to the anonymous author, the entire Persian Gulf was controlled by the "Persians", referring to the Arsacid dynasty. They held dominion over the sea stations and the provisioning of ships used for trade along the Indian Ocean routes. The document also mentions the Parthians' naval superiority and their presence at naval stations along the Indian Ocean route (*Dąbrowa 1991*, 147–148; *Salles 1993*, 508–509). Isidorus of Charax confirms that Ommana was recognized by the inhabitants of Mesen (*Potts 1996*, 279).

Mithradates, King of Characene

In 131 AD, Mithradates, the son of Parthian king Pacorus II, took control of the Kingdom of Characene. He forged strong connections with various ports in the Persian Gulf, including Bahrain, Ed-dur, and Kharg Island, as well as with the merchant stations of Palmyra. A noteworthy discovery shedding light on Mithradates' rule is an inscription found on a bronze figure of Hercules near Baghdad. Erected in the year 442 (131 AD) by the merchants of Spasinou Charax, the figure stands as a tribute to Mithradates' esteemed position and influence, particularly within the merchant community (*Seyrig 1941*, 254–255). During Mithradates' reign, notable changes in coin designs emerged. The coins prominently featured an image of the ruler donning a tiara, symbolizing his elevated rank and prominent status within the Parthian system. Notably, some reverse coins deviated from the customary depiction of a city goddess and instead showcased Hercules. This deviation suggests that these coins may have been minted in proximity to the Euphrates River (*Hansman 1967*, 2).

Characene coins have had a widespread presence throughout the Middle East. Among the significant coin hoards in Mesopotamia are those found in Basra, Susa, and Tello (*Le Rider 1959*). Additionally, they have been discovered in Firouzabad, located in the Fars province (*Huff 1978*, 191–192), as well as in Failaka (*Potts 1988*, 137–167), Dura-Europos (*Bellinger 1942*, 53–56), and various areas along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf (*Haerinck 1998*, 273–302). Mithradates, as part of his efforts to establish a new government in Western Asia, appointed at least two

Palmyrean governors (*Nodelman 1960,* 113). They held high-ranking positions and played a central role in the Gulf trade cycle on Bahrain Island, as attested by an inscription from Characene during the same period. The coins of Characene, specifically those dating between 128 and 147 AD, offer valuable historical insights (*Gardner 1968*, 55). Notably, a coin from 143/4 AD bears an inscription identifying Mithradates as "King of Kings, King of Ommana". It implies that he took control of Ommana, known today as Ed-dur, an important maritime station along the route to India, likely associated with the Characene-Palmyrene commercial network (*Potts 1988,* 146–149).

Mithradates faced an uncertain fate. Historical records provide no definitive information regarding his final whereabouts. However, prevailing belief suggests that he was expelled from his kingdom, leading to conjectures that he sought refuge in Syria (*Potter 1991*, 283). Nodelman proposes that his reign ended around 150 AD (*Nodelman 1960,* 113). In 151 AD, Vologases IV launched a military campaign, invading Characene and overthrowing him. As a symbolic act, the statue of Hercules, previously erected in Characene, was removed and relocated to Seleucia (*Al-Salihi 1971*; *Pennacchietti 1987*; *Morano 1990*). Following Mithradates' defeat and expulsion, it is plausible that Orabzes II ascended to the throne, displaying allegiance to the new Great King. The coinage issued by the kings of Characene predominantly consisted of tetradrachms adorned with Greek letters and Aramaic monograms (*Bellinger 1942*, 56). Some of these coins also bore the inscription "Obabacia," believed to denote being the "son of King Phobas." However, the true identity of Phobas remains largely elusive, prompting scholars to speculate that he might have been a descendant of Mithradates, the former King of Characene (*Black 1984*, 231).

Toponymy of Kharg

Kharg Island, as argued, does not appear in any historical sources prior to the Islamic period. However, its current form is mentioned in Islamic era records. According to Pliny (*Plin. Nat.* 6.31), the name Characene (gr. Χαρακηνή) derived from the Greek designation of its main city, Charax (gr. Χάραξ). Charax seems to be a Hellenized version of the corresponding Aramaic or Persian topomyms, but it has also been used to refer to various other Seleucid towns with the connotation of a palisade. When applied to a city, it appears to indicate a fortified location. The city itself was constructed on an artificial elevation at the junction of the Tigris and Eulaeus rivers (*Plin. Nat.* 6.31). The term χάραξ, derived from χαράσσω, meaning "to sharpen to a point", has been documented in literary sources with similar meanings since at least the Classical period. It has been associated with pointed stakes, wooden constructions like palisades or ramparts, and even vine-props. It encompassed the usage of fences, stockades, and fortified enclosures. The word's feminine form denoted a pointed stake, while the masculine form, often used in the plural, referred to wooden structures.

Notably, charax was also used to mean a pale or stake in entrenchments or fences. Dionysius of Halicarnassus documented its plural form as referring to palisades or ramparts (*D.H.* 6.29), while in the works of Diodorus and Plutarch, the plural form indicated palisaded enclosures, entrenched camps, or places surrounded by palisades (*Diod.* 19.83; *Plut. Aem.* 17; *Plut. Marc.* 18). Charles Virolleaud was the first to pay attention to the toponymy of Kharg. He wrote a brief note suggesting that the present name of Kharg has appeared in other forms such as Kharak (in Persian), Kharedj, or Karet, all of which bear resemblance to the name of Charax (*Ghirshman 1958*, 268). Roman Ghirshman, influenced by Virolleaud's findings, proposed that Kharg might have been derived from Characene, although its name may not necessarily be linked to its capital (*Ghirshman 1958*, 264). Additionally, he speculated that the island of Icare mentioned by Strabo could be identical to Kharg Island (*Ghirshman 1960*, 3).

Following the downfall of the Characene kingdom, many cities underwent name changes during the Sasanian era. However, due to the enduring cultural influence of Characene for over three centuries, some names of rivers and islands from that period managed to survive. One notable example is the city of Spasinou Charax, which was conquered by Ardashir and

later renamed Bahman-Ardashir. Although the city's significance and prosperity waned, it continued to exist under the name Kerkh-e Mishan until the Early Islamic period (*Hansman 1984*, 162–164). Yagut Hamavi's records mention six locations named Kerkh, located in Mesopotamia and Khuzestan (*Yaqut Hamawi*, 159–160). It is plausible that the name Charax briefly persisted in the Sasanian and Early Islamic periods as Kerkh or Kerk, and it likely influenced the present-day name of the Karkheh River.

Conclusion

The Eastern and Southern tombs on Kharg Island bear resemblance to Nabataean and Palmyrene tombs in terms of architectural style and decorative motifs. However, there is limited evidence supporting the presence of Palmyrene and Nabataean merchants or high-ranking officials in the Persian Gulf area. Inscriptions only mention two Palmyrene secretaries and a prominent figure named Yarhai, who served as the satrap of Bahrain. In this study, the motifs and bas-reliefs found in the rock tombs are classified into two groups. The first group, located in the Southern tomb, exhibits high-quality depictions such as a man lying on a bed and a winged figure standing on a sphere. These motifs, carrying Palmyrene symbols, suggest that the tomb may have belonged to Mithradates, the king of Characene during the 1st half of the 2nd century AD. In contrast, the second group of motifs found in the Eastern tomb display lower quality and include carvings of a menorah, boats, and rosettes accompanied by Aramaic-Syrian inscriptions. It is possible that these motifs were added to the tomb at a later time.

The architecture of the Eastern tomb bears similarities to the rock-cut tombs in Kherbet Shemma, Jerusalem. If we assume that the motifs in the Eastern tomb were carved during its construction, it is likely that the tomb belonged to Ananias, a high-ranking figure in Characene during the 1st half of the 1st century AD. Another viewpoint suggests that both the Eastern and Southern tombs were carved around the same time. In this case, the Southern tomb would belong to a local king, possibly Mithradates, the king of Characene. The Eastern tomb, with its irregular and lower quality motifs, would then belong to an individual of lower social status compared to the Southern tomb. In summary, based on the presence of two tombs on Kharg Island, it is likely that they belonged to two kings or high-ranking individuals of Characene, possibly Mithradates and Ananias. The name of the island, Kharg, is likely derived from the Greek word Characene, meaning "fortress," due to its association with the burial of Characene's kings or high-ranking men. This name has been recorded in the form Kharg by Islamic authors.

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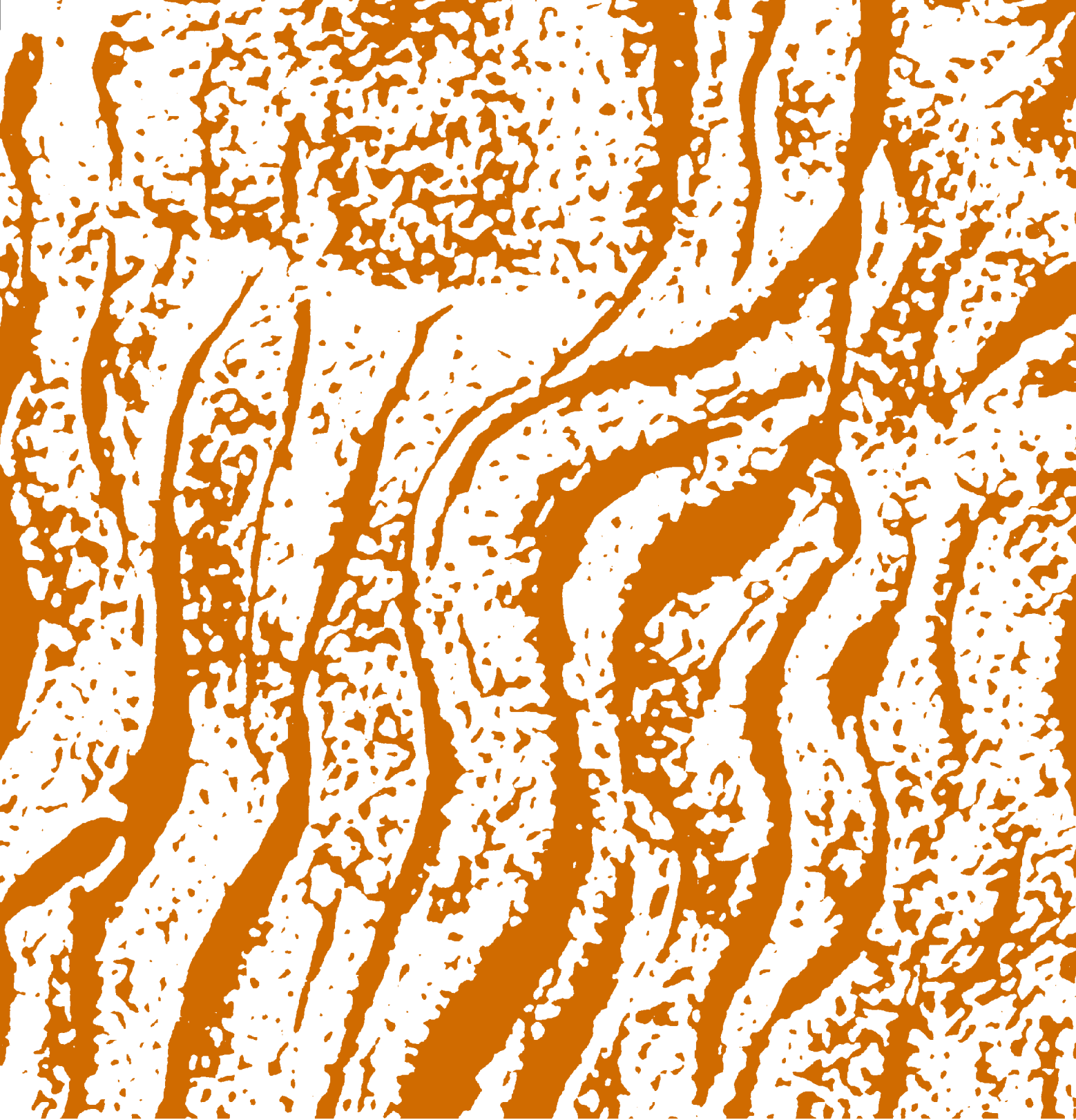*Strab.* – Strabo, Geography. Translated by J. Horace. London 1930.

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