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AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF AN UNEXAMINED RELIQUARY IN THE CHURCH OF MAR TADROS-BLAT, SYRIA

ABSTRACT: This article explores an unstudied, though not recent, discovery – a sarcophagus-shaped reliquary discovered in the village of Blat in Homs, Syria. The research aims to shed light on its cultural and historical importance. By conducting a detailed analysis of its carvings and symbolic iconography, the study seeks to unravel the religious motifs embedded in its design and interpretation, elucidating their connections with saints, pivotal figures intricately associated with sarcophagus reliquaries. Furthermore, the discussion investigates the incorporation of what is known as the circulation system, shedding light on regional religious practices and traditions. It also aims to determine whether the reliquary was openly displayed or kept hidden. The current condition of the reliquary emphasizes its continued reverence and preservation within the religious community.

KEYWORDS: Sarcophagus Reliquary, Theodore, Orans posture, Circulation system, Syria

Introduction

In one of the ancient and smallest villages within the ‘Valley of Christians’, also recognized as the Wadi al-Nasara region, in Homs, stands a notable sarcophagus-shaped reliquary. Uncovered in the village of Blat (Pl. 1: 1), which is be-

lieved to have earned its name from its historical role as a royal court, with 'Blat' signifying court in Arabic, this relatively small reliquary was discovered within the Church of Mar Tadros, also known as St. Theodore (Pl. 1: 2). The discovery of this reliquary strongly indicates the region's connection to the cult of relics, which thrived in Syria during the 5th century AD (Hunter 1991, 157).

Unfortunately, there have been no archaeological excavations conducted to explore the history of Mar Tadros Church. The complete plastering of the church, both inside and outside, complicates efforts to estimate its age. Notably, numerous significant Christian figures were named Theodore, implying that the church could have been dedicated to any of them. As a result, uncertainties remain regarding the identity of the saint to whom the church may be dedicated and the date of its establishment. Without excavations and further studies, identifying such information will be challenging. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that, according to the local community of Blat, the church was dedicated to the great holy martyr, Theodore the Tyro, also known as Theodore the Recruit (Leemans 2003, 82).

However, due to the conditions in Syria and the absence of archaeological research to provide historical context for the church, along with the lack of inscriptions on both the reliquary and within the church, its iconography alone fails to offer precise dating. Consequently, accurately determining the reliquary's age is challenging. Therefore, its dating is estimated within the broader range of Syrian sarcophagus reliquaries, spanning the 5th to the 7th centuries AD (Tchalenko 1953, 336; Peña *et al.* 1990, 92).

A few years ago, Mar Tadros Church was closed, and subsequently, the reliquary was relocated to another church, namely St. Demetrius Church, which was established in the 17th century AD. Mar Tadros Church, this modest and small structure, is characterized by its simple architecture. The church features a rectangular hall with a narrow nave, covered by a vaulted ceiling. At the eastern end, the hall terminates in an apse with a hemispherical stone vault, where the reliquary was placed on a small altar table. On either side of the apse arch, there are small niches likely designed for storing liturgical objects. A single window is positioned high on the wall facing the apse, allowing light to enter (Pl. 2: 1).

The architecture of the church is simple, with no elaborate ornamentation except for a small cross within the apse and another on top, both added at a later date. The church is situated below street level and is accessed by a set of steps that lead down from the street to the entrance.

It is worth noting that the church underwent reconstruction, although the extent of these renovations remains uncertain. This reconstruction may have resulted in significant changes to its layout, potentially leading to the removal or concealment of certain sections.

Due to the absence of literature, attributed to the lack of excavations, this article serves as the only study of the particular reliquary in question. Consequently, its aim is to shed light on a noteworthy reliquary held in high regard by Christians of the Valley. Dating back to the Byzantine period, this reliquary is distinguished by its unique iconography, making it one of the most intriguing sarcophagi reliquaries in Syria.

Nevertheless, before exploring the characteristics and significance of this reliquary, it is crucial to understand the concept of a reliquary, particularly a sarcophagus reliquary like the one being examined.

Essentially, a reliquary serves as a container for sacred relics, safeguarding and occasionally displaying them to believers (Blick 2014, 111). This enables individuals to connect with the divine by touching, smelling, or visually encountering fragments of saints (Noga-Banai 2019, 221).

Sarcophagi reliquaries represent a distinctive and notable category within Christian reliquaries, characterized by a rectangular structure paired with a lid. Their design is influenced by ancient Roman and early Christian burial sarcophagi, which feature gabled roofs and four corner protrusions known as acroteria. However, these reliquaries were crafted in smaller sizes, allowing for convenient transportation to chapels and altars to safeguard the enclosed relics (Dresken-Weiland 2018, 39).

Typically, these reliquaries were crafted from a variety of materials, prominently stone, and exhibited a range of sizes – from small boxes measuring around 20 cm, to occasional larger coffins. They all share a common trait of a relatively shallow internal cavity designed as a compartment to house relics, complemented by a movable lid. The lids exhibit various shapes, including barrel-shaped or gabled-pitched roof designs, as well as flat lids, and may or may not feature acroteria. This distinction is particularly noticeable with flat lids, where acroteria are absent (Kazan 2015, 84-90; Wiśniewski 2019, 134).

While larger or intermediate sizes were more prevalent in Syrian reliquaries (Kazan 2015, 85), which prompted occasional doubts about whether they are reliquaries or conventional sarcophagi, a closer examination reveals that the compartments inside are not very deep, accommodating only small portions of the saint's body. This observation confirms their classification as reliquaries

(Kalinowski 2011, 76). Nevertheless, it is crucial to highlight the existence of smaller examples in Syria, despite their relatively limited numbers, as a few portable sarcophagi have been uncovered in Homs (Comte 2014, 70-71).

In addition to the aforementioned type of sarcophagi reliquaries in Syria, another type known as cippus sarcophagi reliquaries is characterized by a columnar shape and a square or rectangular base, resulting in a vertical design. These are occasionally referred to as reliquaries in the shape of a *stela*.¹ While they share a similar form with sarcophagi, cippus reliquaries have less width, and their height is notably greater than their length, with some lacking acroteria (Sodini 1989, 354). This type of reliquary is prevalent in northern Syria (Tchalenko 1953; Buschhausen 1971, 323-324; Tchalenko and Baccache 1979, 210, Fig. 348; Sodini 1989, 354; Peña *et al.* 1990, 91-92; Comte 2012, 308-319).

Description of the Reliquary

The Blat reliquary takes the shape of a small rectangular basalt stone sarcophagus, featuring a movable gabled lid with a two-sided sloping design. It is adorned with four small triangular corner acroteria that nearly reach the height of the lid's ridge. A decorative molding, an ovolo, runs from the upper edge of the two front acroteria to the lower section of the lid, as well as horizontally across the upper part of the basin (Pl. 2: 2). The overall height of the reliquary, including the lid, is approximately 56 cm, with the body measuring 31 cm and the lid height being 25 cm. The length extends to 36 cm, while the width measures 24 cm.

Given that the reliquary is crafted from basalt and considering the prevalent use of basalt stone in Syria (Butcher 2003, 175, 206), it is plausible that the reliquary was produced locally. This likelihood is further supported by the discovery of around 13 basalt sarcophagi reliquaries in Syria (Lassus 1947, 176; Buschhausen 1971, 324; Comte 2012, 379; Comte 2014, 69-70; Comte 2016, 132),² indicating the existence of local production centers in the region.

¹ A *stela* is an upright monument that conveys information through texts, images, or a combination of both. It has been used as a grave marker, to commemorate individuals or events, and to delineate physical boundaries. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/stela>.

² It is noteworthy that while basalt gained popularity in southern Syria, none of the documented sarcophagus reliquaries have been discovered in this region thus far. Instead, all basalt reliquaries are located in the northwestern part of Syria, as well as in central regions like Hama and Homs. They all share a similar sarcophagus-type shape, characterized by a lid and basin, although many are sizable

The interior surface of the lid is flat and lacks edges to secure it above the basin of the reliquary (Pl. 3: 1). The reliquary basin contains a rectangular compartment with walls of uniform thickness, specifically designed to hold and protect the saint's remains. The compartment measures 30 x 18 cm and has a depth of 6 cm (Pl. 3: 2). Additionally, the reliquary incorporates a circulation system (Pl. 4).

The system's mechanism involves the incorporation of conduits to facilitate the circulation of poured liquids, predominantly oil, although water is also possible. These liquids are poured into the compartment through a designated opening in the lid, known as the libation aperture, which in the Blat reliquary is shaped like a small cavity containing a small hole. This unique design enables the liquids to flow through the compartment, passing over the remains of the saint. Eventually, the liquids collect at an outlet positioned below, referred to as the exit aperture (Canivet 1978; Peña 2000, 74; Bangert 2010, 317; Kazan 2015, 82-83; Wiśniewski 2019, 137).

Blat reliquary features an exit aperture designed in the shape of a chalice (Gessel 1988, 186). This chalice is intricately carved, protruding in the form of an oval cup (Wickenberg Ely 2012, 29). It exhibits relatively narrow feet, has a base, lacks handles, and measures approximately 10 cm in diameter and 18.5 cm in height, mirroring the design observed in certain sarcophagus reliquaries discovered in Syria. A similar design is evident in a reliquary found in Apamea (Buschhausen 1971, 305-306, 324; Comte 2012, 365-366) and another found in Restan (Lassus 1947, 176; Buschhausen 1971, 324; Comte 2016, 123). However, variations exist, such as instances where the chalice is depicted with handles, as seen in another reliquary from Apamea (Comte 2012, 411). Nevertheless, in the majority of sarcophagus reliquaries featuring a distinguishable exit aperture, the chalice form is depicted inward, carved using the intaglio method, and without handles (Tchalenko and Baccache 1979, 222, Fig. 366; Comte 2012: 378).

This chalice, referred to as the Holy Chalice, has been explored in detail in my article, where I delve into the profound connection between the Holy Chalice, saints, and their intricate relationships. The reliquary, saints' relics, and libations resemble the symbolism of Christ's blood and the Holy Chalice, serving as a vessel for his sacred blood. Similarly, sarcophagi reliquaries function

compared to the Blat reliquary and relatively plain, with minimal ornamentation. Nonetheless, they all feature a notable commonality: the circulation system, which will be examined in detail in the discussion.

as receptacles for the relics of saints. The incorporation of cup-shaped chalices on reliquaries can be traced back to the profound influence of the Holy Chalice itself on Christians throughout history. Historical evidence has shown that the Holy Chalice shared a cup-like form, akin to those depicted on sarcophagi. Its representation on reliquaries aims to emphasize the sanctity of the relics contained within and their divine connection (Khouli 2023).

It is worth noting that the incorporation of a libation aperture for pouring liquids was not limited to Syrian sarcophagus reliquaries. However, it is important not to classify it as a complete circulation system when the exit aperture is absent. Two reliquaries from Palestine serve as examples, both lacking the exit aperture. In these cases, believers, after pouring the liquids, could insert a narrow rod attached to a piece of cloth through the libation aperture in the lid. This process would facilitate contact with the relics inside the compartment, enabling the generation of the sacred liquids, known as contact relics, through the same aperture (Comte 2012, 168-173; Wiśniewski 2019, 135). Additional examples can be observed in Cyprus, which occasionally employed a circulation system (Comte 2014, 71).

Nevertheless, the oil circulation system is considered a common characteristic of Syrian sarcophagi reliquaries, potentially originating in Syria (Tchalenko 1953, 334), and even extending to smaller, portable reliquaries. For example, the two portable reliquaries mentioned earlier from Homs illustrate this characteristic. One of these reliquaries features a small hole drilled into the short side of the basin, housing a lead pipe that serves as an exit aperture for oil outflow. In contrast, the second reliquary has the exit aperture on the front side of the basin (Comte 2014, 70-71, Fig. 6-7). An exception to this feature is observed in flat lid reliquaries, where no apertures are present, indicating the absence of a circulation system. This suggests that these reliquaries were solely used to protect the relics housed within them, without any additional purposes (Martiniani-Reber 2000, 102).

In terms of iconography, despite its simple and primitive depiction, what distinguishes this reliquary is its unique visual representation. It prominently features multiple depictions of doves, often arranged in pairs facing each other. This representation, while simple, aims to convey profound symbolism.

The initial pair of doves is depicted on the front side of the lid, where they are shown perched on a branch surrounding the libation opening, possibly depicted as drinking. Positioned above this opening, between the two doves, is an encircled “Maltese” cross (Pl. 5).

The “Maltese” cross is recognized by its distinct eight-pointed star shape. It represents the eight beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) by modifying the Greek cross, adding additional arms to form eight points that narrow towards the center (Clarke 2003, 65), often encircled (Allen 1887, 94). Notably, the “Maltese” cross is most closely associated with the Knights Hospitaller (Ralls 2007, 97). As a result, it has become widely acknowledged as the “Maltese” cross and is essentially considered a variation of the Christian cross (Comte 2016, 119). However, since saints were seen as embodying the beatitudes (Bonowitz 2013, 44), incorporating the “Maltese” cross on reliquaries establishes a profound connection to these venerated figures.

The representation of the dove, on the other hand, holds profound importance in Christian symbolism. The dove has consistently symbolized the Holy Spirit, a representation that has remained unchanged from the early days of Christianity to the present. Its significance is notably rooted in its presence at Jesus’ Baptism (Matthew 3:16). In contrast, saints are seen as vessels overflowing with the sanctity of the Holy Spirit, possessing extraordinary powers to heal not only the body but also the mind and soul. Saints are regarded as intercessors who pray for and assist the souls of the faithful in approaching God (Kazan 2015, 82). Hence, the portrayal of doves, symbolizing purity and renewal (1 Corinthians 6:11), engaged in the act of drinking from the chalice, can be interpreted as a representation of believers receiving spiritual nourishment and renewal through the Holy Spirit.

On the opposite side of the lid, another pair of doves is depicted, one at rest while the other appears to be in motion. Initially, a small hole between the two doves may seem to indicate a libation aperture. However, upon closer examination, it was revealed that while there was an initial attempt to create a libation aperture, it was not pursued for some reason. Instead, the sculptor opted to create the libation aperture on the other side (Pl. 6: 1). The depiction of two facing doves is visible on several sides of the reliquary. In addition to adorning the elongated sides of the lid, the doves are also depicted on one of the shorter sides. Interestingly, an orans posture is situated between the two doves (Pl. 6: 2).

The orans posture holds significant importance in early Christian art, although the term ‘Orans’ was not used by early Christians; it was invented by modern scholars to signify ‘the praying one.’ This posture, predominantly seen in a feminine form in Roman catacombs dating back to the late 2nd century AD (Snyder 1985, 19), also appeared in Jewish art, as evidenced by the synagogue

of Dura Europos in Syria (Fine 2005, 180). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the Blat reliquary depicted a feminine or masculine form.

There is no consensus among scholars regarding its precise meaning. Some interpret it as symbolizing the cross and crucifixion in Christian art (Meeks 2008, 168; Louth 2023, 406). In this context, believers may see it as a call to emulate Jesus's suffering and sacrifice, akin to a eucharistic symbol, urging them to serve others and share in Christ's affliction. Therefore, the orans can be viewed as a symbol of the deceased who, by receiving Holy Communion, has attained eternal life (Herbermann 1909, 591). Others regard it as simply representing the soul of the deceased person (Lassus 1967, 13), guided and blessed by the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the doves. Alternatively, some scholars interpret it as a symbol of prayer and worship (Rosser 2012, 360; Jensen 2013, 13; Witkamp 2018, 192).

In the context of saints, and considering that the orans posture may be used to depict sacred figures actively praying and interceding for others, the inclusion of two doves alongside the orans figure emphasizes the saint's spiritual authority and intercessory role, symbolizing hope and salvation. Consequently, the doves may serve as intermediaries or messengers conveying the saint's prayers on behalf of the people, carrying their intercessions to heaven. However, the existence of a triangular shape in front of the orans, likely representing a chalice, undoubtedly signifies a sacred figure praying before partaking in Holy Communion. This further supports the notion that the doves represent believers receiving spiritual nourishment.

On the contrary, the basin of the reliquary exhibits ornamental features solely on the front wall. It displays two pairs of doves facing each other, positioned beneath two smaller doves also facing each other. The outflow is situated between them, creating the visual impression of doves drinking from the chalice, as the libation may include either water or oil (Pl. 7: 1-2).

The unique design of the Blat reliquary holds spiritual significance and serves a ritualistic purpose. In this context, believers would gather oil or water from the exit aperture for use in anointing, a practice intended to provide protection during illnesses. These consecrated liquids, which came into contact with the relics, were sometimes stored in containers and distributed among the faithful (Kalinowski 2011, 43).

A biblical reference to such a practice and its connection to the gift of the Spirit can be found in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22. Additionally, in the late 4th century, Archbishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople preached a homily on mar-

tyrs, exhorting believers to hold them in profound reverence. He urged them to visit their tombs, emphasizing the sanctity of martyrs' relics, and encouraged anointing with holy oil as a symbolic remembrance of their sacrifice. These acts, he argued, fostered an enduring spiritual bond between believers and martyrs, providing strength and guidance through their exemplary lives (John Chrysostom, 664.45-665.6). Furthermore, Theodoret, the bishop of Cyrrhus hailing from Antioch in Byzantine Syria, recorded in his book *Ecclesiastical History* a case where the sacred oil, produced through contact with relics, was believed to protect against nocturnal visits by demons (Smith and Cheetham 1880, 1454).

The presence of small holes on both the lid and the basin is another distinctive feature of this reliquary. These holes, used in conjunction with metal clamps, served to seal and secure the relics within. This technique was employed to prevent the removal of relics from inside the reliquaries and to protect them from potential damage or theft during their initial use (Kazan 2015, 90; Wiśniewski 2019, 134-148). This discovery suggests the importance and value attributed to the relics it once contained, emphasizing its significance in the religious and cultural context of Syria as a whole and the village of Blat in particular. This characteristic is commonly found in the majority of Syrian sarcophagi reliquaries (Canivet 1978; Sodini 1989; Kalinowski 2011; Comte 2012; Comte 2014; Comte 2016).

Current Status and Conclusion

Upon examination, it was found that the reliquary is open and empty, possibly due to historical events prompting the relocation and safeguarding of its relics. The reliquary exhibits color changes and some fractures, likely as a result of varying climatic conditions. Located within St. Demetrius Church, it is nestled in a niche in the church walls and protected by a glass door. The placement of the reliquary within the church's niche may serve solely the purpose of protection, with no additional significance attached.

However, considering the uncertainty surrounding the precise location of the Blat reliquary within the original church, its features, such as the presence of apertures and detailed iconography, suggest a purpose beyond mere concealment. In Syria, sarcophagi reliquaries were often placed on the ground or on a base within rooms adjacent to the apse, or on the balustrade steps, between the columns of the central nave (Castellana 2010, 44). This differs from other

regions like Arabia, Palestine, and Cyprus, where they were typically placed beneath the altar. This variation may be attributed to the prevalent use of Syrian reliquaries for saint veneration, which often involved the oil circulation system characteristic of Syrian tradition (Comte 2014, 71-73). Additionally, this difference might have been influenced by strict canons prohibiting the placement of relics beneath the altar table (Castellana 2010, 43).³

However, it is worth mentioning a reliquary originating from Ras el-Bassit, where it was discovered sealed under a large table in the northern adjoining room of the church, dating to the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th century AD. Despite featuring the Syrian characteristic of an oil circulation system, it is plain and devoid of decorations and was concealed rather than visibly displayed, akin to Palestinian and Arabian reliquaries, thus establishing a connection across the empire's provinces. Therefore, there is an exception to the typical placement of sarcophagi reliquaries in Syrian churches, where they sometimes adhere to the Byzantine tradition of reliquary placement (Comte 2014, 73). Nevertheless, based on the preceding discussion, the Blat reliquary suggests that it was openly displayed rather than hidden; however, its precise location remains undetermined.

Eventually, it must be said that the Blat reliquary is of significant importance, distinguished by its unique features, particularly the orans posture, which sets it apart from over a hundred sarcophagus reliquaries found in Syria as well as from stone sarcophagus reliquaries in neighboring areas. However, it should be noted that the orans figure has been found on coins, votive plaques, vessels, and wall paintings – as well as on silver and metal reliquaries – but it is notably absent from stone sarcophagus reliquaries. Moreover, the representation of two doves facing each other, particularly engaged in the act of drinking, is a unique feature found specifically in these Syrian stone sarcophagus reliquaries, including the Blat reliquary and another limestone reliquary in The Menil Collection (Accession Number: 6517). This rarity emphasizes the importance of the Blat reliquary and could potentially indicate that the Menil reliquary originates from

³ The Syrian churches refrain from storing relics beneath or within the altar, likely influenced by the directive attributed to John of Tella. Deacons were tasked with maintaining the sanctity of the sanctuary and altar, ensuring their cleanliness to facilitate the celebration of the Mysteries by priests. John's teachings emphasized the importance of preventing the altar from becoming contaminated. In his work *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, John explicitly mentioned that this prohibition extended to, or particularly emphasized, the inclusion of martyrs' bones (Vööbus 1975-1976, 213; Menze 2006, 68).

the central region of Syria. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to thoroughly investigate this comparison in the future.

Although the identity of the saint it once enshrined remains unknown, the reliquary continues to attract pilgrims seeking protection and blessings, symbolizing Syria's enduring spiritual heritage.

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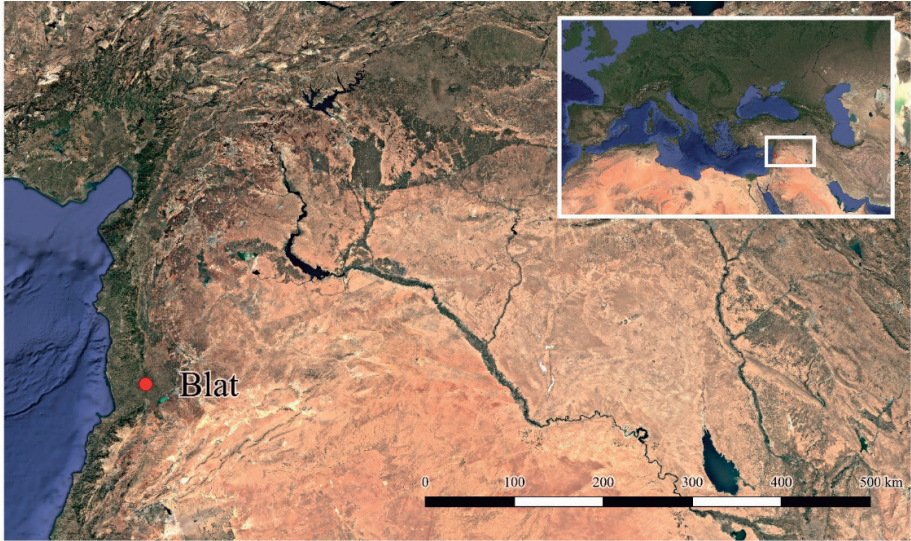
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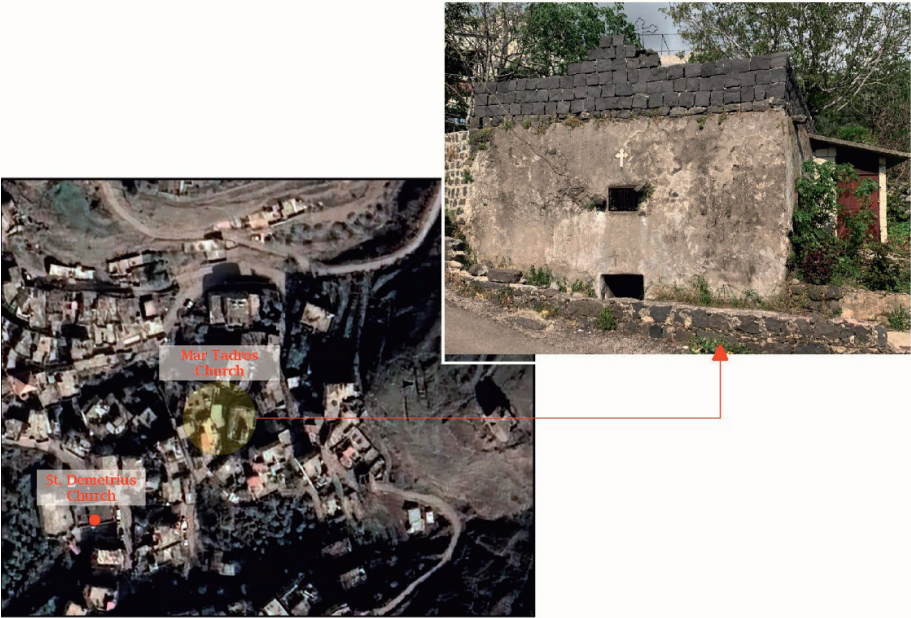
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PLATE 1



1



2

Pl. 1: 1 – Location of Blat (By Kamila Niziolek)

Pl. 1: 2 – Blat map pinpointing the Mar Tadros Church and St. Demetrius Church locations within the area. By the author

PLATE 2



1



2

Pl. 2: 1 – Inside Mar Tadros Church. Photo by the author

Pl. 2: 2 – The sarcophagus-shaped reliquary discovered in the church of Mar Tadros. Photo by the author

PLATE 3



1

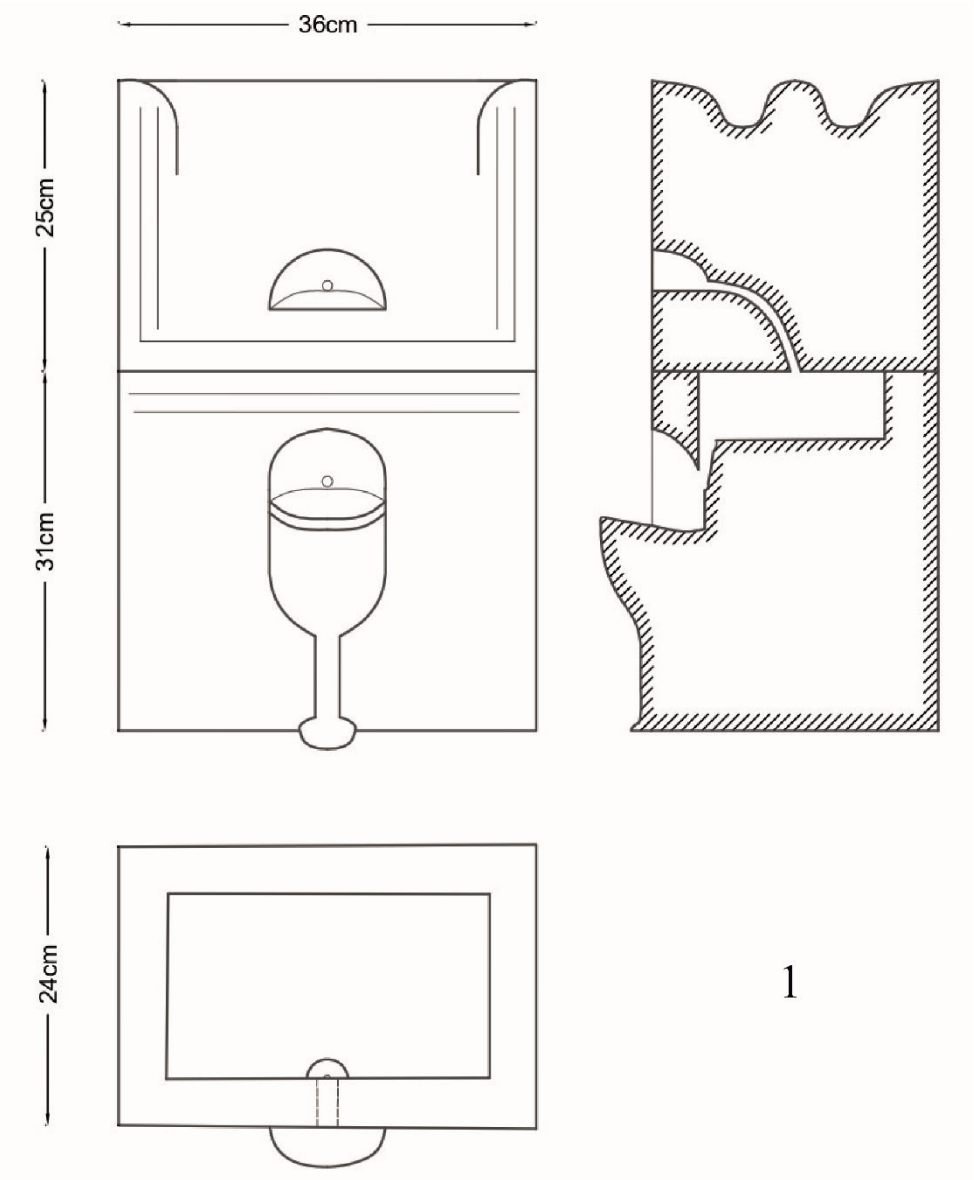


2

Pl. 3: 1 – The interior view of the lid, revealing the hole leading to the libation aperture. Photo by the author

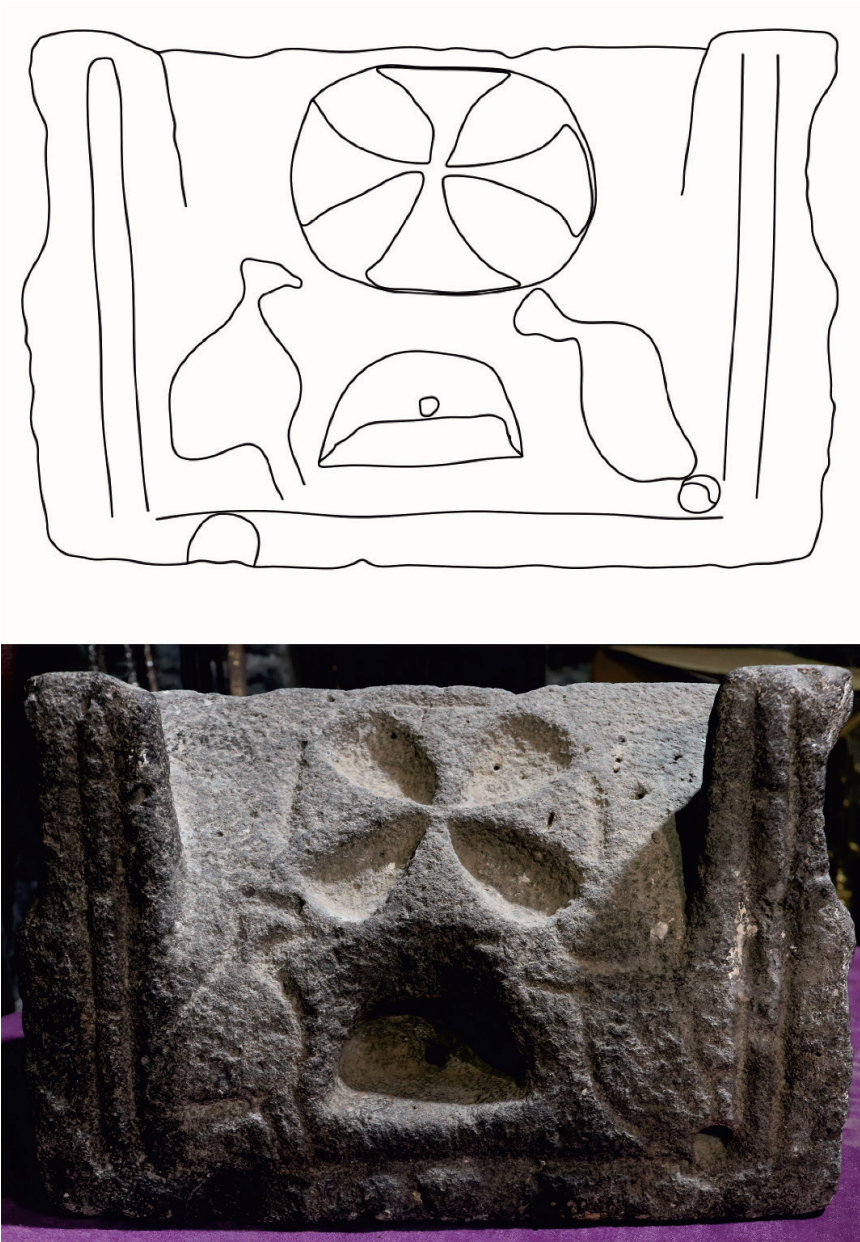
Pl. 3: 2 – Placement of the compartment inside the reliquary. Photo by the author

PLATE 4



Pl. 4 – An illustration of the reliquary (without the iconography). By the author and Ahmad Dawa

PLATE 5



1

Pl. 5 – The two doves surrounding the Maltese cross, photo and drawing by the author

PLATE 6



1

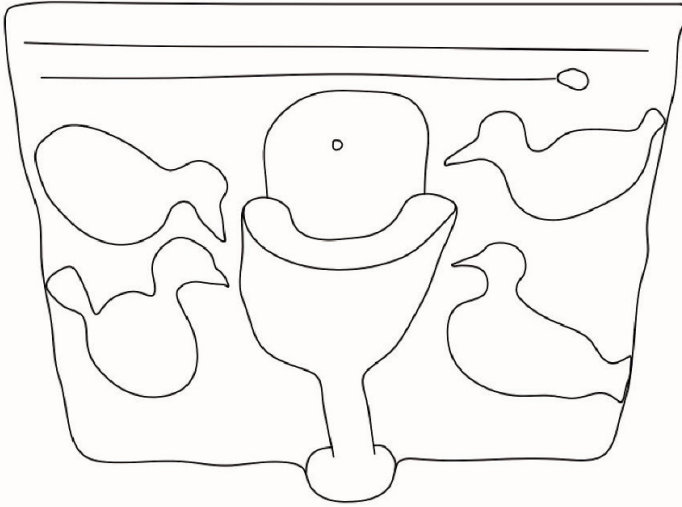


2

Pl. 6: 1 – The two doves depicted on the back side of the lid. Photo by the author

Pl. 6: 2 – The orans posture depicted on the short side of the reliquary. Photo by the author.

PLATE 7



1



2

Pl. 7: 1 – Illustration of the chalice and the accompanying doves, by the author

Pl. 7: 2 – Two doves are depicted facing each other, encircling the exit outflow on the front wall of the basin, photo by the author