

Articles

A late-antique catacomb in Sirte: a reassessment of the evidence a century after its excavation

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Abstract

In 1926, Roberto Bartoccini excavated a late-antique tomb at Sirte, Libya. Fifty-three inscriptions in Latin, Greek and Latino-Punic have been recorded and used as evidence of a thriving Christian community. This article reassesses these inscriptions, paying particular attention to the Latino-Punic texts, and discusses the persistence of a Punic identity that can be placed in the context of the wider archaeological landscape.

مقبرة من العصر القديم المتأخر في سرت: إعادة تقييم الأدلة بعد قرن من التنقيب
كارولين بارون

في عام 1926، قام روبرتو بارتوتشيني بحفر مقابر من العصر القديم المتأخر في سرت، ليبيا. تم تسجيل 53 نقشاً باللاتينية واليونانية واللاتينية البونيقية واستخدمت كدليل على وجود مجتمع مسيحي مزدهر. تعيد هذه المقالة تقييم هذه النقوش، مع إيلاء اهتمام خاص للنصوص اللاتينية البونيقية، و تناقش بقاء الهوية البونيقية التي يمكن وضعها في سياق المشهد الأثري الأوسع.

Keywords: catacombs; Christianity; inscriptions; late antiquity; Latino-Punic; Sirte

In 2021 a second digital edition of *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* was published.¹ Among the many inscriptions added to the corpus of that edition were 53 epitaphs in Latin, Greek and Latino-Punic from a fourth-century CE catacomb in Sirte.² These inscriptions had been excavated and published by Roberto Bartoccini in 1926–1928,³ but they were not included in the original 1952 publication beyond a single entry for all 53 texts at IRT 855, a brief description of the findspot and the inclusion of the names from the epitaphs in the 1952 Index.⁴ Subsequent scholarship on Latino-Punic epigraphy has included the examples from this catacomb,⁵ but the inscriptions remain an under-appreciated group of texts in the context of Libyan epigraphy. It is the intention of this article to reassess the evidence for the inscriptions, and to consider them alongside the excavation of similar catacomb structures that have been identified since Bartoccini was active in 1926. By bringing the Latino-Punic material into consideration alongside the better-known corpus of late-Latin inscriptions, it is hoped that a more holistic understanding of the community that set them up might be achieved, as well as broadening our insight into the diversity of Libyan epigraphy as a whole.

Bartoccini's 1928 publication recorded that in September 1925 he learned of the existence of a 'kind of underground catacomb' that had been discovered through the digging of a well some 30 or so years beforehand.⁶ The opening was situated in a big piazza in front of the old Turkish barracks,⁷ and he described it as being 'close to a surrounding wall, which cut a third of it, supported by a large I-shaped piece of iron'.⁸ Bartoccini recognised the underground space to be a Christian hypogeum, containing

approximately 100 *loculi* for burials, some of which were still marked by their original inscriptions.⁹ The catacomb had been disturbed by those constructing the well, who had entered it hoping to find valuable objects and who had damaged the plaster closures to the *loculi* as a result.¹⁰ A more systematic exploration of the chamber was established and led, on Bartoccini's behalf, by Giovanni Briulotta, who recovered all identifiable archaeological material – including more than 200 oil lamps – and who cleared the space of earth so that it could be more properly recorded.¹¹

Bartoccini returned to the site in April 1927 to do just this; he documented a necropolis eight metres below the then ground level, oriented from NNW to SSE, with an average underground height of two metres (Figure 1). He recorded that the chamber was constructed from the same sandstone that can be found at Sirte's coastline and noted that the flat roof was supported by three large pilasters of the same material.¹² It measured 31.65 metres in length with an average width of 4 metres. The walls were punctuated with *loculi* measuring 1.75 x 0.45m, in which the heads of the deceased were pointed in a north by north-westerly direction, with the exception of those in the shorter walls of the chamber in which they were directed towards the east.¹³ The *loculi* were arranged in three or four rows, including many smaller ones that Bartoccini interpreted as being intended for the remains of children; later scholarship has suggested that they were in fact for bones rather than entire inhumations.¹⁴ On the eastern wall close to the entrance stood an arched recess, an *arcosolium*, containing space for three burials.¹⁵ Bartoccini also identified graves dug into the flooring, which appeared to have been dug once no more space for *loculi* existed in the walls.¹⁶ Next to or beneath the *loculi* small holes had been dug out for terracotta oil lamps, some of which remained in places, mostly ornamented with simple geometric designs. In total the excavation yielded 214 complete lamps and some further fragments.¹⁷

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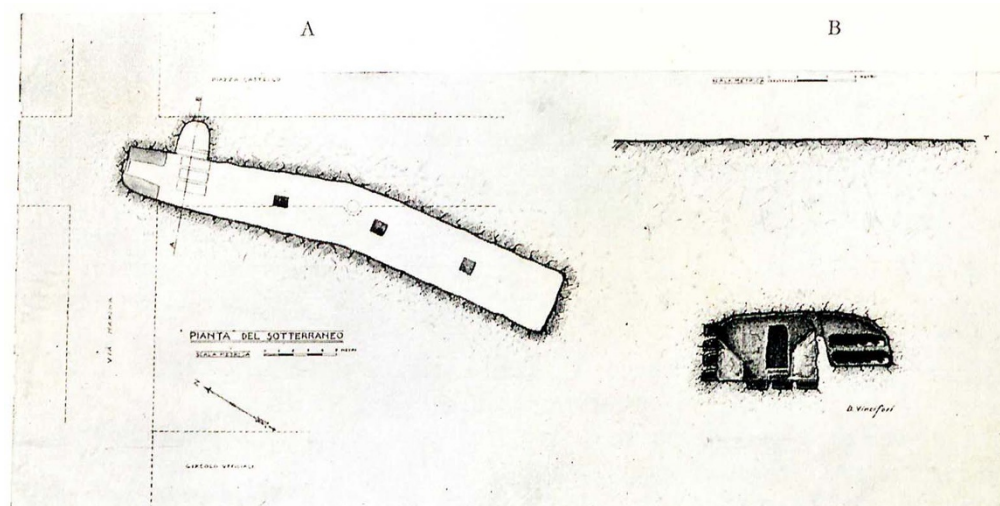


Figure 1. Plan and section of the hypogeum at Sirte made by Roberto Bartoccini in 1927. Originally published in Bartoccini, R. 1928. *Scavi e rinvenimenti in Tripolitania negli anni 1926-1927: Sirte – Ipogeo Cristiano del IV secolo*. *Africa Italiana* 2.3: 187–200. Reproduced here by kind permission of the Biblioteca di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome.

The *loculi* were all closed with slabs or plaques of sandstone plastered in place, onto which the inscriptions were either graffitied or painted in red, which was noted to have largely disappeared under the grease of the *balsamina* that had been applied to the closure of the niches.¹⁸ Overall, Bartoccini considered the catacomb graves to be unassuming, only a handful containing textual details that rendered them interesting, such as decoration in the form of crude *tabula ansata* or the Constantinian Chi-Rho symbol on their inscription panels.¹⁹ In total he recorded 53 inscriptions (Figure 2), of which 15 contained Latin names, 12 contained Greek names, eight were of Semitic origin (he acknowledged this could be an indication of Punic or Jewish onomastics) and nine he considered ‘doubtful’ but which probably belonged to the third group of either Punic or Jewish names.²⁰ Four of the inscriptions (IRT2021 1240, 1251, 1263 and 1266) contain the names of two individuals.²¹ The texts are very simple; the name of the deceased followed – in most cases – by *vixit* or *bixit* and the number of years lived. The chi-rho symbol evident as a decorative feature on many of the inscriptions led Bartoccini to identify them as Christian epitaphs, which – given the presence of Latino-Punic noted in some of the texts (e.g. IRT2021, 1239; 1246; 1257; 1271; 1281) – meant that this hypogeum was understood as a Christian burial ground for a community that even in the fourth century CE was still connected to its Punic origins, at the very least in the language used for commemoration even if it was influenced and represented by another script.²² However, what these Latino-Punic features are and why they matter for how we understand this community has received less attention, particularly in the context of similar archaeological and epigraphic finds, which this article attempts to remedy.

Of the 53 inscriptions recorded by Bartoccini, 12 are written in Latino-Punic.²³ Initially described as ‘Latino-Libyan’, when the first example was discovered in the necropolis of Ghirza in 1824,²⁴ almost 70 inscriptions are known today, in which the neo-Punic language is written in Latin script.²⁵ The inscriptions come from either the *Gefara*, the coastal region of Tripolitania, including the texts from Lepcis Magna, or from the *Gebel*, the pre-desert hinterland.²⁶ Robert Kerr’s catalogue of the Latino-Punic corpus notes that the earliest texts, dating to the first century CE, are from the coastal region, which fits with the explosion of epigraphic activity we see taking place in Lepcis Magna by the Lepcitanian elite in the Augustan period.²⁷ Literary evidence attests to the continued use of Punic as the local vernacular up to the time of St Augustine,²⁸ but

the existence of inscriptions in both Punic and Latino-Punic bears ‘first-hand witness’ to an identifiably indigenous community that survived into the Christian era,²⁹ as is the case with the hypogeum corpus under consideration here. There is evidence too for the continued use of Punic further inland, with references to the language in Procopius,³⁰ and inscriptions from the so-called ‘fortified farms’ or *gsur* – the defensible farms with flood-water systems that were instituted to defend the oases of Bu Njem, Gheriat el-Gharbia and Ghadames in the third century CE.³¹ Latino-Punic represents 42% of the total surviving corpus from this interior region, with the percentage increasing the further into the pre-desert one moves.³² The number of texts under consideration here is not extensive, so the percentages proposed by Kerr should not be taken as evidence for a mass preference for the Punic language over Latin in this period, but it is clear that in spite of the extent and length of contact with Rome, and the success the ‘epigraphic habit’ found in Tripolitania, the Punic language remained intact throughout the region in the fourth century CE, even if its inscriptions had adapted to the use of the Latin script.³³

The Latino-Punic of the inscriptions at the Sirte hypogeum should, on this basis, not surprise us, but they are the only identifiable physical evidence for the presence of the Punic-speaking Christian community known otherwise only from Augustine. These catacomb texts are, as noted above, short and, like their Latin counterparts, detail the names and length of life lived by the deceased. For example, IRT2021 1239, records that *avo aniboni/sanv v*, or that ‘Anibonius lived for 5 years.’³⁴ Kerr notes that *anibonius* is the Latinised form of the Semitic name *Annobal*, or *hnb^l*, in which the final *b^l* (-bal) has become -bonus.³⁵ The verb here is *avo*, which corresponds in these texts to ‘lived,’³⁶ and which is taken with *sanv*, an apocopation – or the shortening a word by removing its final sound or syllable – of *sanvth* in line 2, meaning ‘years’, giving an ‘equivalent to and no doubt calqued on *vixit annis*.’³⁷ Vattioni and Elmayer, in their catalogues of these texts, read *sanv* as missing the final consonants and did not record the Latin number next to it, but – as Kerr has noted – upon studying Bartoccini’s drawing of the text, the third sign appears to be a ligature of *n* and *v*, to give *sanv v*, or ‘lived 5 years’, which Bartoccini himself noted in his recording of the text.³⁸

There has also been a change to the syntactical order of the *avo sanv* formula compared with the previous example; the epitaph now follows the order of Latin epitaphs, with the name of the deceased coming first, then the verb and its object, which may

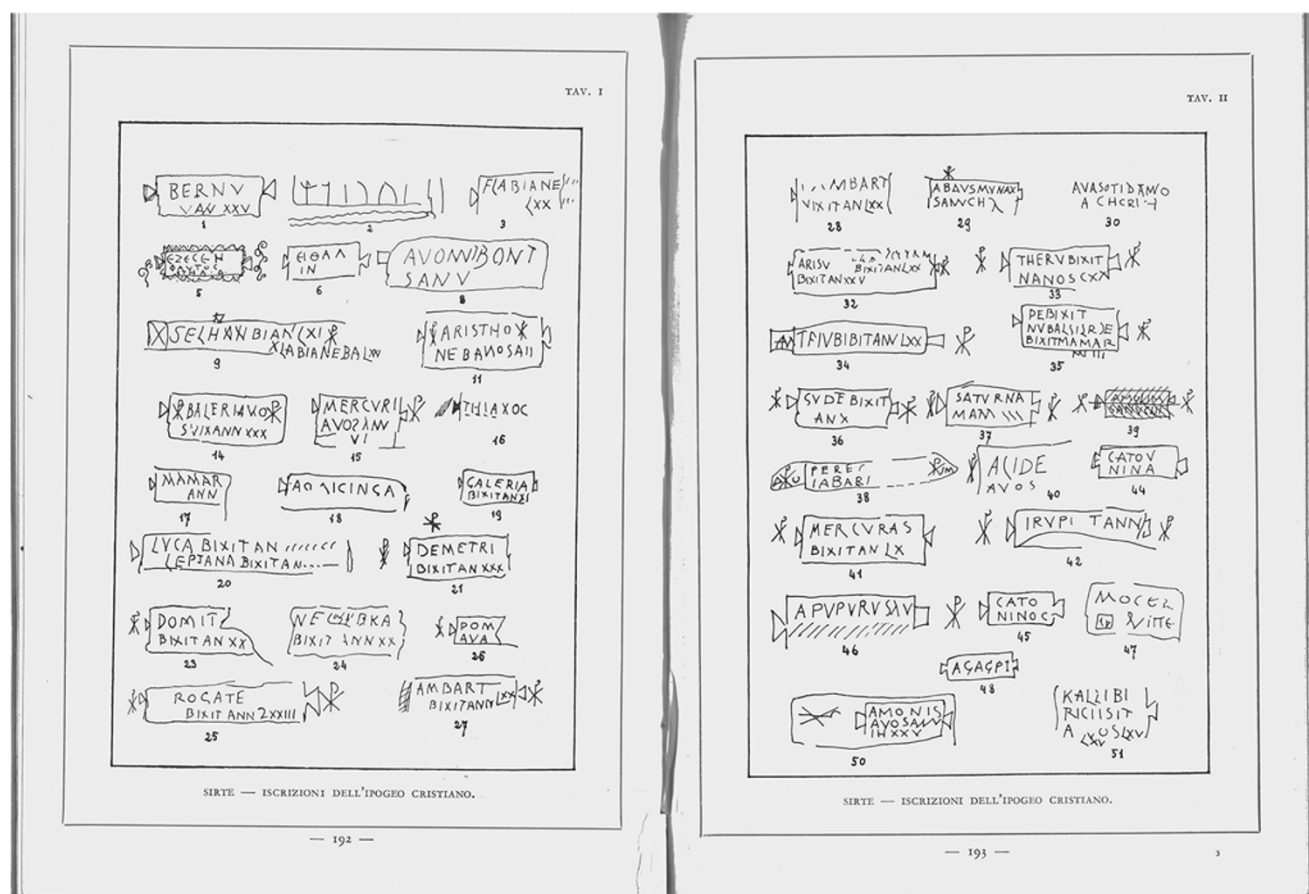


Figure 2. Plates I and II of Bartoccini's drawing of the inscriptions. Originally published in Bartoccini, R. 1928. Scavi e rinvenimenti in Tripolitania negli anni 1926–1927: Sirte – Ipogeo Cristiano del IV secolo. *Africa Italiana* 2.3: 187–200. Reproduced here by kind permission of the Biblioteca di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome.

also be evidence for the influence of Latin, in an otherwise Punic-language text.³⁹ The other ten Latino-Punic texts from the Sirte hypogeum follow much the same pattern; *IRT2021* 1257 appears to start with an abbreviated, possibly Latin female name, *Pompeia*, and the verb *ava*, but without further space for the number of years lived.⁴⁰ *IRT2021* 1260 also repeats the Name-Verb-Object formula: *abdvsmvn av/sanvth* λ, 'Abdusmun lived 30 years'.⁴¹ The Semitic name is followed by an abbreviated *av* for *avo*, perhaps mimicking an abbreviated *vix* for *vixit*, and his age is given by the Greek numeral, which Kerr proposes to be a more convenient use of space than the Latin numerals XXX.⁴² The remaining examples continue the same pattern: the Latino-Punic *IRT2021* 1270,⁴³ *Amothilim*, or 'Handmaiden of the God' – a Punic plural of majesty referring to a singular, specific unnamed deity – is given followed by the number of years lived, according to the Latin syntactical organisation.⁴⁴ One example, *IRT2021* 1282, also includes the Punic demonstrative *sit* before the *avo sanvth* formula, following the Latin example *qui vixit annis*.⁴⁵ The influence of Latin on the syntactical organisation of the Latino-Punic inscriptions is therefore clear, but the influence extends into the morphological too. As Robert Kerr has demonstrated, the feminine plural form of *sanv* or *sanvth* as an equivalent form of the Latin *annis* is crucially not a form found in Phoenician or Punic, but only in neo-Punic or Latino-Punic, which both emerged under the period of Roman governance of Tripolitania.⁴⁶ Indeed, the neo-Punic and Latino-Punic both render 'years' in the plural, following the Latin, whereas in Phoenician only the singular form of the noun is to be expected.⁴⁷ He also notes that recording the number of years lived by an individual was not a customary aspect of Semitic epitaphs, which preferred to record the patriarchal relationship, 'a stone erected for X, son of Y'.⁴⁸

The influence of Latin formulae on the inscriptions set up by Punic communities is not limited to Sirte or to the fourth century CE, however; similar instances of Latin syntactical construction can be seen in earlier texts too, such as *IRT2021*, 828, a funerary inscription set up in Lepcis Magna in the second–third centuries CE. The text, in Latino-Punic, records:

[m]ynsyf[h m]u fel Ba[r]icbal Typafi loby[the-]/m Uiytila u-Lilystim ihmymthem byrysoth/uybivy mystyth fel baiaem bithem, which Kerr translates as: 'Mausoleum which Baricbal Tapapi made for his parents Viystila and Lilystim ... and ... made; during his life (he was) perfect'.⁴⁹ The last three words of the text – *fel baiaem bithem* or 'made during his life' – are of particular note here, as they appear to correspond to the Latin formula *de sua pecunia*, or 'at his own expense'.⁵⁰ That such an inscription set up by a member of the Tapapii family should take inspiration from the Latin is not surprising either; a series of public bilingual inscriptions in Latin and neo-Punic set up by Annobal Tapapius, a member of the local Punic elite during the Augustan period in Lepcis Magna, also reformulated the structure of Latin epigraphic formulae in order to fit the honorific declarations desired by the neo-Punic version of the texts.⁵¹ That the family continued to be visible and presumably wealthy – given the construction of a family tomb recorded by the inscription – would also explain their continued interaction with the language and practices of the Roman administration, several centuries later.

Another feature of the Latino-Punic inscriptions is the ubiquity of the vocative form of the name of the deceased, in place of the nominative as we would expect from a Latin text. As Adams has noted, this is all the more visible because they are written in Latin script.⁵² This can be seen in the example of *IRT2021*, 1246, given

above, in which 'Mercurius' is inscribed in the vocative *Mercvri*. This appears to be a particular inflection of African Latin which could either be understood as a genuine acclamation, a 'calling out' to the deceased, followed by a shift into the third-person singular to recall their length of life, or what has been described as 'fossilised vocatives' playing the role of nominatives, in order to imitate the way that names were used in practical vernacular.⁵³ Although there are relatively few examples of this in the Latin inscriptions from Africa,⁵⁴ it happens with much more frequency in the neo-Punic inscriptions there that include names of Latin origin.⁵⁵ In the case of the inscriptions from our hypogeum at Sirte, names have been given in the vocative case regardless of the language of the inscription, indicating that the vocative use of names in place of the nominative was so widespread in African Latin that when Latin names were described in the Punic language the vocative usage was carried over.⁵⁶ It might also be the case that the vocative of the Latino-Punic texts represents those for whom Punic remained a first language, and for whom competency or literacy in Latin was not quite full, and so the vocative use of the name most commonly heard from conversational usage was carried into the written record.⁵⁷ Such a convergence of Latin and Punic in the deployment of the vocative form of the names found at the Sirte hypogeum might then be understood to represent the 'relatively closed' language situation at Sirte amongst the community who installed the inscriptions;⁵⁸ their primary language was, even in the fourth century CE, still Punic, but literacy in its written form had been replaced by a (more?) competent written literacy in Latin script. Within such a preference for the Latin script came the imitation of Latin epigraphic formulae in the Punic epitaphs, the borrowing of Latin words into Punic, as well as signs of code-switching between the two, with Punic as the dominant language represented by the Latin script.⁵⁹ The influence of Latin on the Punic language is undeniable,⁶⁰ but it is nonetheless interesting that even at this later stage of Roman administration in North Africa, the use of the Punic language still persisted (even when recorded in Latin script) among a community that – as the inscriptions from the hypogeum demonstrate – appears also to have known Latin and Greek. Sirte's more interior geographical position, further removed from the cosmopolitanism of Lepcis Magna, might go some way to explain this, but it is also clear that the suggestion that a Roman identity in Tripolitania simply 'replaced' a Punic one as the centuries of contact with Rome progressed is far too binary an explanation for the experience of those communities on the ground. It was, rather, a constant shift back and forth between tradition, innovation and interactions between different communities, both of Tripolitanian origin, temporary Roman occupation and what would eventually become a more nuanced merging of the two.

The hypogeum at Sirte was one of a network of similar structures that were constructed in conjunction with the spread of Christianity across Tripolitania, both along the coastal region and into the interior, in the late third and fourth centuries CE. Although much of our understanding of how Christianity spread has depended on the textual evidence from Numidia, it should not be relied upon for understanding the process across North Africa as a whole, where differences and variations can be identified between Numidia, Africa Proconsularis, Byzacena and Tripolitania, and indeed within the provinces themselves.⁶¹ In Tripolitania, Christianity appears to have originated from the large Jewish community of neighbouring Cyrenaica: a Christian bishop, Archaeus, is recorded in Lepcis Magna in the second century CE,⁶² with episcopal sees also established at Sabratha and Oea by the mid third century.⁶³ North Africa was the scene of the so-called 'Donatist' movement, a schism that split the church in the fourth–fifth centuries CE over the apostasy of certain members of the church during the Diocletianic persecutions,⁶⁴ and Tripolitania did not escape the conflict, with the Catholic Bishop of Sabratha

the only bishop of the five then established in Tripolitania to retain his see at the Council of Carthage in 411.⁶⁵ That said, the impact of the schism was perhaps less keenly felt in Tripolitania than in the other North-African provinces, in part due to the relatively late (perhaps the final decades of the fourth century CE?) conversion of much of the interior, which led to less acute tension overall.⁶⁶ In any case, the Christian community in Tripolitania was securely enough established to leave a demonstrable presence in the archaeological record. Churches were established in Lepcis Magna,⁶⁷ Sabratha,⁶⁸ and presumably in Oea too, for which the names of three bishops are listed, although no site for a physical church has yet been identified.⁶⁹ Cemeteries, single graves, inscriptions and variations of the Greek and Latin crosses, as well as the chi-rho symbol evident in Sirte, also attest to the Christian presence along the coastal zone.⁷⁰ No structures identifiably 'Christian' have been located in the interior region of the province, but this is in keeping with the absence of urban centres in that part of Tripolitania.

Comparable with the hypogeum in Sirte, however, are the catacombs in Sabratha and at Tahuna. In Sabratha a catacomb was discovered to the east of the theatre; first identified in 1942, by the time of the publication of *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* (1952) and Ward-Perkins and Goodchild's survey of *The Christian Antiquities of Tripolitania* (1953) a decade later, it had been excavated to reveal series of low-ceilinged galleries that branch out irregularly, the walls of which are lined with *loculi*.⁷¹ As at the hypogeum in Sirte, the catacomb was cut into the natural sandstone and the graves were sealed with plaster, onto which were inscribed or painted epitaphs for the deceased, along with the chi-rho symbol for decoration.⁷² Five inscriptions – IRT2021 194, 195, 216, 217 and 228 – were recorded for the original publication, all of which were dated by the lettering to have been from the fourth century CE, and therefore represented a Christian community that was contemporaneous with the one at Sirte.⁷³ A catacomb, albeit with an epigraphic *loculi*, was also discovered at Tarhuna in 1936, which was conjectured to date to the same period.⁷⁴ In 2005 a further catacomb was excavated in Sirte that also conformed to the same underground, chamber layout.⁷⁵ Located in the eastern part of Sirte, in a modern residential district about 1km from the centre, the catacomb was found sealed with a stone slab and its interior contents preserved.⁷⁶ According to the excavation report, a corridor of steep steps was cut into the sandstone, descending from east to west, which opened into a rectangular space. This led to a narrower passage, at the end of which the main chamber was located: an underground room approximately 4.5m beneath the modern ground level, rectangular in shape, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and walls with a slightly curved profile.⁷⁷ The walls contained a series of shallow, arched niches for the remains, beneath which ran narrow platforms, presumably for the placing of offerings.⁷⁸ The ceiling and walls were covered with lime plaster, which on the ceiling took the form of decorative garlands and spirals of acanthus, which framed the niches.⁷⁹ The niches were unevenly distributed – six on one wall, four on the opposite wall, and one in the centre facing the entrance – but niches were probably intended for the southern wall (where the four were found) based on the extent of plaster decoration, which would create the symmetrical organisation of the space more in keeping with what we might expect from Roman architectural practices.⁸⁰ In total the hypogeum contained 16 sets of ashes and two inhumations. The urns containing ashes were placed inside the niches or on the platform in front of them, with the interred remains excavated from graves in the pavement on the sides of the entrance.⁸¹ Ceramic offerings, perhaps from funerary banquets in honour of the dead, were also excavated.⁸² Unlike the Sirte hypogeum, in which it appeared that almost every *loculus* was marked with an inscribed or painted epitaph, only three of the sixteen cinerary urns at this second catacomb were marked with the name of the deceased.⁸³ The first, written along

the border of the urn's lid, is not fully legible; the second, written along the sloping edge of the lid, records the name *Calenis*, which has been proposed as a nominative feminine of the Latin *Calenus* – meaning someone from ancient Cale, or modern Calais – with the Greek suffix *-is*.⁸⁴ The third inscription, again on the lid of the urn, records the name *Caelia Caletyche*. According to both the onomastics and the palaeography of the lettering – as well as the choice of funerary vessel and decoration – the inscriptions would place the tomb in the middle of the second century CE.⁸⁵ The combination of architectural element, decorative features and offerings would indicate that the tomb most probably served a single household of some economic means, or at least with enough to sustain the construction of the tomb and the addition of offerings.⁸⁶ Unlike the fourth-century-CE catacomb excavated by Bartoccini, this hypogeum reflected the Roman practice of creating and maintaining a funerary space for the *familia*, not for the wider religious community of which the household was a part. The catacomb excavated in the 1920s contained the remains of a household community, but one that was bound by religious identity. It is worth noting that both catacombs – in spite of some Roman elements featuring in both – share more architectural form with the shaft tombs of the Punic funerary world, and not of the Mediterranean. Three 'families' of tomb structure have been identified in Phoenicio-Punic communities in Tunisia: 'megalithic tombs' – either single or multi-roomed structures, most commonly found in Tunisia;⁸⁷ rock-cut tombs, or *haouanet*, known for their rich and complex architecture and ornament;⁸⁸ and the shaft tombs known from the Phoenicio-Punic tradition. These are found predominantly along the coastline of Tunisia and share some similarities with the structures discussed here.⁸⁹ These shaft tombs were deliberately dug underground for protection, with a single large chamber or a series of smaller rooms containing rectangular burial chambers and decorative features along the walls and ceilings.⁹⁰ The similarity of those identified along the Tunisian coast, at Gigthis, Thapsus, in the Sahel and the Lesser Syrtis, suggests that there was a known form of funerary structure that linked Punic communities by a common architectural identity, as well as a regional, linguistic or social one. Indeed, 42 hypogea tombs are known in the area around Lepcis Magna between the first–third centuries AD, indicating that their form was synonymous with funerary culture in Tripolitania, and that some intercultural dynamic remained, even under Roman administration.⁹¹

The Latino-Punic inscriptions of the first Sirte catacomb should then be considered in light of such cultural plurality. Although often labelled 'Christian' epitaphs, the Latino-Punic inscriptions are rather a reflection of the range of self-expression that existed within a Romano-Libyan community by the fourth century CE. The religious life of North Africa is usually presented as though native Libyan, Punic, Roman and Christian systems existed as stratified layers, dependent on the chronology of habitation and practice,⁹² but the reality is less binary and is not fully borne out by examples such as the catacomb at Sirte. There, a community of Christians were buried in a catacomb in the form of a Punic shaft tomb, with the deceased recorded according to Roman epigraphic funerary formulae, in Latin, Greek and in Latino-Punic. The survival of a Punic tomb structure and language, in spite of it being written in Latin script, attests to a longevity of Punic usage that is potentially at odds with the cultural distinctions implied by our understanding of occupation and power. Whether or not this is also indicative of a sense of a separate 'Punic identity' is a matter of debate. As Robert Kerr's article in this volume demonstrates,⁹³ the continued use of Punic in Tripolitania in this period may simply be a question of linguistic ability; those who wrote in Punic may not have had enough Latin to formulate the necessary text in that language, and their interactions with Latin-speakers did not require full fluency. However, in the context of a catacomb in which three languages were employed to commemorate the dead,

the use of Latino-Punic for some of them must represent an element of deliberate choice on the part of the commemorator and/or deceased.

The Punic language is generally understood to have fallen out of common use in North Africa around the second century CE,⁹⁴ but as these inscriptions have demonstrated, Punic elements remained and indeed evolved according to the influence of Latin syntax, morphology and epigraphic habit. The *anv sanv* formula created a standardised system for recording the age at death that followed Rome's practice, but in a language that still resonated with its community audience, and some elements of Punic remained in the way names were recorded for commemorative purposes, but without the grammatical structure we expect from the same practice in Latin. There is nothing to identify the Latino-Punic itself as 'Christian', but the chi-rho symbols that decorated the *loculi* are a clear indication of the community's religious orientation, a community that still retained some elements of Punic linguistic and funerary architecture in its remembrance of the dead. The multiplicity of identities within this hypogeum space is, then, indicative of a Punic culture that continued to hold relevance in North Africa even as late as the fourth century CE; it had evolved through contact with Rome and the language was written in a different script, but the so-called 'decline' of Punic culture cannot really be evidenced by the example of these inscriptions.

Notes

- 1 <https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/>
- 2 IRT2021, 1232–84. Sirte, or *Sirtica*, was the narrow southern coastal strip along the Gulf of Sidara. Semi-arid, it was separate from the settled coastal area of the Three Cities (Lepcis Magna, Sabratha and Oea) to the north west, and was more closely allied with the frontier districts of the southern slopes of the Djebel and of the Sofeggin basin. See IRT2009, Introductions. Chapter 5: The Sirtica: https://inslib.kcl.ac.uk/irt2009/introductions/15_sirtica.html
- 3 Bartoccini 1928, 187–200.
- 4 IRT2021, 855: <https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT0855.html>
- 5 e.g. Vattioni 1966, 37–55; Vattioni 1976, 505–55; Garbini 1986; Jongeling and Kerr 2005, 71–74; Kerr 2010: 211–16.
- 6 Bartoccini 1928, 187.
- 7 Bartoccini 1928, 187.; IRT2021, 855: <https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT0855.html>
- 8 Bartoccini 1928, 187: 'Lorifizo del pozzo si apriva a ridosso di un muro di cinta, che anzi lo tagliava per un terzo.' My translation.
- 9 Bartoccini 1928, 187.
- 10 Bartoccini 1928, 187.
- 11 Bartoccini 1928, 187. In total 214 whole oil lamps were excavated, of which 31 were decorated with figures. Today they are all lost or fragmented, due to their long storage following Bartoccini's excavation of the site, and the subsequent removal of 96 of them to the Saraya (Red Castle) Museum in Tripoli. These 96 were examined and published by La Lomia in 1971, who was able to organise them into groups based on the similarity of their decoration. See La Lomia 1971, 7–21, for details of this decoration.
- 12 Bartoccini 1928, 187–88. On p. 188 a scale line drawing of the structure indicating the placement of the pilasters can be found. The drawings associated with this excavation are still under copyright and could not be reproduced in the present article, but can be accessed online here: http://periodici.librari.beniculturali.it/visualizzatore.aspx?anno=1927-1928&ID_testata=36&ID_periodico=4460
- 13 Bartoccini 1928, 188.
- 14 Fontana 2001, 162–64.
- 15 Bartoccini 1928, 188.
- 16 Bartoccini 1928, 188.
- 17 Bartoccini 1928, 189. See 189–91 for brief notes on certain lamps that he considered to have decorative details of particular note.
- 18 Ibid. *Balsmin* is from the plant, *Impatiens Balsamina*, or Garden Balsam.
- 19 Bartoccini 1928, 191.
- 20 Bartoccini 1928, 200.
- 21 <https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT1241.html>
<https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT1251.html>

- <https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT1263.html>
<https://irt2021.inslib.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT1266.html>
- 22 Bartoccini 1928, 191.
 - 23 IRT2021 1239; 1246; 1247; 1257; 1260; 1261; 1270; 1271; 1274; 1277; 1281 and 1282.
 - 24 Goodchild 1971, 135.
 - 25 Elmayer 1997 cites 71 inscriptions, but Kerr 2010 excludes two of these – a text in Greek characters from Lepcis Magna published by La Lomia in 1974 and another in Latin identified as Punic by Garbini in 1967 – due to too uncertain an interpretation of their texts. See Kerr 2010, 3; Marichal 1992. The corpus does not include the Bu Njem ostraca inscriptions due to the cursive nature of their texts making interpretation again difficult. For translations of some of these ostraca texts, see IRT2021 1501–73. For a full discussion of them, see Marichal 1992.
 - 26 Kerr 2010, 7. For this region, see Barker *et al.* (eds 1996).
 - 27 Kerr 2010, 7–8. For the involvement of local Punic elites in public epigraphy, see Barron 2020, 10–23.
 - 28 Augustine, *Ep.* LXXXIV: 5.
 - 29 Kerr 2010, 8.
 - 30 Procop. *De bello Vandalico* II.10.20; *De aedificiis* VI.3.9f.
 - 31 Kerr 2005; Barker *et al.* 1996, 111–97.
 - 32 Kerr 2010, 10.
 - 33 Some Latino-Punic inscriptions have also been identified on ostraca from Gheriat el-Gharbia, which may date from the first half of the fifth century AD, although they display variant usages indicative of a potential regional dialect: see Ziegler and Mackensen 2014, 320.
 - 34 Bartoccini 1928, 195, n. 8; Vattioni 1976, 539; Elmayer 1997, 337, n. LP 6a; Kerr 2010, 211, LP 1.
 - 35 Kerr 2010: 211.
 - 36 For the development of the form of this Punic verb, which derives from the root *ḥwy*, see Kerr 2010, 163–65.
 - 37 Adams 2003, 231.
 - 38 Bartoccini 1928, 195, n. 8; Kerr 2010, 211, LP 1.
 - 39 Kerr 2010, 212; Adams 2003, 235.
 - 40 Bartoccini 1928, 197, n. 26; pl. I, n. 26; Vattioni 1976, 540; Elmayer 1997, 337, n. LP 9; Kerr 2010, 212 LP 4.
 - 41 Bartoccini 1928, 197, n. 29; Vattioni 1976, 540; Elmayer 1997, 337, n. LP 10; Kerr 2010, 213, LP 5.
 - 42 Kerr 2010, 213.
 - 43 Bartoccini 1928, 198, n. 39; Vattioni 1976, 541; Elmayer 1997, 338, n. LP 15; Kerr 2010, 214, LP 7.
 - 44 For the Punic singular: *ʾlm/*ilim*, see Jongeling 2008, 18, Labdah N8: *q ʾysr bn ʾlm* = ‘Caesar divi filius’.
 - 45 Bartoccini 1928, 200, n. 51; Vattioni 1976, 541; Elmayer 1997, 339, n. LP 21; Kerr 2010, 216, LP 12.
 - 46 Kerr 2010, 145.
 - 47 Kerr 2010, 145–146.
 - 48 Kerr 2010, 145, n. 15.
 - 49 Kerr 2010, 206, Libya OU LP 1. Elmayer 1997, 327, n. LP 2, offers a slightly different translation: ‘Stele which Barigbaad Typafimade for his father Viyastila and for his wife, his brother (and) himself. This shaft tomb, for his family, that is below did he make during his lifetime and at his own expense.’
 - 50 Kerr 2010, 207; Adams 2003, 233.
 - 51 See Barron 2020, 10–23.
 - 52 Adams 2003, 233.
 - 53 Ibid. 512.
 - 54 Adamik 1987, 4, notes seven examples in a corpus of 30,000.
 - 55 Adams 2003, 513.
 - 56 Latino-Punic examples of this use of the vocative at IRT2021, 1239: *ani-boni* and 1246: *mercvri*. In the Latin, vocatives are given in IRT2021, 1234: *Flabiane*; 1240: *[F]labiane*; 1252: *Demetri*; 1256: *Rogate* and 1282: *Kallibi*. See Adams 2003, 513–14.
 - 57 Ibid. 515.
 - 58 Adams 2003, 235.
 - 59 Adams 2003, 235.
 - 60 This can also be seen in a group of four Punic funerary texts from Mactar, in which the Punic follows an atypical formula of demonstrative particles, denominial verbal neologisms, unusual syntax and the placement of the verb at the end to give a phrase that corresponds to the Latin *hic sepultus est* or *hoc loco sepultus est*. See Kerr 2023, esp. 298–307.
 - 61 Leone 2022, 354. See this chapter for an overview of the spread of Christianity in North Africa and relevant literature. For a more detailed discussion, see Six-Means 2011, 391–408.
 - 62 Romanelli, 1925, 1926, 156. A fragmentary manuscript treatise concerning the date of the Easter recorded Archaeus as the ‘*episcopus fuit Leptitanae urbis in Africa*’, and survives in a codex in the Vatican Library, *Bibliothecae Vaticanae Codicibus Ex Arabicis et Syriacis*, reproduced in Mai 1839, III, 707.
 - 63 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 2–3.
 - 64 Leone 2022, 354–55. For the Donatist movement, see Miles 2016.
 - 65 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 4. The bishops at Lepcis and Oea joined the Donatist movement, and those at Girba and Tacapae were represented by rival claimants. For an overview of the bishoprics of North Africa, see Leone 2011–2012.
 - 66 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 5; 76–77.
 - 67 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 22–34.
 - 68 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 7–19.
 - 69 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 19–22.
 - 70 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 72–78.
 - 71 Ibid. 19; Kenrick, 2009, 66–67.
 - 72 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild, 1953, 19; Kenrick, 2009, 66–67.
 - 73 Further Christian epitaphs were excavated in the so-called Forum cemetery, to the east and north of Church 1 in Sabratha, and also from the scattered cemetery that surrounds Churches 3 and 4, but these are later in date, based on the lettering and the use of the monogram cross, rather than the chi-rho symbol for decoration. See Reynolds and Ward-Perkins 1952, 20–72.
 - 74 Caputo 1947, 24 ff. and 36; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 1953, 50.
 - 75 Baldoni *et al.* 2021, 19–43.
 - 76 Baldoni *et al.* 2021, 20. The funerary objects were immediately removed for conservation at the Museum of Assultan and, following a survey and photography, the catacomb chambers were filled in with concrete, rendering them inaccessible.
 - 77 Baldoni *et al.*, 2021, 23.
 - 78 Ibid.
 - 79 Ibid. For more in-depth analysis of this decorative scheme, see *ibid.* 25–28.
 - 80 Ibid. 23.
 - 81 Ibid. 29.
 - 82 Ibid. 30–31. Other finds, including some glass vessels, terracotta lamps, and coins, are discussed at 32–36.
 - 83 Ibid. 31.
 - 84 Ibid.
 - 85 Ibid.
 - 86 Ibid. 37.
 - 87 Camps 1961.
 - 88 Ben Younes 2007, 34; Camps and Longerstay 2000, 3361–87.
 - 89 Ben Younes 2007, 35–36.
 - 90 Ibid. 37–41.
 - 91 These tombs were not limited to entire households or to the ‘elite’ of Lepcis but rather served a cross-section of society. The poorer citizens and slaves were, however, buried in surface graveyards without inscriptions: see Fontana 2001, 162–65. Burials in the late-antique period moved into urban structures, with graves dug systematically into the pavements of buildings: see e.g. Leone 2007, 164–203.
 - 92 McCarty 2022, 285.
 - 93 Kerr 2025.
 - 94 Adams 2003, 230–35.

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