

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# Rescue excavation at Kurnish al-Bahr Tombs (Latakia city)

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## Abstract

The focus of this paper is to explore the findings of a never-before-studied site on the Syrian Coast: The Kurnish al-bahr site in the City of Latakia. It is worth noting that the topic of tombs and funerary artifacts is not an entirely new issue discussed in the literature; however, our aim is to present a new location that has not been previously studied or documented before.

Although the number of Roman-period tombs in Syria is estimated in the thousands (wherefrom troves of hand-made glass artifacts were recovered), only those tombs found at the Kurnish al-bahr site have been considered for the purpose of this paper. Historically speaking, the site dates back to the period between the first and third centuries CE based on the dating of artifacts recovered at the site.

The tombs found at this particular site were completely excavated during the 1994 season, and a total of 21 tombs were uncovered. Only three of the 21 tombs are considered for this paper where glass artefacts were found. Further, we will only be discussing the glass items recovered from the aforementioned tombs given the challenges of gaining access to all other glass material available at the National Museum in Latakia. What few glass items discussed herein vary in terms of form, size, and even color.

It is worth mentioning that these tombs all belong to the Roman period and have been carved into the sandstone cliffside. The tombs are void of any and all carvings, drawings, or inscriptions mentioning names or dates. The tombs also show evidence of multiple recurring looting activities. All artifacts recovered were found on tomb floors.

Recent excavation efforts in the City of Latakia (generally carried out as Rescue excavations) have contributed greatly to the studies pertaining to funerary practices during the late Roman period. The numerous findings from these excavations throughout the last century have enriched local collections and offered new insights regarding Roman funerary practices.

**Keywords:** Tombs, Hypogea, Roman Syria, Unguentaria, Grave Goods.

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## 1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITE

Latakia, an ancient city situated on the coast of the Mediterranean, was known to the Phoenicians as Ramitha, meaning 'the elevated.' While it was mentioned by Pliny, later historians have debated its origins, with consensus leaning towards its establishment by Seleucus Nicator. Nonetheless, some scholars argue for its Phoenician roots, citing the discovery of a Canaanite coin referencing 'Laodicea' (Yanni, 1881).

Present-day Latakia occupies the site of the historically significant Roman city of Laodicea, a name bestowed upon it by Seleucus I Nicator in honour of his mother, Laodicea (Butcher, 2003). Positioned in the northwest region of Syria, Latakia commands a commanding position overlooking the Mediterranean Sea (Ball, 2000). The city is situated on a promontory that extends into the Mediterranean, forming a distinctive cape-like structure. It is surrounded by the Mediterranean waters on its southern, south-eastern, and western perimeters while maintaining connections to the mainland from the north and northeast (Sa'ada, 1976).

Syria held significant importance within the Seleucid Empire, leading to extensive colonization efforts by Seleucus Nicator. Key cities established by him include Antioch, Apamea, Seleucia, and 'Laodicea' (Jones, 1971).

During the early Roman Empire, cities along the Phoenician coast and the Tetrapolis were considered independent city-states. Pliny's accounts suggest that cities like Laodicea enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Only Emessa and 'Laodicea' possessed a mint, and this occurred primarily during the latter part of the second century CE (see Figure 1).

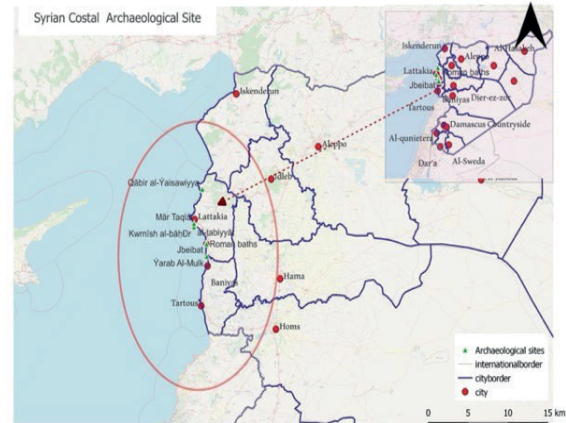


Figure 1. Map of the distribution of the sites in Latakia city, (Map by Hammoud,S).

## 2. KURNISH AL-BAHR

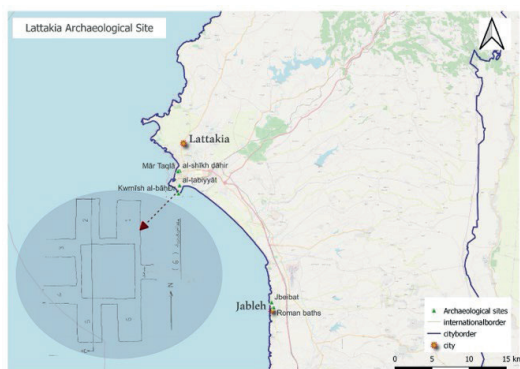
In Latakia, it has become quite a commonplace occurrence to come upon archaeological discoveries during any construction and/or public works project. The number of emergency excavation reports is proof enough of the number of locations that have been unearthed during recent projects. One prime example is all the Roman cemeteries that had been discovered hewn into the rocky seaside cliffs during works on the Latakia Port expansion project. Further cemeteries and burial sites were also unearthed during one of the major public works projects to upgrade the sewage system all along the seaside (The Kurnish). It was later established that all these findings indicate the presence of a significantly large burial grounds site spanning the distance between the Sheikh Daher neighborhood northward to the Prison neighborhood, and from the seaside westward to the Mar Taqla neighborhood. All of these cemeteries were found to be collective tombs (each belonging to one family) that were carved into the sandstone which forms the geological bedrock of the City of Latakia. The site was called The Kurnish Cemeteries after their present-day location along the stretch of Latakia's seaside waterfront (see Figure 2).

According to local oral historical tradition, most of these burial chambers and tombs could always be seen dotting the coastline up until the second half of the 20th century when all the major projects to modernize the City started to take

place. That was when these cemeteries began to disappear and be eaten by the urban sprawl.

During the 19th century, many Western explorers visiting Latakia had mentioned these cemeteries and tombs in their journals. The sites were also mentioned by the historian Elias Saleh in his major time documenting the history of Latakia. The last academic mention of these cemeteries was in 1976 by professor Gibrael Saadeh in his article *Archaeological Excavation in Latakia* published (in French) in the peer-reviewed *Les Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*.

In 1994, during works being carried out to upgrade the public sewage system in Latakia, a cemetery dating back to the Roman and Byzantine periods was unearthed. The site consisted of various tombs each containing numerous loculi. Dating the site was done based on the number of artifacts that had been found in the rock-hewn tombs. The tombs were simple structures with no discernible ornamentation or inscriptions that could provide an accurate date for any of the structures. It is important to note as well that, like many other cemeteries and tombs around Syria, these tombs were largely already looted with any leftover finds or artifacts being too few to provide any reasonable narrative detailing their form, date, or context (Haidar, 1994).



**Figure 2.** Map of the distribution of Kurnish al Bahr tombs (Map by Hammoud, S).

### 3. THE TOMBS OF KURNISH AL-BAHR

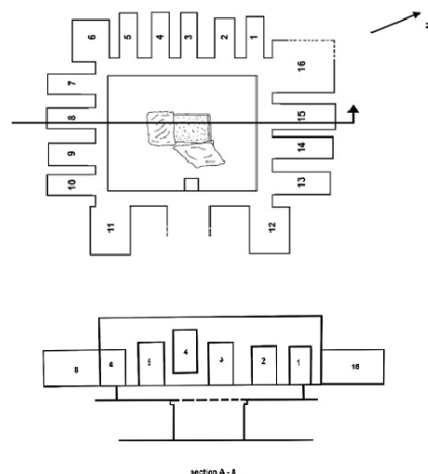
Excavation on this site began in 1994, during which the archaeological team unearthed a total of 21 tombs. Three of these tombs will be presented in this section, as they are the only

ones in which glass artifacts were found. In the excavation report documenting the find, the tombs were numbered from 1 to 21. The ones considered for this paper are identified as Tomb 4, Tomb 6, and Tomb 16.

**Tomb 4:** The tomb consists of a large rectangular chamber measuring 4x5 meters and housing a total of 16 loculi, a single grave is situated at the centre of the tomb's floor (see Figure 3).

After removing the debris and rubble from the tomb; the tomb and its loculi were visible. It was found to contain the following:

- The west side contains six loculi open to the east, numbered 1-2-3-4-5-6. Notably, niche number 4 stands out from the others with a height difference of 30 cm and a vaulted ceiling.
- The south side holds four loculi open to the north, numbered 7-8-9-10.
- The tomb's entrance is at the center of the eastern side. To its right and left are loculi labelled 11-12.
- The north side contains four loculi numbered 13-14-15-16.
- Surrounding the tomb's chamber is a step leading to the loculi, measuring 40 cm in height and 50 cm in width.



**Figure 3.** Ground plan of Tomb 4; Section A-A of Tomb 4. Excavation report 1994, (Edited by: Madarati, H).



**Figure 4.** Glass unguentaria /1/ found in tomb 4  
(Drawn found in the excavation report).

Situated at the center of the tomb's floor lies a single grave measuring 175 cm in length, 90 cm in width, and 100 cm in depth. It was covered by two stone slabs, each measuring 90×90 cm in dimension.

The slabs were found to have been disturbed and out of place. This grave has been labelled as number 17.

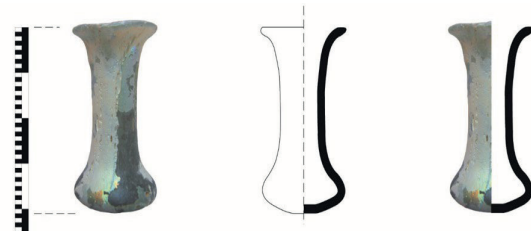
The grave goods discovered within Tomb 4 include:

- Oil lamp.
- Glass unguentaria
- Unguentaria
- Bronze coin
- Glass bead (N/A)
- Pottery Jar (Haidar, 1994).

It's worth mentioning, concerning the piece of glass bead mentioned as having been found in the excavation report, that it was not found among the finds belonging to the same site. Therefore, it seems it is missing from the items of the National Museum in Latakia.

The first item (see Figure 4) found at this tomb is a glass unguentarium. This type of unguentaria resembles the shape of an amphora, dating back to the second to third century CE, it has a spindle-like body with eight glass spirals decorating the outer surface covering the entire form. The rim had been broken off and is missing. It has two handles, one of which is missing while the other is fully intact. Unfortunately, we do not have a

clear image of this particular item, with the only illustration available from the Tomb's excavation report. The eight trailed handles attached to this unguentarium, from shoulder to base create a cage-like structure encircling the neck. This type of unguents was used primarily as a container for powdered or cosmetics stuff used as eye makeup. Because the openings at the top of these tubes were generally very small, a small metal bone spoon was used to extract the contents (Kelley, 2012 & Telli, 2019).

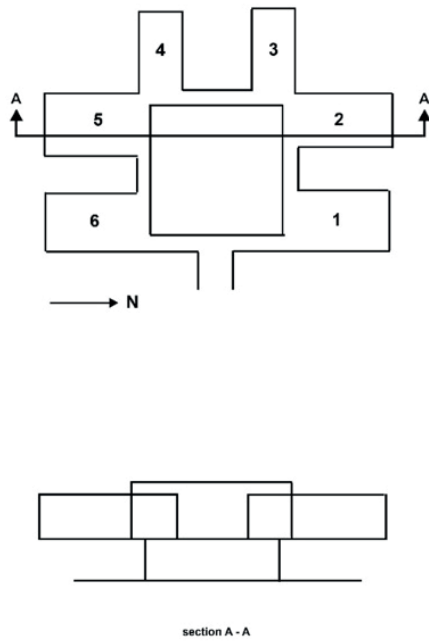


**Figure 5.** Candlestick unguentaria /2/ found in tomb 4 (Drawn by: Hammoud, S).

Another recovered item from this tomb is another unguentarium (see Figure 5), this type of unguentaria is called (**Candlestick Unguentarium**), dated to the same period. It is translucent blue, with a rim folding out and back in. It has a cylindrical shape, and a slightly convex neck with irregular tooling marks at the top. It also has a broad, flaring mouth. At its base, another horizontal indent can be found. Its conical body has slightly convex sides and a pushed-in bottom. The vessel also shows intact, pinprick, limy encrustations, and faint wreathing on its exterior (Isings, 1957 & Fleming, 1998).

This type of unguentaria were mostly used as containers for oil and were also suited for storing and dispensing other liquid and powdered substances (Khāiry, 1980 & Lightfoot, 2017).

**Tomb 6:** The tomb consists of a narrow square-shaped chamber measuring approximately 265×260 cm. Following the excavation within the tomb, a step surrounding the chamber emerged, measuring 50 cm in width and 60 cm in height. This step leads to the loculi (a total of six), evenly distributed in three directions along the walls of the tomb as follows: (see Figure 6)



**Figure 6.** Ground plan of Tomb 6; Section A-A of Tomb 6. Excavation report 1994 (Edited by: Madarati, H).

- The eastern side was solely allocated for the tomb's entrance.
- The northern side accommodated loculi numbered 1-2.
- The western side housed loculi numbered 3-4.
- The southern side also contained loculi numbered 5-6.

The chamber of the tomb was filled with red agricultural soil that had seeped in due to rainfall and construction works, intermixed with grey-hued ashen soil.

Several archaeological findings were unearthed from the tomb's chamber, including:

- Four oil lamps.
- Glass unguentaria.
- A bronze coin (Haidar, 1994).

This example of unguentaria (see Figure 7) dated to the second-third century CE, was found in Tomb 6 and was mostly used to contain ointments (unguent), medicine, cosmetics, or perfume as we mentioned before, besides this function, unguent bottles were also utilized for

other religious purposes, especially as votive objects at tombs (Laflı, 2018). This type was known (Bulbous Unguentarium), it features a short and small conical body with convex sides, slightly concave at the bottom, leading to a long thick cylindrical neck and a small out-flared flat rim. The vessel is almost completely covered with a base of dark encrustation. There are small pockets of iridescence covering the entirety of the piece (Rütti, 1991).



**Figure 7.** Bulbous unguentaria found in tomb 6 (Drawn by: Hammoud, S).

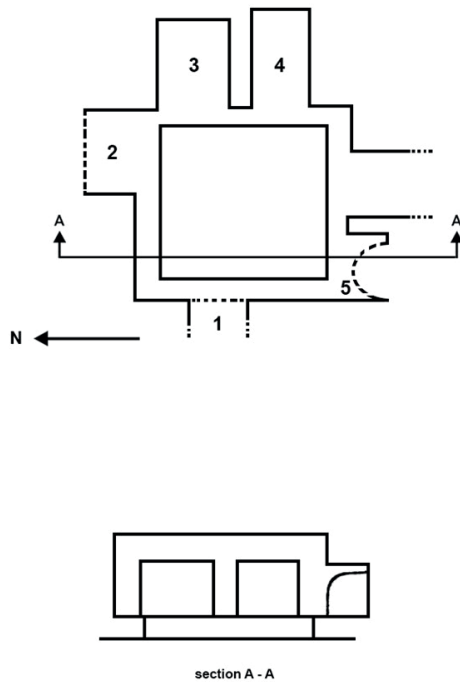
**Tomb 16:** This tomb comprises a narrow, nearly square-shaped chamber measuring approximately 300×260 cm, encompassed by a step leading to the loculi, with a width of 40 cm and a depth/height of 45 cm. The tomb comprises a total of 5 loculi arranged in the following manner:

- On the west side of the tomb, one loculus labelled as 1.
- On the northern side, one loculus is situated and labelled as 2.
- Two loculi are located on the eastern side and labelled as 3-4.

The southern side houses the tomb's entrance, with one loculus numbered 5 (see Figure 8).

And it is worth mentioning that this tomb was still under construction, and the burial niches had not yet been fully constructed and prepared; specifically, loculus number 5 (Haidar, 1994).

A single, small piece of unguentarium (another type of candlestick unguentarium) (see Figure 9) dated to the second - third century CE, was recovered from Tomb 16.



**Figure 8.** Ground plan of Tomb 16; Section A-A of Tomb 16. Excavation report 1994 (Edited by: Madarati, H).

Just as the majority of other unguentaria, this one was found in a funerary context where such items were usually either cremated with the deceased or placed in tombs as votive objects (Isings, 1957 & Fleming, 1998).

The dimensions of the piece found in this tomb are 8.9 cm height, 3.8 cm Rim diameter, and 0.1 cm thickness.

It is translucent blue, with an uneven, flared-out rim. It has a cylindrical neck, with an elongated conical body that curves into a small flat bottom. This item was recovered fully intact with some discoloration affecting its outer surface.



**Figure 9.** Candelstick unguentaria found in tomb 16 (Drawn by: Hammoud, S).

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE OF KURNISH AL-BAHR'S TOMBS

Burial customs emphasizing communal interments held significant sway in Roman Syria and across the eastern reaches of the Empire. The predominant burial form in these regions was the hypogeum, an underground burial chamber resembling a crypt or tomb (Hamoud & Eger, 2018). These hypogea were often hewn into rock formations, primarily situated beyond the confines of populated areas and nestled into the slopes of nearby hills (De Jong, 2017).

This style of tomb is usually communal, with each hypogeum/tomb typically accommodating individuals from the same familial lineage. While the architectural forms of hypogeal tombs vary, the general layout typically includes a sloping staircase leading down to the primary subterranean structure (al-Nu'mat, 2017). The structure is often configured in a T-shape or cross-shaped layout (Ball, 2000). Access to the hypogeum is facilitated through a corridor known as the dromos, leading into a small chamber sealed by a stone slab. The primary chamber typically exhibits a rectangular or occasionally square shape, with burial niches (loculi) carved into the walls on one or every side ('Umīarī & Rūbā, 2012). The ceilings of these underground tombs may either be flat or vaulted (al-Nu'mat, 2017).

Typically, a hypogeum houses six loculi, although some structures may include additional chambers, possibly added at a later stage. Nevertheless, the prevailing trend suggests that the majority of hypogea accommodate fewer than ten burial compartments (De Jong, 2017).

The internal dimensions of subterranean tombs exhibit variability contingent upon the number of interred individuals or correlate with the socio-economic standing of the familial proprietors. Predominantly, the interior walls of these loculi are enveloped in plaster, embellished with aesthetically pleasing paintings portraying the members interred within or illustrating a spectrum of mythical motifs. Furthermore, decorative elements showcasing diverse classical and indigenous themes are also prevalent within these structures (al-Nu'mat, 2017).

While a hypogeum is inherently an underground burial structure, it was common for many to have supplementary above-ground constructions erected atop them to delineate their positions. Approximately one-third of the hypogea examined by scholars were found to have some form of above-ground structure associated with them (De Jong, 2017).

It was customary for individuals to prepare their burial site before their passing, regardless of whether it entailed a modest grave dug in the earth or rock or an elaborate mausoleum intended for themselves and their kin. The form of the tomb was often commensurate with the individual's socio-economic status.

If the tomb is of the communal type designated for the family, the head of the family is responsible for preparing and arranging the tomb. Moreover, numerous tombs have been utilized across successive generations, although without definitive evidence regarding whether all the interred individuals belong to the same family or not (ʿUmīārī & Rūbā, 2012).

While the utilization of hypogea became prevalent during the Roman Period, their use as burial structures originated much earlier, evidenced by findings from the Hellenistic and Parthian periods. Moreover, older burial structures from the Hellenistic period showed signs of similar functional usage since the Iron Age, indicating a continuity of use spanning from the Iron Age to the Hellenistic period. Pre-Roman hypogea displayed a wide variety of design and construction styles, albeit typically smaller and less decorated compared to their Roman counterparts.

In contrast to Roman hypogea, examples from the Hellenistic and Parthian periods often lacked aboveground structures to mark their locations. Their layouts varied, with some being irregular while others exhibited identifiable configurations (De Jong, 2017). Although the practice of utilizing loculi as burial structures dates back to earlier periods, the concurrent use of loculi and arcosolia was a new development during the Roman period (Hamoud & Eger, 2018).

In 1994, 21 hypogea were excavated at Kurnish al-Bahr in Latakia. These structures exhibited similarities in terms of size and layout.

The site forms part of an expansive burial complex that stretches from the Sheikh Daher neighbourhood to the northward direction of Prison neighbourhood and extends westward through the Mar Taqla neighbourhood where it continues to meet the City's coastline. The tombs found within this complex have all been found to be communal tombs that had been carved into the sandstone which forms the geological bedrock of Latakia (Haidar, 1994).

Dating these tombs relied extensively on analysing the architectural features present and comparing them with structures of known dates with the same resemblant characteristics. Furthermore, by dating the glassware found within the tomb structures was also a key factor in establishing the date of the tombs since no coins, human remains, or other artifacts were discovered.

In 2021, numerous hypogea were unearthed in Mar Taqla's neighborhood, (Madarati, 2022 & Radwan & Ahmad & Suliman, 2021) followed by discoveries in al-Sheikh Daher's neighborhood in 2022, all dating to the middle of the second century CE (Madarati, 2023 & Radwan, 2022). The architectural features of the tombs at the Mar Taqla and al-Sheikh Daher locations resemble those found at the Kurnish al-Bahr site, further corroborating their date. Therefore, it has been concluded (through comparative analysis) that Tombs 4, 6, and 16 all date back to the period from the middle of the second century CE to the early third century CE.

It is worth mentioning here that the prevailing architectural style of the Tombs at the Kurnish al-Bahr site is simple and lacking any notable features, decorations, and/or adornments that had been found in other tombs (such as those at Palmyra). This heavily suggests that these structures were largely built and used by members of middle-class families. It is also worth mentioning that with the absence of any inscriptions, no further insight as to who had been interred in these structures can be gleaned.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Roman tombs discovered in Kurnish al-Bahr were predominantly constructed of sandstone. These structures suffered partial damage as a result of construction activities conducted in 1994. This study focuses on three out of the 21 tombs unearthed during the excavation. These three tombs were distinguished by the presence of glassware among their grave goods which set them apart from others within the archaeological site. The glass findings discussed above date to a period when glass was an everyday commodity in and around the Mediterranean World. The ubiquitous presence of Roman glassware in Roman tombs points to the significant role they played in funerary and burial rituals. The presence of glass objects in burial sites reflects the prevalent cultural and religious aspects of society at the time, and people's attitudes and beliefs vis-à-vis death and the after-life.

The discovery of fragmented and shattered grave goods in the main chambers of these tombs suggests heavy looting activities in earlier periods. Only objects that can be clearly classified as unguentaria had been recovered from these structures and had all been found to serve funerary and votive purposes.

The architectural characteristics of the tomb structures, simple as they are; along with the presence of glassware in the main chambers strongly correlate with existing data that point to Tombs 4, 6, and 16 being dated to the middle of the second century to the early third century CE. The largest of the three, Tomb 4 housing 16 loculi, likely served as the resting place of a large family. Tomb 6, on the other hand, seems to have been intended for a family of six members.

Tomb 16 showed evidence that it had not been fully constructed. It was likely designed to accommodate five individuals, with four of its loculi having been fully constructed, while a fifth loculus remained incomplete. Unfortunately, no inscriptions or notable features were found within the tombs that could point to further historical information surrounding those buried within. Nonetheless, it is evident that these tombs had been commissioned by families of significant

economic means and social standing, enabling them to construct such elaborate structures.

The absence of skeletal remains presents a challenge in determining whether or not the tombs were emptied for potential reuse in later periods, yet, remained unused. It is plausible that they were re-purposed for other functions, such as shelters during wartime or personal dwellings, given the historical context of Latakia.

Finally, it is safe to say that the aforementioned glass artifacts which have been dating to the second-third century CE, form but a miniscule part of a larger, highly diversified collection of glass findings that had been recovered from burial sites and tombs. Unfortunately, they are all that could have been accessed given the challenges that face the archaeological sector in Syria at the present. The small size of the sample discussed herein does not afford any broader conclusions as to the historical and/or economic contexts they were recovered from. This remains open for further research to, hopefully, be able to accomplish.

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YANNI, J.A.(1881). *Tarikh Sūriyya.* Beirut, Princeton university library. ISBN: 32101076412566.

**Note of Transcription:** Transcription of Arabic means rendering Arabic with Latin characters. Transcription is used to smoothly quote an Arabic word or expression in a text that is otherwise written in English or another language with Latin characters, especially if the intended readership does not master Arabic (general linguists, literary historians, or critics). Transcription is also a straightforward way of stating the pronunciation if the original Arabic text is unvocalized. I used in this paper some Arabic names; thus, you can notice the transcription in the bibliography and footnotes.