Burial epigraphy and archaeology have played particularly important roles in the analysis of Jewish culture of Roman North Africa because most extant Jewish materials in the region relate to burial and to the marking of the tombs for the deceased. Taking advantage of the fecundity of sources, scholars have relied on their interpretations of commemorative aspects of epitaphs and funeral archaeology to derive broader—and, at times, competing—claims about the parameters of North African Jewish beliefs, practices, and communities in the Roman period.

Interpretations of the catacombs at Gammarth in Tunisia have been disproportionately influential in the development of this literature and have spawned many of these competing analyses. To some nineteenth-century French missionaries, correspondence between the burial architecture of the Gammarth catacombs and Palestinian burial spaces substantiated their claims that North African Jews had traveled directly from the Holy Land and had brought associated theologies and customs with them (Delattre 1895, 49). Subsequent archaeologists
similarly explained the apparently “idiosyncratic” architecture of the Jewish African catacombs as resulting from the Palestinian Jews’ transposition to the west of the burial habits exemplified in Jericho and Beth She’arim in the east (Goodenough 1953, 2.65; Hachlili 1998, 208). Still others pointed to the alignment of the construction of North African tombs with the prescriptions for burial architecture set forth in Babylonian Talmudic texts. These scholars have evaluated the African “manifestations” of Talmudic prescriptions accordingly (b. Baba Batra 100b–102b; Le Bohec 1981a, 168). Assertions within Christian literary texts, too, have fortified scholars’ conclusions that only select and Jewish individuals were permitted to be included in the “Jewish” burial complex (Le Bohec 1981a, 168–169). The resulting interpretation of the catacombs—that they represent the burials of those who possessed Palestinian origin, uniform beliefs, and antagonism toward Christian neighbors—has been applied to Jewish culture of Roman North Africa generally (Le Bohec 1981a, 168). The prevailing interpretation has been reified through over a century of often uncritical repetition. Yet upon closer inspection, this perspective and its broader social-historical corollaries unravel. After all, were North African Jewish burial practices actually so different from those of their African neighbors? Did North African Jews only bury with one another? Are foreign comparanda and, moreover, local polemics the most appropriate media for interpreting North African Jewish burial complex?

*Les hypogées de Gamart appartiennent donc indubitablement à une nécropole juive* (1895, 51).

2 See Avigad (1976) and Zanger (1994) for maps of catacombs in Beth She’arim and Jericho; cf. b. Baba Batra 101a–b. Of course, the presumed connection between Iron Age II burials in Jericho and third- through fifth-century burials in Africa derives from assumptions, which still prevail in many circles, about continuities between ancient Israelite practices and those of only Judaism.

3 The animosity Tertullian describes in his interpretation of Christian scripture between Jews and Christians (e.g., Scorp. X and adv. Iud. I) inspires Le Bohec to suggest that Jews and Christians at Gammarth and elsewhere would have refused to bury their dead together. Le Bohec states, “De plus, la haine entre Juifs et Chrétiens était très vive, attestée au plus tard dès Tertullien, alors que cette nécropole est d’époque relativement basse” (Le Bohec 1981a, 168).

4 It is unclear whether this characterization implies that the North African Jews were aware of similar practices, which also informed the formation of the Talmudic text in Babylonia, or whether they possessed “copies” of the texts themselves. Either way, such an assertion has little substantiation within this context.