

Khirbat as-Samrā Cemetery: A Question of Dating

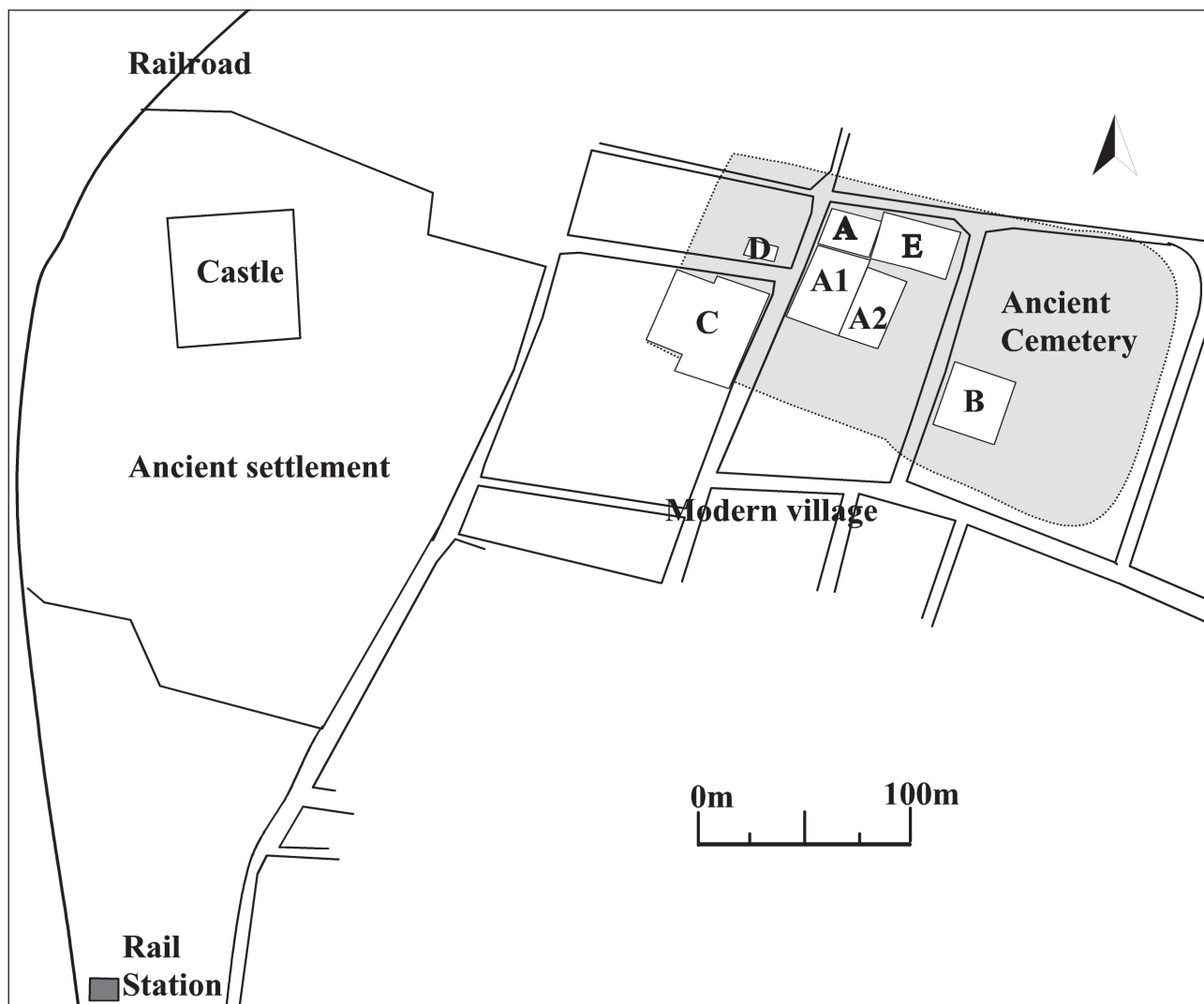
Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery (Mafraq District, Palestine grid: 2598/1767) is situated east of the ancient settlement of the same name, and separated only by rudimentary stone walls. Savigniac (1925: 417-8) described it as being comprised of predominantly Roman ‘*Greco-Arab*’ burials dated to the 2nd to 4th centuries AD and another sector of predominantly Christian/Byzantine ‘*Greco-Syrian*’ burials dated to the 6th to 8th centuries AD. Savigniac’s distinction was based on epigraphic evidence of the then still *in situ* tombstones. Surface cemetery features have subsequently disappeared but aerial photographic imagery clearly shows recognizable remains within the modern village of Khirbat as-Samrā. It appears that the ‘*Greco-Arab*’ sector was lost to urban expansion while parts of the ‘*Greco-Syrian*’ sector are still accessible.

Excavations in the cemetery were undertaken by a team from the Institute for Human Biology at Hamburg University and began in an area labelled, Site B (FIG. 1) where the tombs evidently dated to the 6th and 7th centuries AD, that is in concordance with the supposed age of the cemetery. The Christian aspects of the burials were reflected in a diverse range of objects but with the expansion of excavations further westwards and later northwards a different picture evolved. In these areas some tombs revealed

features uncharacteristic of a ‘Christian burial’. For example, one female had been interred wearing all her private jewellery, from head to ankle and including cosmetic utensils and glass vessels left at her feet. In another female burial a small basalt cooking pot was placed above the left shoulder. In other tombs the deceased was laid in a contracted position. Further evidence based on conservative estimates of population size and excavation data indicate that the local population in Khirbat as-Samrā was maintained at approximately 430 individuals over a period of some 300 years. This appears unlikely given the size of the ancient settlement.

The topsoil layer revealed a distinctive phase of human activity between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD and the 7th and 8th centuries AD with reuse in recent times. This represents the time span during which the cemetery was in use. This was also indicated by the linguistically diverse tombstones found in the excavated areas. In addition to the dated examples, the rediscovery of another inscribed tombstone that Savigniac had documented in 1925, confirmed that excavations had been carried out within the ‘*Greco-Syrian*’ sector of the cemetery.

The datable archaeological evidence obtained from the tombs was both limited and ambiguous. Coins were for the most part badly preserved. There were a few legible 6th century



1. Khirbat as-Samrā: The location of “*Greco-Syrian*” section of the cemetery (in grey) and the excavated sites.

AD bronze coins (Site B) that were used as amulets and three Roman coins of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (Site A2 and C). Pottery vessels were rarely deposited in tombs. There was one possible Roman vessel, two Byzantine vessels, and less than a handful of unspecific Roman/Byzantine vessels. Lamps were absent from all burials. Glass vessels of variable shape, size and colour, were frequently found in burials, often damaged and incomplete. The glass material dated from the 1st century AD to the late Byzantine period but some could belong to either period. Occasionally Roman and possibly Byzantine glass vessels were found in the same burial. Plaster objects were found in relative abundance in many tombs. They appear to be related to 7th century AD

burials. This was confirmed by C¹⁴ radiocarbon dates from a plaster figurine in one burial, though other figurines might be of an earlier date. In one tomb plaster objects were found *in situ* with two Roman glass unguentaria, thus making contradictory dating indications. Furthermore, radiocarbon dating confirmed previous observations that neighbouring tombs could be one or two centuries apart in time. This and earlier observations support the suggestion that the cemetery included familial burial plots, or sectors. Thus, it appears that the expansion of the cemetery was neither periodic nor sporadic.

With the cessation of excavations in the ‘*Greco-Syrian*’ sector of the cemetery it became evident that none of the tombs could be dated beyond the 7th century AD and that it is possible that many

tombs were earlier than the 6th century AD. In fact there are indications that this sector was used prior to the 6th century AD, because of evidence of the discard of previous interments. Thus it is also possible that some older burials remained.

The divergent observations presented above reflect the need to refine the dating methods and strategies for the excavations of necropolis and cemeteries. The dating of tombs is not only

part of the project's general framework, it is a vital element to infer on population structure, continuity, and migration.

Bibliography

Savignac, R. 1925. Excursion en Transjordanie et au Kh. Es-Samra. *RB* 34, 110-131, Plate II-III.

Other information was based on the excavation reports published by the first author in *ADAJ* since 1996 and elsewhere.