

# EXCAVATIONS IN THE BYZANTINE CEMETERY AT KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ' Site B - 1995

by

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Preliminary excavations at the Byzantine cemetery in Khirbat as-Samrā' 1993 (site A) gave some information on the regional sixth century AD inhabitants. To cover different periods of population and to increase the osteological sample size to a statistically reliable degree, other parts of the cemetery were to be excavated. For the 1995 season,<sup>1</sup> an eastern part of the Byzantine cemetery was excavated in an area that was expected to represent the Christian-Moslem transitional period, that is late seventh to eighth century AD (site B).

Depending on the nature of the top soil, the upper 15-50 cm of 19 squares (5x5 m) were cleared to locate burials. In this process, 8 tombstones and fragments of ceramic oil lamps, datable to the late seventh century AD, as well as other pottery fragments were found. By the end of the campaign 67 tombs were located, an average of 3.35 tombs in each 25m<sup>2</sup>, and 64 tombs were excavated and numbered from Tomb 23 to Tomb 86 (Fig.1).

The burials were mostly in a west-east direction though few were markedly tilted to the south-east and with lines of stones or gravel pilings appearing to provide a sort of walling or demarcation between tomb clusters. Greater variability in the length, width and depth of the tombs was also observed (107 x 45 x 125 cm to 250 x 55 x 185 cm). The tombs are constructed as trenches, dug in the virgin soil with 5-10 cm wide shelves, 30 to 60 cm from the bottom, serving as shoulder for the tomb slabs to rest upon. The slabs are usually 5 -10 cm Basalt flagstones

whereby those of burial 39 were of rose quartzite stones. In tomb 36 three whitish slabs were found with crosses as well as Greek and probable Syrian inscriptions engraved on them. The excavated part confirmed previous reports of tomb robberies, as indicated by their disturbed structure.

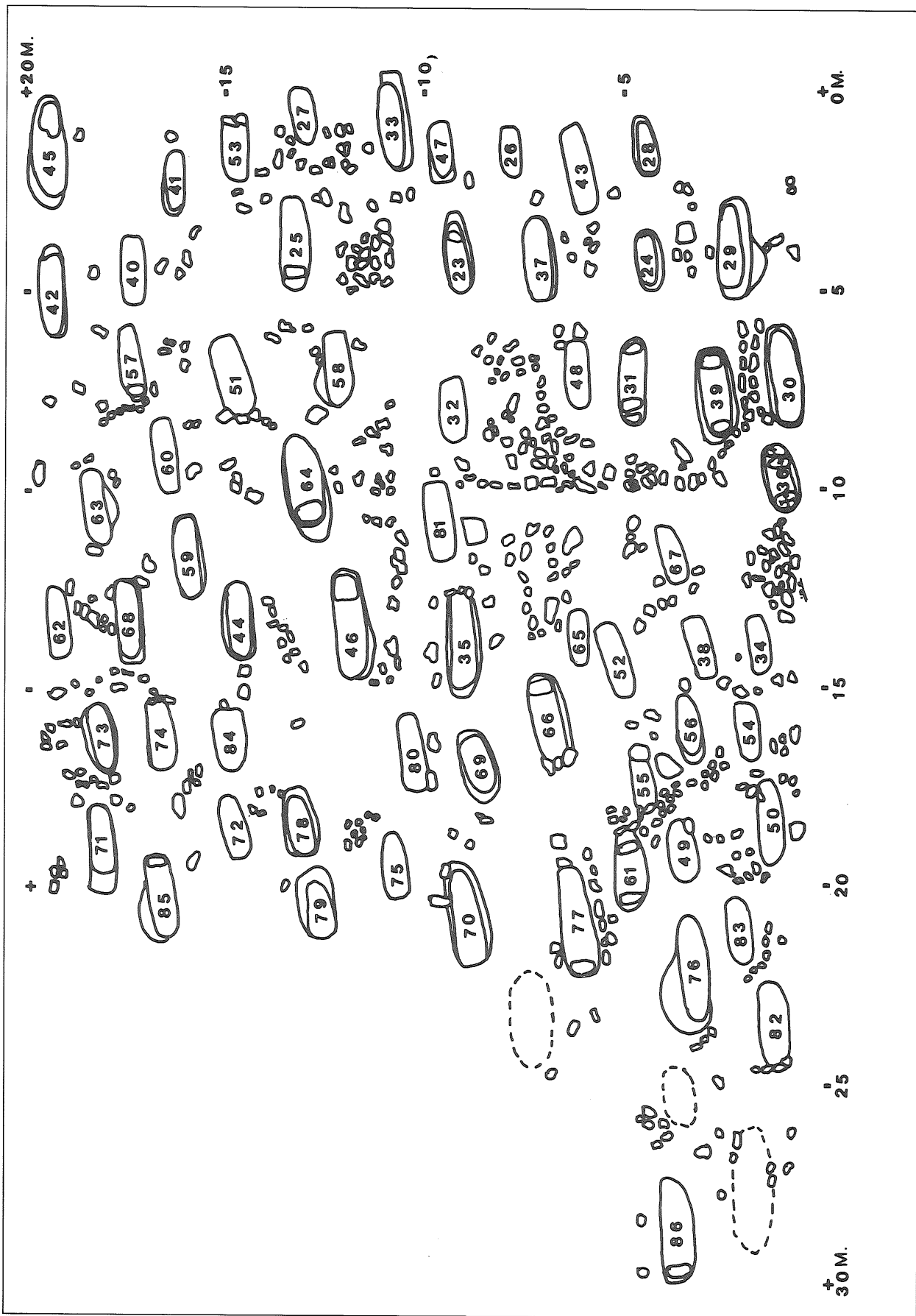
Human bones were obtained from 48 of the the 64 excavated tombs only, two of which were *in situ*, that is not opened before excavations. The condition of the osteological material was generally poor and in most cases only 30% or less of it was preserved. Preliminary analysis indicated that 14-16 of the tombs were for adult burials: 7 were identified as females and 6 as males. The remaining material belongs to non-adult burials, mostly infants or children less than 5 years old (Table 1). The fact that 31 of the excavated tombs were definitely child burials was reflected in the estimated low mean mortality age (11.53 y) based on the material available.

**Table 1.** Age distribution of the obtained human skeletal material from site B of the Byzantine cemetery of Khirbat as-Samrā'.

Age group in years	Observed number
0-02	8
3-05	14
6-10	4
11-15	5
16-20	3
21-25	4
26-30	5
30-35	1
> -45	1

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1. The excavation plan of site B of the Byzantine cemetery at Khirbat as-Samra' 1995.

Alongside the osteological material, various numbers of objects were salvaged from the burials. These included metal and bronze crosses, rings, earrings, bracelets and amulets together with various types of beads (glass, shells, bone and wood). Four bronze coins were also found attached as part of a necklace with two of the coins covered in a leather mantel. Furthermore, painted and unpainted gypsum frames of mirrors, stone spindles, strap buckles, (metal and bronze), hair and cloth pins, a broken spearhead, two intact ceramic vases (10 cm high) and other, presently unidentifiable, metal objects were salvaged.

Though very similar in the layout of burials, the excavated site B differs in many respects from site A of the 1993 season. The obtained human bones were less abundant not only as a result of repeated tomb disturbance or shallower burials but also because most tombs are child burials that are more susceptible to bone deterioration. Including small burials, which lacked human

skeletal remains, two thirds of all excavated tombs are very probably child burials. Thus, a greater part of site B can be seen to represent a type of child cemetery so that demographic parameters, for example mortality rate, based on this part may lead to biased information on the population concerned. Another aspect is the great abundance of objects and particularly those with religious connotations, like the crosses. This may be related to the transitional late seventh century, the period of introduction of Islam to the region.

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