

# KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ ANCIENT CEMETERY: THE 2011 EXCAVATION SEASON

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The eleventh season of excavation at the ancient Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery was carried out between 9th September and 11th October 2011 at the Site A and Site E areas of the old cemetery, located within the modern village of Rawdhit al-Amir Muhammad in Mafraaq district. The methodology employed was that described in previous reports (*ADAJ* 51-53). During the 2011 season, the excavation team obtained good results and made numerous observations, many of which are subject to ongoing investigation. This report describes the results of the 2011 excavations, while providing further information on a few case-studies that reflect the main results of this long-running project.

## Site E Excavation

Following the 2009 excavation at Site E, a long strip of land between a small building

and the adjacent modern street to the north was left unexcavated for technical reasons (Nabulsi 2010). Subsequent results, including unpublished C<sup>14</sup> dates, indicated that this part of the site might contain pre-6th century AD burials and may have been located at the boundary of the “Quartier Gréco-Arabe” (Savignac 1925: 117, Pls II-III), the potentially earlier Roman cemetery.

In 2011, it became possible to excavate this part of Site E. The 2009 grid was extended so that 200m<sup>2</sup> of the available area could be explored; 26 tombs were identified and excavated (**Fig. 1**). Except for Tomb 564, all tombs excavated were disturbed. There appeared to be no significant variation between the tombs excavated at Site E in 2009 and 2011, although a few observations could be made.

In square F4, the eastern ends of adjacent Tombs 561 and 562, which contained adult buri-



1. The 2011 excavation at Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery: Site E (foreground) and Site A (top background) from the east.

als, were ‘connected’ by a trench *ca.* 60cm wide and 80cm deep. The trench floor was lined with a row of rough, natural stones of various sizes (**Fig. 2**). The trench and row of stones could be seen in the sections of the opposing tomb walls. There was no superstructure on the surface and no extension of the structure to the sides. So far, no plausible explanation for the function or intent of this constructed ‘link’ between the two tombs has been found, but its presence might indicate a relationship between the burials, or at least that the burials were contemporary.

### Tomb 583

A variety of objects were found in this part of Site E, whether as funerary deposits, offerings or personal items. Most significant were the finds from Tomb 583, which provide new information on observations from previously excavated tombs in this cemetery. The tomb was a typical vertical shaft tomb with a closed burial chamber (Type II; Nabulsi *et al.* 2009: 167-168). It was disturbed at least once before excavation, although two basalt covering slabs were still in their original position at either end of the tomb. The tomb dimensions of 190 x 55 x 161cm were in accordance with its contents, i.e. the bones of a juvenile human burial. At the western end, at a depth of *ca.* 120cm, the southern shoulder was broadened at the level of the second covering slab to form a small concave niche, 30cm high and 25cm deep. Two glass flasks (*unguentaria*) and three plaster figurines were found in this earth-filled niche, slightly displaced from their original position (**Fig. 3**). Small niches and deposits outside the

burial chamber have been previously observed in a few other tombs in the cemetery. During the 2006 season, part of a glass vessel and a rounded plaster mirror frame were found with a large shell at the edge of the last (eastern) covering slab of Tomb 322. At the time, they were thought to have been displaced by later intruders. In Tomb 541 at Site A2, a near-rectangular niche, 20x30cm, was found in the western wall *ca.* 60cm below the modern ground surface (Nabulsi *et al.* 2011: fig. 2).

The two glass *unguentaria* found in the niche were blue-green in colour with minor surface deterioration (**Fig. 4**). The larger vessel (KS-1868 [h = 107mm]) had toppled on to its side. It had a rounded body (diam = 58mm) and an almost unnoticeable short, flat base. The neck was approx. 60mm long and 19mm in diameter. It widened half-way up to form a wrapped, flaring rim 43mm in diameter. A 20mm long nozzle / spout, with a narrow (*ca.* 2mm) aperture, protruded vertically from the upper third of the body. The second, smaller *unguntarium* (KS-1869 [h = 54mm]) had a short, flaring neck and a rounded body (diam = 42mm) with no base or handle. This glass-type has been documented in a variety of sizes in the cemetery. The ‘nozzled’ KS-1868 flask is not a common type amongst regional Roman and Byzantine glassware. In a personal communication, C. Eger suggested that KS-1868 may be similar to a glass vessel reported by Hayes (1975: 91, no. 299, pl. 21), which dated to late 3rd or 4th century AD. Though their dimensions are close, there are differences at the base, in the position of the spout and at the rim.



2. Site E, square F4 with deep, constructed stone link between Tombs 561 and 562.



3. Tomb 583 from above; arrow indicates position of niche in southern wall and its contents (*in situ*).



4. Two glass unguentaria (KS-1868; KS-1869) found in the niche in Tomb 583.

Of the three plaster figurines found<sup>1</sup>, two were broadly similar but of different size (KS-1865 [111 x 56 x 52mm]; KS-1866 [98 x 47 x 50mm]). Both figurines were in the shape of resting bird with folded wings and lowered tails, but without feet. Their main anatomical features were highlighted by lines of black paint. The heads had long beaks, decorated with 4 black circles drawn on the base, and moderate crests. The folded wings were marked with a bilateral depression applied by a small flat, blunt instrument, likely a spatula. The lowered tails were about a third of the figurines' total size. KS-1865 revealed a perforation just behind the neck and another in front of the tail; both extended to the base. The smaller bird figurine had only a central

deep depression on the base. The two figurines appear to represent the local hoopoe (*Upupa epops*).

The third plaster object (KS-1867 [98 x 60 x 32mm]) appeared *in situ* as fish-shaped mirror frame with an intact central rounded mirror (diam = 35mm). Once lifted, the opposite side was found to be in the shape of a bearded man's head wearing a pointed cap, with a perforation near the pointed end. The main facial features were accentuated with black paint, though traces of other colours were also observed. This figurine consisted just of the head, as has been the case with all other objects with male representations discovered at the Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery to date. It should be noted that the KS-1867 figurine has similarities with Phoenician figurines depicting a male head wearing a pointed cap (e.g. Oggiano 2012: 6, fig. 1). While birds in general and hoopoes in particular were associated with different subjects (Orr 1939: 1419), the function and purpose behind the three plaster figurines from Tomb 583 remain uncertain.

A number of small objects were found inside the burial chamber with the fragmentary remains of a disturbed juvenile burial. Amongst these were rusty iron fragments and broken large stone beads with attachment marks evident on

1. The plaster figurines are currently under study; unfortunately

no illustrations are available at the current time.



the rusty surfaces. It was possible to reconstruct these parts to form a three-element 'chain', attached through an iron disk, with an iron cross, the lower arm of which was adorned with four stone beads of different colours. This object (KS-1981; **Fig. 5**) had a total length of about 20cm - too large for a pendant or amulet, but possibly a 'ceremonial' cross. This interpretation could be extended to other objects, viz. the pointed iron rod (KS-1558) and attached bronze cross (KS-1559) found previously in Tomb 477 at Site E (Nabulsi 2010: 217). The cross indicates that Tomb 583 cannot be earlier than the late 6th century AD. The objects found both within and without the burial chamber of Tomb 583 are related, reflecting aspects of the local population's burial rites during the late Byzantine period in the cemetery under study. It is unlikely that the objects in the niche belonged to an earlier burial and were subsequently redeposited.

#### Site A Excavation

In 1993, a French team from the École Biblique in Jerusalem undertook test excavations at the Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery (Humbert 1993), in the eastern part of that area later designated Site A. As the French team was content with the results from the 22 tombs they excavated, the author of this report (who was involved in the 1993 excavations) continued to work at the site as a separate project focused on systematic excavation of the available cemetery area<sup>2</sup>. In 2011, it proved possible to return and excavate an area of 175m<sup>2</sup> at the western side of Site A, based on an extension to the north of the adjacent Site A1 grid (**Fig. 1**). On excavation, this area displayed common features with the cemetery areas to the east and west.



5. Reconstructed iron cross (KS-1981) consisting of three rods, a disc and the actual cross, decorated with stone beads and missing a fragment (arrow).

28 tombs were excavated at Site A, although three were intact child burials in which the bone material had completely disintegrated. In three adult burials, the deceased were buried in an extended position but on one side, two facing north (on the left side) and one south (on the right side). These examples were more obvious 'side burials' than previously observed cases, e.g. Tomb 499 (Nabulsi *et al.* 2012: fig. 2). Recent studies have suggested different explanations for 'irregular' burial positions (e.g. Perschke 2012). Nevertheless, the 'side burials' in the Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery have to be considered as part of its diversity, possibly related to an as yet undetermined period or group.

The tombs at Site A contained fewer objects than those at Site E, but were richer in organic objects such as leather, fabric (e.g. linen, cotton), wool and wood, as well as seeds. In Tomb 597, a substantial amount of fabric and fragments of a wooden plate were found between two adult burials, along with the remains of leather sandals or shoes at the eastern end.

Recovery of human bone in the Site A burials was hindered by modern root intrusions (from shrubs on the ground surface) that often ran through the shafts of long bones, i.e. at a depth of more than 2m. The excavators often had to cut through 1cm thick roots to free bones. This rapidly reduced the preservation of bone material, particularly of dorsally located skeletal elements, e.g. pectorals, vertebral arches. Modern village roads have recently been constructed at a higher level than the surrounding area. Consequently Site A, which previously occupied an elevated position, now becomes waterlogged during the rainy season, thereby increasing moisture in the deepest tombs and encouraging deeper root penetration. This observation emphasises how complex and random factors influence bone preservation in ancient burials, particularly in this region.

By the end of the 2011 season, the total number of burials excavated at the ancient Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery had increased to 614. In addition to the observations made and interesting objects recovered, important evidence concerning burial customs was obtained. The three long tombs with built walls (Nabulsi *et al.*

2. The University of Hamburg, Department

(prev. Institute) of Human Biology team.

2011) suggest this type represents 1-2% of all tombs in the cemetery. There was also evidence for burials with and without a shroud, the use in some cases of wooden coffins and burial chambers being filled with earth prior to their closure, as well as for tombs with and without a sealed burial chamber.

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