

## THE ANCIENT CEMETERY OF KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ: 2010 EXCAVATIONS AT SITE A2

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Excavations were carried out at Site A2 between 14 September and 19 October 2010, opposite the portion of Site A1 excavated in 2006 (Nabulsi *et al.* 2007: **Fig. 2**). It was the tenth season of systematic excavation at the ancient Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery. The northern part of the site was excavated in six squares in 1997. The remaining, larger part became available for excavation after the recent removal of animal shelters and a subsequent request from the land owner for an archaeological team to come in and ‘clear’ his property. A 5 x 5 m grid of four rows (1 to 4) and five columns (A to E) was laid out and excavated according to standard procedures (Nabulsi 1998: 271). A total of 17 squares were opened (total area 395 m<sup>2</sup>), four of which were 5 x 3.5 m. Of the 66 tombs located and excavated (**Fig. 1**), only six were intact. One further tomb was located but not excavated, as it had recently been re-used as a rubbish pit. The number of tombs excavated in the cemetery as a whole has now reached 560, or at least 10 % of the estimated total (Nabulsi *et al.* 2007: 280).

### **Overview of the Site A2 Excavations (Fig. 2)**

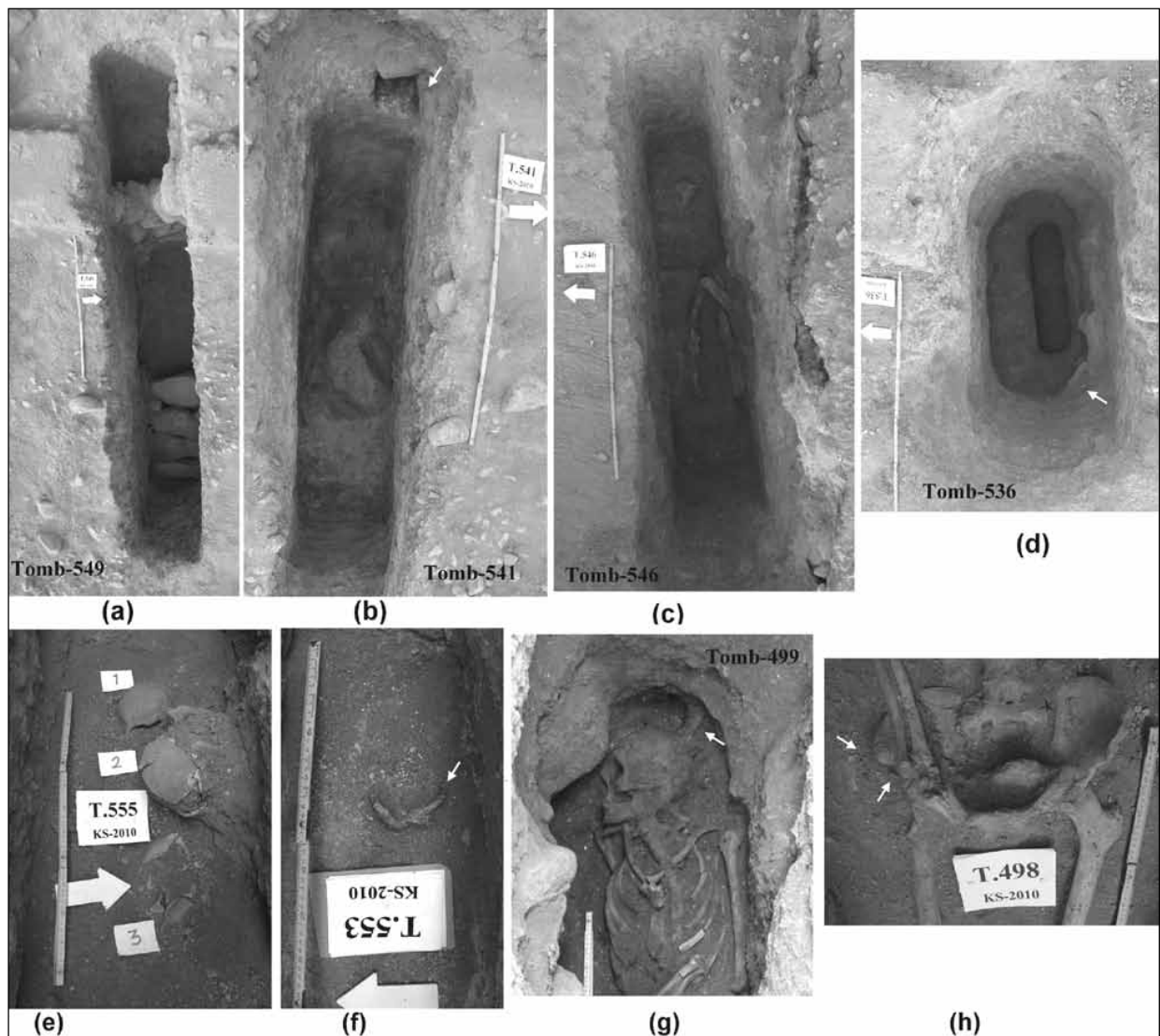
As with the other sites, Site A2 was orientated west-east. The layout of graves was relatively simple, with a few more complex arrangements

as well as some variations from the standard vertical shaft tombs with sealed burial cists. These variations included the unusually long Tomb-549, which included a wall constructed of natural cobbles. It is probable that the emergence of a large stone at about 100 cm depth prompted the eastwards extension of the tomb, with the wall being constructed as its western edge. The small area at the western end showed neither structural nor material evidence that it was used as a burial pit. The tomb, which was similar to Tomb-113 at Site B, was a single burial. A small rectangular pit (30 x 20 cm) was dug in the upper part of the western wall of Tomb-541. The pit, covered by a flat stone, was empty. Tomb-546 was dug for an adult, but was later re-used for the burial of a child. The child’s burial cist was V-shaped, being built on the floor of the tomb after removal of the earlier burial. A few substantial cist tombs (Type III, Nabulsi *et al.* 2009: 167) of variable size were also found at Site A2. These were not concentrated in any one area as was the case at Site C; one of them, Tomb-536, appears to have been sealed with a vault.

A number of cut and dressed stones, possibly from the buildings of the ancient settlement, were re-used as capstones. The eastern part of Site A2 revealed a number of burial cists



*1. General view of Site A2 after excavation.*



2. Site A2 tombs discovered in 2010: (a) and (c) see text, (b) arrow marks position of small rectangular pit, (d) arrow marks start of vaulted closure, (e) skulls 1 - 3, (f) iron anklets found in situ in intact but badly preserved burial of a child, (g) arrow marks in situ position of bronze hair-pin or spatula (KS-1642), (h) arrows mark in situ positions of bronze buckle (KS-1677), near to bones of right arm, and one of the associated buttons (KS-1678).

in which yellowish limestone was used instead of, or along with, basalt capstones. Three tombs yielded a variable quantity (0.1 to >1 kg) of what may be the remnants of wooden coffins, since this material was almost entirely restricted to the burial cists. All of these tombs were disturbed prior to excavation. In the absence of conclusive evidence, a later insertion — perhaps as charcoal — has also to be considered.

### Results of Excavations

Human skeletal remains were recovered from 58 tombs, two of which clearly contained mul-

tiples burials, viz. two individuals in Tomb-449 and three in Tomb-555 (Fig. 2e). First indications suggest that most (>50 %) burials were of sub-adults, although this still needs to be confirmed.

Various objects were recovered from Site A2, including items of personal adornment, grave offerings and grave furniture. Some of these objects were clearly displaced, being recovered either from topsoil or from tomb-shaft fill; this was probably the result of the early 20th century looting that Khirbat as-Samrā is known to have been subjected to. Furthermore, fragments of the

same object were found in different loci on more than one occasion. Bracelets and anklets, which could only be differentiated when found *in situ* (**Fig. 2f**), were common. Many were made of copper alloy, but the majority were of iron and therefore badly corroded. Fragments of the same hollow lead anklet (KS-1670) were found in Tomb-505 and the fill of neighbouring Tomb-551. It had a rounded profile (*ca.* 15 mm diameter), with geometric decoration on the outer surface (**Fig. 3**). Inside, it was filled with small fragments of iron and wood, a combination that would have produced a soft rattling sound.

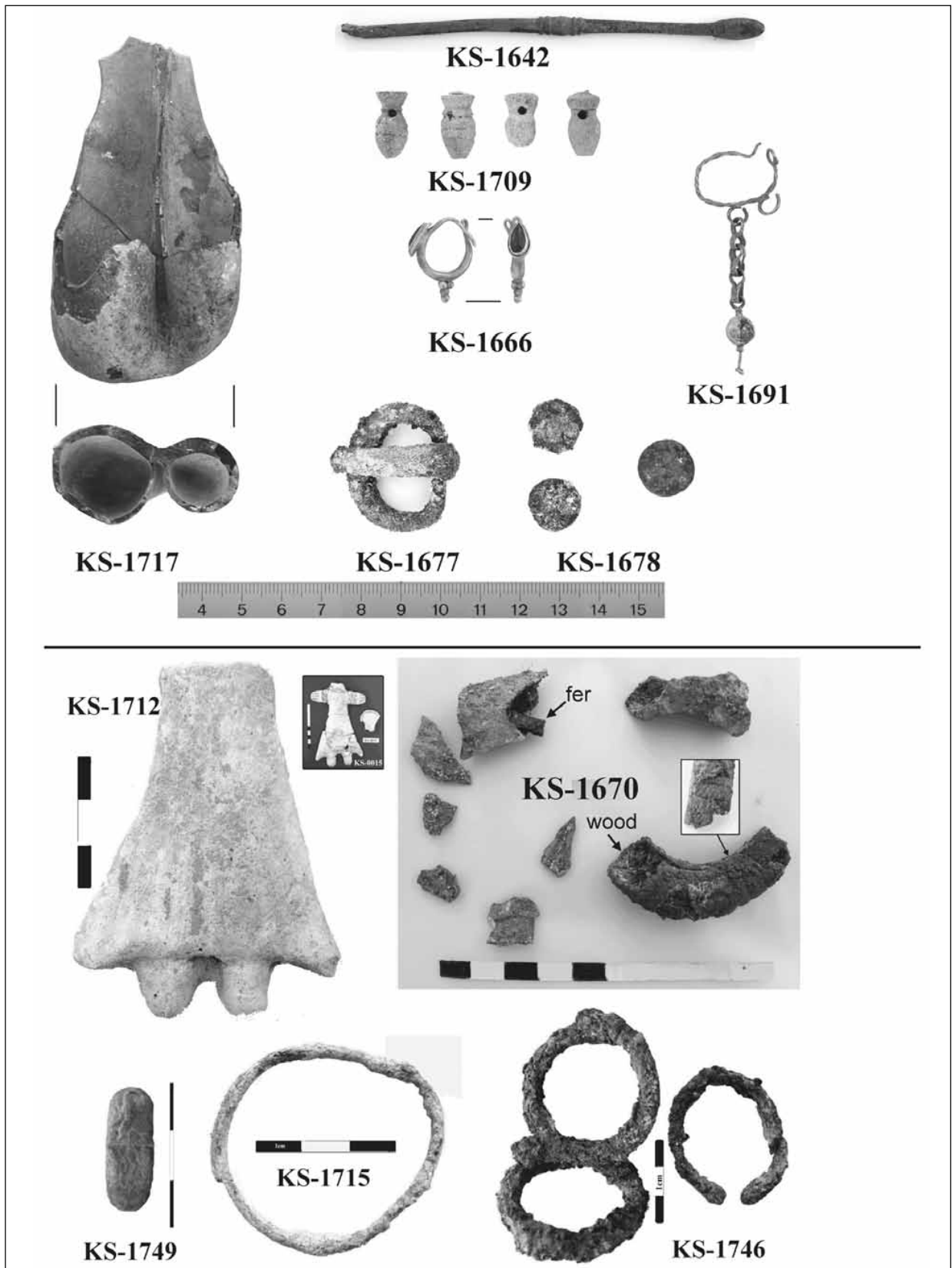
Another dispersed object was incomplete glass vessel KS-1717, fragments of which were found in Tomb-518 and adjacent Tomb-539. It has been identified as the lower part of a so-called twin *balsamarium* (**Fig. 3**). This was a typical glass vessel of Late Roman Syria and Palestine. It consisted of two oblong tubes, sometimes connected by a wide, curved handle. Both parts are sometimes decorated with serpentine glass strands, but the KS-1717 fragments clearly belong to an undecorated example. Twin *balsamaria* are thought to have been used for cosmetics, and are generally dated to the 4th and possibly early 5th centuries AD (Hayes 1975: 101-102). At present, there is no archaeological evidence with which to accurately date KS-1717. A number of other glass vessels were also found at the site, but unfortunately all were badly preserved. A glass vessel (KS-1667) from Tomb-505 had fragmented into dozens of tiny pieces, all weathered to a yellowish milky white. The original shape has not yet been ascertained, but seems to have been round bodied. Tomb-526 yielded fragments of two glass jars (including KS-1776), with at least one and possibly two or more zigzag handles. Another possible cosmetic item (KS-1642; **Figs. 2g and 3**) was found *in situ*, on the skull of the primary burial of Tomb-499. This could be a fragmented bronze spatula with the narrow blade missing, a hair pin or perhaps even a spatula handle used as a hair pin. It is not the first object of this type to be found at the cemetery.

Two gold earrings (**Fig. 3**) recovered from the cemetery may indicate the presence of high status female burials. The first (Tomb-526, KS-1666) was an ovoid loop, closed with a hook and with two soldered decorative elements: a small granulated pendant at the bottom and a drop-

shaped mount with a red stone (possibly garnet or ruby) inlay on the side. The form and style of this earring are typically regarded as middle Roman, but this does not preclude the possibility that such pieces were worn well into the 5th century AD (see parallels in Chehade 1972, cat. 17-18). The second earring (KS-1691) was a twisted loop with two attached eyes, from one of which a hollow, spherical pendant — originally decorated with a now lost bead or pearl — was suspended on a chain. Earrings with attached eyes and a wire pendant with inlaid mount were an (eastern) Mediterranean type of the 5th to 7th centuries AD. Examples with more than one eye are less common and may be slightly later within the same general time-frame (Deppert-Lippitz 2000: 62; Bierbrauer 1987: 154-157), although to date there is no firm evidence to support this supposition. It is however known that cast variants with three eyes were not common before the 7th century AD, and that they continued to be worn into the 8th century AD. It seems clear that both the earrings discovered at Site A2 in 2010 are of early Byzantine date (5th-6th centuries AD).

Numerous beads of various kinds were found in many of the tombs excavated at Site A2. As well as monochrome and polychrome glass examples, a few carnelian beads, other stone beads and small white cowrie shells were also found. Some vase-shaped bone beads with grooved decoration were found in Tomb-520 (KS-1709; **Fig. 3**) and Tomb 548; these were similar to previous finds from Site B. Close parallels are now known from southern Syria, in the region of Damascus (C. Eger unpublished report).

KS-1712 (**Fig. 3**) was another plaster figurine to be found at the Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery. The female doll-type figurine was incomplete; only the lower part of the body, from waist downwards (8 x 6.1 cm), was recovered and this revealed no trace of paint. This type of figurine has the form of a woman dressed in a long gown (sometimes decorated with a small mirror), with stubby horizontal or over-the-head arched arms (with a small mirror between head and arms) and small protruding feet. The figurines were originally painted (Nabulsi 2000). Two similar examples are known from Site B (KS-0001; KS-1015), but both were larger (8-9 cm width) and had mirror-decorated gowns. Recent ra-



3. Some of the objects found at Site A2 in 2010.



4. Jars from Tomb-552: (A) KS-1744 and (B) KS-1745.

diocarbon dating of a Site E burial (Tomb-429) containing a plaster figurine dated the material to 615-680 cal. AD at 95% probability (OxA-22446: 1376 ±25 years BP). This, and evidence from Site B (Nabulsi 1998), indicate that a 7th century AD date might be applicable to all plaster figurines from the cemetery.

Personal adornment worn specifically by males is more difficult to identify. Various metal belt buckles may have been typical male accessories, but this is a hypothesis that still needs to be tested. The probable male burial in Tomb-498 yielded a belt buckle (KS-1677), being a simple ovoid with a pin but no fitting, as well as one po-

lygonal and two circular buttons (KS-1678) that were part of a belt. All four objects were made of a copper alloy and were found *in situ* (Figs. 2 and 3). This type of button (Ger. *Gürtelhaften*) was worn on the belt directly behind the buckle and is known from many well-documented 6th century AD tombs in south-west, west and central Europe (Sasse 2000: 21). Recently, it has become clear that this type of belt, with a simple buckle and between one and three buttons, was also common in the eastern Mediterranean, where it probably came into use some decades earlier than in the western Mediterranean and its European hinterland.

The fill of Tomb-549 produced an unfamiliar object in the form of a flat bronze cylinder (KS-1749, 24 x 9 x 4 mm; **Fig. 3**). One side of the cylinder was engraved with animal motifs similar to those of Egyptian cartouches. So far, it has not been possible to draw any conclusions about the function and / or authenticity of this object.

Pottery fragments from topsoil and tomb fill at Site A2 included a relative abundance of oil lamp fragments, generally comparable with those from Site B. Preliminary analysis identified different types of round or ovoid (local Jerash type, Scholl 1986) lamps, with a single example of a candlestick form. All have numerous parallels from diverse sites in Jordan, e.g. Jarash (Da Costa 2004), the Jordan Valley (Abu-Shmais and Waheeb 2002) and Ḥisbān (Sauer 1973: 36-39). In general, these oil lamps fragments date to the late Byzantine and early Islamic (Umayyad) periods, i.e. ca. 6th to early 8th centuries AD. Lime deposits covered the surface and edges of the majority of sherds, possibly as a result of direct exposure to the elements. This, along with observed similarities with the pottery lamps from Site B, indicates that these objects do not date the excavated tombs at the site, but rather human activity in that same area. The presence of similarly dated, more or less complete cooking pots with charred outer surfaces tends to support this supposition.

Additional pottery finds include two small 'funerary' objects, found *in situ* in Tomb-552 with a unique *unguntarium* form known from the Nabataean to early Roman periods (**Fig. 4**). The first was a small jar (KS-1744, 8.4 cm height, 8.6 cm diameter) with a single flattened strap-handle, crudely attached to the rim. The warped ribbed body was wheel-made, with a fine pink slip (Munsell 5YR7/3), reddish-yellow core (Munsell 5YR7/6) and an irregular, footed, hand-made base. The jar, dated to the late Byzantine period, i.e. 6th century AD, has a good parallel at Yājūz (Suleiman 1999: figs. 22-2). The second object was also a small jar (KS-1745, 10.4 cm height, 9.4 cm diameter, 5.6 cm rim diameter), with an angular loop-handle. The neck had a flattened, flared rim. It was wheel-made with reddish-brown slip (Munsell 2.5YR6/3) on a fine fabric typical of the 6th century AD. The hand-made handle was laterally pressed on to the body. The jar was decorated with knobs and

a small relief circle, thereby giving it the shape of a female body. KS-1745 is an unusual funerary jar for the Byzantine period.

Four tombstones inscribed with crude crosses were found in different tombs, all re-used as capstones. They all had the same, previously discussed features (Nabulsi 2010). A large (88 x 41 x 22 cm) inscribed basalt tombstone (KS-1685) was recovered from the fill of Tomb-517 (**Fig. 5**). It had apparently been re-used as a capstone at the eastern end of the broad burial cist. The inscription was later confirmed to be Nabataean (M. Macdonald, pers. comm.); further details will be published in due course. The KS-1685 inscription emphasises the epigraphic richness and diversity of Khirbat as-Samrā ancient cemetery, and is one of the most significant discoveries to be made there since the start of this project in 1995.



5. Inscribed tombstone KS-1685.

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