

## KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ ANCIENT CEMETERY: PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF SITE C

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### Introduction

During the summer of 2008, excavations at Site C in the ancient cemetery of Khirbat as-Samrā were completed. It was the fourth season after the 1997, 1998 and 2007 campaigns. This has provided a timely opportunity to present an outline of the archaeological observations made at the site. Some features have already been discussed in previous reports (Nabulsi *et al.* 2007, 2008).

### Field Observations at Site C

This site represents the south-western corner of the cemetery. The area was divided into a 5 x 5m grid of rows (A to G) and columns (1 to 9) (Fig. 1). The cemetery's expansion to the south was restricted by an irregular rise in the level of the basalt bedrock layer that almost reached the ground surface in squares C3 and D8. From Column 9, the cemetery boundary turns at E9 in the direction of G6. There are no tombs in the area beyond this line. This was the result of a 25m trench dug by Humbert (1993). To the west, the cemetery ends at Row G. The tomb at the end of Square G3, XX2, is an unfinished grave that is 50cm deep; it is similar to XX1 in Square B7.

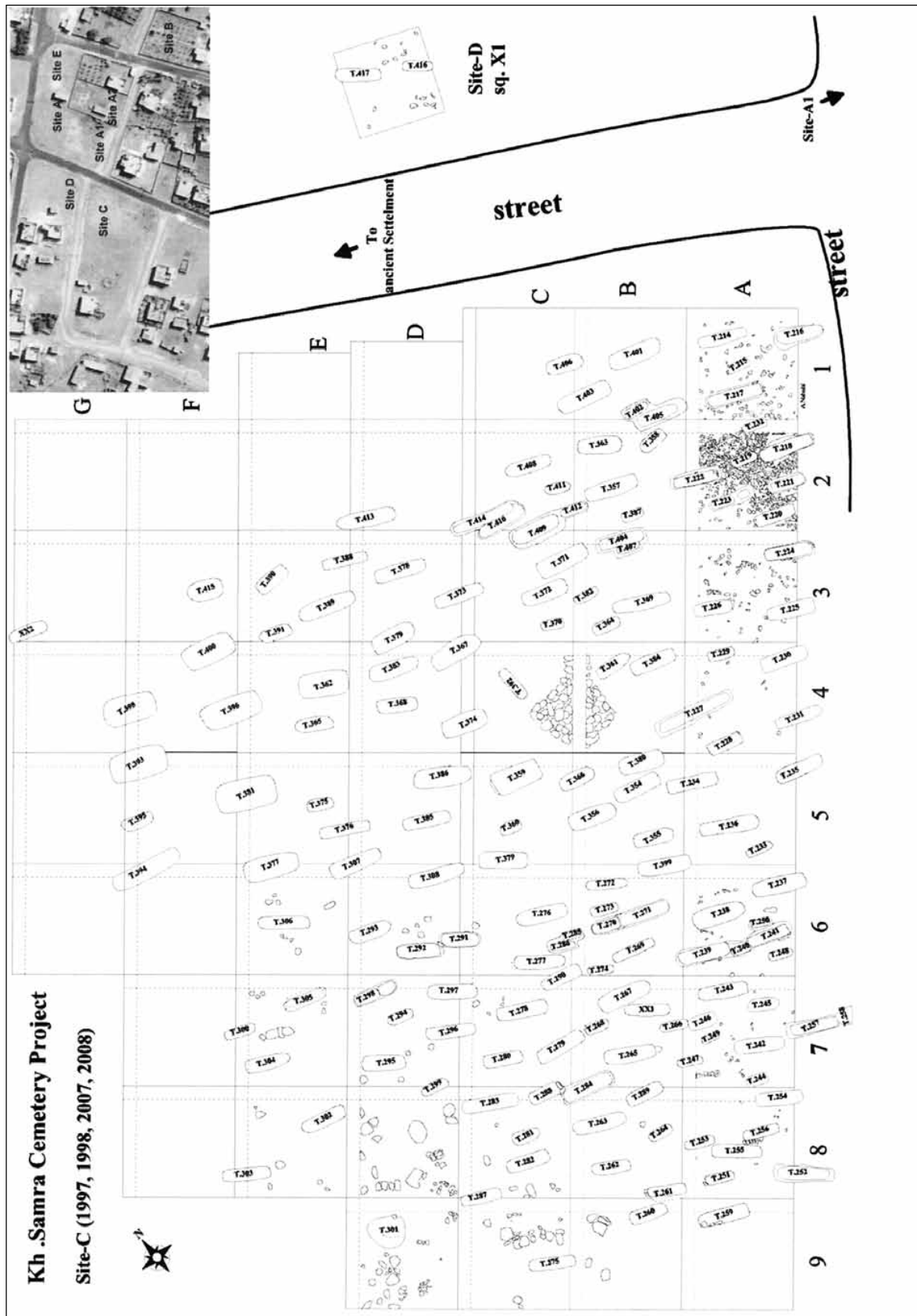
Contrary to our predictions, no tombs were found north of a line extending from Square G3 to the upper part of Square C1, though some of the 'empty' squares were dug much deeper than the standard 20-30cm. Site A1 is located on the opposite side of the road and extends further northwards. Since the cemetery was expected to expand northwards beyond Site C, a 4 x 4m square (D-X1) was excavated at Site D. This site is located north of Site C, on the opposite side of the modern road leading to the ancient town. Two tombs were found and excavated in that square (Fig. 1). This confirms the cemetery's extension

to the north. The empty space between Sites C and D could be part of an old road or pathway from the ancient settlement that may have run through the cemetery itself. This suspected road ended either in the cemetery, somewhere before reaching the area of Site A1, or it turned to the north. The recent growth of the modern village prevents this hypothesis from being tested.

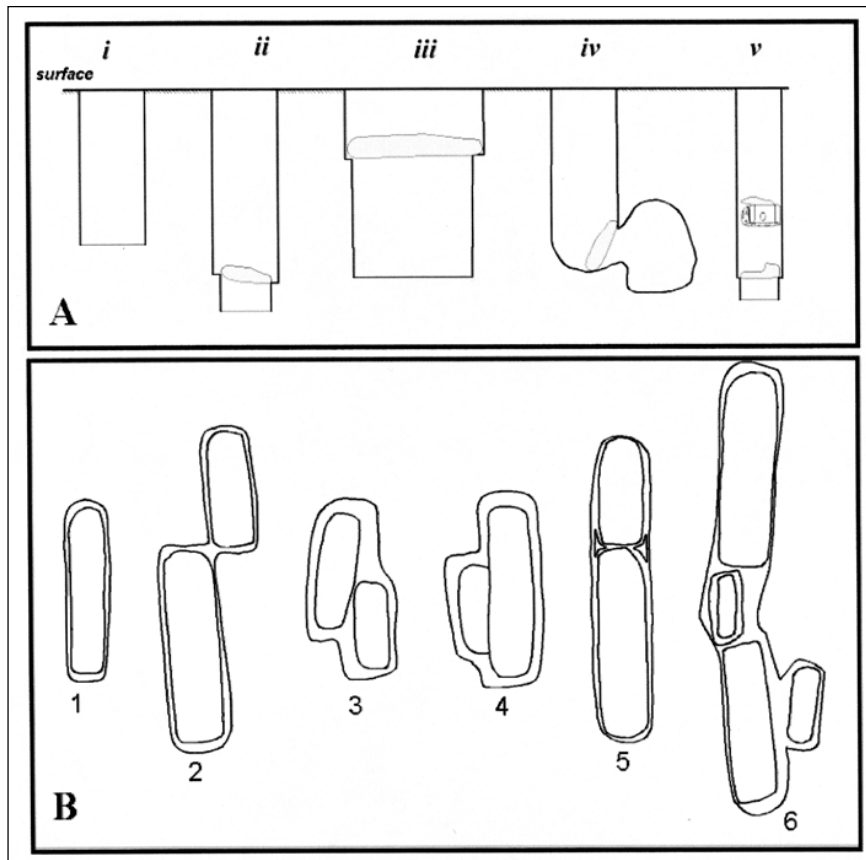
The site reflects the cemetery's general organization of parallel lines of tombs orientated east-west. Tomb 392, with its north-south axis is an exception. Further division in 'family' areas has already been suggested (Nabulsi *et al.* 2008). The deceased were buried on their backs, with variations in the positioning of the head and limbs. At the surface, tombstones were positioned at either end to mark the graves. Three tombs revealed small, shallow pits contiguous with their shafts: Tombs 277 and 359 to the west, and Tomb 265 to the east. It is probable that these were sockets for the tombstones. The west tombstone of Tomb 280 was found *in situ*; its engraved side had a cross and Greek inscription, and faced eastwards.

All excavated tombs in the cemetery were shaft-tombs with variations in the burial chamber. At Site C, five types of tomb were differentiated (Fig. 2A):

- i. Shallow pit tomb with no 'shoulders'.
- ii. Cist-tomb with 'shoulders' and stone covering slabs; burial chamber less than 60cm wide.
- iii. Large cist-tombs similar to Type (ii), but with broad (> 75cm), relatively high burial chamber covered by huge stone slabs.
- iv. Burial cist hollowed out of either of the broad sides, and closed with diagonally placed slabs.
- v. Two 'storey' cist-tombs, with two distinct



1. The complete excavated area of Site C; the top corner of the satellite picture of the modern village shows the excavation sites within the ancient cemetery (source Google Maps).



2. Tomb variation at Site C (details in the text).

A. Variation in burial chamber.

B. Variation in tomb arrangement.

burial chambers at different levels.

Type (iii) is restricted to specific areas of Site C. The other types were found in various parts of this site, and at other sites in the cemetery. Type (ii) is the standard form. Types (i), (iv) and (v) were documented in ten, three and one tombs respectively.

Tombs were situated at varying distances from their neighbours. In some cases, two or more tombs were dug so close to each other that they shared – partially or completely – at least one side, thereby forming a long or broad shaft. These tomb arrangements were classified in 6 types (**Fig. 2B**; also **Fig. 1** for examples):

1. Single: the standard tomb with a distinct shaft.
2. In-line: the tombs, often two, are joined at one of the narrow sides.
3. Corner-linked: two adjacent tombs with shared corners.
4. Partly parallel: two tombs partly open to one another along the broad side.
5. Parallel: two completely parallel tombs sharing one open broad side.
6. Complex: a cluster of three or more tombs re-

vealing variable combinations of Types 2-5.

A total of 157 tombs were excavated at the site, 53 of which were intact. Most tombs were single burials, but graves with multiple (two to three) burials were relatively common. Fragmentary human bones were found in the fill of some intact tombs. In Tomb 290, a cranium was placed in the lower south corner, on the stone slabs, while the postcranial remains were piled at the eastern end in the burial cist. These observations suggest extensive re-use of tombs. It was estimated that at least 40 % of the tombs were re-used, either by means of multiple insertions, or by discard and re-interment. This observation is presently valid for Site C only.

### Objects and Tomb Offerings

Some of the objects found at Site C have been discussed in previous reports and many are still under study. Only a generalized inventory of objects is presented here (**Table 1**).

Objects were recovered from 89 (or 57 %) of the 157 tombs, as well as from topsoil. Two-thirds of objects can be considered jewellery, including

**Table 1:** Objects recovered at Site C of the Khirbat as-Samrā ancient cemetery during the 1997, 1998, 2007 and 2008 excavations.

<b>Object</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Found in</b>
Bracelet and anklet	45	8 Brz, 30 Fer, 1 Glass, 4 Os, 2 Wood	31 tombs
Beads <sup>(A)</sup>	109 (521)	2 Brz, 54 Glass, 11 Os, 25 Shell, 17 Stone	38 tombs
Buckle	2	1 Brz, 1 Fer	2 tombs
Chain	7	6 Fer, 1 Brz	7 tombs
Cloth	4	Linen (shroud)	4 tombs
Coin	3	2 Brz, 1 Silver	3 tombs
Earring	26	15 Gold, 7 Silver, 1 Brz, 3 Glass	10 tombs
Gems and seals	5	2 Scarabs, 3 Gemstones	5 tombs
Ceramics	4	2 Juglets, 2 Lamps	Topsoil and 3 tombs
Leather	4	Fragments of belt and sandals?	4 tombs
Nail	10	10 Fer, single and multiple occurrences	8 tombs
Necklace	2	1 Brz, 1 Brz / Fer	2 tombs
Pendant	13	2 Brz, 2 Shell, 1 Fer, 3 Glass, 4 Os, 1 Stone	10 tombs
Pin	13	All Ivory hairpins	4 tombs
Plant	6	1 Fruit, 5 Seed	6 tombs
Ring	12	5 Brz, 7 Fer	10 tombs
Spatula	7	5 Brz, 1 Fer, 1 Os	5 tombs
Tombstone	8	5 Engraved with cross, 4 inscribed	Topsoil and 2 tombs
Vessels	12	11 Glass Vase, 1 Alabaster	6 tombs
Wood	10	9 Wood, 1 Charcoal pieces	Topsoil and 5 tombs
Others <sup>(B)</sup>	14	10 Fer, 3 Brz, 1 Cer, 4 Os, 3 Stone	Topsoil and 17 tombs
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>		<b>Topsoil and 89 tombs</b>

Key: brz = bronze, fer = iron, os = bone, cer = ceramic.  
<sup>(a)</sup> = sum of types found in each tomb, total number in brackets.  
<sup>(b)</sup> = includes cleats, a stone axe and other fragmentary and indefinable objects.

rings and earrings, anklets and bracelets, various beads, pendants and necklaces, as well as gemstones. These were made of various materials, particularly iron, bronze and glass. They also include 15 gold and seven silver earrings. Together with cosmetic items (e.g. spatulae, hairpins and associated glass vessels), 75 % of objects can tentatively be considered female-related.

Tomb 292 is a special case. The intact burial of a 14 to 15 year-old girl included more than 50 items, i.e. 20 % of the 316 objects found at the site. Jewellery objects were concentrated on and around the upper body. The girl was buried wearing bracelets on the upper and lower arms. Below her feet, three glass vases and one alabaster pot, containing a fossilized mammalian

bone fragment, were placed. Other material, including iron nails, wood and linen cloth fragments, could be associated with funerary rites. It is highly probable that the deceased was buried wrapped in a linen shroud, or laid on a wooden stretcher -- if not in a wooden coffin. Other objects, such as iron cleats and large nails, found in other tombs indicate that cloth and occasionally wooden coffins were used in burial practices.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The significance of Site C as part of the systematic excavations in the Khirbat as-Samrā ancient cemetery can best be comprehended in comparison with Site B, which was excavated in 1996.

Site C had greater variation in tomb types and arrangements, relatively frequent multiple burials and no religious objects, except for two tombstones with engraved crosses. Site B yielded twice as many objects as Site C, many of which are suggestive of a 'Christian' background (Nabulsi 2007). Objects date Site B to the seventh and eighth centuries AD, whereas C is probably earlier. The 53 intact tombs at Site C (cf. 4 out of 130 at Site B) are extremely significant, as is the relatively better state of preservation of the human bone. Whereas most of the individuals buried at Site B were sub-adults (Nabulsi 1998), the majority of tombs in Site C contained adult burials. It was observed that secondarily-used tombstones, serving as covering slabs, were placed with the engraved side looking into the burial cist at Site C, whereas Site B revealed the opposite (see pictures in Humbert 1998: 268-269).

The diversity so far revealed at this cemetery is a reflection of the systematic nature of the work carried out. Subsequent archaeological and biological studies will probably provide more definitive results and interpretations. Comparison with other cemeteries, particularly those with archaeological or geographical parallels, e.g. Umm al-Jimal (Brashler 1995), will yield essential comparative data and information on the history and structure of local populations.

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### Addendum

In the 2008 report (Nabulsi *et al.* 2008), it was suggested that a basalt stone (represented by fragments KS-1331 and KS-1332) with an engraved North Arabic / Safaitic inscription had probably been intentionally damaged with a chisel. Another fragment (KS-1382) was found on the last day of the 2007 season. Later, in 2008, it was recognized to be the lower part of the inscribed stone. One can clearly observe the continuation of the upper frame (**Fig. 3**). The chisel marks continued on to the non-inscribed part of the stone, and were not restricted to the area of text. The damage to the inscription was thus circumstantial and not intentional, as we first suggested. The stone was probably erected as a tombstone.

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3. Fragments KS-1331, KS-1332 and KS-1382 of the North Arabic / Safaitic inscribed tombstone.

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