

THE 2007 SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS AT KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ ANCIENT CEMETERY

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Introduction

The objectives of the 2007 excavation at Site-C were to determine the western boundaries of the ancient cemetery at Khirbat as-Samrā, increase qualitatively and quantitatively the human skeletal sample, and to obtain further archaeological evidence concerning the cemetery as a whole. Site-C is supposed to cover the western edge of the cemetery. The 1997 and 1998 excavations at this site resulted in determining the cemetery's southern boundary. It is the least molested part of the cemetery. About 40% of the 95 excavated tombs were intact, many with multiple burials (Nabulsi *et al.* 2007). This report outlines some observations and results of the seventh season of excavations in the cemetery.

The Excavation at Site C

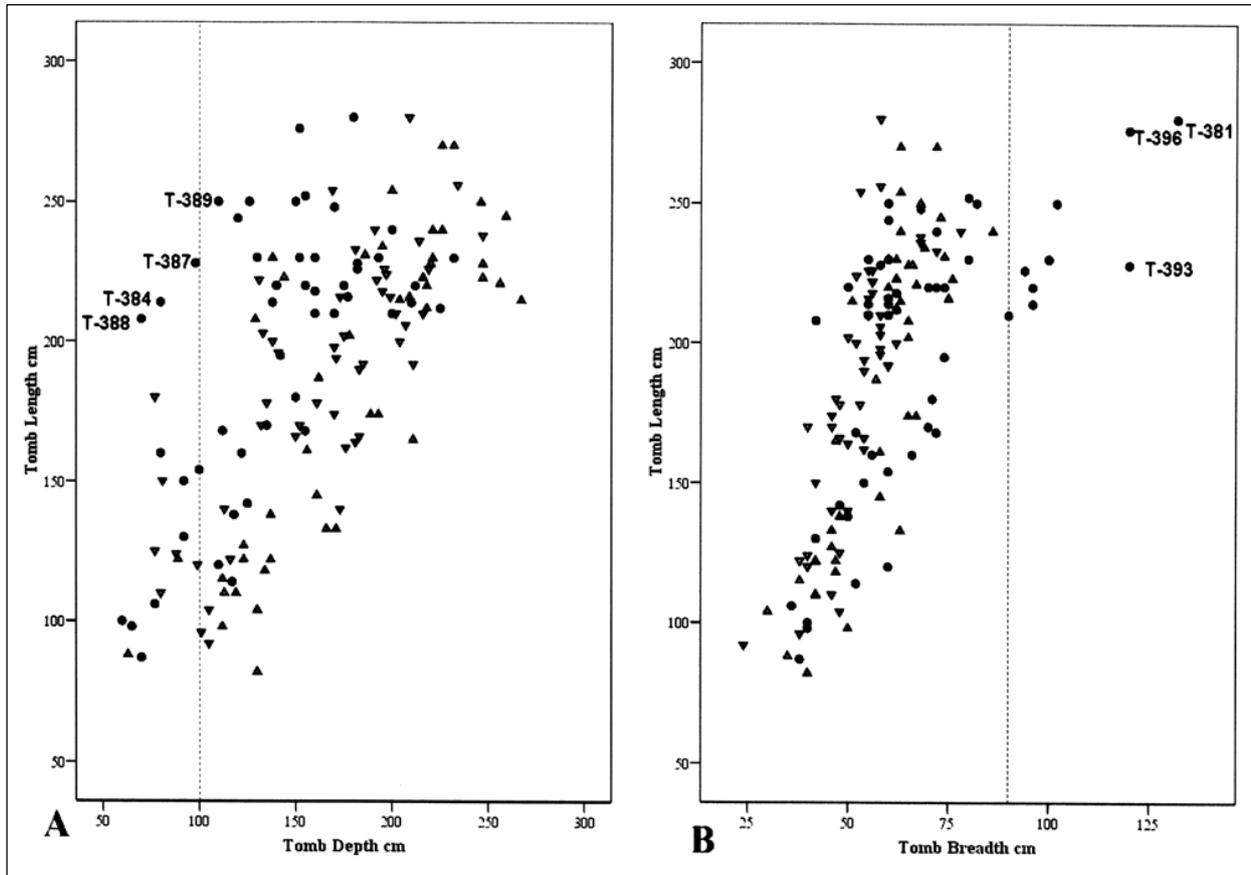
The excavations were carried from 28th July to 6th September 2007. Based on a previously set 5x5m grid of six rows (A to F from east to west) and nine columns (1 to 9 from North to south), 15 squares were opened starting by square B5 extending northwards and westwards. A total of 50 tombs were excavated, 11 of which were intact. Some tombs extended beyond row F, i.e. few meters beyond the expected cemetery margin and about 80m from the ancient city.

The excavated tombs were variably and generally more thinner distributed than previously observed. Many evidently adult tombs, over 2m in length, were significantly shallower than those found in 1997 and 1998 (Fig. 1A). The correlation coefficient between tomb length and depth fell from 0.776 to 0.654 after adding the 2007 data. The tombs 378, 388 and 389 are not only shallow but also have neither shoulders nor covering slaps. Also there is no evidence for the use of a coffin of any type. Tomb-403, a slap-

grave, revealed 4 iron cleats of rectangular shape *in situ*, one in each corner of the tomb, as well as other displaced ones. Clumps of decomposed wood stuck on the "inner" surfaces of the cleats. This indicates the use of a wooden coffin in this particular tomb.

The lateral west part of the excavated part revealed a distinctive area of markedly broad tombs with broad shoulders and massive (>1m long, 30-60cm broad and ca.20cm thick) rough-cut basalt slaps. These slaps are similar to boulders used in buildings at the ancient settlement. Remnants of the white plaster used to seal the slaps were found on some stones. At Umm al-Jimāl, Brashler (1995) excavated similarly structured Byzantine tomb, though Khirbat as-Samrā tombs involved single burials. Tomb-381 is the largest excavated tomb in the cemetery (280x132x176cm). The huge stone slaps were ca. 50cm below the surface leaving a 1m deep burial cist. The almost decomposed human remains were laid stretched at one side; apparently to make room for following burial(s), something which did not happen.

A large pile of stones covering some 20m² distorted the excavated area. Four tombstones were found in the pile, all with engraved crosses. One of them, tombstone KS-1326 (Fig. 2), has an Aramaic or "araméenne melkite", according to Desreumaux (1998), inscription engraved below the cross. Local information suggested that this particular area used to be a sewage drainage pit of a local house demolished some 30 years ago. The pit was then filled with the stone debris. Further efforts to clear the stones were consequently abandoned. During the last seasons, it was possible to confirm observations on the tomb desecration that was carried around 1910s. In two incidents, the socket of the tombstone



1. Plot of Site-C tomb length against tomb depth (A) and tomb width (B). Circles represent tombs excavated in 2007, triangles tombs excavated in 1997 and 1998.



2. Tombstone KS-1326 with engraved cross and araméenne melkite inscription.

was found on the tomb’s eastern end. When Savigniac (1925) visited the site he recognized the cemetery by the then field of tombstones. He also noticed disturbances in some tombs that were easy to locate from the surface. Tombstones were used to locate tomb. Those without a tombstone, for one reason or another, have had a better chance to escape being looted. Probably most of the tombstones in the area covering Site-C were displaced before the 20th century. Thus many tombs remained “unmolested” prior excavations. All tombstones disappeared from the surface decades ago.

Objects and Other Finds

A moderate number of objects and tomb offerings were retrieved during this season. These include few gold and silver earrings and a moderate number of cheap jewellery of various materials. Most objects were fragmentary and incomplete.

Yet, some interesting objects were found.

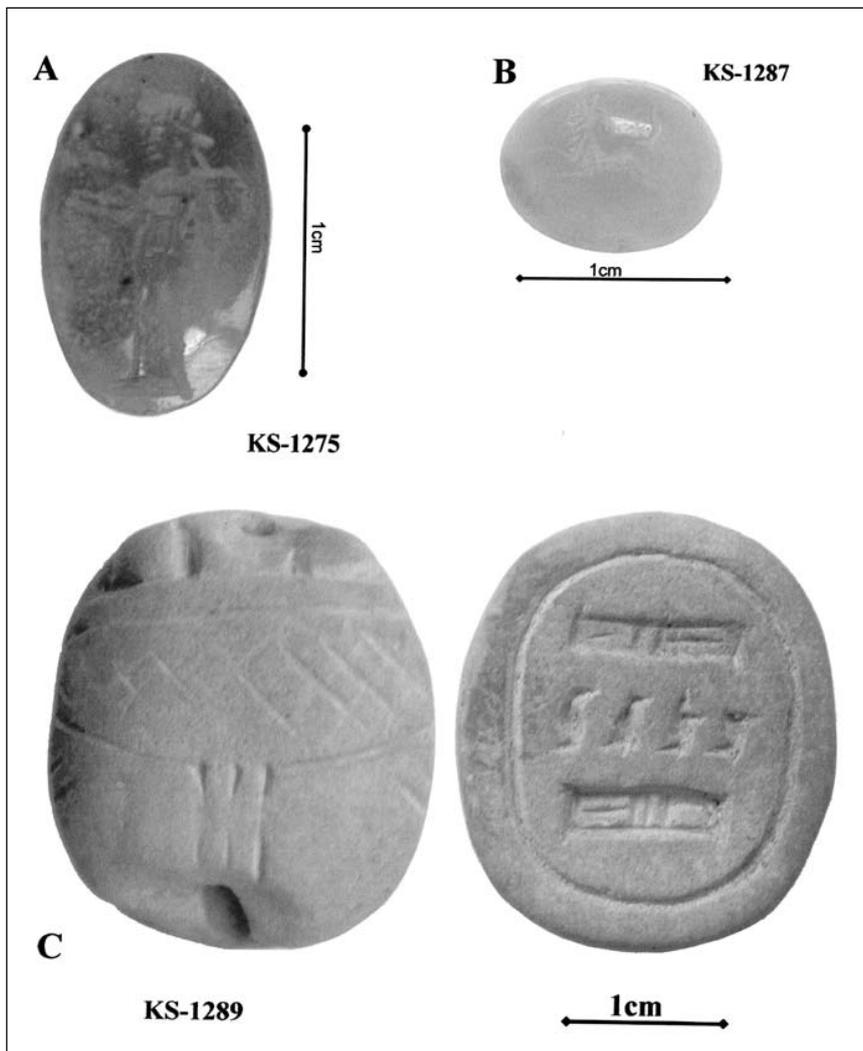
Among them are two gemstones (**Fig. 3A and B**). The first, KS-1275, is a oval flat bezel of cornelian stone, 13.4x8.5x3.4mm in size. The engraving on the flat side represents a standing female, probably Hygeia the Greek goddess of health and daughter of Asklepios, holding a snake with her left arm and with a bowl in her right hand (Croissant 1990). This stone, datable to 2nd-4th century AD, was found in Tomb-392 that contrary to all other tombs have a North-South axis. The second, KS-1287, is also a cornelian, oval and 10.7x8.8x3.2mm in size. It has a crude lion engraved on its flat side. It is probably of an earlier date than KS-1275.

KS-1289 is an olive green steatite stone, oval shaped and 25.8x21x10mm in size (**Fig. 3C**). The convex side is decorated with geometric lines. The stamp is a cartouche including four

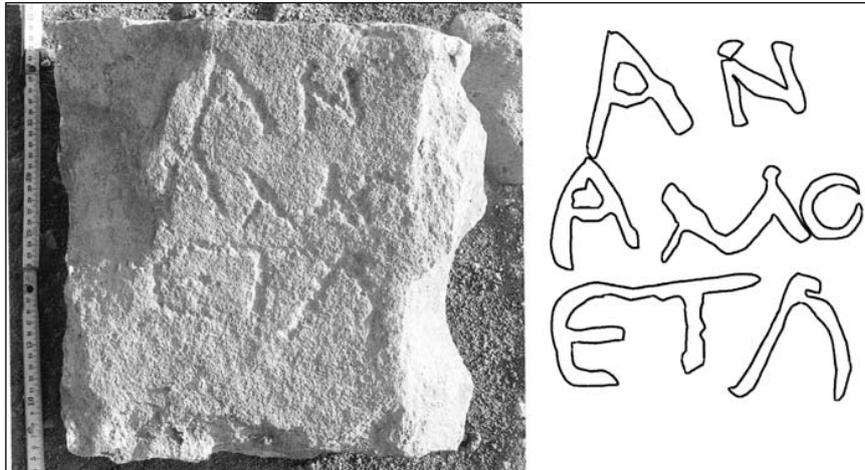
variable s-shaped elements between two vertical decorative bands. The stone looks like an imitation of old Egyptian scarabs, not unusual in Palestine and Jordan in Iron Age contexts (Keel and Egger 2006), but no later reference was found. This case requires further investigation. The stone is perforated through the long axis like a large bead and was used as an amulet-pendant. It was found in the intact Tomb-358, involving a child burial. Tomb-358 also included the engraved tombstone KS-1325, reused as covering slaps. It is a light brown limestone, 36x35x18cm in size.

Tombstone KS-1325

Three lines of Greek letters are engraved on the stone KS-1325 (**Fig. 4**). Although the left corner is damaged, it is clear that no character



3. Gemstones from the 2007 excavation.



4. Tombstone KS-1325 with its Greek inscription. The stone was reused as a covering slab in Tomb-358.

is missing. The alignment of the first letters in each line supports this observation.

The first line includes two letters AN only. The second line starts with an A. The second letter M is closely attached to the partly damaged O to the right. The clearly readable AN in the first line is too short for a personal name and meaningless as a short form. Hence, the first two lines are to be connected: AN/AMO = ANAMO. This form has no corresponding Greek or Latin name. For the meaning, it is easier to consider the Semitic root *n'm*, which is documented in personal names the Arabic (Nu'aim), over to the biblical Hebrew (comp. Na'em, Na'ama, No'mi) and the Palmyran Syrian (Wuthnow 1930). Desreumaux (1998: 488) offers a name in a Syrian inscription (Nw'ymw) on tombstones from Khirbat as-Samrā (S.0655 and S.0655) and provides an overview including other in Greek (NAOM) from different sites. Whether the writing AN/AMO = ANAMO is a derived from *n'm* with prosthetic Aleph (= *An'am) or a writing error (= *Na'amo) remains to be a subject of own discretion. This is also the case for the ending O. Since the letter A occurs twice in the text but not at the end, it is possible to interpret the Greek O meaning the Arabic U.

The third line starts with an E, followed by T and Λ (=L). The text formulation of comparative tombstones (Canova 1954; Gatier 1998) reveal the name of the deceased and his or her age. Other statements on the father's name or common terms, such as *θαρο(ε)ι*, could be added. The letter Λ in the third line probably refers to the number 30. Thus, the line means: εΤ (ωΝ)Λ or "(died at the age of) 30 years". The whole text

is "*An'amu (*Na'amu) of 30 years".

The letters form indicate a dating of stone KS-1325 before the fourth century AD Tomb-358, where it was reused as a covering slab, is of a later date.

Inscription KS-1331 and KS-1332

Two fragments of an inscribed basalt stone were found as part of the covering slaps of the already molested Tomb-357. The inscription on these fragments, KS-1331 and KS-1332, together 55x40x15cm (Fig. 5) are north Arabic Safaitic. The original stone was evidently cut across and oblong so that part of the text is lost with the missing part(s). The inscription is the 8th of its kind to be found in Khirbat as-Samrā. Other



5. The two fitting fragments, KS-1331 and KS-1332, of a basalt stone with North Arabic (Safaitic) inscription. The arrow (top right) marks the supposed text start. Based on the table of characters suggested by Knauf (1998), the text starts with the characters equivalent to the Arabic letters "ج", "ع" or "ح". Notice the chisel marks along the detachment line. Remains of a frame are seen along the lower side of KS-1332.

than being the first to be found in the cemetery, the three-lined text was engraved on a prepared cut-stone with a relative flat surface. Marks of a simple frame can be seen on the lower edge of KS-1332. The text appears to be dedicative. It is not known if the original stone was placed vertically or erected horizontally somewhere in the ancient settlement or the cemetery. Presently, the condition of the stone fragments is of relevance. It is clear that the chisel marks damaged the inscription. Furthermore, the two fragments were placed near each other in the tomb. It would not have made a difference to leave the inscribed stone intact, given the size of other slabs used in Tomb-357 and others nearby. It appears that the damage to this stone was intentional.

The aim of defining the western boundary of the ancient Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery was not achieved in this season of excavations. The total number of excavated tombs was raised to 403 and the human osteological sample was improved. Previous observations on the cemetery's organization became physically substantiated. The appearance of the safaitic text adds to the epigraphic richness of the site in Khirbat as-Samrā as a whole.

Acknowledgement

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