

FIVE ROCK CUT SHAFT TOMBS FROM WĀDĪ AL-MAṬĀḤA

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Five rock-cut shaft tombs excavated in Wādi al-Maṭāḥa between 1999 and 2005 provide information for estimating period of use and burial practices employed. Close grouping of the tombs, together with commonalities of orientation and general lack of grave goods suggest that these tombs represent the burials of a lower class family group. Furthermore, the general setting of the shaft burials appears to link the context of ritual physical structure to the more ephemeral construction of social structure and funerary practice.

Introduction

In 2005, Brigham Young University's Wādi al-Maṭāḥa Expedition completed the excavation of five rock cut shaft tombs begun in 1999. These shaft tombs are located on the ridge to the west and above the main bed of the Wādi al-Maṭāḥa and approximately 500 meters south of the entrance to the water channel running through the Wādi Muḏḥlin. This ridge separates two major sets of rock cut façade tombs, No. 669A to the north and No. 668 to the south as numbered in the survey of Brunnow and Domeski.

The rock cut shafts, identified as Site 4 (Fig. 1), run in a line consecutively north-northeast to south-southwest. Each was designated as A, B, C, D or E, with Tomb A located to the east nearest the Wādi al-Maṭāḥa and Tomb E situated farthest to the west (Fig. 2). Each shaft tomb was excavated stratigraphically using only trowels and small tools. All excavated material was sifted through a 4mm screen. Except for the lower portion of shaft grave D, a double burial in which a grave cover was intact over the lower portion, all of the graves had been partially disturbed in antiquity.

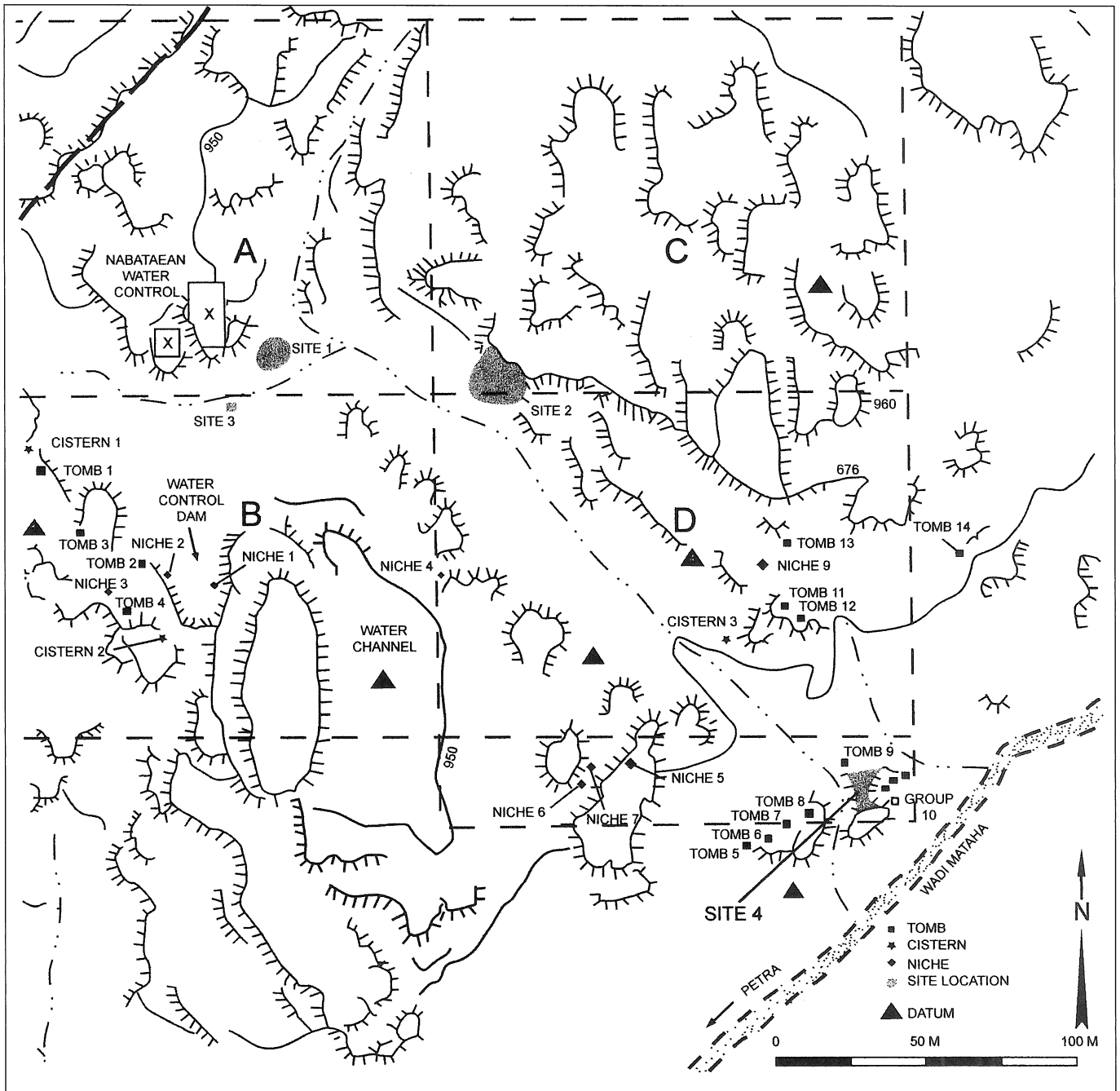
Description

Shaft Tomb A (Fig. 3): located farthest to the east measures 200cm long, 55cm wide, and 115cm deep. At 47cm depth is a stone lip approximately 10cm wide that probably served as a platform for slab cover stones over the grave. Three stratigraphic units (SU) were excavated in shaft Tomb A. Stratigraphic unit 1 consisted of tan to light brown loose soil containing no artifacts. Below SU 1 was a layer of loose rocks (SU 2), most of which measured approximately 19-22cm in size. Below these rocks was SU 3, a darker brown soil containing pottery shards and human remains.

The dominant types of ceramic shards present in shaft Tomb A were fine orange wares with tan or light tan slips, and Nabataean light red painted wares. Some of the ceramics had horizontal and vertical ribbing. Plates, bowls, and large bowls were represented. These pottery forms indicate an early-to mid-late first century AD date for this burial.

The human bone scatter was concentrated on both the north and south ends of the grave in SU 3. Twelve fragments of a skeleton were present: the distal ends of a left tibia and right ulna, the scapula of a child, a right molar, two tibial proximal ends, the unossified distal end of a fibula, a temporal mastoid process, a femur shaft piece, and a possible occipital bone. A fragment of mandible included the mental foramen; also present was a portion of the maxilla with an erupting tooth in place. The scapula and unossified fibula suggest that these are the remains of a small, young individual between the ages of 8-14. The burial appeared to be primary, with the body extended and the head oriented northeast.

Shaft Tomb B (Fig. 4): measures 200cm long,



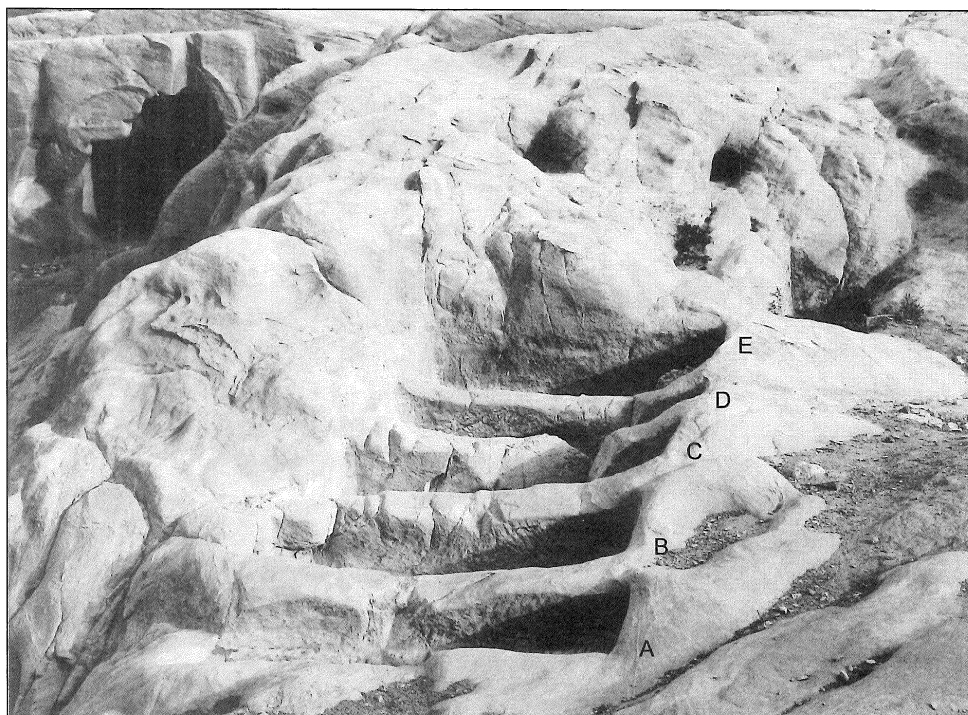
1. Reconnaissance Site Map, Wādī al-Maṭāḥa.

59cm wide, and 115cm deep. At 45cm below the ground surface is a lip approximately 11cm wide that served as the platform for cist cover stones. One of the cover stones was still present at the time of excavation, tilted into the grave and lying within the first two soil layers.

Five stratigraphic units were identified in Tomb B. SU 1 consisted of a loose tan to light brown soil containing some shards. SU 2 was a darker, loose soil incorporating a small amount of bone fragments, while SU 3 consisted of a layer of rounded rocks. Below the rock layer

were two levels of hard packed sediment – SU 4, a brownish red soil with evidence of bone, pottery, and cement and SU 5, a hard packed mixture of clay and sand with red and yellow streaks. SU 5 also contained human bone and pottery.

Pottery shards contained within stratigraphic units 1 and 2 consisted mainly of orange wares with tan slips and dark red painted Nabataean fine wares, as well as exterior black painted orange wares with ring bases, indicating a second century AD period of deposition. The lower



2. Photograph of Site 4 Shaft Tombs A through E.



3. Plan View Photograph of Shaft Tomb A.

two stratigraphic units (SU 4 and SU 5) held a heavier concentration of pottery. Forms present included plates, bowls, jugs and unguentaria in orange ware with tan slips and fine ribbing, as



4. Plan View Photograph of Shaft Tomb B.

well as Nabataean light-red painted wares, all indicating an initial date for this burial as the early to mid first century AD.

Human skeletal remains identified from SU 2

included portions of the left and right feet including phalanx shafts, portions of all ten metatarsals, and six nearly complete second phalanges measuring 1.35, 2.0, 2.0, 1.85, 2.0, and 2.0cm in length respectively, along with several tarsal bones including one talus. Also present were one first and possibly a third cuneiform bone from the wrist. These bones were concentrated in the southern portion of the shaft tomb.

A single lumbar vertebra and mandible were recovered from SU 4 in the northern portion of the grave. An erupting first molar and a second premolar which was beginning to erupt remained in place in the mandible. SU 5 contained a femur, a tibia, and a fibula. The femur was located mid-grave on the west side, oriented with the proximal end north and posterior side down. The *linea aspera* measures 26mm from front to back and 30mm from left to right. The tibia and fibula were both found south of the femur with the fibula east of the tibia. Extant parts of the tibia consist of three pieces from its lower half. The tibia fragments are unossified, measuring 18mm from front to back and 21mm wide at the mid-shaft. At its mid-shaft, the fibula measures 13mm wide. The unossified tibia and early stages of tooth eruption point to a young individual between the ages of 10-14. This burial was probably partially disturbed, though the bone location seems to indicate a primary extended burial with the head oriented to the northeast.

Grave goods consisted of a triangular shaped stone measuring approximately 10 x 9 x 13cm. One side of the stone is distinctly worked and flat. The stone, along with a fragment of a rosetted lamp, was found in SU 4 near the fibula shaft.

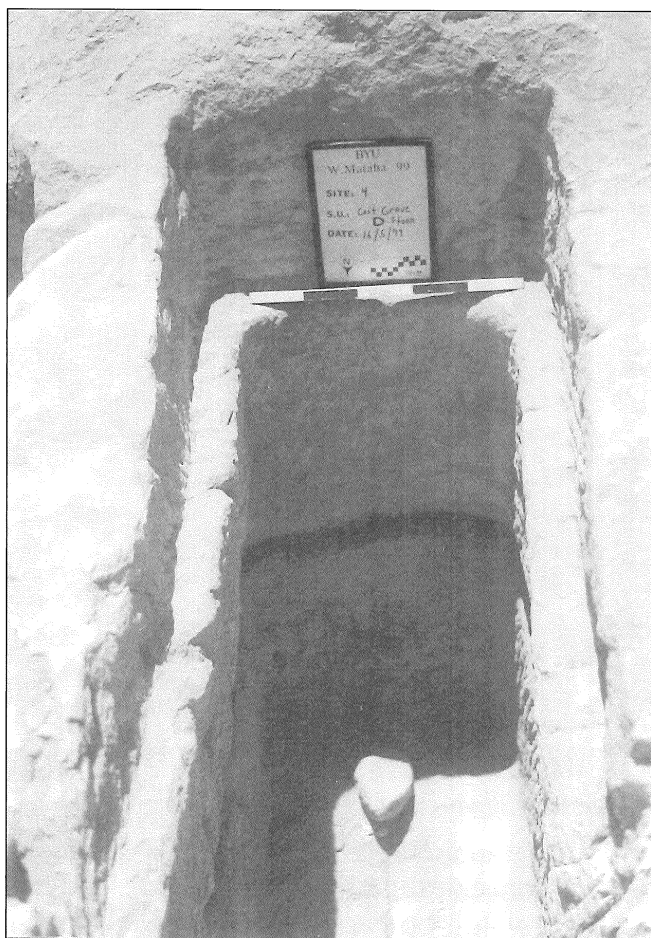
Shaft Tomb C (Fig. 2): is 200cm long, 53cm wide, and 130cm deep. Each of east and west sides of the shaft features a 2cm wide lip lying at 48cm depth. Two stratigraphic units were identified in Tomb C. SU 1 was a loose, tan to light-brown sandy soil. SU 2 below it consisted of a harder packed, darker brown, sandy soil.

Nabataean thin orange ware plates and bowls with tan and white slips on the rims, as well as some fragments of Nabataean dark red-on-orange fine painted wares formed a heavy concentration of ceramic shards in SU 1. Present in SU 2 was a similar mix of shards with the addition

of fine ware cup and unguentaria fragments, indicating a late first century AD date for this burial.

Skeletal remains from Shaft Tomb C consisted of mid body parts. Two ischium fragments, small rib fragments, a vertebra and a clavicle were found in the center of the tomb in SU 1. The south and north ends of SU 2 contained skeletal remains from both the lower and upper body. Lower skeletal bones consisted of a fragmentary femur, tibia, and fibula. Upper body remains were all skull fragments, consisting of an occipital bone with crest and 6mm thick lambdoidal suture, a temporal bone with mastoid process, a sphenoid, and a mandible with an intact mental foramen. These remains appear to represent an adult burial, probably secondary, oriented with the head northeast. One lithic tool, a chert scraper, was found with the pottery shards in SU 2.

Shaft Tomb D (Fig. 5): measuring approximately 204 x 65 x 157cm in size is interesting because it is a double level tomb. A top, grooved,



5. Plan View Photograph of Shaft Tomb D.

slab cover lip situated 27cm below the top of the tomb lip on the south side runs around the entire perimeter of the tomb at that level. A second, grooved slab cover lip located 80cm lower down also runs around the entire perimeter of the tomb. Two hand or toe holds have been cut into the western and eastern sides of the tomb. The top of the western hole is located 42cm from the top of the tomb and lies centered about 85cm from the southern wall. The hole measures 8cm long by 15cm wide. A long groove filled with pieces of white sandstone about 10cm deep and 6cm wide lies in the bottom of the tomb.

Four stratigraphic units were identified in Tomb D. SU 1 was an obviously disturbed light tan soil with a loose, darker brown soil (SU 2) below it. In the northern end of the grave, SU 2 lay above an intact slab covering stone. Below the slab were two layers of much harder packed, darker brown soils (SU 3 and SU 4) containing pottery and human bone, probably intact from antiquity.

SU 1 contained a scant concentration of pottery, mainly fragments of orange ware bowls with tan slips, and a ribbed store jar handle. SU 2 contained a heavier concentration of orange ware bowls, cups, and cooking pots with tan slips, along with fragments of dark red-on-orange Nabataean fine painted wares. SU 3 contained a few shards of orange ware while SU 4 had a heavier concentration of orange ware plates, bowls, and cooking pots. A few shards of dark red-on-orange ware fine Nabataean painted plates were also included in the concentration. Based on the pottery, this tomb probably dates to the late first century AD.

Human remains from SU 2 indicate multiple secondary burials. Skeletal fragments include a juvenile (suggested by a right tibia with a slight anterior crest), and at least one adult represented by an adult fibula, carpal phalanx, two tarsal phalanges and a metatarsal. SU 3 contained an adult pelvic fragment including the femur socket and sciatic notch. The width of the notch indicates that this burial is probably a female. Also found were an adult tibia shaft, a femur ball joint, three adult carpal phalanges, one adult first toe tarsal phalanx, the distal end of a fibula, a sub-adult patella, tarsals, rib fragments, and a probable radius. SU 4 contained skull fragments including the eye orbital area, an occipital bone with small

protuberance (female), and a number of occipital and parietal fragments. All long bones recovered from the cist were oriented in a northeast to southeast direction.

Shaft Tomb E (Fig. 2): is 204cm long, 66cm wide, and 89cm deep, with a 12cm wide lip sitting at a depth of 52cm. Three stratigraphic units were identified in this tomb. SU 1 was a loose, tan to light brown, sandy soil containing a small amount of human remains as well as several large rocks, including a piece of basalt that may have been deliberately placed on the northeast end. SU 2 consisted of a slightly darker, loose, brown, sandy soil located in the northeast end of the tomb but which disappeared at about 50cm from that end. Below these two units was SU 3, a hard packed, reddish-tan sand containing bone and pottery fragments.

Pottery recovered from SU 1 consisted of a fragment of ceramic roof tile. SU 3 contained a concentration of orange ware shards of plates and jugs, including dark red-on-orange fine Nabataean painted wares, indicating a late first century AD date.

Human remains found in SU 1 indicate the secondary burial of at least one sub-adult based on the presence of a group of fragmentary ribs together with both the right and left clavicle. SU 3 contained one proximal tarsal phalanx, the distal end of a humerus, long bone fragments, and a sub-adult patella. A tibia and a femur fragment were recovered from the south end of the grave, while a radius, ulna, rib, metacarpal and wrist bones were identified from the northern end. Skull fragments and a scapula were found just south of the metacarpal and wrist bones.

Site Interpretation and Conclusion

Lenoble *et al.* (2001) suggest that Nabataean burial practices reflect “a social structure associating a main family, that of the ancestor (founder of the monumental tomb), a family linked to a sanctuary, and ordinary peasant families.” This concept of family grouping and relationships with lower class families is probably reflected in shaft Tombs A-E in Wādi al-Maṭāḥa. The close grouping of the shaft tombs, the presence of adult and sub-adult individuals, the common orientation, the similarity of the pottery artifacts and the general lack of other burial or

grave goods suggest a lower class family group. At least superficially, gender distinctions in the burial ritual are not evident, though there is a hint of differing treatment of bodily remains in terms of age (indicated by the primary burial and orientation of the youths in Tombs A and B).

As this group of tombs is located directly above and to the southwest of the more complex rock-cut tomb group complex 10, and also in close proximity to three offering niches directly to the west, the tombs appear to be linked to a main (ancestral) family as suggested by Lenoble. Indeed there is an open air High Place sanctuary with triclinium located about 100m northwest of the Site 4 tomb complex. The physical location of these tombs suggests that the horizontal dimension existed within Nabataean society, which recognized interrelationships between individuals and groups separate from the vertical dimension dependent on wealth and power. The general setting of these five shaft burials at Wādī al-Maṭāḥa appears to link the context of ritual physical structure to the more ephemeral construct of social interaction, religious belief, and funerary practice.

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