

THE 1996 EXCAVATION SEASON AT KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ' THE BYZANTINE CEMETERY SITE B

by

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The systematic excavation of the still accessible areas within the ancient Byzantine cemetery was resumed in the 11th campaign at Khirbat as-Samrā' (1996)¹ aiming at concluding work at site B already started in the summer of 1995. Site B covers an area of 35x30 m and was divided into 5x5 m squares with 60 cm balks on the southern and eastern sides. In the 1996 season 20 squares were excavated. Tombs were located after clearing down to 50 cm of the top soil, whereby relevant stone structures were uncovered. A total of 66 tombs were excavated, of which only three were undisturbed (Fig.1). In both campaigns, 130 burials were excavated and 4 more were only localised in a 1000 m² area of the site (i.e., 1.34 tombs per 10m²).

In this season the excavated area is complementary to that of the previous one but the extent of damage by pillage was much less (Nabulsi and Humbert 1996). Human bones were missing in three burials only (there were 17 of 64 tombs in the 1995 season). No differences in the cemetery organisation, as indicated by the primitive wall structures dividing the cemetery into different sectors, and tomb architecture were observed. A relatively large number of fragmented ceramic oil lamps were salvaged in the process of top surface clearance. These were homogeneous and datable to the seventh century AD (late Byzantine - early Umayyad), suggesting that site B belongs to the same period.

Analysis of Human Skeletal Remains

The majority of burials excavated were

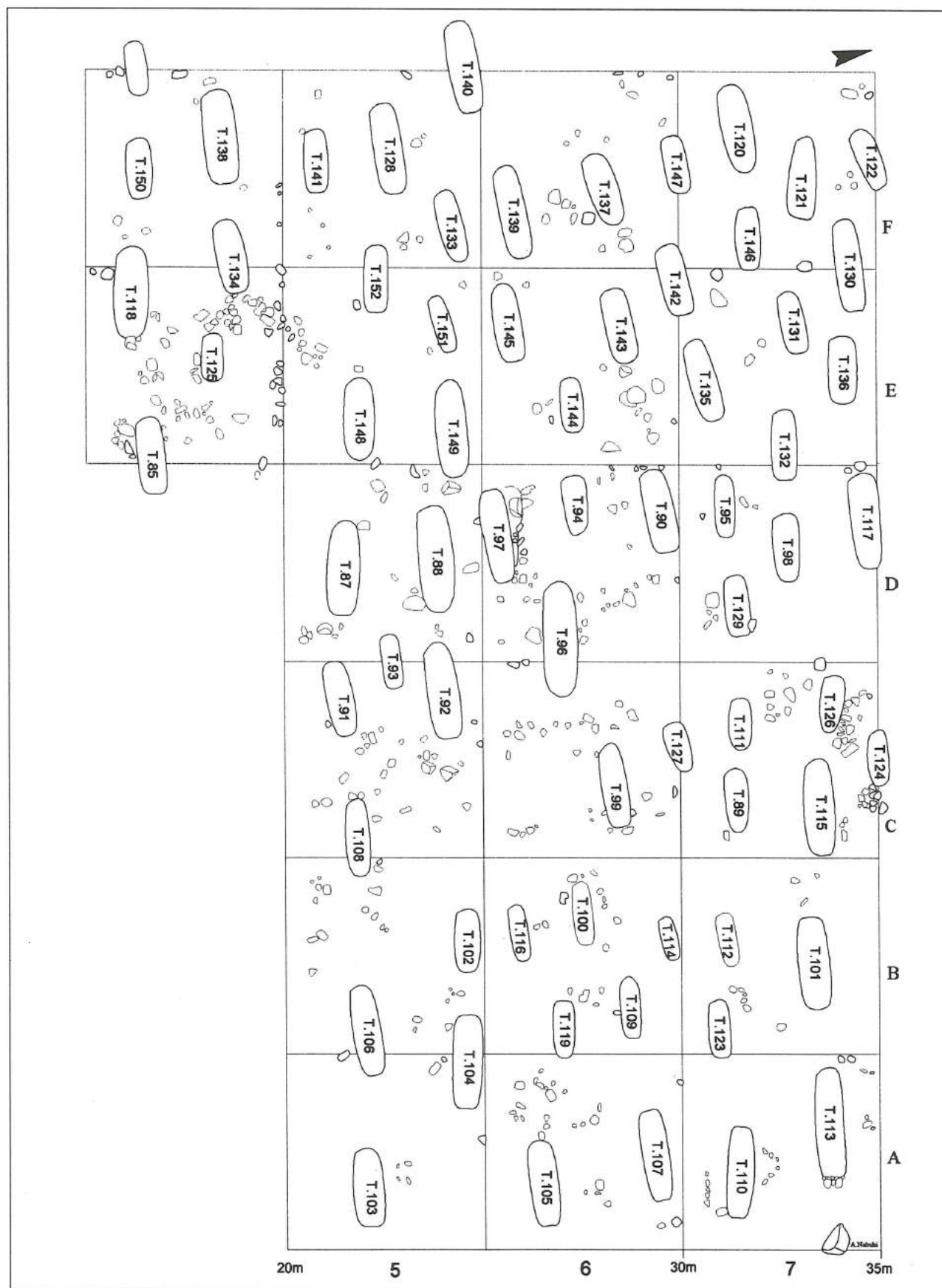
disturbed and the human skeletal remains found varied from near complete to few fragments. Yet, the osteological material was more abundant and less fragile than in previous excavations allowing, in a few cases, *in situ* analysis. In a previous report, the preliminary results of anthropometric, paleopathological and epigenetic analysis were presented (Nabulsi 1996). For more reliable inferences, we prefer to postpone further reporting on these points until excavation is completed. Presently, only the demographic analysis of human bone material excavated from site B are considered.

Age and sex distribution in the skeletal material are presented in Table 1. The obtained data in the 1996 excavation revealed no significant differences towards those of the 1995 season so that site B can be approached as a whole unit. Age distribution in the sample reflects high child mortality of that population: more than 65% of the examined remains belong to non-adults and 44% were less than 5 years old. It is evident that those who reached adulthood seldom survived to the age of 50 years. Accordingly, the estimated mean mortality age ($h=11.55$ years) is very low while the average mortality rate ($m=0.086$) is very high (see methods in Drenhaus 1992). These parameters indicate a population size of ca. 140 individuals.

It is very improbable that a population of this size can maintain itself over a period of 300 years under such a high mortality rate. Besides, the size of the ancient settlement (Humbert 1990) contradicts these estimates. It is most probable that site B represents

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1. Khirbat as-Samrā' Byzantine Cemetery Site B 1996.

Table 1. Age groups and sex distribution in the human skeletal material of site B.

Age group	Site B 1996			Site B 95-96 ^(a)			Total	Anthrop. & Objects. ^(b)		
	F	M	U	F	M	U		F	M	U
0-2 y.	-	-	20	-	-	28	28	-	-	28
2-5 y.	-	-	7	-	-	20	20	-	-	20
5-10 y.	1	-	7	1	-	11	12	4	2	6
10-15 y.	3	1	3	4	1	7	12	5	4	3
Σ non adult	4	1	37	5	1	66	72	9	6	57
15-20 y.	1	2	4	3	3	4	10	5	4	1
20-25 y.	2	2	-	3	5	1	9	3	5	1
25-35 y.	-	2	1	3	4	1	8	3	5	-
35-45 y.	-	3	1	-	3	1	4	1	3	-
>45 y.	-	1	-	1	1	-	2	1	1	-
Adult ^(c)	-	-	2	-	-	5	5	2	-	3
Σ adult	3	10	8	10	16	12	38	15	18	5
no bone ^(d)	-	-	3	-	-	20	20	-	-	20
Σ	7	11	48	15	17	98	130	24	24	78

F: female, M: male, U: sex presently indeterminable.
^(a): in all site B.
^(b): sex determined in association with objects found (see text).
^(c): adult material (>20 y.) allowing no further age estimation.
^(d): burial missing human remains.

mainly a child cemetery within the larger graveyard as previously hinted at (Nabulsi and Humbert 1996). This is substantiated by the fact that most of the 20 tombs with missing human bones and thus excluded from the statistics are too small in size to involve adult burials. Also, there is no evidence to relate the high child mortality to

epidemics since indications of ceremonial burials were noticed in all excavated tombs.

The condition of the human bones did not allow anthropological sex determination for a large number of individuals. Though identifiable sex distribution reflects balanced sex ratio, females appear to display lower life expectancy than males. These data remain

limited by the small size of the sample.

Tomb Objects

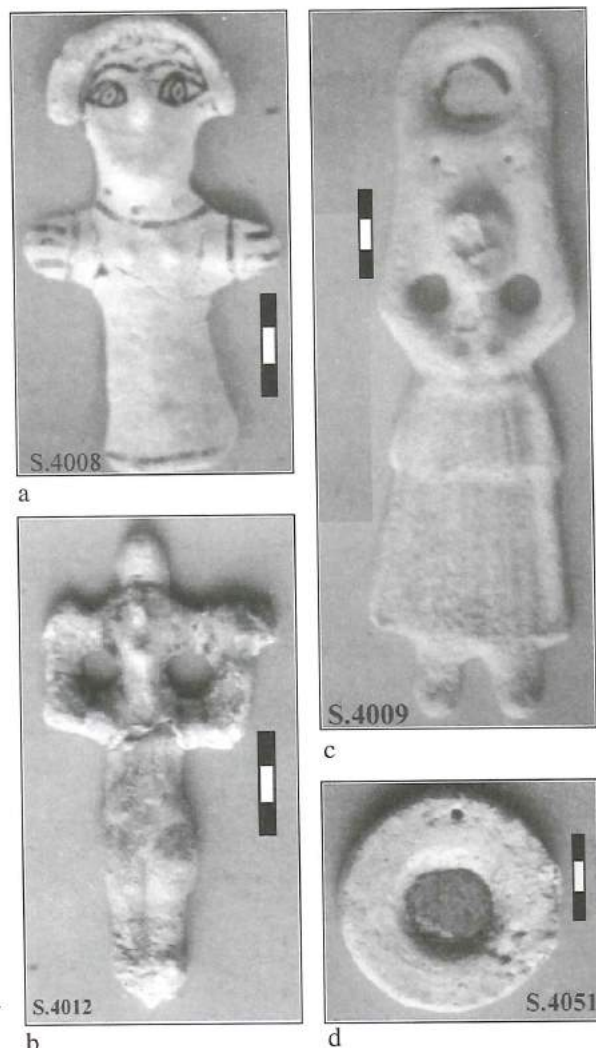
Diverse tomb offerings were salvaged during the last excavation at site B, including iron, bronze, stone, glass, plaster, ceramic and gold objects. They were in relatively acceptable condition and can be categorised as either jewellery (and anklets, bracelets amulets, rings, earrings, bells, pins and pins) or utensils (vases, cups, mirrors, chains, strap buckles and daggers). Necklaces were very common tomb offerings and included a variety of glass, stone, animal bone and bronze beads, together with different amulet types (crosses, "bells", bronze coins and others), metal rings and spindle stones. A number of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic pebbles were found on the surface. and in tomb fillings, whereby a nicely chipped flint (S.5315) was part of the tomb's 118 objects.

Painted plaster figurines (gypsum) of variable shape, form and size were the most interesting objects so far obtained from the cemetery in Khirbat as-Samrā'. They were restricted to non-adult burials and included figurines of geometric form (half spherical, rounded or oval disks, star-shaped and quadratic) or painted figurines of crude "female" or animal design. Most of these objects were broken and incomplete but we were able to restore some that are presented in this report.

Object S.4008 (Fig. 2a) represents a female wearing a long dress. This black-on-white painted, 12 cm long figurine was found *in situ* in tomb 99 placed in the right hand of a 12-15 year old female child. At least two more identical but less intact figurines were found in other child burials. They are believed to have served as dolls. In the same burial (T.99) was found a round framed mirror, 7 cm in diameter, (Fig. 2d). Brashler (1995) reported a similar find in the Byzantine cemetery at Umm al-Jimāl (sixth century AD). The fragments of object

S.4009 (Fig. 2c) were found in the filling of tomb 128 (Fig. 2b). The slightly worn, 22.5 cm long figurine represents a female wearing an elaborate dress. The two arms were stretched above the head to form a circle around a mirror. The two circular spaces between the arms were probably filled with small mirrors. Painted figurine, S.4012, 13.5 cm long, was found in tomb 126 (Fig. 2b). It represents a woman "dancer" wearing a long transparent dress revealing detailed body contours. This figurine is incomplete but probably missing an attached mirror above the head, similar to that of figurine S.4009.

Female plaster figurines are suggested to



2. Plaster figurines of Khirbat as-Samrā', site B (photo: A.J. Nabulsi, restoration: H.G.Bunger, courtesy of the DAJ).

have a long regional history. Besides the one reported by Smith (1969) in Pella, we were able to trace similar objects dated to the fifth century BC in Greece (Amiet *et al.* 1994). Yet, the quantity and diversity of such finds in the limited area of Khirbat as-Samrā's cemetery appears to be particular. Furthermore, these objects are datable to a period about 150 years later than the one suggested for similar finds in Jordan (Smith 1969, Bashler 1995). We hope in the near future and after the completion of restoration work to provide a detailed study covering the wide range of the plaster figurines obtained from this site.

The distribution of tomb offerings over the whole excavated area of site B was observed to be variable. This was manifest not only in their presence or absence in burials but also in the occurrence of clusters of specific objects at different parts of the site. For example, bronze cross amulets were concentrated in tombs in the southern part of site B while plaster figurines were almost restricted to the north-eastern parts, with similar objects often being found in adjacent burials. These variations tend to be associated with the simple 'walls' separating the different familial graveyards as suggested above. Tomb density was observed to decrease as distance from the walls increases. Also, child burials, in which most objects were found, were concentrated around these enclosures. Hence, the distribution of object types may reflect different periods of a few decades, each with different types of tomb offerings, and showing socio-economic differences be-

tween the various contemporary families. These objects may also be useful when investigating regional and local trade contacts of that time.

The tomb objects also helped to overcome problems caused by the bad condition of bone material that prevented osteological sex determination: Statistical analyses were based on the distribution of objects in burials which contained skeletal remains of anthropologically determinable sex. The obtained data showed that the presence and quantity of specific grave goods strongly correlates with the sex of the deceased, that is earrings, beads, bronze bracelets and plaster mirror frames were found with females, daggers and worn bronze rings with males. The age and sex distributions, in the last three columns of Table 1, indicate a more balanced total sex ratio. However, one has to caution that the absence of objects in many male burials may lead to a bias in these estimates.

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