

Unusual Burials from the Khirbat as-Samrā' Cemetery

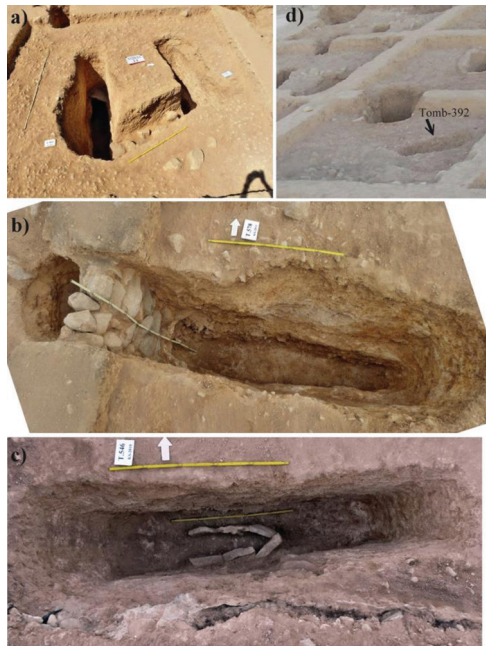
Introduction

The Byzantine part of the Khirbat as-Samrā' cemetery was dated to between the 5th and 8th c. AD. Until the 1920's, the cemetery area was a field of tombstones (Savignac 1925). In thirteen seasons of excavations, the cemetery revealed a wide range of variability among the 725 excavated shaft-tombs (Nabulsi *et al.* 2009), as well as a number of extreme or deviant observations related to the structure or contents of these tombs.

Structural Observations

Tomb-651 and Tomb-652 were found to be "connected" at their eastern ends by a line of natural stones (20–40 cm in diameter) placed in a trench that was dug to about 60 cm in the virgin soil layer (FIG. 1a). No relevant structure was found anywhere near. Hence, the construct was intentional but its function remains unknown. Tombs in this cemetery varied in

length from 1 m for subadults to around 2.4 m for adult burials. A few of the excavated tombs measured more than 3.5 m in length. They were reduced from the inside on the eastern or western end by a built stone wall to standard tomb size (FIG. 1b). The extra length in two of these tombs was obviously dictated by the appearance of a huge and unmovable stone or the basalt bedrock layer, which necessitated the building of the wall and extending the tomb in the opposite direction. Yet, this was surely not the case in the other large tombs. Tomb-546 (size 200 x 56 x 165 cm) was thought to belong to an adult burial. In the middle of the tomb's floor, there was a single row stone-structure that marked a small tomb closed by covering stones (FIG. 1c). The small tomb was probably of a totally deteriorated child burial that could have replaced the earlier (adult) one, or alternatively the tomb was just available at that time. Tomb-392 marked a change of direction. While all excavated



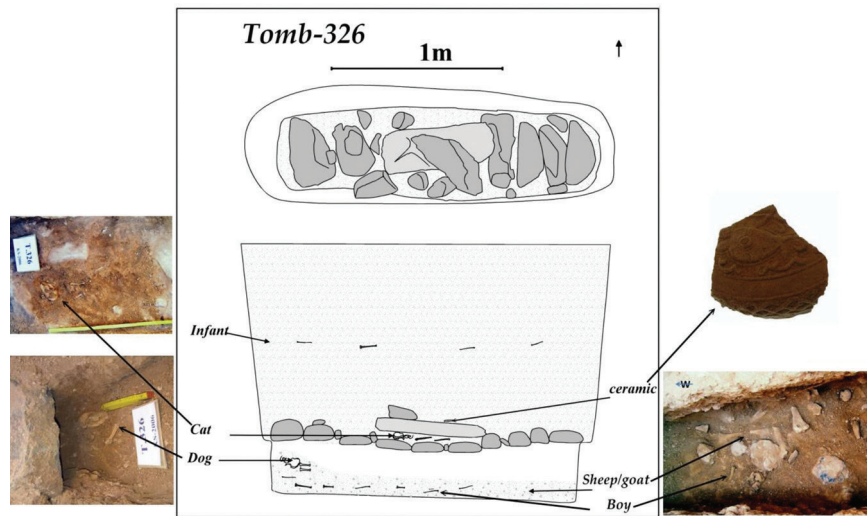
1. Unusual tombs from Khirbat as-Samrā' cemetery: a) stone-lined connected tombs; b) an example of long tombs with a built wall; c) built tomb in Tomb-546; d) Tomb-392 with N-S axis.

tombs were in general W-E direction, the small and shallow Tomb-392 (142 x 48 x 125 cm) revealed an exact N-S axis (FIG. 1c). Besides a few child bone fragments, there was an oval cornelian stone (Reg. no.: KS-1275, 13.4 x 8.5 x 3.4 mm) with an engraving on its flat side depicting Hygeia, the Greek goddess of health, all insufficient to explain this singular observation.

Tomb-326

Though it has already been published (see Wilson *et al.* 2012), Tomb-326 (FIG. 2) was a very different case that has to be included in this presentation of unusual burials. The tomb was excavated in 2006. In the shaft fill, a few bone fragments of an infant were found. Finding human bones in the fill was not unusual, even in intact tombs due to the common practice of tomb

reuse. Upon reaching the cover slabs of the burial below, a brown-green painted pottery fragment (KS-1183) decorated with engraved geometric lines (eye-shape!) and dated as Islamic Fatimid-Mameluke (11th–14th AD) was found on a protruding cover slab. Below this stone, the skeleton of a small cat was found buried in a semi-rectangular grave. The burial chamber below was still closed. Upon removing the cover slabs, the remains of a small dog were found buried at the western (head) end covered with fine, loose earth. In the grave below was a 10 cm thick layer of hard mud, where fragmented skeletal remains of a 10–12 year-old juvenile male were found. At the eastern end, the human bones were mixed with sheep or goat tarsal bones that appeared to be positioned where the boy's legs were. The sheep/goat bones were already sun-dried prior to their deposition in the tomb and therefore cannot be associated with feasting. The problem was not only to explain these extraordinary finds, but also the presence of the Islamic pottery fragment implied extending the use of this cemetery for at least four more centuries. This would contradict the chronology and history of the site (*comp.* Humbert 1998). To solve this problem, radiocarbon ¹⁴C dating was carried out on bone samples from the infant, dog, boy child, and sheep/goat fragments. The burials of the cat and dog were obviously simultaneous. The sequence of events in Tomb-326 became accordingly clear. The original burial was that of the juvenile male that took place between the 5th and 6th c. AD (430–571 cal AD at 95.4% probability). The burial was disturbed sometime between AD 1253 and AD 1385 when the tomb was opened and the boy's bones were broken and mixed with earth. Then the sheep/goat bones (1253–1383 cal AD at 95.4%) were placed there instead of the boy's legs. Later, the dog (1266–1384 cal AD at 95.4%) was buried at the west end. The burial cist was closed by the stone slabs and the grave for



2. The case of Tomb-362: the locations of the various deposits (see text).

the cat was made. The cat was then buried and covered by a flat stone upon which the Islamic pottery fragment was placed. The shaft was then half refilled before burying the infant (1261-1385 cal AD at 95.4%), and finally the tomb fill was completed. The observations made in this tomb open the door to a wide range of speculative interpretations. After the abandonment of the settlement during the 9th c. AD, the area was seasonally frequented by roaming groups (Humbert 1998). One might suggest that one of these groups or individuals carried out the 13th/14th c. AD manipulations in Tomb-326, which was located centrally within a field of tombstones engraved with crosses and unintelligible letters. All observed manipulations were part of a single procedure or act, from the location of the tomb to the disturbance of the original juvenile burial below. It is possible that the group had undertaken these manipulations as a protective or preventive measurement against an unknown or uncontrollable danger, possibly represented by the anonymous juvenile male tomb, which was believed to cause harm or en-

danger the group's viability (survival). This remains speculation and the truth might never be known.

Tomb-345

This tomb was about 10 m to the NW of Tomb-326. Tomb-345 (FIG. 3) contained the remains of two consecutive female burials. A 3 cm thick mud layer separated



3. The juvenile female second (upper) burial in Tomb-345. Notice the burial position, diverse utensils, and the basalt cooking pot KS-1172 to the right of the deceased.

the first and older adult female burial below from the second juvenile female above it. She was laid stretched on her right side and accompanied by various cosmetic utensils (e.g., ivory and plaster mirrors and small glass vessels, as well as jewellery that included a silver earring with an elongated cross). Below the juvenile's left shoulder was a basalt cooking pot (KS-1172: 16 cm diameter, 9.9 cm height and ca. 1 cm thick) with a small knob handle. The lower half of this vessel was covered with soot. It is thus probable that the deposited pot contained some kind of cooked food. The side position of the deceased is rare but not unusual in this cemetery, whereby the deposition of a cooking pot is exceptional in any Christian Byzantine burial from this region.

“Lamenting” Woman Figurine

During the last excavation in 2013, a plaster figurine (KS-2275) was found in the burial of a female, Tomb-703 (FIG. 4a). The plaque figurine depicted a standing woman wearing a short-sleeved and transparent gown that revealed her breasts and pubic hair. The arms were stretched to reach the braided hair on each side and the wide open eyes and mouth (painted in black) suggest a shouting or “lamenting” female figurine. Small quantities of plaster were applied using a flat instrument to cover the mouth, nose, hands, elbows, and around the feet. The figurine was broken through the waist and “mended” with thick plaster applied around it. The light yellowish spots on the painted surface suggest that an unidentifiable liquid was sprinkled on it. These alterations were obviously undertaken shortly before depositing the figurine with the buried. Earlier in 1996, another similar figurine (KS-1051) was found in Tomb-126 (FIG. 4b), and then referred to as “dancer” figurine (Nabulsi 2000). What was thought to be lime deposits on the figurine was in fact added plaster. With KS-1051, two further broken female figurines were found,



- Alterations on the female plaster figurines retrieved from different tombs in Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery: a–b) manipulations on two different “lamenting” female figurines (see text); c) female figurine with an intact and d) deformed face.

both with deformed facial parts and similar to the state of another similar figurine (KS-0030) from Tomb-143 (FIGS. 4c–d). These alterations to the plaster figurines were probably practiced by some relatives of the deceased for an unknown reason.

Conclusion

The above described examples were part of unusual observations that were made during 13 seasons of excavations in the ancient Byzantine cemetery of Khirbat as-Samrā. In the case of Tomb-326, the use of new technology prevented a major dating error that would have affected the whole site and provided the chronology of incidents. It could not, however, provide any explanation

to the situation in that tomb. The variability observed in this cemetery, including the outliers, has to be seen as different parts of one picture, and that variability in a cemetery must not always be associated with change. It is obvious that many of the presented observations might be associated with the grieving relatives of the deceased, who could act according to personal and/or irrational motives that are thus difficult to explain. One has therefore to concede that some questions will remain unanswered.

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