

KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ CEMETERY: SITE E SEASON 2009

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The ninth season of the systematic excavations at Khirbat as-Samrā ancient cemetery was carried out during the 2009 summer in the area of Site E. One of the objectives was to mark the northern cemetery boundary, which was expected to intercept the site's NE corner, as suggested by aerial photograph analysis. This report documents some observations that were made during the excavation.

The Excavation at Site E

The 45 days of excavations at this site began on the 27th July 2009¹. The site is cornered between Site A in the west and A2 in the south. The area was divided by a 5 x 5m grid into 20 squares (4 columns and 5 rows), and excavated by the standard method described in previous *ADAJ* (2007-2009) reports. A total of 67 tombs were excavated and only 3 were intact. The tombs were nearly evenly distributed over the site (3.35 tombs/25m²) and revealed no complex arrangements. All were vertical shaft tombs with slab-cist burial chamber of Type- ii organized in semi-parallel lines (classifications in Nabulsi *et al.* 2009). Since tombs were found in all excavated squares, the cemetery's northern boundary must be set further north of Site E. Its north-south width at this level exceeds 150m.

A rough-cut rectangular basalt stone (registry no. KS-1538) was the first of the covering slabs of the intact Tomb-477. The stone has a crude cross "scratched" on its relative clean inner side facing the head the deceased. This was the third such observation. A small natural stones of semi-triangular shape and about 31 x 18 x 9cm in size with crude engraved cross (KS-1537) was found

near the surface of the same tomb. This might suggest that not all anepigraphic cross-engraved stones were reused tombstones but genuine covering slabs. It is very probable that KS-1537 was the original tombstone of Tomb-477. Furthermore, field observations in previous excavations had revealed that inscribed tombstones without engraved crosses were always found in the lower, eastern half of the covering-slabs layer.

Human skeletal remains were salvaged from 65 tombs. The material varied from few teeth to near complete, but mostly fragmentary, skeletons.

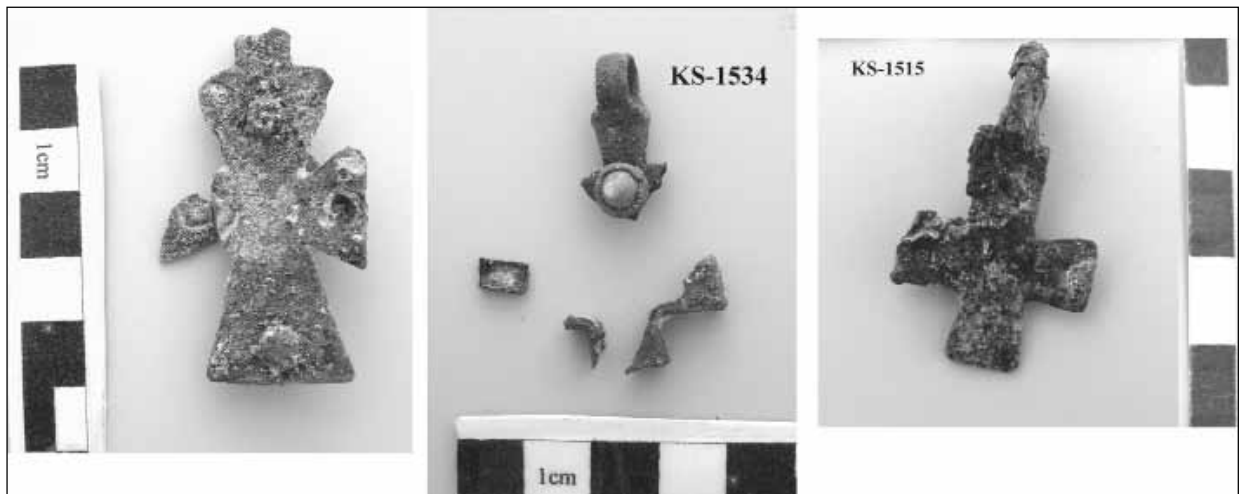
Objects and Tomb Offerings

A significant number objects was retrieved during the excavation in Site E. Some can be associated with the burying process of the deceased, such as iron nails, remains of wood and cloth from coffins. Objects that might be described as tomb offerings included diverse iron and bronze jewellery (rings, bracelets, pendants and amulets), glass beads, ivory hairpins, a bronze buckle, bronze coins, two golden earrings, fragments from different glass vessels and one incomplete pottery lamp. All iron and bronze objects were fragmentary and strong corroded.

Different tombs yielded cross-shape objects that date Site E to the Christian Byzantine period. Most such offerings were pendants, three bronze and one silver (**Fig. 1**). Objects from the intact Tomb-477 included a bronze cross (KS-1558), 52 x 30mm, alongside an iron rod (KS-1559), 91mm long and 21mm diameter. The bronze cross could be a buckle, though its pres-

1. Excavated with Dr. Ch. Eger, University München, Dr. P. Schönrock-Nabulsi, Ratzeburg, Mr. D. Daum, Ha-

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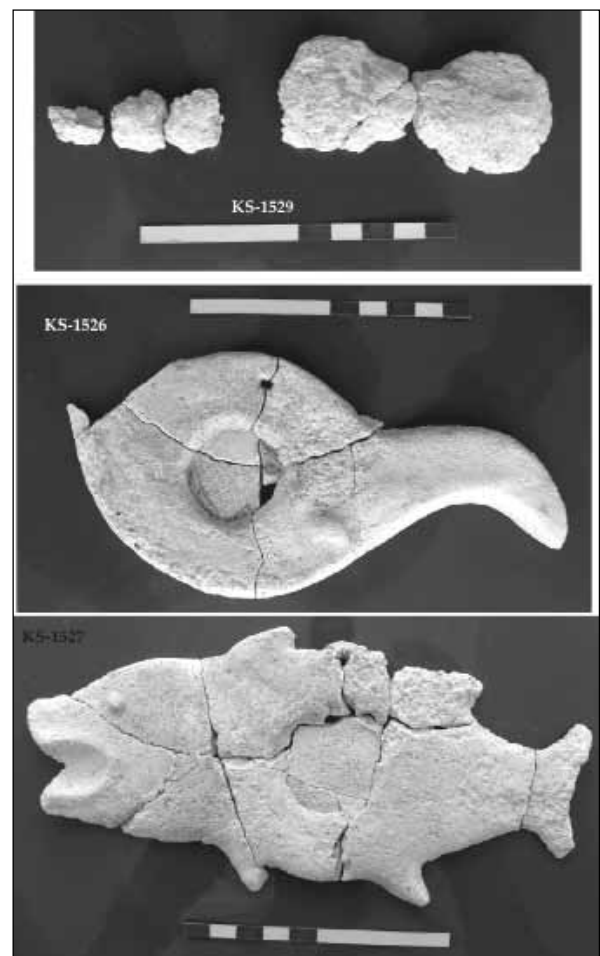
1. Cross-shaped objects. a bronze (KS-1515) and a broken silver (KS-1534) pendant. Possible bronze buckle (KS-1559) and iron rod (KS-1558).

ence and association with the iron rod (dagger!) in an infant burial remains unclear.

Three plaster figurines were also among the objects found. They were fragmentary, white with no trace of paint (Fig. 2). Both the largely incomplete plaster doll KS-1529, and the camel type mirror frame KS-1526, with a missing head and a rounded (3cm diameter) depression for the missing mirror in the middle, have parallel cases from Site B (Nabulsi 2000). The almost complete reconstructed mirror frame KS-1527 (205 x 102 x 10mm) has a fish or dolphin shape with a semi-quadratic (ca. 3 x 3cm) mirror depression in the middle. Both mirror frames, KS-1526 and KS-1527, had a small middle-top perforation that allowed them to be hung up, fixed or dangling.

The plaster figurines are probably the most noticeable type of objects found in Khirbat as-Samrā cemetery. Elsewhere in Jordan, singular cases were reported from similar dated tombs or cemeteries in Pella (Smith 1969), Umm al-Jimāl (Brashler 1995) and Faynān (Findlater *et al.* 1998). The relative abundance and diverse forms of the figurines from Khirbat as-Samrā is probably related to the large number of excavated tombs, 494 so far. The restriction of this type of objects to primarily Byzantine (Christian) tombs might suggest cultural or traditional background. Martin-Kilcher (2000) had made some suggestions on the inclusion of mirrors and dolls in Roman and early Christian burials in Europe. Since fish and dolphins are

considered to be Christian symbols (Bettenson 1970), the plaster frame KS-1527 could have a



2. The plaster figurines from Site E: doll type, camel and fish (or dolphin) mirror frames.

religious connection. Yet, it remains questionable to extend roman rituals in Europe to the local ancient population at Khirbat as-Samrā. Furthermore, there is sufficient evidence that at many of the plaster objects were used during lifetime and their use was not restricted to funerary practices.

The homogenous Site E has more similarities with the 50m distant (SE) Site B rather than with the adjacent Sites A, A2 as well as A1 and dates to the Byzantine seventh century AD.

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