

THE ANCIENT CEMETERY IN KHIRBAT AS-SAMRĀ AFTER THE SIXTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS (2006)

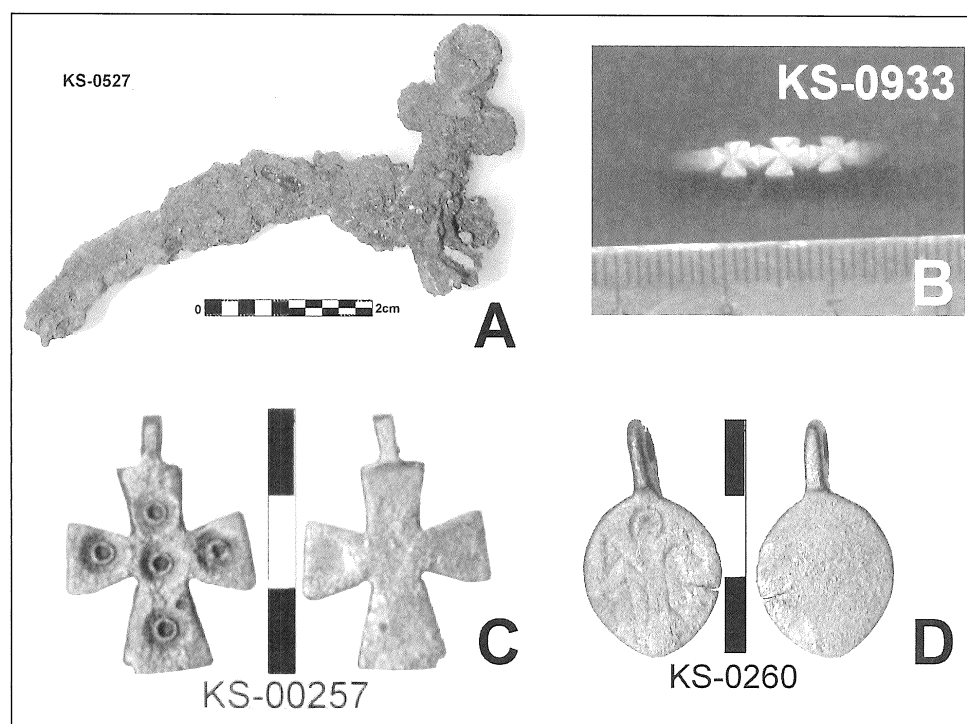
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Introduction

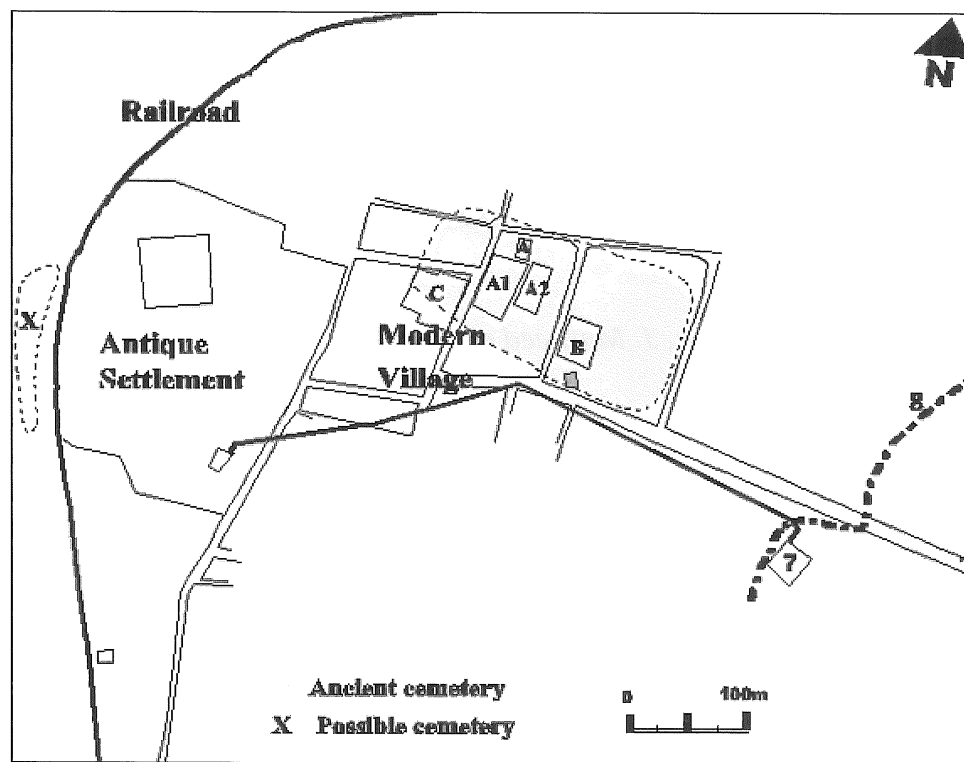
The results obtained from the first season of excavations at the ancient cemetery in Khirbat as-Samrā, Site-B, were largely homogenous (Nabulsi 1998). Although most sites were disturbed, (supposedly during the 1910's), single burials in simple vertical shaft tombs with flat covering stone slabs yielded a wide range of tomb offerings. Many offerings can be described as "Christian" or as having some relation to Christianity (Fig. 1). Archaeological evidence, such as coins and pottery lamps, dates site-B tombs from the late Byzantine period to the early Umayyad, seventh-eighth century (AD). These observations conform to the outlined archaeological and historical background suggested by Humbert (1998). The observations mark the end

of a declining phase in the fifth century AD; Christianity was spreading in the settlement. By the end of the century, there followed a period of "Christian" prosperity (sixth-seventh AD) and a population increase of about 300 inhabitants. The slow decline in the eighth century ended when occupation ceased at the settlement during the ninth century AD. The Christian tombstones were erected during the seventh century AD in the "Christian" Byzantine cemetery.

The objectives of the succeeding excavations were to consolidate previously obtained results, to increase the human skeletal samples to a statistically reliable size, and to attempt to define the boundaries of the actual size of the ancient cemetery as a whole. Excavations carried out in the 1997 season at Site-A1, -A2 and -C (Fig. 2)



1. Examples of the "Christian" tomb goods found in burials from Site-B (1995-1996). KS-0527: Fragment of an iron bracelet. KS-0613: Bronze seal ring. KS-0931: St.-George amulet. KS-0652: Bronze cross pendant.



2. General plan site plan of Khabrat as-Samrā.

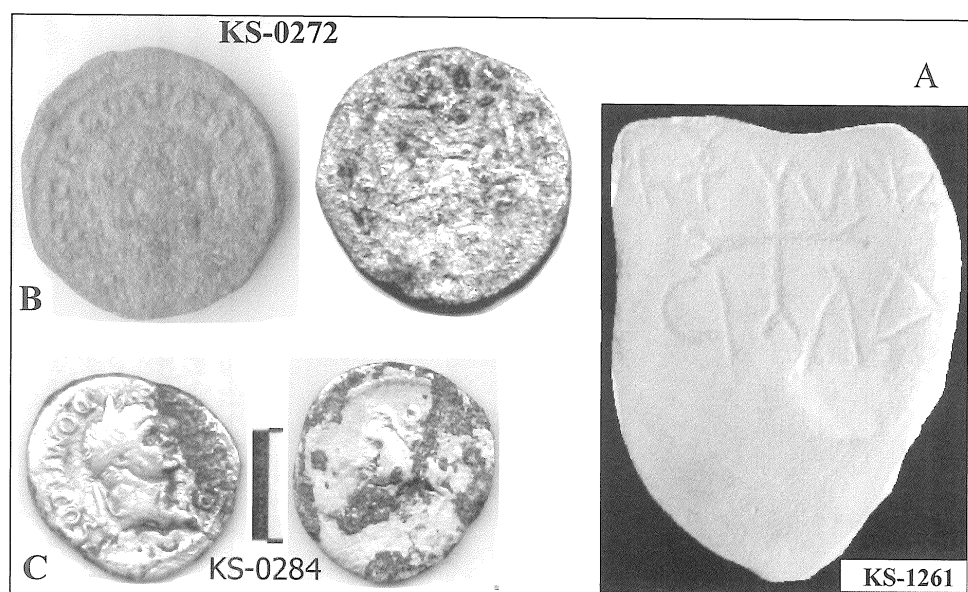
and the subsequent initial analysis provided a different picture of the cemetery. This became more evident after the 1998 season at Site-C. There, the western boundary of the cemetery was more than 20 meters beyond the expected limit defined by aerial photographs. Of the 156 tombs excavated during these two seasons, 46 were intact (in Site-B only 2 of the 130 were excavated).

Variations were observed in tomb concentrations; the type and form of the covering stones and burial chambers differed, as did the positioning of the buried. Some tombs were used in multiple consecutive burials. There is sufficient archaeological and osteological evidence to indicate that over 40% of the tombs were reused. The previous burials were often discarded in the tomb filling. Other tombs were opened partially or completely along one side or at the end, indicating the possibility of simultaneous burials.

Compared with Site-B, objects and tomb offerings retrieved from Site-A1, -A2 and -C were less abundant. Except for a few cross-engraved tombstones, none was of the "Christian" type as shown in Figure 1. A fallen tombstone (KS-1261) found *in situ* in Tomb-153 from Site-A1 had an engraved cross with Greek text (Fig. 3A) on it. The inscription, read by Dr. F. Zayadine of DoA, provided two numbers; one is believed to indicate a date of the year 457 but later was

corrected to 561AD. The second number is 38 and probably refers to the age of the deceased, which fit the osteologically determined age estimation. Two Roman coins were found in two neighbouring tombs from Site-C (Fig. 3A, B, C). The first is a bronze coin dated to Elgebalus (221-222AD) and was very probably minted in Bostra (Spijkerman 1978: Plate 15, no. 42 and 43; Kindler 1984: Plate 3, no. 33-33b). The second is a silver coin that dates to the time of Domitian in the late first century AD. It is probably a local contemporary imitation. This type of coinage was locally minted in the Decapolis (Millar 1994).

Osteological analysis of the human bones from site C revealed significantly more adult burials, which result in a higher life expectancy and a lower mortality rate than what was previously estimated (Nabulsi 1998). The material also displayed clusters of different sets of cranial and post-cranial variables; metric and epigenetic, each of which is related to a cluster of tombs from the site. For example, the patellar index, squamomastoid suture, metopic suture and vertebral numerical variations are present. Other variables tend to interconnect different cemetery areas. Accordingly, the osteological data indicates that the examined human remains can be allocated to a continuous, endogamic population.



3. Findings of special interest found during the 1997 and 1998 excavation seasons.

KS-1261: Inscribed tombstone from Tomb-153 of Site-A1 with an engraved cross and Greek texts. The first upper right reads 457 indicating a date (561AD corrected) the lower second reads 38 possible age of the deceased.

KS-0272: Bronze coin dated to Elgebalus (221-222AD) found in Site-C.

KS-0284: Silver coin dated to Domitianus of the late first century AD and also found in Site-C.

The 2006 Excavation Season

In the light of these partly unexpected results, the aim of the following excavations in this cemetery is to investigate all possible areas in hopes of reaching the consolidation stage. For technical reasons, it was not possible to resume excavations before 2006. In this sixth season of excavations, the work was conducted in site-A1. The work was carried out in the same manner that was described at a previous time (Nabulsi 1998). A total of 45 tombs were excavated in an area of 275m² (Fig. 4). This report presents few tombs as cases of special interest. The intention is to show the multifaceted nature of this ancient cemetery at Khirbat as-Samrā and the difficulties presented regarding scientific interpretation. These difficulties are due to the cemetery's presumed history.

Tomb -342, -332, -333 and -336 Complex

This is a row of linear connected tombs extending 720cm in an east-west direction from square A4 to square A6 (Figs. 4 and 5). Tomb-332 and -333 are opened at both ends to the preceding tomb from the eastern end and to the subsequent end on the west. The longitudinal axis of each tomb deviates slightly to the south or north from tomb to tomb. The tombs were dug to variable depths. The dimensions (length x width x height) are: Tomb-342: 215 x 62 x 200cm, Tomb-332: 165 x 50 x 153cm, Tomb-333: 210 x 70 x 176cm and Tomb-3336: 89 x 40 x 109cm. It appears that the tombs were dug intentionally at different depths in order to avoid

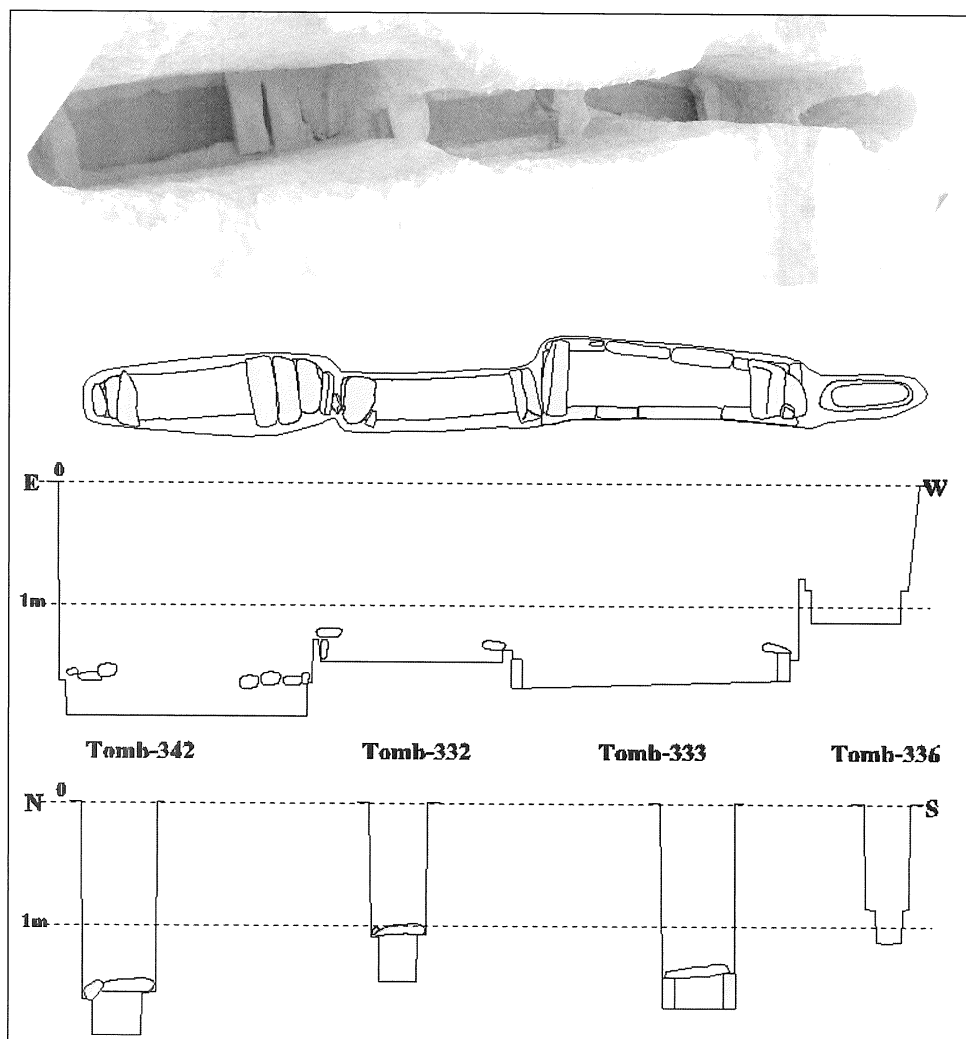
placing the head and feet of the buried in line with other bodies. Despite weak evidence, it is probable that the tombs were dug simultaneously. This is not the case for Tomb-336. This linear tomb complex stands in strong contrast to the empty space left to the north and south of it (Fig. 4). All four tombs were disturbed prior to excavation and the remaining human remains were incomplete. Tomb goods were scant in all four tombs. Beside small fragments of iron rings and bracelets, a cheap golden earring (KS-1153) was found in Tomb-333. This tomb is unique in having a built burial vault. The lower part of the tomb shaft is lined with flat, rectangular, moderately cut and unpolished basalt stones. They are of variable length and about 40cm high and 10cm thick. The flat basalt covering stones completed the chamber. A similar, more elaborate tomb was excavated in 1988 in the side room 94 of Church-95 in the ancient settlement (Humbert 1998). Differences are evident in the size, finishing, type of stones and the number of burials found.

Tomb -345

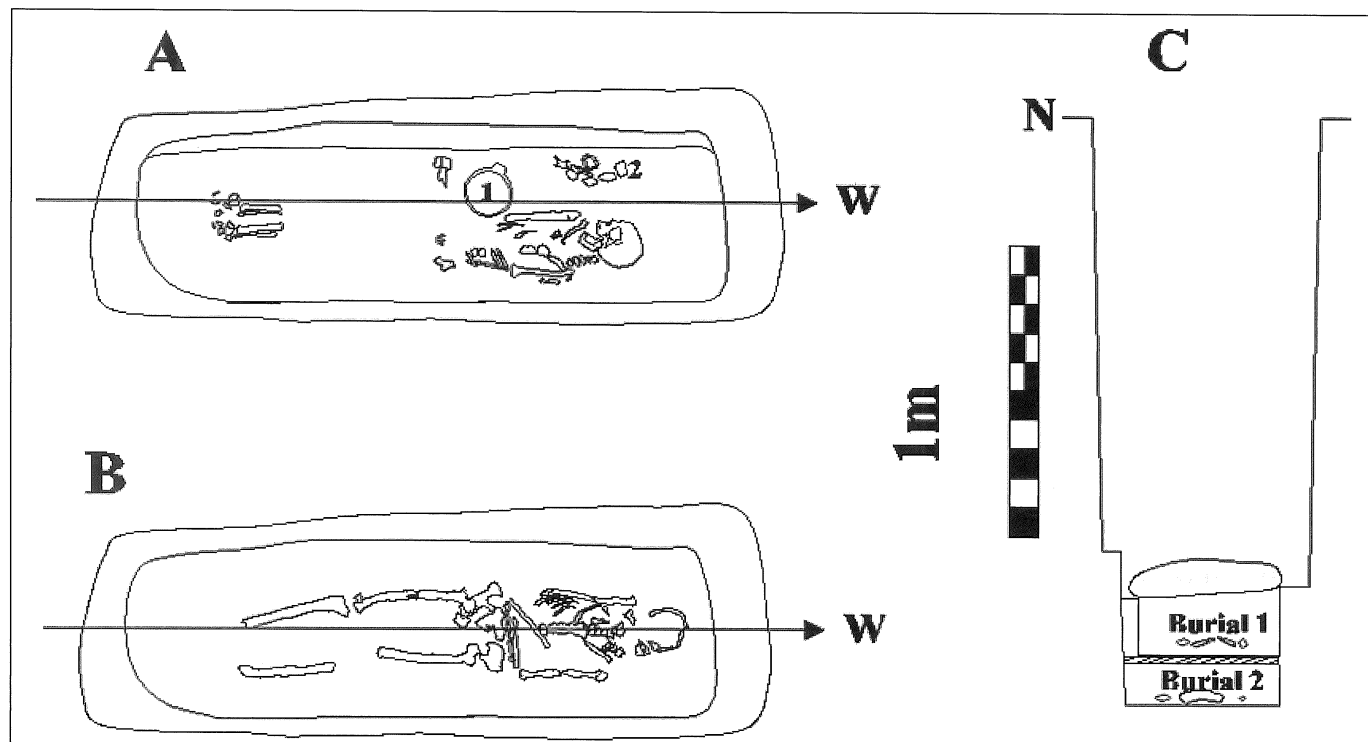
This tomb (230 x 78 x 200cm) is located in square B5 and was disturbed at its eastern end. In the intact part of the tomb shaft, the filling contained fragmentary human remains (mostly cranial), about 1m from the surface. The covering slabs at the eastern end of the burial chamber were displaced. The chamber contained the skeletal remains of two individuals buried at two different levels (Fig. 6A). The first is the

lower, and probably the original burial, and contained the articulated remains of an aged male (KS-1271). Although the remains were *in situ*, the bones were fragmented and fragile and contained damaged facial and pelvic parts.

3-5cm layer of mud. Adding another shoulder along the southern original shoulder narrowed the burial chamber. The second burial was then laid stretching more towards the middle and the north. The left shoulder was slightly elevated. The observed fragmentation of the lower burial was very probably the result of the disturbance related to the process of burying the second in-



5. Tomb-342, -332, -333 and -336 complex showing the tombs after excavation, top view, Schematic longitudinal (along the axis of each tomb) and tombs' cross sections.



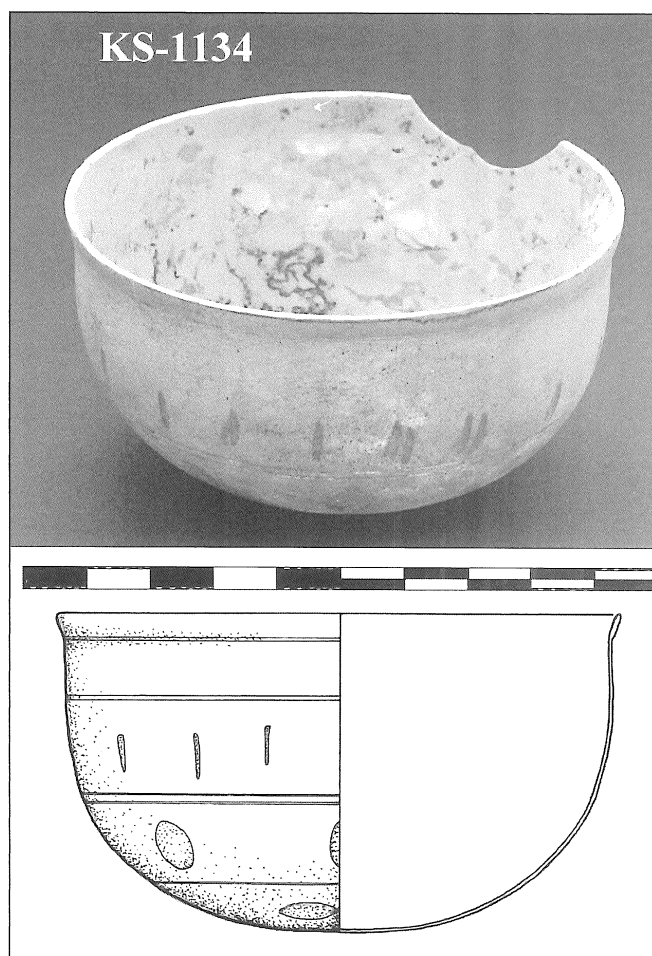
6. Tomb-345. The upper burial 2 (KS-1270) with the KS-1172 basalt cooking pot (a) and other tomb goods (b). The lower burial 1 (KS-1271) is separated by a mud layer as shown in the schematic cross section.

dividual. This burial was disturbed and partially articulated. Yet the skeletal material was almost complete despite the displacement of the parts from the distal pelvic parts to the tibiae. The remains of this upper burial were allocated to a female who was 20-24 years old (KS-1270). This upper burial contained numerous tomb goods (Fig. 6B). Included was a handmade basalt bowl (KS-1172); 11cm in diameter, 9cm high and 10mm thick that had been placed near the right elbow together with other objects. Other objects included: broken glass vases, a plaster mirror, ivory hair pinheads, a vase, a metal bracelet decorated with stone beads, an iron buckle, shell beads, an amulet and parts of an iron chain. The basalt cooking pot had a charred outer surface, indicating its' function. It is the first of its' art and type to be found in the cemetery.

Tomb-310

It is a simple shaft tomb, 240 x 55 x 201cm, in square B1. Horizontal furrows were bilaterally dug, alongside the narrow tomb shoulders so that the flat covering stone slabs could be slid to shut the burial chamber. One of the basalt slabs was a re-used tombstone with a Greek inscription. The tomb was disturbed prior excavation, although the upper half of the skeleton was more or less intact (Fig. 7). The equipment of Tomb-310 is especially noteworthy. On the left side, a glass bowl was placed beside the skull. Also, a steatite scarab and several bronze fragments of an object of unknown function (KS-1140) had left a green discoloration of soil mixed with organic rests residue. The scarab (KS-1133) is an antique of Egyptian provenance and had been pierced at a later time.

For the chronology of this grave, the glass bowl (KS-1134) draws closer attention. With the exception of damage on the rim, the vessel is completely preserved. It has a hemispheric form with a flat rounded bottom. The short rim is "outplayed", or, directed towards the outside of the vessel. Now covered by milky white weathering, the thin-walled glass might have been originally colourless with accents of pale green. On the rounded bottom and the lower body, oval patterns had been polished; the body shows engraved decoration of short vertical lines, which are enclosed by horizontal abraded lines at the top and the bottom.



7. Glass bowl (KS-1134) found in tomb-310 (drawing by C. Eger).

Thin-walled hemispheric bowls have been classified by Isings (1957) as having either an undecorated form (96a) or a decorated form (96b). They had an extensive distribution and were traded in the whole Mediterranean up to the Rhine as well as into the northern Barbaricum. The provenance, however, is discussed controversially. It has been suggested that the form came from the eastern parts of the Roman world. A huge amount of bowl fragments in different Pontic cities, (including fragments with similar decoration to KS-1134), indicated that one production centre has to be located in the Black Sea area. Archaeological evidence for glassworks is given on the Crimea and in Tanais (Rau 1972). But others also suggested a Rhenanian origin (Lund Hansen 1987: type E 216, 77-78).

The hemispheric glass bowls with fine polished decoration apparently originated in the third century AD. Several items are known to be from Germanic chieftain graves. They have

a well dated inventory of the second half of the third century including the time around 300 (Rau 1972), although Lund Hansen (1987) preferred an earlier date. In Jordan, dated parallels are only sporadically known. One was found during the French excavations in the temple of Zeus at Gerasa within a stratified context of the end of third century. (Dussart 1998). There is little evidence for such bowls after the first half of the fourth century AD. It is possible that the bowl KS-1134 could have survived and remained in use for a century.

Tomb-326

This tomb appears to be one of the few intact tombs excavated during the 2006 season. It was found in square A1, inserted between two recently disturbed graves, Tomb-325 and Tomb-328, which nonetheless delivered a number of tomb goods. The upper filling of Tomb-326 contained 4 long bone shafts and other bone fragments of a 3-6 month old infant. At the western end, articulated animal skeletal remains were found. One was just above and the other below the stone slabs at the close of the burial chamber. The burial itself contained the skeletal remains of a juvenile mixed with fragments of animal tarsal bones.

More relevant presently is a piece of shard, KS-1183, found “placed” in the muddy sealing of the covering stone slabs (**Fig. 8**). It measures about 6 x 7cm and is 6.5mm thick. The fragment is from a small jar base of earthenware and has a whitish core and low-quality firing. The outer surface is a blue-green colour. It has a stamped decoration parallel to the metallic ware that can be described as having typical eastern or oriental tradition from Mosul. The ornamentations are typically Islamic with wavy lines and heart patterns forming a circular medallion, which is intersected by other lines. The main decoration is the eye located on the base. This type of decoration goes back to the Umayyad period though comparative analysis (Hobson 1932) tends to date KS-1183 to the 11th century AD.

One has to notice that the tomb size (212 x 55 x 151cm) does not correspond with the buried juvenile. This might indicate the possibility of multiple tomb usages in the cemetery this is supported by considering that the infant bone remains were found in the upper tomb filling.



8. Islamic pottery fragment found in tomb-326.

Tomb-326 represents with these findings a peculiar case and will be dealt with extensively in a separate subsequent report.

The “Western” Cemetery

During a private visit to the village in 2002, a number of recently disturbed burials were observed on the plateau just west of the railroad (**Fig. 2**). Small Roman and Byzantine pottery fragments were observed on the surface. These could not have been washed down from the ancient settlement and then upward to the plateau. This narrow field (ca. 1000m²) appeared to have served as a cemetery, sometime during the Roman and/or Byzantine periods. For the 2006 season of excavations, the intention was to do a test trench in this cemetery area. Unfortunately, that was not possible. All the area was sewn with recent robbery trenches. Bone and pottery fragments were scattered on the surface. The idea of an archaeological excavation was abandoned.

Discussion and Conclusion

This report presented some tombs that were excavated during the 2006 season in Site-A1 at the ancient cemetery of Khirbat as-Samrā. The tombs demonstrated part of an observed diversity and the discrepancies with the suggested history of the ancient site and its population. They

also deviate markedly from the conclusions made in the last publication about the cemetery (Nabulsi 1998).

Conclusions become obvious when the bulk of data obtained from all six seasons of excavations at this cemetery are considered. Results can be summarized in a few points. To avoid jumping again to premature conclusions, it is better to leave the reader with these results to build his own opinion.

1. The cemetery observed variability in the structure, concentration and usage of tombs. Other excavated cemetery sites from the same period in Jordan, e.g. Umm al-Jimāl (Brashler 1995) and Wādī Faynān (Findlater *et al.* 1998) were restricted to small areas and can not provide sufficient comparative material, despite some similarities shown.
2. Roman coins dating to the first (KS-0248) and third century AD (KS-0272) were found in neighbouring tombs at Site-C.
3. The glass bowl (KS-1134) that dated to the third century was probably still in use in the fourth century AD.
4. KS-1261 is the first "Christian" tombstone to be found in the cemetery with an inscribed date (457 corrected to 561AD).
5. The mostly fragmented ceramic lamps found in site-B (topsoil and tombs) date to the seventh-eighth century AD.
6. The pottery fragment found in Tomb-326 is Islamic and dates to the 11th century AD.
7. All the inscribed tombstones found were reused as covering slabs and were written in Greek, with or without Christian symbols.
8. The observed larger cemetery size of at least 36000m², tomb density and multiple usage lead to an estimate of at least 5800 tombs involving a minimum of 7000 burials. Based on a high mortality rate of 0.040, demographic estimations show that the ancient settlement at Khirbat as-Samrā must have maintained a minimal population size of 430 individuals over a period of 400 years ranging from 450AD until 850AD.

For the excavation project itself, there is a need to consider connecting the cemetery with the ancient settlement and its surrounding area, the extended families' graveyards (where religious affiliations are irrelevant), and to use more precise dating methods. This is preferable to re-

lying only on archaeological evidence (pottery and coins).

Acknowledgement

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