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ABDALLAH NIRQI 1964


BURIALS

(PL. I—VIII)

A) CEMETERY 249

The expedition unearthed a comparatively small section of the extensive Christian cemetery situated N to the settlement of Abdallah Nirqi (fig. 1, Pls I, II/1). The following tombs were studied:

*Tomb No. 1* (fig. 2, Pl. II/1—III). The rectangle-shaped superstructure was built of large, irregular stones. On its side remains of white plastering were still well discernible. The oval pit was covered by five carefully plastered stone slabs. In the pit a female corpse in relatively good condition was found. Her hands were placed on her lap with the thumbs crossing each other. The finger-nails were red, they were probably painted. The body was covered by several layers of linen the major part of which — as well as the leather shoe at the right foot — has remained almost intact. The face was similarly covered by linen, the imprint of the fabric of the cloth was well discernible on the skin. Dimensions: superstructure length: at the bottom 235 cm, on the top 225 cm; breadth: at the bottom 85 cm, on the top 65 cm. The length of the pit was 228 cm, its breadth 56 cm.

*Tomb No. 2* (figs 3, 4). The low, rectangle-shaped superstructure was surrounded by a stone frame and it was lined with a thick layer of mud both on the top and on its sides. On its western side the remains of a decoration consisting of wavy grooves were discernible: . There was a fragment of vessel built in at its NE corner. Within the stone frame under the mud layer a loose sand filling was found. Near the E side of the superstructure a semicircular opening (filled with sand) was leading towards the pit. The pit itself was roughly rectangle-shaped with rounded corners. The stone slabs that had covered it, have fallen on the skeleton. Some parts of the linen covering of the (male?) skeleton lying supine in stretched position have remained. He was wearing a bronze ring (diam.: 1.9 cm) on the fourth finger of his left hand (see *J.II*).

From the filling of the pit three fragments of a vessel with thick wall were unearthed. The vessel had a low base ring, the body was decorated with wavy grooves. Fabric: dark brown; slip: light orange. (*P. 246*.) Dimensions: superstructure: length 260 cm, breadth 90 cm; pit: length 185 cm, breadth 60 cm, depth 60 cm. Length of the skeleton 165 cm.

*Tomb No. 3* (fig. 5). A grave with rectangle-shaped superstructure, built of bricks and large stones. Its sides and surface were carefully plastered. It was not opened.

Dimensions: length 200 cm, breadth 87 cm, height 25 cm.

*Tomb No. 4* (fig. 5). A grave with rectangle-shaped superstructure built of irregular stones of various size. It was not opened.

Dimensions: length 220 cm, breadth 95 cm, height 25 cm.

*Tomb No. 5* (figs 5, 6; Pl. IV/1). The major part of the rectangular superstructure was built of bricks with stones in some places at the bottom. The top surface of the structure was formed in the shape of a cross with a protruding central part. The lower part of the sides was covered with a coat of lime and a low bench was surrounding it. On its SW side a small rectangle-shaped



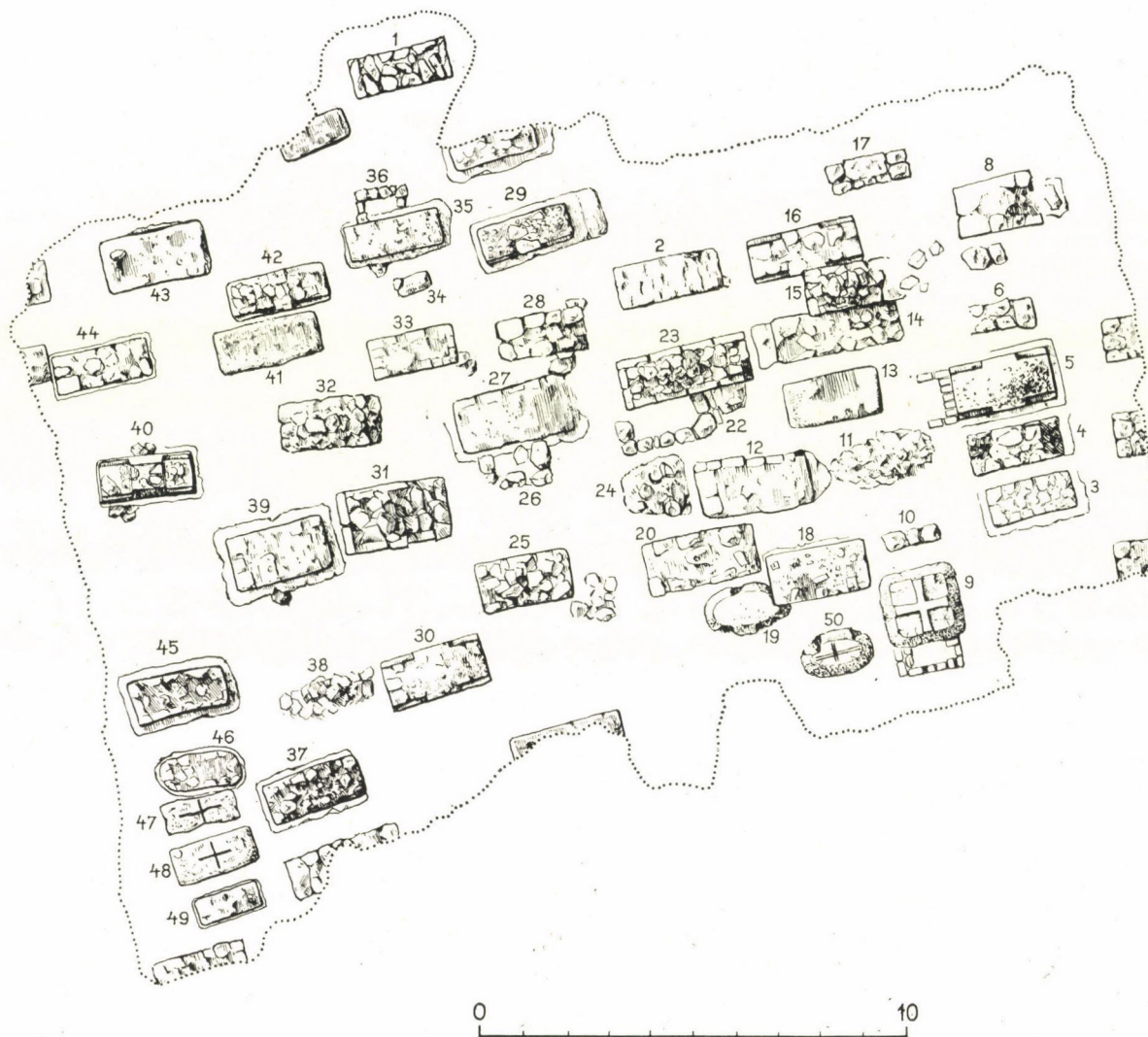


Fig. 1. Cemetery 239, the excavated section

structure was situated; at later interments it was on this side that the dead was placed into the grave. The oval pit was covered by irregular stone slabs.

Three bodies were buried into the grave. (It was impossible to ascertain their sex.) Two skeletons were lying on each other in the pit. Over these a third body was placed; the latter, however, was lying in a position with the legs in the pit and the trunk and pelvis below the rectangle-shaped structure.

Dimensions: superstructure: length 235 cm, breadth 115 cm, height 54 cm. Pit: length 300 cm, breadth 70 cm, depth 80 cm. Skeletons: those lying in the pit: 175 resp. 130 cm, the last body buried there 165 cm.

*Tomb No. 9* (fig. 7; Pl. IV/2). A low, square superstructure growing wider downwards, with rounded corners. The hard mud plastering was decorated on the top with a Greek cross in relief. The corners and sides of the grave were strengthened by some large stones. Near the grave a rectangle-shaped structure was built of bricks. Between the mud plastering and the pit a loose sand filling was observed. Three graves belonged to this burial place.

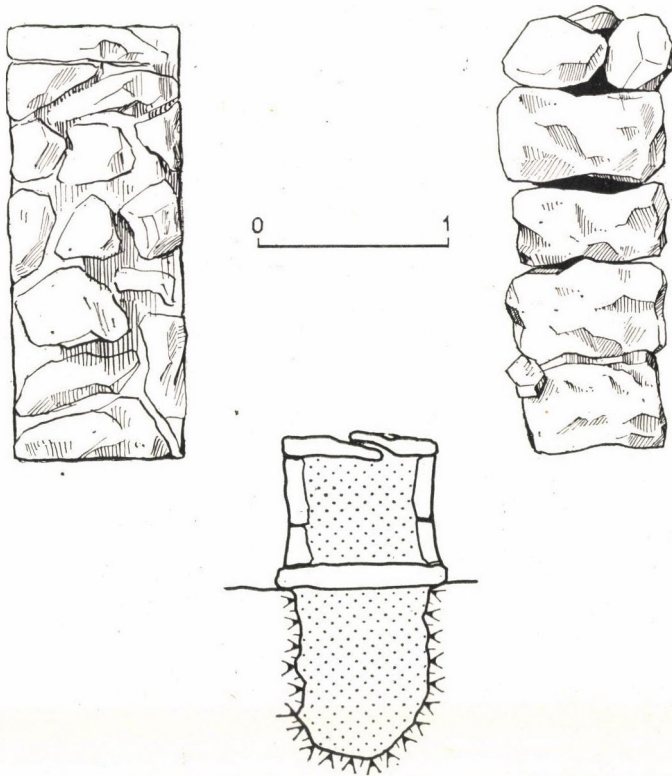


Fig. 2. Tomb No. 1. superstructure and cross-section

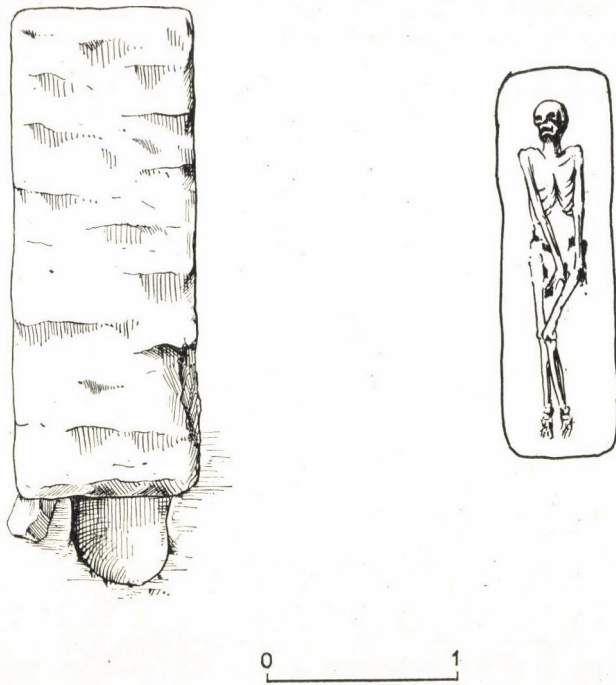


Fig. 3. Tomb No. 2. superstructure and the grave opened



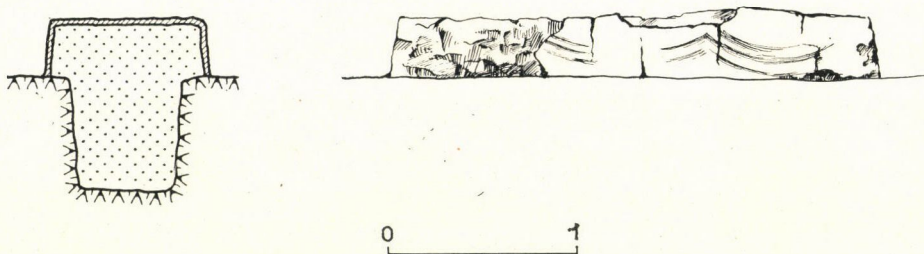


Fig. 4. Tomb No. 2, superstructure and cross-section

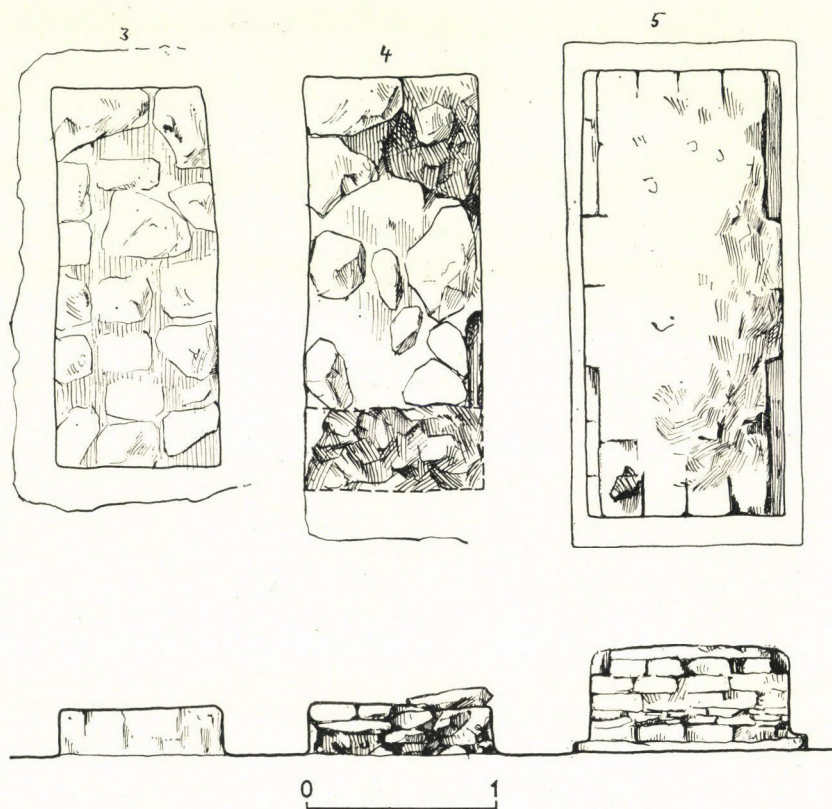


Fig. 5. Tombs No. 3-4-5

A. The largest pit was situated under the superstructure. Similarly to the other two, this was also covered by stone slabs placed slantwise and protruding into the pit. In the small hollow deepened into the N wall of the pit the corpse of a child was placed. Its face and body was covered with linen fastened by a black and white spun string. On the legs the meshing of the string was well discernible. On the head of the child light, fluffy hair could be observed. Sex: ?

B. Pit situated under the brick building near the grave. At the bottom of the pit, in its north part the skeleton of a child was found leaning slightly to the right. The body was wrapped in linen completely covering also the face. Sex: ?

C. 30 cm N to the first pit, outside the superstructure a pit smaller than the previous ones was found. An almost entirely mouldered infant skeleton was lying in it; only its head has



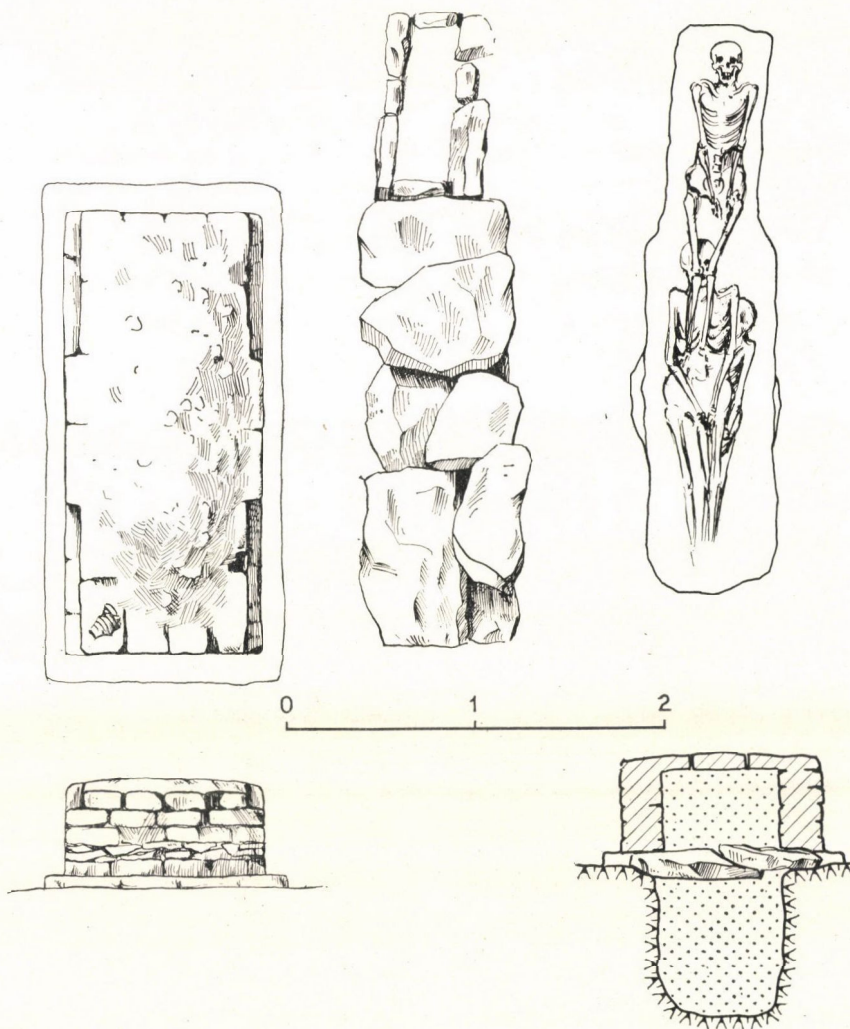


Fig. 6. Tomb No. 5, structure and pit opened

remained in relatively good condition. On the skull remains of light, fluffy hair were discernible. Traces of textile were not found on it. Sex: ?

Dimensions: superstructure: length 130 cm, breadth 125 cm, height 20 cm. Brick structure: length 154 cm, breadth 90 cm. A/pit: length 139 cm, breadth 60 cm, depth 55 cm. Skeleton 88 cm. B/pit: length 110 cm, breadth 33 cm, depth 45 cm. Skeleton 70 cm. C/pit: length 88 cm, breadth 35 cm, depth 45 cm. Skeleton c. 55 cm.

*Tomb No. 28* (Pl. V/2). One part of its superstructure built of irregular stones has remained intact while its other part was in poor condition. A vessel was found at the grave (*P 33/A*). The grave was not opened.

*Tomb No. 29* (fig. 1). Its superstructure consisting of mostly small stones and filling was in poor preservation. On its surface some larger stones were also lying. From the traces it can be concluded that on its top a similar, cross-shaped decoration was placed as in the case of tomb No. 5. On three sides it was surrounded by benches. Near to one of its short sides the bench was raised and widened. The tomb was not opened. The surface of the grave yielded a vessel fragment without any characteristic feature.

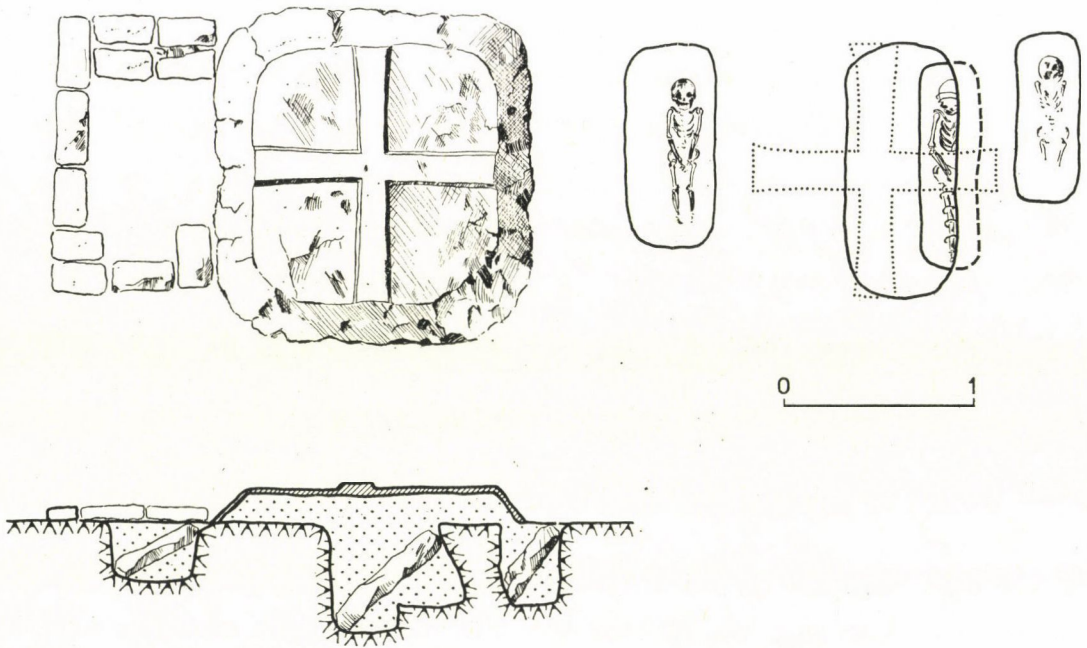


Fig. 7. Tomb No. 9

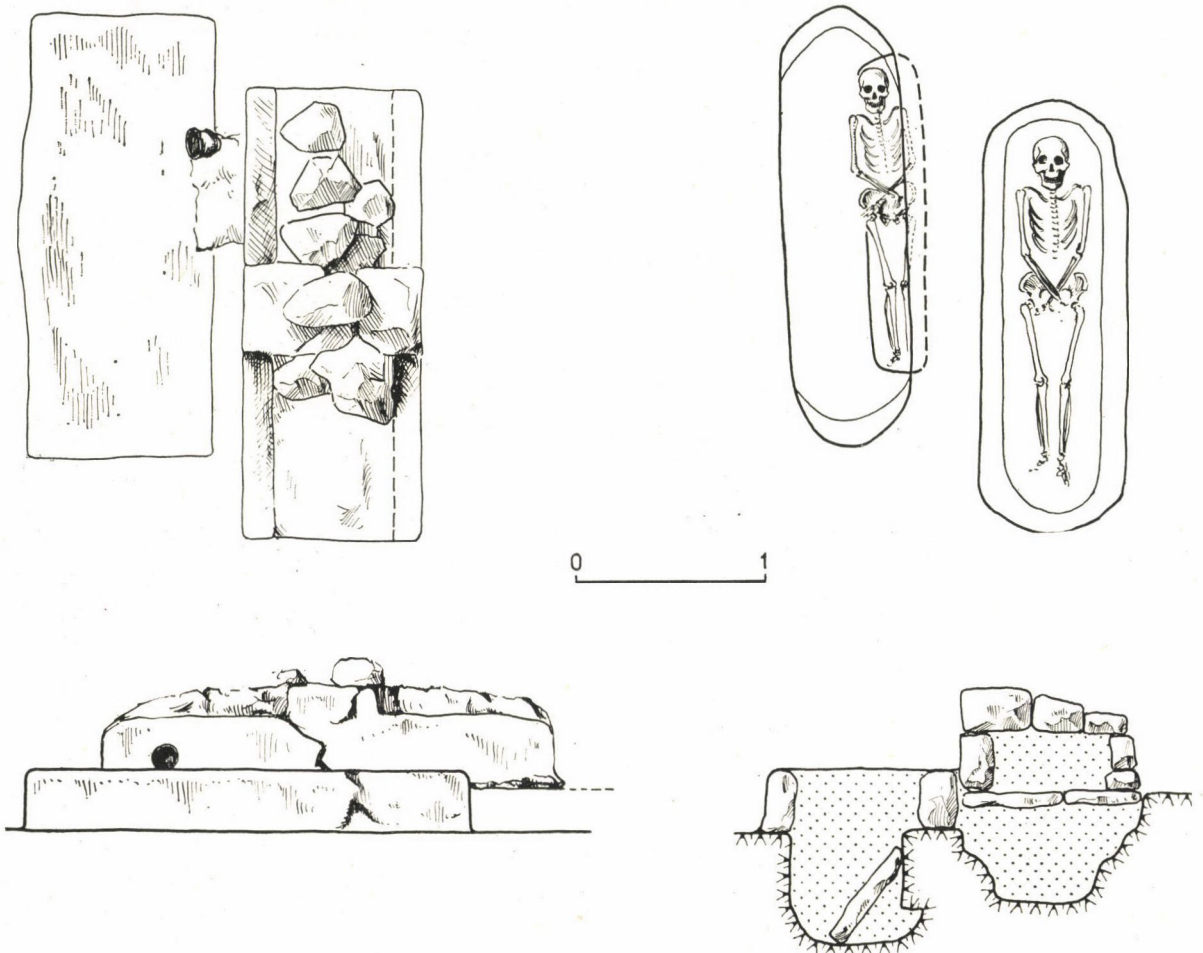


Fig. 8. Tombs Nos 41, 42



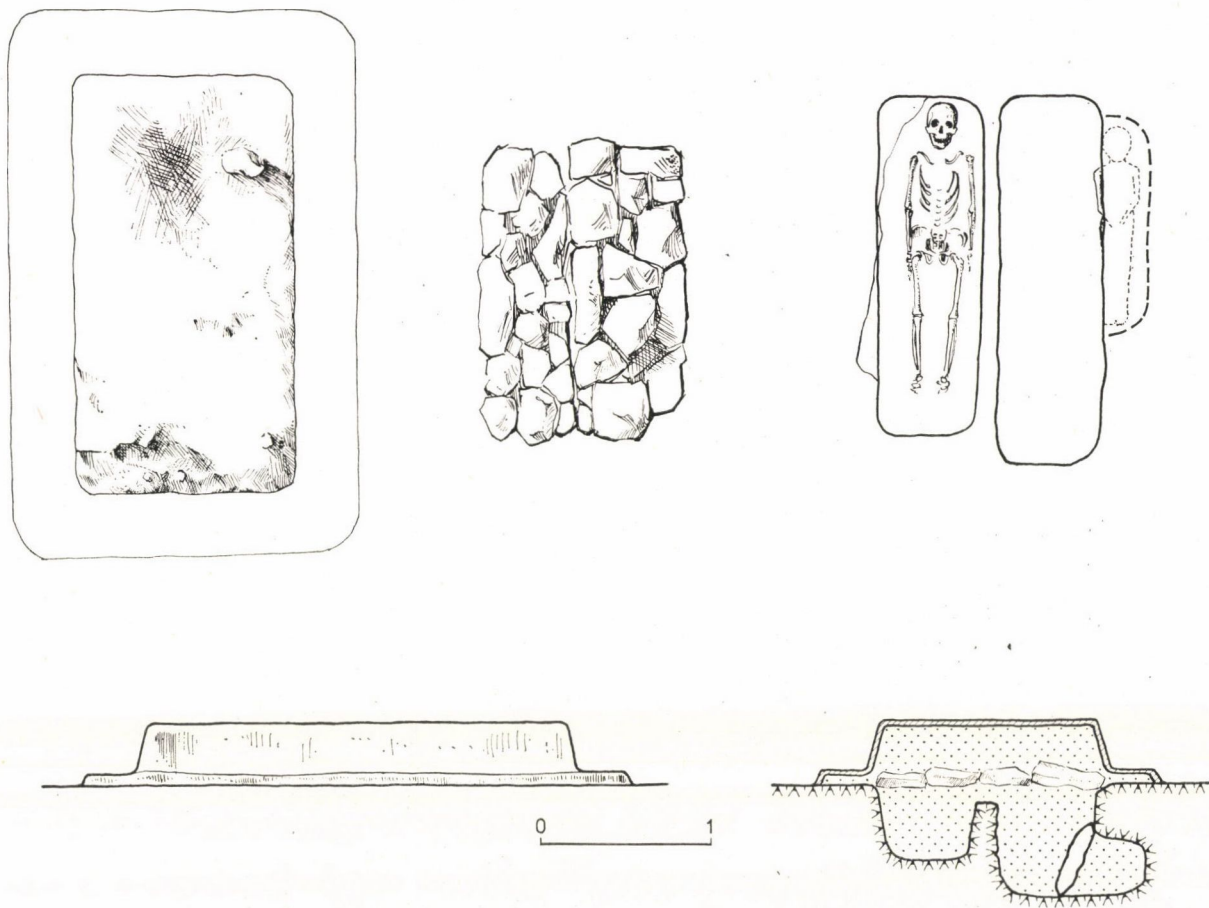


Fig. 9. Tomb No. 43

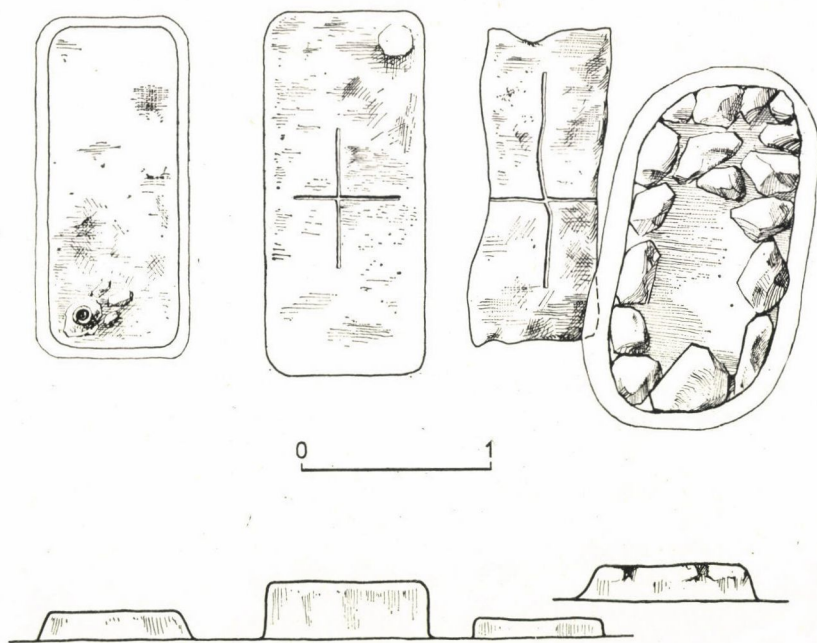


Fig.10. The superstructure of tombs 46—49

Dimensions: length 214 cm, breadth 100 cm, max. height 48 cm. Wall seat 6 and 10 cm.

*Tomb No. 30* (fig. 1). The rectangle-shaped superstructure was considerably protruding at the middle. In certain places on its sides and top the original plastering was still preserved. The tomb was not opened.

*Tomb No. 41* (fig. 8). The rectangular superstructure was covered by a coat of white-washed mud. The corners and the edges of the structure were supported by large stones with broken stones between them. The oval pit was covered by 6 large stone slabs placed slantwise.

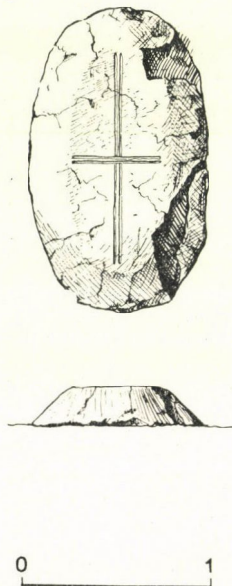


Fig. 11. Tomb No. 50, superstructure

The body of a female adult lying supine was placed partly in this pit and partly in the side-niche formed on the northern wall of the former one. Remains of a linen wrapping were discernible fastened by a black spun string. The head of the dead was leaning slightly to the right; her hands were placed in her lap.

On the surface of the grave a vase was found. It was made of light brown clay with cream-coloured, slipped surface. Most of the vase was covered with the white layer of lime forming the coat on the grave. A part of the body, the shoulder and the rim are missing. It was placed on the grave in an already broken condition, since the broken surfaces were covered with lime, too. Its height was 14 cm, diam. of the base ring 5.8 cm (see *P 245*).

Dimensions of the grave: Superstructure: length 235 cm, breadth 100 cm, height 32 cm. Pit (inside): length 210 cm, breadth 60 cm, depth 60 cm. Side-niche: length 170 cm, breadth 30 cm, height 25 cm. Skeleton 150 cm.

*Tomb No. 42* (fig. 8). It was situated in the close vicinity of grave No. 41. The two graves were touching each other. The superstructure of tomb 42 consisted of irregular stones heaped up with plastering and broken stones in between. At the corners large stones were serving for supporting. The pit was covered by flat stone slabs placed horizontally — some of which had fallen into the pit before the excavation.

The corpse of a male adult placed in EW direction into the pit was covered by a thick layer of sand. Pieces of linen were not found. The hands were placed in the lap. The left leg was



crippled, its shin-bone being shorter than that of the right leg, the big toe was deformed as well as the other toes. The hair was relatively well preserved; there was a black goatee on his chin.

Dimensions: superstructure: length 240 cm, breadth 93 cm, height 28 cm. Pit (inside): length 220 cm, breadth 50 cm, depth 60 cm. Skeleton 170 cm.

*Tomb No. 43* (fig. 9; Pl. VI/1). A superstructure built of irregular stones with smooth plastering on the outer surface. Both its sides and the low wall-bench surrounding the structure were covered by a coat of lime. On the top of the structure, inside it and in the layer of filling under it, vessel fragments were found.

The structure has covered two pits:

A) Under the layer of smaller stones covering the pit sand and earth was found. On the W side of the pit a smaller pit was formed — covered by stone slabs placed slantwise — with the body of an infant (girl) in it. Her whole body was wrapped in linen.

B) The body of an adult person was lying supine, placed to the middle of the pit. Sex indeterminable.

Surface finds:

1. Two fragments of a vessel with thick wall, hand-made. Reddish brown fabric, unslipped surface.

2. A thick-walled, ribbed fragment with red surface.

3. The fragment of a spout of a vase with red slip.

4. The fragment of a bowl with a part of the base ring. Brick-red fabric with red slip.

Height 6.7 cm. (*P.* 78)

Inside of the structure and the layer under it:

1. Fragments of a large storage vessel with ribbed wall (*P.* 243).

2. Fragments of three domestic pots with thick wall.

Dimensions: superstructure: length 250 cm, breadth 130 cm, height 30 cm. A/pit: length 216 cm, breadth 70 cm, depth 65 cm. Side pit: length 130 cm, breadth 30 cm, skeleton 115 cm. B/pit: length 200 cm, breadth 60 cm, depth 45 cm. Skeleton 160 cm.

*Tomb No. 47* (fig. 10). The sides of the roughly rectangular superstructure are irregular, curved. On its evenly plastered top an incised cross. It was touching grave No. 46. Not opened.

Dimensions: length 167 cm, breadth 65 cm, height 10 cm.

*Tomb No. 48* (fig. 10). Rectangle-shaped superstructure with rounded corners. It was smoothly plastered. On its top traces of whitewashing and an incised cross could be observed. Not opened.

Dimensions: length 195 cm, breadth 86 cm, height 30 cm.

*Tomb No. 49* (fig. 10). Rectangular superstructure becoming broader downwards. It was carefully plastered and there were vessel fragments found on its top. Probably the grave of an infant. It was not opened.

Dimensions: length 170 cm, breadth 70 cm, height 15 cm.

*Tomb No. 50* (fig. 11). An elliptic superstructure, downwards widening. There were traces of lime on the plastering; on the top a cross smoothed with finger. Possibly the grave of an infant. It was not opened.

Dimensions: length 160 cm, breadth 95 cm, height c. 20 cm.

#### *The Characterization of Cemetery 249*

Most of the graves were provided with a rectangular superstructure built of large stones, broken stones and sometimes of mud bricks. Grave No. 9 is an almost symmetrical square while graves 19, 46 and 50 are oval-shaped. Graves 5, 9, 16, 30 and perhaps 29 are decorated with a



cross made of clay and stones in relief.<sup>1</sup> In the case of some minor complexes (e.g.: 3, 4, 5, 46, 47, 48, 49) an attempt for their regular arrangement can be recognized; however, rows of graves intersecting at right angles are not apparent.

Incised crosses were on graves 47 and 48 and another one smoothed with finger on grave 50. One structure could have covered several pits (9, 43). Structures plastered with clay were originally whitewashed — the traces of which could be observed in a number of cases. The graves were generally surrounded by benches. The bodies were in most cases right under the structure, in the middle of the pit covered with large stones and in some cases in side-niches (41, 43). In the case of grave 5 three bodies were buried into one pit. Similarly to the other Christian cemeteries of Nubia the graves at Abdallah Nirqi were also orientated E—W.<sup>2</sup> The superstructure type known from other Nubian cemeteries<sup>3</sup> — with a small niche for a lamp and vessel at the west end — was perhaps prevailing at Abdallah Nirqi, too (see grave 5), although in the section excavated by our expedition no lamp was found. Similarly, in the course of the excavation there were not any grave stelae found, either; but it is not excluded that the one with Coptic inscription, built into the citadel wall<sup>4</sup> has come from this cemetery.

### Conclusions

In the course of the excavations a relatively small sector of the Cemetery 249 has been unearthed. Major differences in the forms of the superstructures could be observed only in certain cases (infant burials). The complex of graves excavated shows a roughly uniform character. The significant differences in the distance of the graves from each other, moreover the fact that some of the graves were situated in the close vicinity of each other or even on the top of each other — either partly or entirely — all show that this part of the cemetery had been in use for several generations. Even the approximate determination of this period causes serious problems. In respect of the dating of Christian cemeteries in Nubia a great uncertainty is still prevailing. According to the studies carried on by L. Török, vessels (see *P* 33A, 78, 195, 243, 245, 246) unearthed in the cemetery can be dated to a relatively early period (6th—8th cent.). According to these it can be taken for granted that we can count only with the period preceding the millennium. The Coptic stela found in the neighbouring Tamit<sup>5</sup> used secondarily in a church but undoubtedly coming originally from one of the Christian cemeteries of Tamit, presents a suitable basis for this dating. The date of 61(.) (the last figure has worn down), of the martyr-era can be read on it, i.e. it must have been made at the end of the 9th century or at the beginning of the 10th. The cemeteries at Tamit show similar features with Cemetery 249,<sup>6</sup> consequently, even considering the conservative character of Christian burial forms, it is not possible to assume a major deviation in time between them. In our opinion some of the vessels were placed in this cemetery after having been used for a long time. The settlement of Abdallah Nirqi was founded undoubtedly earlier than Tamit, thus it is the 8th—9th centuries that seem to be the most probable for dating the cemetery section excavated. Some tombs may be, however, of a later date.

<sup>1</sup> As for the cemeteries containing graves decorated with crosses cp. U. MONNERET DE VILLARD: *La Nubia Iedioevale I—IV*. Le Caire 1935—1957 (= MDEV —IV) III. 71 ff. (Qasr Ibrim, Sakinya, Ar-Ramal, Tamit (south and north), Faras (to the latter see F. L. L. GRIFFITH: *Oxford Excavations in Nubia*. LAAA 14 (1927); p. 108. At Qasr Ibrim the crosses are formed in high relief (see also MDEV I. 112. fig. 96.)

<sup>2</sup> I. HOFMANN: *Die Kulturen des Niltals von Aswan bis Sennar*. Hamburg 1967, 530.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. MDEV I. 137 (Ar-Ramal), H. JUNKER:

*Bericht über die Grabungen d. Akad. Wiss. Wien auf den Friedhöfen von Ermenne (Nubien)*. Akad. Wiss. Wien, Phil.-hist. Kl. Denkschr. 67, Bd. 1. Abh. Wien 1925, 159, etc.

<sup>4</sup> H. S. SMITH: *Preliminary Reports . . . Cairo 1962*. 43, Pl. V/1.

<sup>5</sup> E. BRESCIANI—I. BALDASSARE—S. DONADONI—A. ROVERI—S. BOSTICCO: *Tamit*. Roma, 1967. 72 ff; Tav. 24/1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* 85 ff.



## B) BURIALS IN THE REGION OF THE TOWN

*Tomb No. 1 at the Church* (TAC II. 1) (figs 12, 13; Pls VI/2, VII/1—2). The tomb was unearthed 3 m south to the Citadel-church excavated by the Dutch expedition. The superstructure was built of bricks, it was plastered and its sides were whitewashed. In the middle of the plastered top linear and curved smoothings could be observed. The framework of the structure was formed of two rows of bricks placed side by side. The framework consisted in height of 6 rows of bricks placed horizontally and one row of bricks placed on the longitudinal side. The structure within

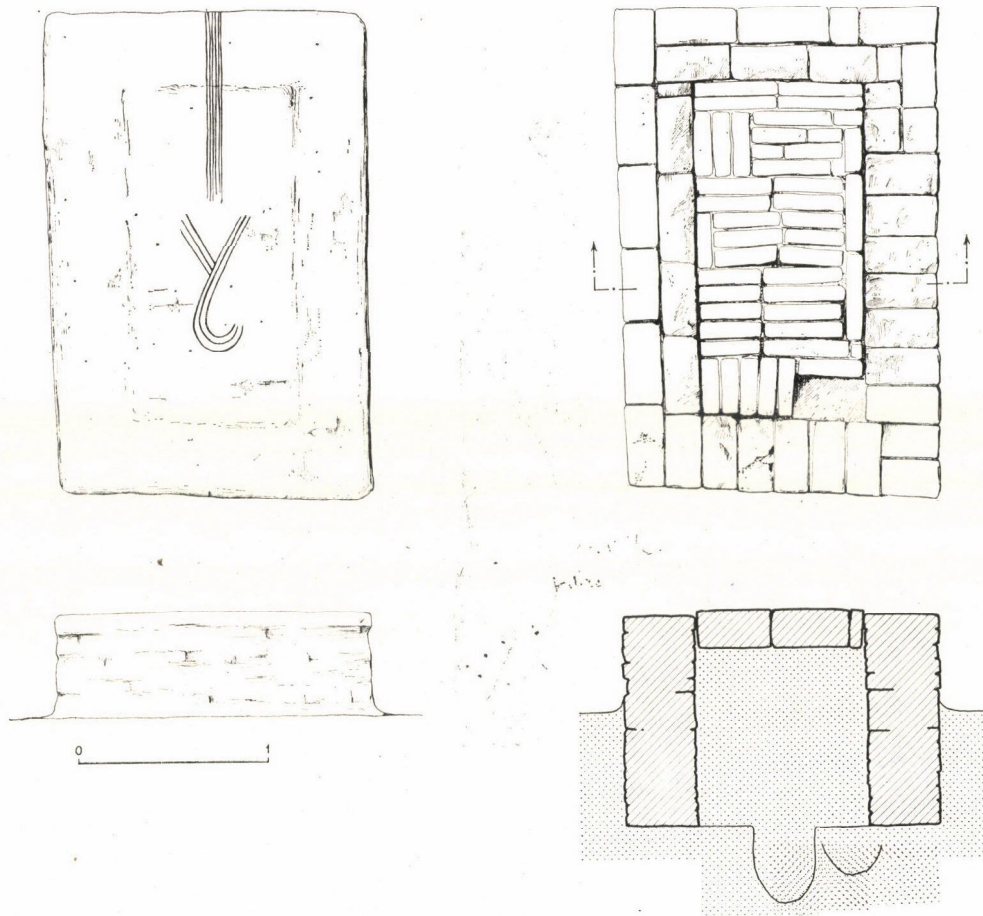


Fig. 12. TAC II/1 Tomb, superstructure and cross-section

the framework was filled by bricks standing on their edges. Under it a layer of sand and a narrow pit was situated. The body of a male adult was placed into the pit partly slantwise. On his skull, knee and foot the skin and flesh have partly remained as well as the fair hair on his head and the brownish beard on his chin. The dimensions of the superstructure: length, at the bottom 261 cm, on the top 256 cm; breadth 170 cm. (Breadth of framework 40 cm.) Pit: length 190 cm, breadth 33 cm. — The textiles yielded by the grave see *T 30—T 33*.

*Tomb No. 2 at the Church* (TAC II. 2) (figs 14—16; Pl. VII/3—4). It was unearthed in the vicinity of the Citadel-church, about 2.5 m SW from it. The superstructure was built of sun-dried mud bricks with stones of irregular shape between them. On its western side the superstructure was lowered; the rim was here a row of bricks lower. This was the place where the dead were put

into the pit. On the outer side of the structure traces of a lime coating could be recognized. Judging from the insignificant remains it must have been enclosed by a bench of 15 cm breadth. The filling under the structure yielded fragments of vessels.

The burial hole deepened into the rock was covered with stones of irregular shape plastered with clay. Seven skeletons were lying in it — with the exception of two of them their bones were scattered about. The remains of some brown linen (see *T* 34—*T* 37) and a piece of thin, mouldy wood have been unearthed here. Close to the head of the 1st skeleton the remains of black and grey hair were found.



Fig. 13. TAC II/1 Tomb

- Finds: 1. Doqas fragment. Wall and bottom. Thick, brick-coloured clay.  
 2. Small fragment of a thick-walled domestic pot (= *P* 83).  
 3. Fragment of a wheel-made vessel (= *P* 163).  
 4. Fragment of a thin-walled vessel (= *P* 40).  
 5. A piece of leather (see *L* 3).

Dimensions: superstructure: length 260 cm, breadth 100 cm, height 75 cm. Height of the part standing out of the ground 25 cm. Pit: length 230 cm, breadth 50 cm, depth 75 cm; 25 cm at the head. The length of the 1st skeleton: 170 cm, 2nd skeleton: about 160 cm; the length of the others could not be established because of the disturbed condition of the bones. Later on the town wall was built over the grave; this, however, did not cause any damage in the structure.



*Infant Burial in Amphora* (cp. Pl. VIII). Among the burials in houses there was one from a house of the second settlement (room C IV 5) deserving special attention because of its character different from the others. In this room two floor levels could be observed the first one yielding beside vessels an amphora as well (= P 192A) with the skeleton of a premature infant wrapped in linen.<sup>7</sup> While in the other houses the burials were apparently taking place after the houses had become deserted, in this case it can be taken for certain that the dead newborn infant was buried under the floor by the occupants of the house.

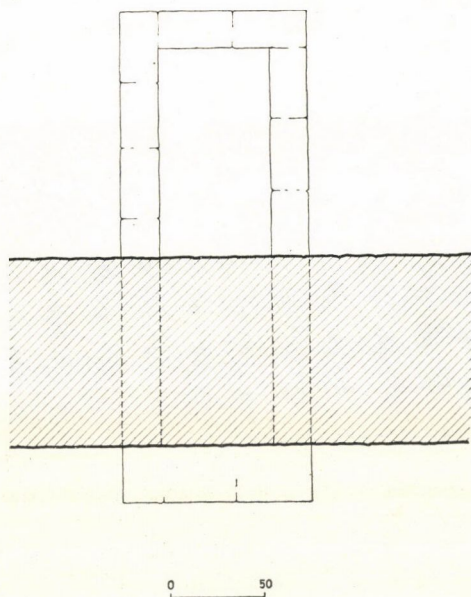


Fig. 14. Situation of tomb TAC/II/2

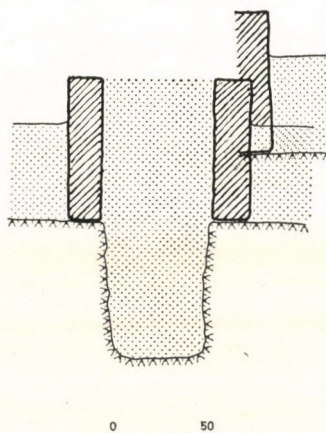


Fig. 15. TAC II/2 Tomb, cross-section

This way of infant burials is connected to a wide-spread custom the proofs of which can be found in distant areas of the world and in the most various periods. There are numerous examples of it from Egypt, too. It is not my aim to deal in details with the custom of burials of grown-ups in pots or the covering of the dead with big jars prevailing in some parts of Egypt in pre-dynastic times, in the Old Kingdom and in the Age of the Ptolemies.<sup>8</sup> In Egypt the burying of sacred animals into vessels was also in use.<sup>9</sup> The placing of dead *infants* into vessels belonged to one of the most persistent form of burials. In the workers' settlement of Deir el-Medine in the course of the XVIIIth dynasty there was a special cemetery for infants buried into vessels.<sup>10</sup> From later times the cemetery of Hadra in Alexandria should be mentioned where vases were unearthed serving for burial places of infants.<sup>11</sup> In a cemetery of Greco-Roman age situated west to Abukir the grown-ups were placed into two amphorae fitted to each other and the children in a single amphora.<sup>12</sup> Pots were used in the same way in the Kom-Firin cemetery (30 km SE to

<sup>7</sup> Its anthropological examinations: I. KISZELY: Anthropological Examination of a Nubian Premature Infant. *Archivio per l'antropologia e l'etnologia* 99 (1969) 79–83.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. E. PEET—W. S. L. LOAT: *The Cemeteries of Abydos III*. London 1913. 20 ff.

<sup>9</sup> The placing of ibis mummies into pots occurs especially frequently. *Op. cit.* 40 ff; W. B. EMERY,

JEA 51 (1965). Cats: E. NAVILLE: *The cemeteries of Abydos I*. Pl. II. 2.

<sup>10</sup> B. BRUYÈRE: *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934–35) II<sup>e</sup> partie*. Le Caire 1937 11 ff.

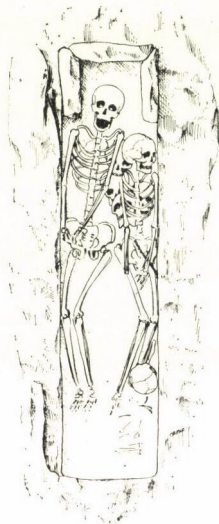
<sup>11</sup> A. ADRIANI in: *Annuaire du Musée Gréco-Romaine* 3 (1940–1950) 2.

<sup>12</sup> J. LECLANT in: *Orientalia NS*. 33 (1964) 340.



Naukratis).<sup>13</sup> Nubian analogies are known e.g. from the age of the New Kingdom and of the X-Group.<sup>14</sup> These few examples chosen from the abundance of data will be sufficient, in our opinion, to prove the prevalence of this custom in the ancient Egypt.

To demonstrate how little this custom can be connected to individual religions it is enough to study the finds from Egypt. An infant amphora-burial of the Middle Ages can be proved e.g. from the region of Assiut.<sup>15</sup> Blackman observed the custom among Upper-Egyptian Copts to place the infant that had died before being baptized into the vessel (qadus) used on the water wheel



0 50

Fig. 16. TAC II/2 Tomb, pit after opening

and to bury it under the floor of one of the rooms in the house instead of the cemetery. According to their belief it assures future children for the mother.<sup>16</sup>

It is of course doubtful whether the same had been the explanation of earlier infant burials as well. From the ancient world there are no written sources proving this assumption at our disposal. It is, however, mentioned by Pliny that infant bodies were subjected to a different treatment than those of grown-ups in the time of generally used cremation. The custom was not to cremate infants before the appearance of the first tooth. They had to be buried, instead.<sup>17</sup> (*Hominem prius quam genito dente cremari mos gentium non est.*)

Perhaps it was the idea of the vase-mother that had played an important part in the spreading of this custom. The similarity of the vessels and the body of a pregnant woman may have suggested a secret relationship between the two; the vessels formed on the model of a female body hint at the same assumption. In Egyptian mythology Chnum had formed people — similarly to vessels — on a potter's wheel. According to an Indian myth the sperm of Indra and Varuna

<sup>13</sup> H. BRUNNER AfO 16 (1952—53) 387.

<sup>14</sup> EMERY-KIRWAN I: New Kingdom (XIXth dynasty): El-Riqa graves 4 and 15 p. 202 ff; X Group: Wadi el Arab graves, 106 pp. 122, 141. Living man in a pot on a wall-painting in Abdallah Nirqi: L. TÖRÖK in: Antik Tanulmányok 19 (1972) 220 ff.

<sup>15</sup> W. DE BOCK: Matériaux pour servir à l'archéolo-

gie de l'Égypte chrétienne. 1901 vol I.91, 93; A. L. SCHMITZ ZAS 65 (1930) 7 ff.

<sup>16</sup> W. S. BLACKMAN: The Fellahin of Upper Egypt. London 1927. 388.

<sup>17</sup> NH VII. 16. Fr. Cumont: Lux perpetua. Paris, 1949. 388.



when catching sight of Urvasi had fallen into a pot from where Agatya the wise was born later.<sup>18</sup> The members of the Yazidi sect in Iraq trace their descent back to a pair of twins, who were born from a pot containing the sperm of Adam for nine months. Thus, pots can play the part of womb. The dead, so to say, returns to its prenatal state, thus giving the infant the assurance of resurrection.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> J. DOWSON: *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* . . . London 1914. 339. (see *s.v.* Vasishtha). In another version the birth of Vasishtha is related similarly. E. WASHBURN-HOPKINS: *Epic Mythology* (Grundriß der Indo-Arischen Philologie und Alter-

tumskunde III. 1. Heft). Straßbourg, 1915. 118, 61.

<sup>19</sup> To the idea of vase-mother and burials in pots see also A. A. BARB, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953) p. 206 and note 211.