



The Islamic graveyard on Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. Excavation season 2007/2008

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THE ISLAMIC GRAVEYARD ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

EXCAVATION SEASON 2007/2008

Emanuela Kulicka

Abstract: The paper reports on the exploration of tombs from the upper phase of an Islamic graveyard in Areas H and G, dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. Most of the tombs were of the simple type, but some with *mihrab* decoration in the plaster superstructure were also noted. Current results corroborated earlier findings as to the construction of individual tombs and mortuary customs. Low enclosure walls around groups of family(?) graves were documented. Cemetery layers yielded: Islamic glazed ceramic wares, lamps, glass vessels, weights, gaming pieces, bronze coins and fragments of copper-alloy artifacts and a green-glazed jar containing a charred organic substance.

Keywords: Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka, Islamic graveyard, Upper Necropolis, *mihrab*

The excavation season in the winter of 2007 concentrated, among others, on the exploration of a large stretch of the Islamic graveyard discovered in the 1980s in Areas H and G [Fig. 1]. The layer of burials assigned to the so-called Upper Necropolis, dated from other research to the turn of the 11th and in the 12th centuries, was cleared this year (Majcherek 2004: 25–34). Of the 42 tombs that were uncovered — 34 in Area H and eight in Area G — only five retained any semblance of superstructures (H 91, H 92, H 93, H 94, H 95).

The surface of the mound on which the graveyard was situated was 13 m a.s.l. The layer containing the burials was approximately 2 m thick. The burials were oriented latitudinally with minimal deviation, the bodies laid on one side, heads to the west, facing Mekka. Both superstructures and substructures were not

preserved in a good condition in this sector [Fig. 2, left]. Of the superstructures that were preserved, H 94 represented a simple type without decoration. Its size (1.30 x 2.00 m) and construction (rectangular plan, small dressed limestone blocks plastered on the outside and inside) were consistent with the characteristics already established for this type. The remaining four featured a rich and ornamental form, the rectangular superstructure having a *mihrab* shaped in the plaster on the inside. The best preserved of these was the superstructure of tomb H 91 [Fig. 2, right]. The *mihrab* was made of brick, the floor of the burial marker plastered. Damages to the eastern end attest to the tomb being reopened for the purpose of another burial. Atypically, the primary burial was pushed aside toward the eastern end rather than the western one as is the rule.

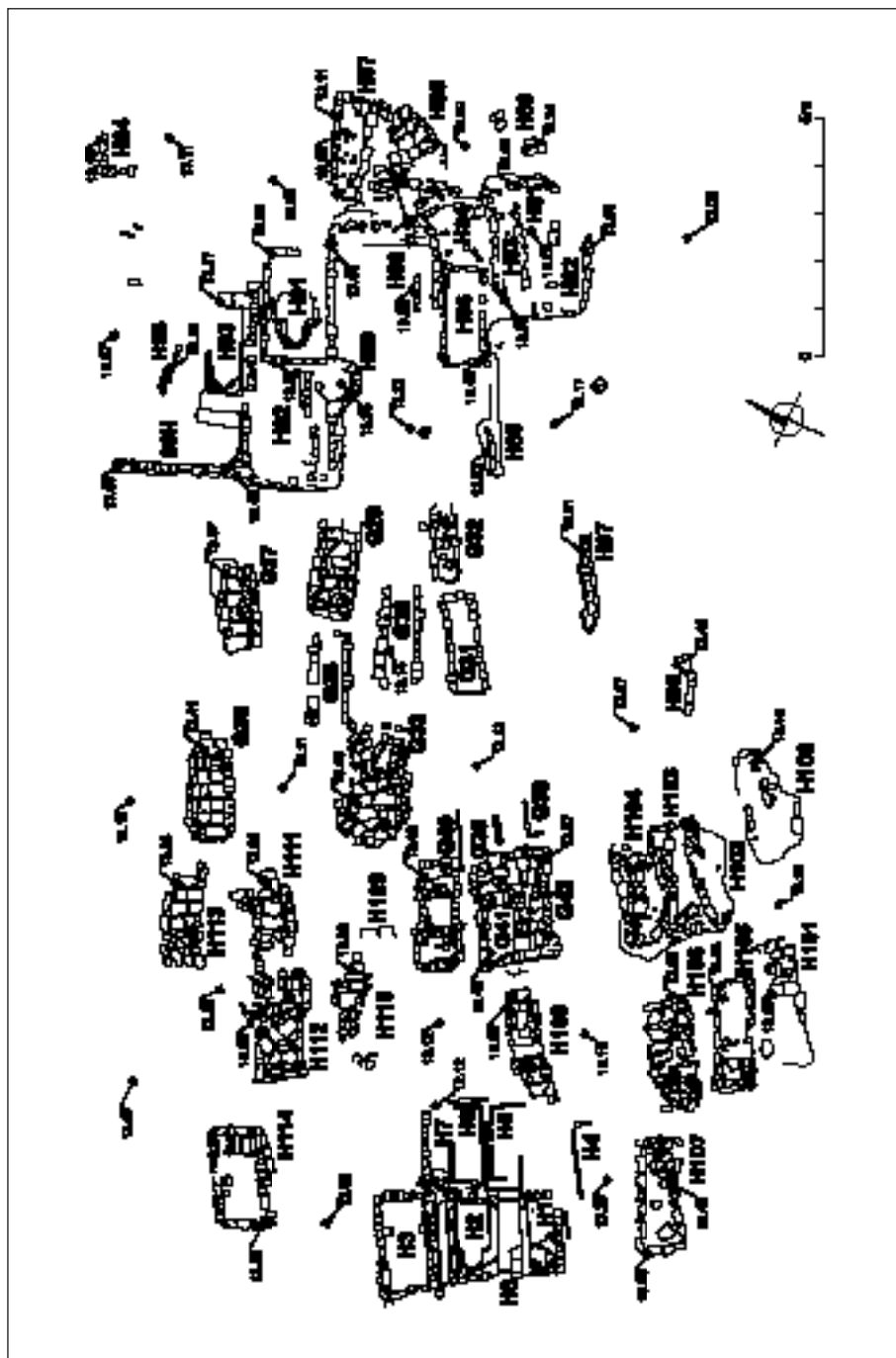


Fig 1. Plan of tombs in the 11th and 12th century Islamic graveyard in Areas H and G
(Plan A. Brzozowska)

In most of the cases where the roofing of tomb substructures was preserved, stone slabs were laid flat (23 instances) or gabled (two tombs). The boxes were located about a meter underground, sometimes slightly deviating from the axis of the superstructures.

Approximately half the burials were placed in stone boxes measuring 0.40 m by 1.80 m, constructed of irregular limestone blocks. The remaining boxes, measuring 0.60 x 2.00 m, were made of small regularly dressed blocks of limestone, the sides

measuring about 15 cm, bonded in mortar and frequently plastered on the inside. The most elaborate tombs of the latter type had a shaft at the eastern end for the purpose of secondary burials. These boxes had gabled roofs while the shafts had special ledges for the covering slabs.

It should be noted that about 10% of the building material in the case of the substructures was composed of baked bricks.

The substructures in this part of the graveyard contained from one to three

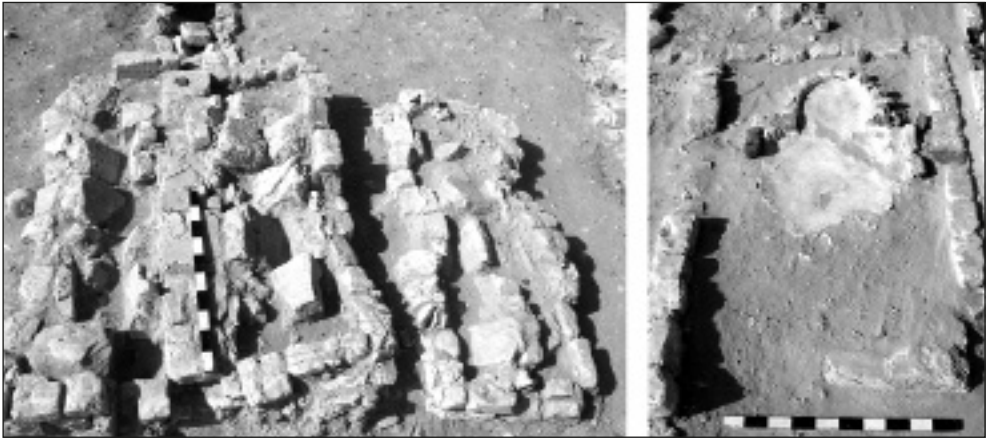


Fig. 2. Damaged tomb substructures G 41, G 41a, G 42 (left) and preserved superstructure with mihrab of tomb H 91 (Photo E. Kulicka)

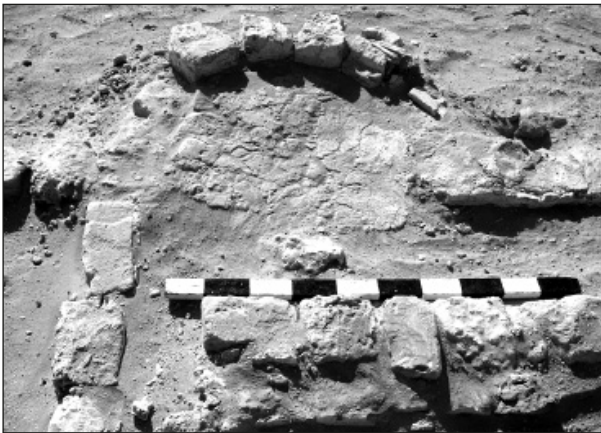


Fig. 3. Mihrab in the southeastern section of the enclosure wall around tombs H 91, H 92, H 93 and H 95 (Photo E. Kulicka)

burials, the previous burials being pushed to the western part of the box. Repeated use of the tombs suggests that the graveyard may have remained in use for even a hundred years. The skeletal material has been heavily damaged and fragmented.

A green-glazed two-handled jar [Fig. 4] was discovered inside one of the disturbed tomb boxes. It proved to have been placed in the tomb, which had been emptied of the primary burial, and it contained a charred organic substance. The deposition was intentional, but the jar was not part of the grave goods nor was it a symbolic burial.

Graves H 91, H 92, H 93 and H 95 were surrounded by a low enclosure wall, forming most likely a family or community burial complex. The southeastern section of the wall was formed into a *mihrab* [Fig. 3; for another view of the *mihrab* and associated superstructure of tomb H 91, see Fig. 2 on page 38]. A similar *mihrab* pointing toward Mecca was discovered in Area CW of the Upper Necropolis (Kulicka 2008: 45). The low wall with *mihrab* marked the *mussalla*, a kind of open prayer area, in this case, a cemetery "chapel" (Raymond 2005: 63).

The fill around the tombs also yielded finds, which sometimes penetrated into the tomb substructures. The most frequent finds included glazed Islamic ceramic wares, lamps, glass vessels, weights and so-called gaming pieces, bronze coins and fragments of bronze objects.



Fig. 4. Green-glazed jar from tomb H 95, Reg. no. 92.01.07 (Photo E. Kulicka)

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