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Old Dongola: Cemeteries 1995

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OLD DONGOLA

CEMETERIES 1995

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The ring of *extra muros* cemeteries surrounding the monastery on Kom H is divided into four units: TNH, TSH, TEH and TWH.¹ Burials were also found *intra muros*, beneath the chapel-like structures (tentatively identified as commemorative chapels or *memoriae*).

Graves on the TWH cemetery are in relatively good repair (sepulchers on the remaining three cemeteries around Kom H are reduced to the substructures alone). They were quickly engulfed in sand and afterwards covered with a "protective" layer of architectural debris from the destruction of the western part of the monastery.

The excavation of 46 graves on the TWH cemetery, which is divided into the southern (TSWH) and northern (TNWH) parts, started in 1989 and ended in 1995.

The solid superstructure graves on TSWH cemetery were built of red bricks in mud mortar, covered with two layers of hard lime plaster. The exterior walls of the mastabas have *gir*-washing which ranges from ivory white to pale white. The lamp boxes attached to the western (i.e., front) side of the superstructures yielded a few charcoal samples, mostly charred tamarisk twigs and berries (either juniper or acacia) which had been used as incense. A laboratory analysis of one sample, done at the Department of Physics of the University of Technology in Gliwice (Poland), gave aB.P 1020 ± 45 date (Gd-6180).

¹ All cemeteries within the boundaries of the Polish concession in Old Dongola have been coded in relation to the nearest Kom (designated with capital letters), e.g. TNH - Tombs north of (kom) H, TSJ - Tombs south of (kom) J, etc.

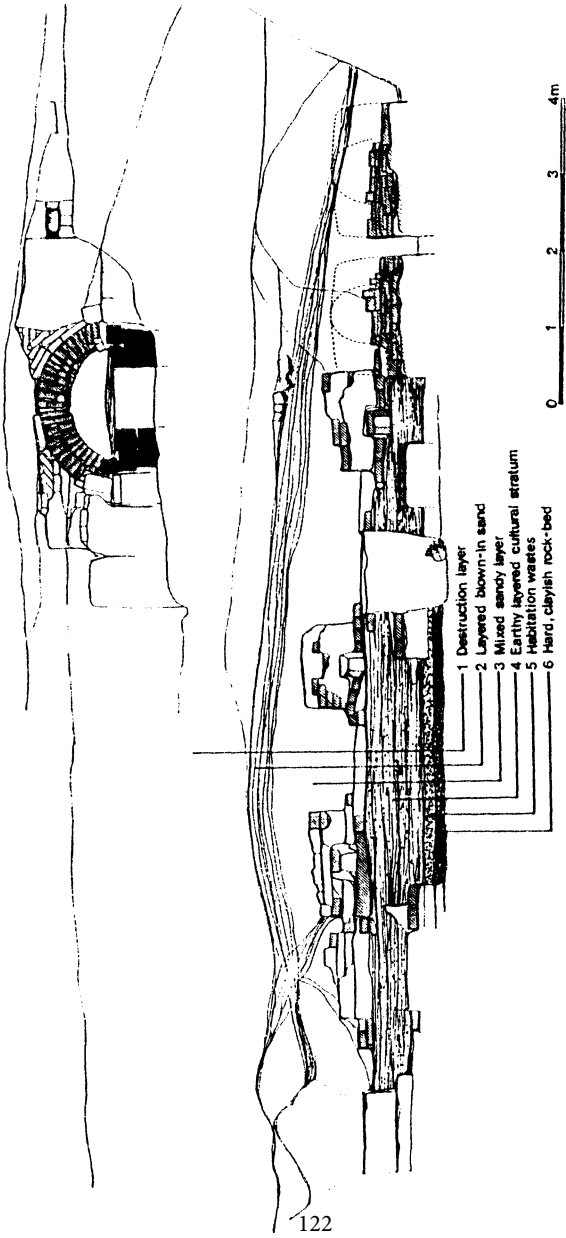


Fig. 1. Stratigraphy of the TSWH cemetery. Stone gate in the background.
 Drawing B. Żurawski

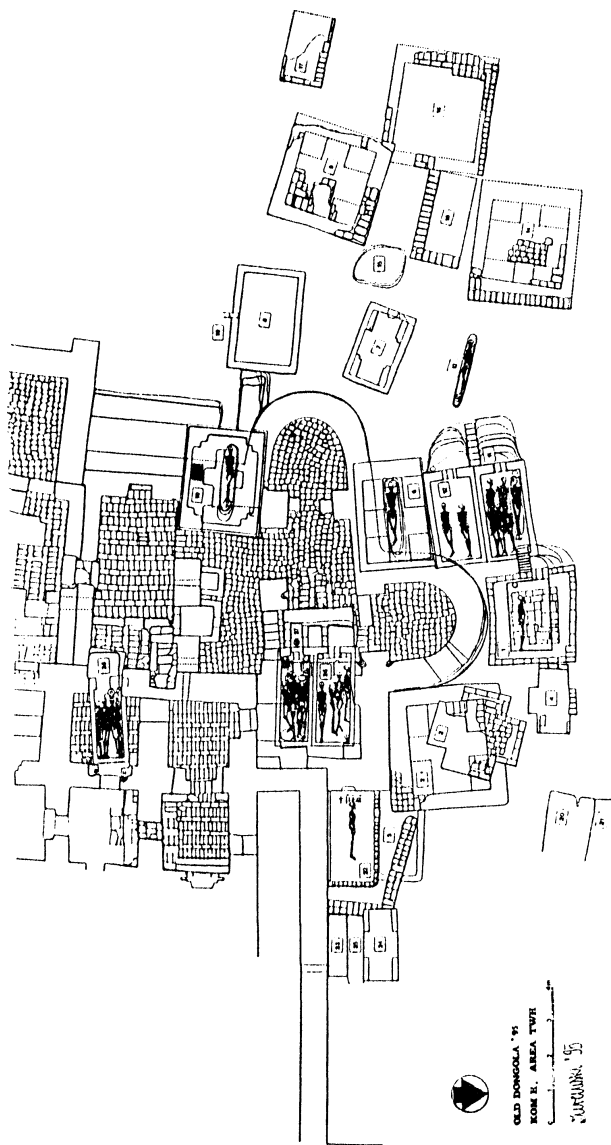


Fig. 2. Northern part of TWH cemetery (=TNWH).
 Drawing B. Zurawski.

One grave was excavated *in toto*. It appeared to be a slot shaft grave dug through strata composed of sand, crushed bricks, plaster fragments, potsherds and organic debris.

The lowermost cultural layer consists mostly of 7th-8th century potsherds. Disposal of domestic waste is the most plausible reason for its accumulation.

The pottery found in this layer closely resembles that from the nearby Monastery on Kom D, and is characterized by thin-walled, yellowish-brown bowls with circular appliqué decorations.

In 1995, work was resumed on the TSWH cemetery with the goal of locating the western limit of the monastery and establishing a chronology of the architectural development of the complex. The outer face of the western wall was surveyed and a stone gate was duly located. (Fig. 1)

The gate leading in the direction of the river was built of finely dressed sandstone blocks set in mud mortar. The stone gate was built after the original western wall of the monastery was doubled. The original passageway was modelled in bricks.

The northern part of TWH (=TNWH) is the most impressive cemetery ever found in Old Dongola. The still existing grave superstructures reach 2.5 m. The predominant superstructure type is a cruciform masonry monument. The mostly baked-brick mausolea were built on square bases with four corner pillars and arched openings in the middle of the walls. The subterranean parts were constructed of large baked bricks in *kurba* mortar. The interiors and exteriors of the superstructures were generally plastered with hard lime and whitewashed.

The cruciform Grave No. 7 from the outer ring of westernmost sepulchers contained a lamp niche and a rectangular recess in the western wall for the stela. The empty-space mausoleum was probably constructed above two parallel subterranean vaults (Grave No. 2), located northeast of the northern hemicycle.

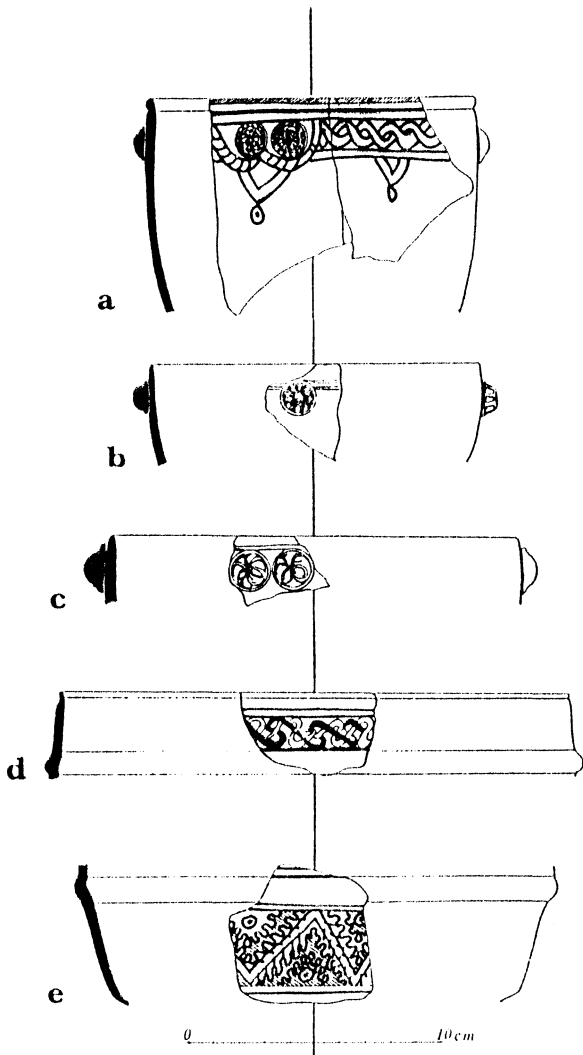


Fig. 3. Pottery from the lowermost layer on TSWH cemetery.
Drawing B. Żurawski

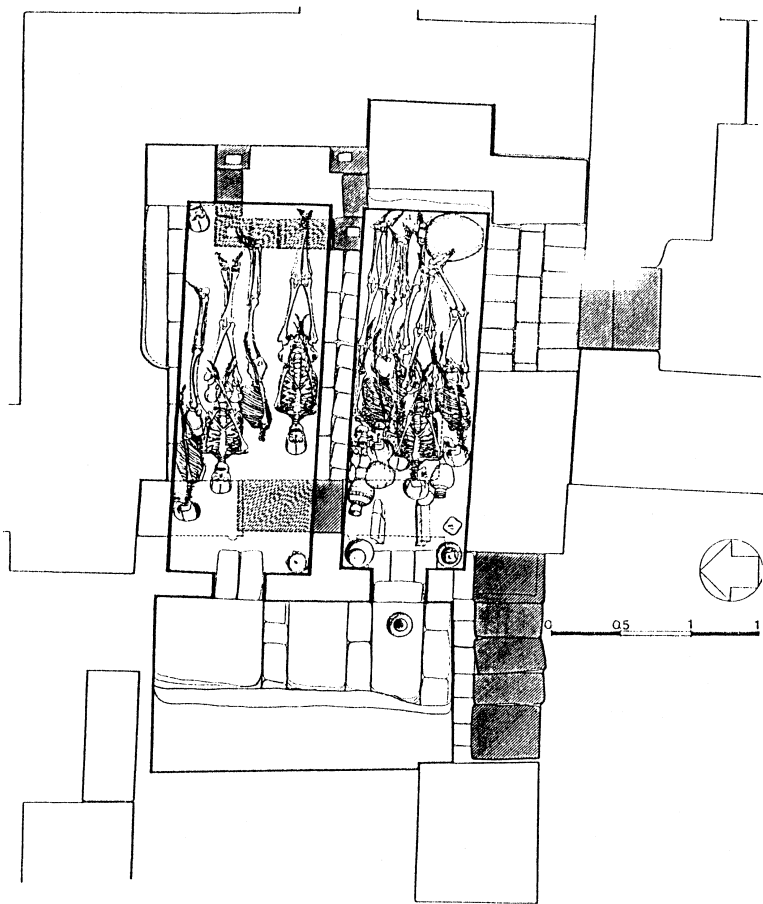


Fig. 4. Crypts (nos. 26, 27) below the haikal of the northern commemorative chapel.
Drawing B. Żurawski.

The sepulchers erected around the northwestern corner of the monastery seem to be contemporaneous or later with graves unearthed in the southern part of the TWH cemetery. Their tentative date, based upon architecture, building mode and two radiocarbon datings, place them in the 9th-11th century.

During the 1995 season, all three crypts beneath the commemorative chapels (Graves Nos. 26, 27, 28) were reopened, measured and drawn. Moreover, limited excavations were conducted in the western parts of the crypts, leaving the bodies untouched.

The "twin crypts below the portal" (cf. *PAMVI* (1994) pp. 88-89) were badly damaged by rainwater which flooded the burial chambers. The enshrouded skeletons in the northern crypt were found embedded in a thick stone-hard layer of mud washed from the walls and cemented by water.

In the southern crypt, six enshrouded skeletons were buried. The burials were accompanied by grave goods (water-jars, lamps and some basketry). Five water jars (called *qullas*) were deposited within the burial chamber, in its western part, close to the heads of the deceased (one extra jar was buried in the access shaft). Lamps were found lying on the rims of the *qullas*. The last burial in the crypt was deposited along the southern wall. Instead of the usual coarse shroud the skeleton is wound in superb textiles. The outer wrapping is not tied. The general appearance of this burial resembles the Gebel Adda burials from Church No. 4, dated to the late 13th century.²

The crypts below the portal were built well before the chapel with two hemicycles was raised. The bulk of *kurba*-masonry in the southwestern corner of the sanctuary sits on the already existing vault of crypt no. 27. Significantly, each of the twin crypts below the portal was associated with a separate altar located along

² Nicholas B. Millet, Gebel Adda preliminary report, 1965-66, *JARCE* 6 (1967), p. 60.

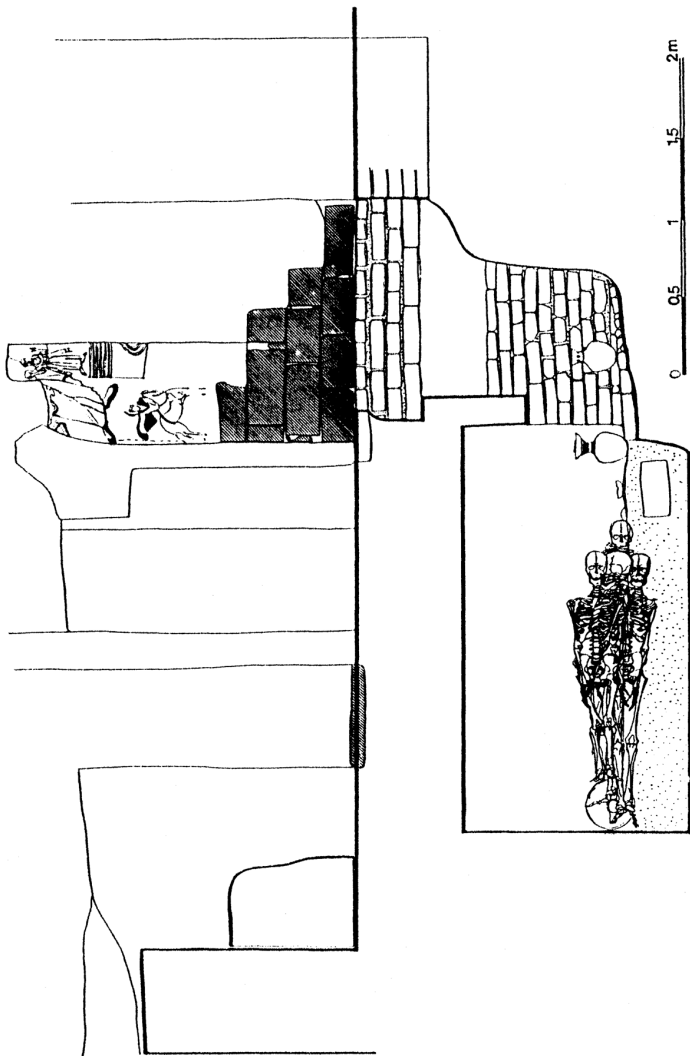


Fig. 5. Section through crypt no. 27 (looking south).
 Drawing B. Żurawski.

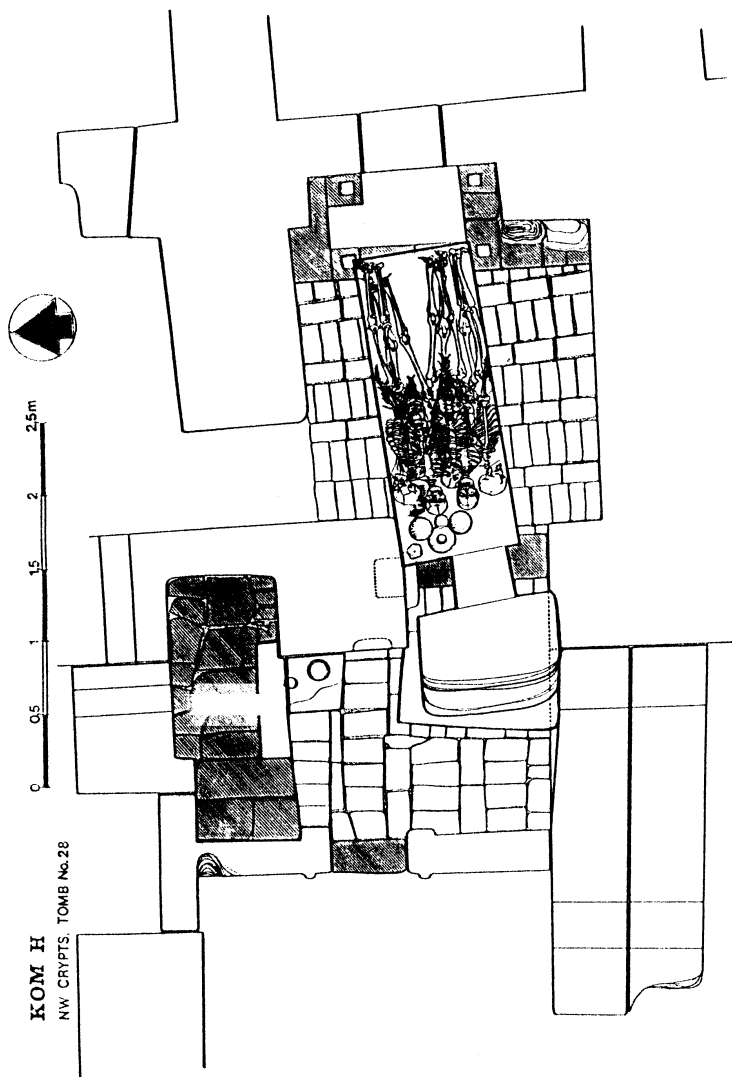


Fig. 6. Crypt no. 28 (the so called archbishop Georgios crypt)
Drawing B. Żurawski.

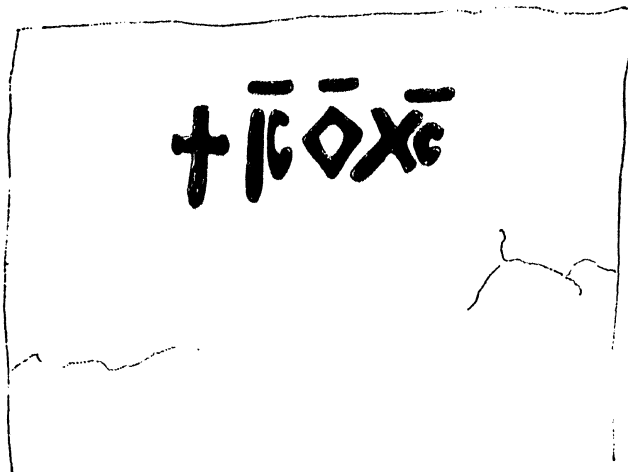


Fig. 7. Relief inscription found on the upper surface of grave no. 22.
Drawing B. Żurawski.

the eastern wall of the chapel. The older crypt (no. 27) was "served" by a brick-made altar located in the recess in the eastern wall. The later altar, apparently connected with crypt no. 26, was built along similar lines as the altar in the commemorative chapel above the so called archbishop Georgios crypt (no. 28). This later altar served both crypts. Its *mensa* was supported on four wooden legs set in squarish holes cut in the stone pedestal.

The grouping of the most imposing tombs around the memorial complex suggests that they were raised on an *ad sanctos* principle around the burials of the local monks or ecclesiastics held in the highest esteem and *post mortem* veneration by the population of Dongola. There are sound reason to think that the commemorative complex on the TWH cemetery was the place of pilgrimage, a good augury of the later Nubian Muslim sheikh cult and pilgrimages.

In January-February 1995, large scale excavations were conducted on a *sub divo* cemetery around the "crypts below the portal". An area of c. 200 m² was dug to bedrock.

In one case the upper surface of the mastaba was found intact. In the western section of the upper surface of the superstructure, just below the stela-niche, carefully rendered Greek characters preceded by a cross were modelled in the lime plaster covering the mastaba.

Graves nos. 23, 24, 25 belong to the latest horizon (13th-15th century) and are the latest sepulchers recorded on TNWH. The construction of the cruciform grave no. 24 required the demolition of the brick wall screening off the much venerated grave no. 22 from the rest of the TNWH cemetery.

The mausoleum-grave no. 2 was built before the chapel above the twin crypts and the northern apse were constructed. On the contrary, the huge mausoleum-type grave no. 1 and neighbouring grave no. 4 were built after the commemorative unit was raised. The remaining relics of the mausoleum indicate that it was an empty-space superstructure floored with big red-bricks, apparently without apertures in the walls. The anterior entrance was located in front of the western wall of the grave.

In the spacious burial chamber of grave no. 1 only one body was found (among nine vaulted graves hitherto opened on cemeteries around Kom H only two were occupied by single burials). It rested on its left side with the head to the west (i.e. to the entrance). A handmade Black-Ware bowl-type lamp was found in the southwestern corner of the burial chamber.

In twin graves (Nos. 11, 12) altogether eight bodies were buried. Six skeletons deposited in grave no. 11 were enshrouded and tied with tapes. The body lying along the northern wall was additionally enveloped in a baggy shroud made of dyed wool. West of the head of this deceased a bowl-type lamp was found. Another saucer-type lamp was placed on the pelvis of the secondary burial

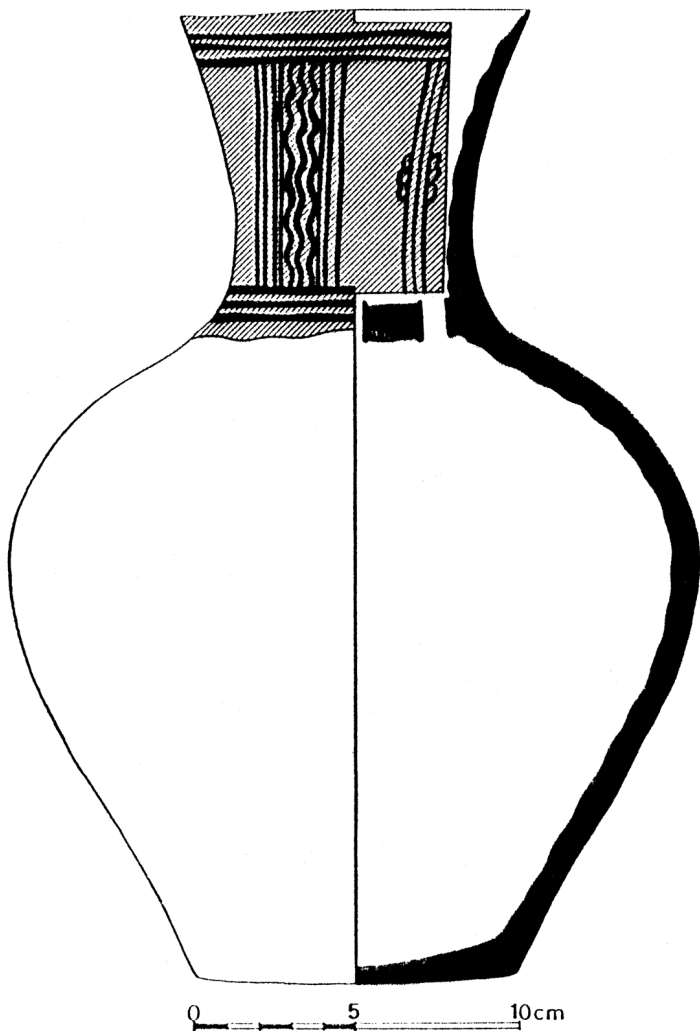


Fig. 8. One of the six gullas found in crypt no. 27 (D.45/95).
Drawing B. Żurawski.

put on top of the first occupants of the vault. Two superbly decorated leather belts used to tie the outer wrapping were found in this grave.

Two bodies resting in vault no. 12 were buried in nothing but coarse shrouds. Neither belts nor lamps were found. A bowl-type lamp similar to that found in the neighbouring crypt was put in the southern corner of the access shaft.

Grave no. 12 was intensively venerated by incense burning in the ritual place in front of the western wall of the superstructure. The C-14 analysis of a charcoal sample, done at the Department of Physics (C-14 Laboratory) of the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice (Poland) gave a 930 ± 60 B.P.(Gd-11194) dating. It is a very important date since the construction of grave no. 12 constitutes a *terminus ante quem* for the erection of the chapel above the twin crypts.

The vaulted graves nos. 11 and 12 were provided with modest superstructures which were partly dismantled. Pit grave no. 6, which adjoins them on the south had a superstructure with arched openings in the walls and empty inside. The deceased was buried (in an earth-filled pit) in extended position, on the back with hands crossed on the pelvis. The head was protected against the filling of the pit by two bricks set up on edge and topped by a third.

The aboveground monument of grave no. 6 was partly incorporated into the northern wall of the western hemicycle. A similar sepulcher comprising a modest pit-burial and an elaborate, monumental superstructure stands on the other (southern) side of the western hemicycle.

The huge massive superstructure no. 10 (probably crowned with a lying cross) has no parallels in the vast repertory of Nubian grave forms. It was raised mostly of huge red-bricks. The upper surface was done partly with floor-tiles laid on edge. A disarticulated skeleton (only the head part of the body was exposed) was found at the bottom level of the burial pit.

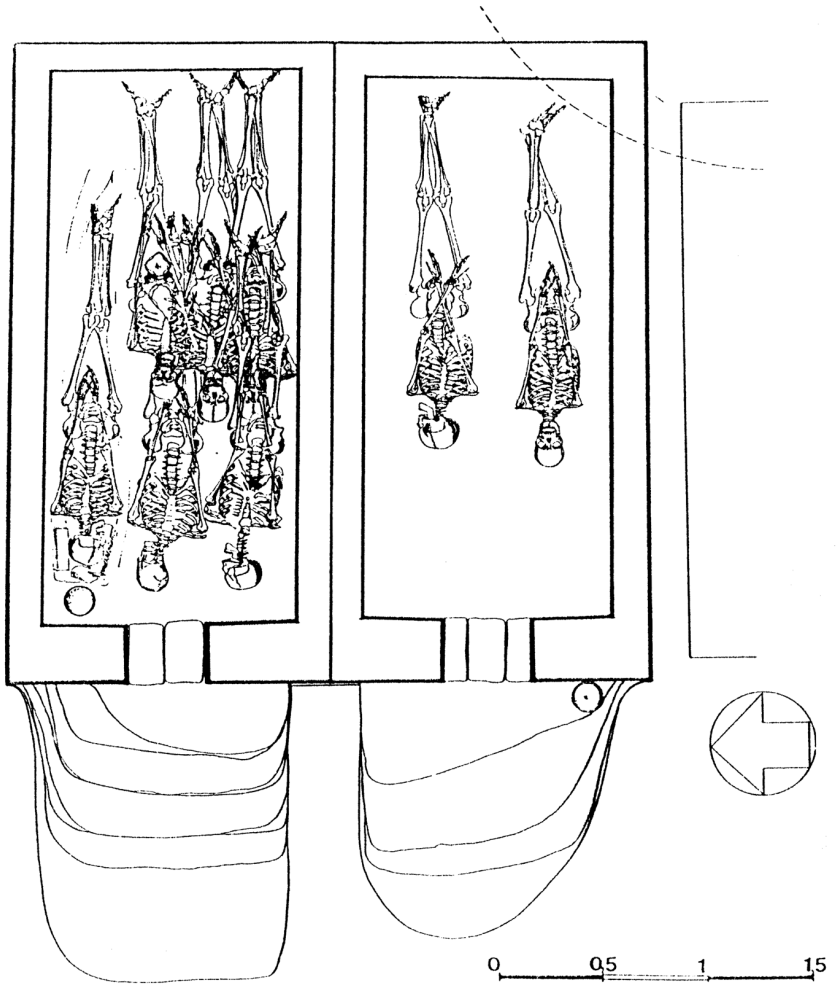


Fig. 9. Graves nos 11, 12
Drawing B. Żurawski

The sumptuous sepulchers around the commemorative chapel contrast with the modest pit-burial no. 13 which consists of an extremely narrow pit with the body "squeezed into" it on the right side.

Grave no. 7 to the south was not opened. Its cruciform superstructure was surprisingly well preserved (as compared to the lamentable condition of its neighbours). It is built mostly of red-bricks and plastered with very hard lime plaster with high sand content. The lamp-niche on the west side is topped by a stela-niche.

Immediately west of the cruciform grave there was a *gabus*-burial, containing the fragile, almost totally disintegrated bones of a fetus.

The five graves on the western periphery of TNWH were left unopened. Three of them were of the empty-space mausoleum-type. Two were simple mastaba-like graves. Near the northeastern corner of grave no. 17 a White Ware bowl was found, apparently used as a lamp.

Three commemorative chapels hitherto unearthed on Kom H reveal some common features. The sanctuary (*haikal*) with an altar, screened from the "naos" by a *templon* screen (*higab*) with an elaborate triumphal arch, seems to be their essential part.