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Cemetery C in Naqlun : Preliminary Report on the Excavation in 2006

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CEMETERY C IN NAQLUN: PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION IN 2006

Iwona Zych

The location of cemetery C has been known since the first survey of the site in 1986; a single tomb of the more than 180 identified at the time was tested and dated based on textile evidence to the 6th-7th century (Godlewski 1990: 33-34; cf. also Godlewski *et alii* 1989; 1994). Another five tombs were explored during the 2004 season, choosing evident locations of tomb shafts and excavating the graves with the

purpose of verifying the dating and character of the necropolis (Godlewski 2005: 184-186). By then it was clear that it was rather not the burial ground of monks from the Nekloni monastery. On the other hand, chance finds of inscribed funerary stelae from the 6th century have suggested not only that the tombs were owned by ordinary inhabitants of the oasis, but also that tomb superstructures of some



Fig. 1. General view of the site before exploration, looking southwest (the ridge in the back has since been identified as another part of this burial ground (C.2), separated from C.1 by a depression through which a road runs today) (Photo I. Zych)

elaborateness existed (Godlewski, Łajtar 2006; see also below, 248 and Fig. 2). No relevant archaeological evidence has been forthcoming from the cemetery itself.

The excavation in 2006, which was carried out by the present author within the framework of the Naqlun fieldwork program (for the main report, see above, contribution by W. Godlewski and other reports in the Naqlun section), was conceived of as a means of studying a section of the cemetery in its entirety. A trench 10 by 7 m was situated on the desert ridge

identified as the site of the necropolis, just west of the modern monastery enclosure wall (topographically, it should be about the middle of the presumed extent of the cemetery from east to west) [Fig. 1].¹ The trench was located crosswise to the ridge, extending south of the centerline and encompassing the eroded southern slope. The premise was to uncover a continuous surface of the necropolis in order to search for possible remnants of superstructures and to study the spatial organization of the tombs.

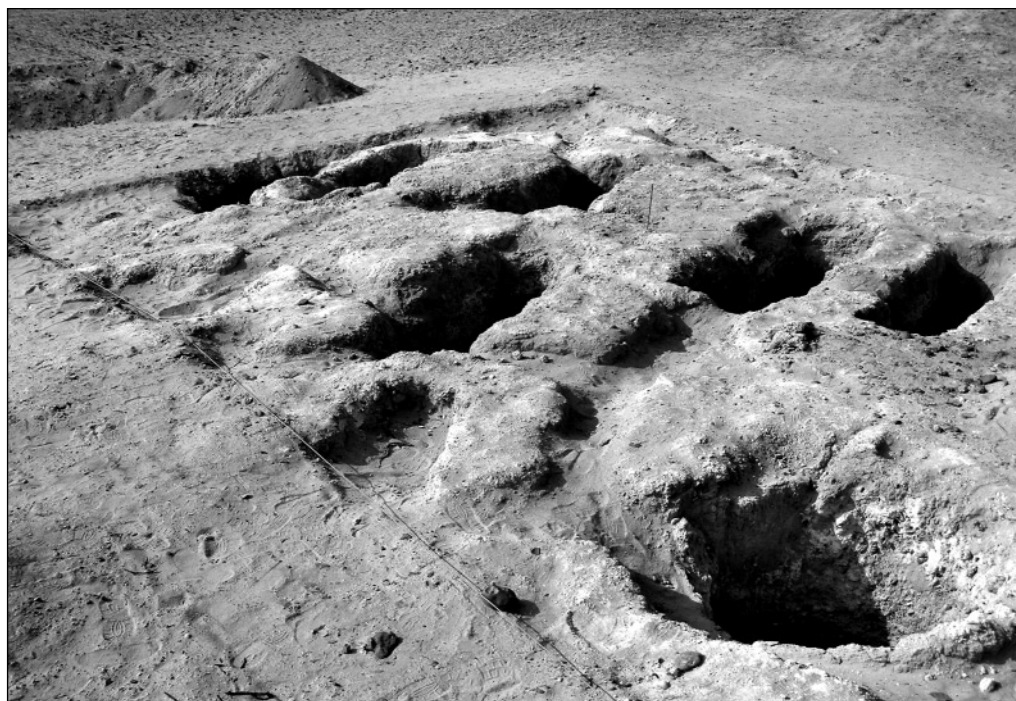


Fig. 2. General view of the trench with explored grave pits, view from the northeast (the shaft of C.T.12 seen in right foreground) (Photo I. Zych)

1 The ridge is one of several rocky ridges separated by sand-filled depressions (wadis), running down from the gebel in the east toward the edge of the oasis in the west. Nearer to the oasis, the team has located and explored some early hermitages of the 5th-6th century. The graves start some 50 m to the east and run up the ridge all the way to the modern enclosure wall of the Deir el-Malak monastery and beyond, reaching almost to the foot of the plateau on which the ancient monastery was located, at least according to currently available data. The extent of the cemetery from east to west can thus be set at about 250 m. It has been established since (during a topographic survey in 2007) that the neighboring ridge to the south was also part of this cemetery.

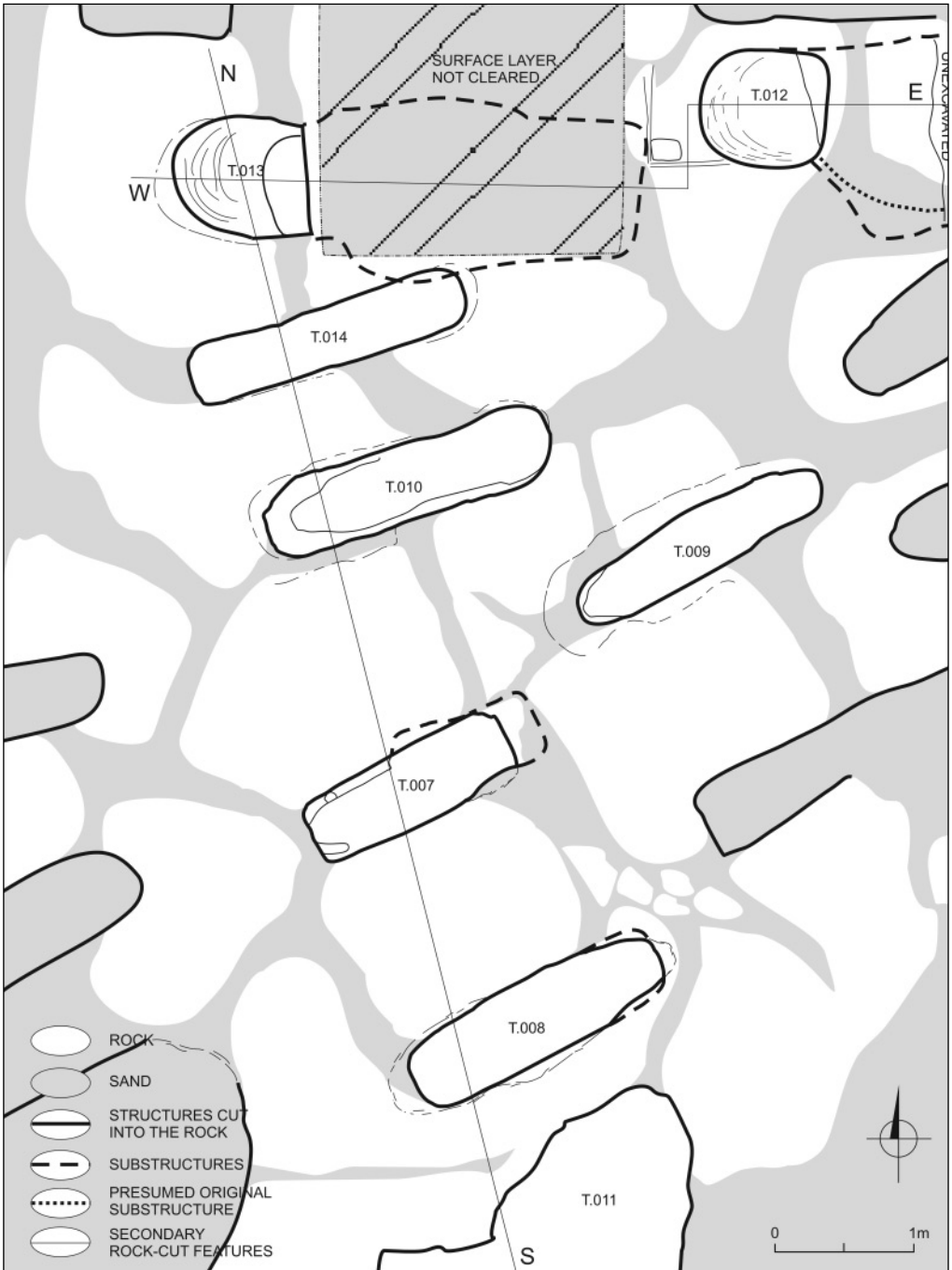


Fig. 3. General plan of grave pits uncovered in the 2006 trench (Drawing I. Zych; digitizing D. Dzierzbicka)

ORGANIZATION OF THE CEMETERY

The first step was a clearing of the surface layer from the entire area of the trench. Nowhere thicker than about 10-15 cm, this covering layer consisted of sand, small pebbles and rock detritus from eroding bedrock. It was not uniform, tending toward small mounds, but too eroded and indistinct to be identified as separate

intentional features attributable to any given grave. Absolutely no signs of any kind of superstructure of a more permanent nature, which could have served to mount a funerary tombstone, could be found.

The surface of the bedrock proved to be much eroded. It is crisscrossed with a web of natural cracks filled with the same kind of gravelly sand which is found on the surface

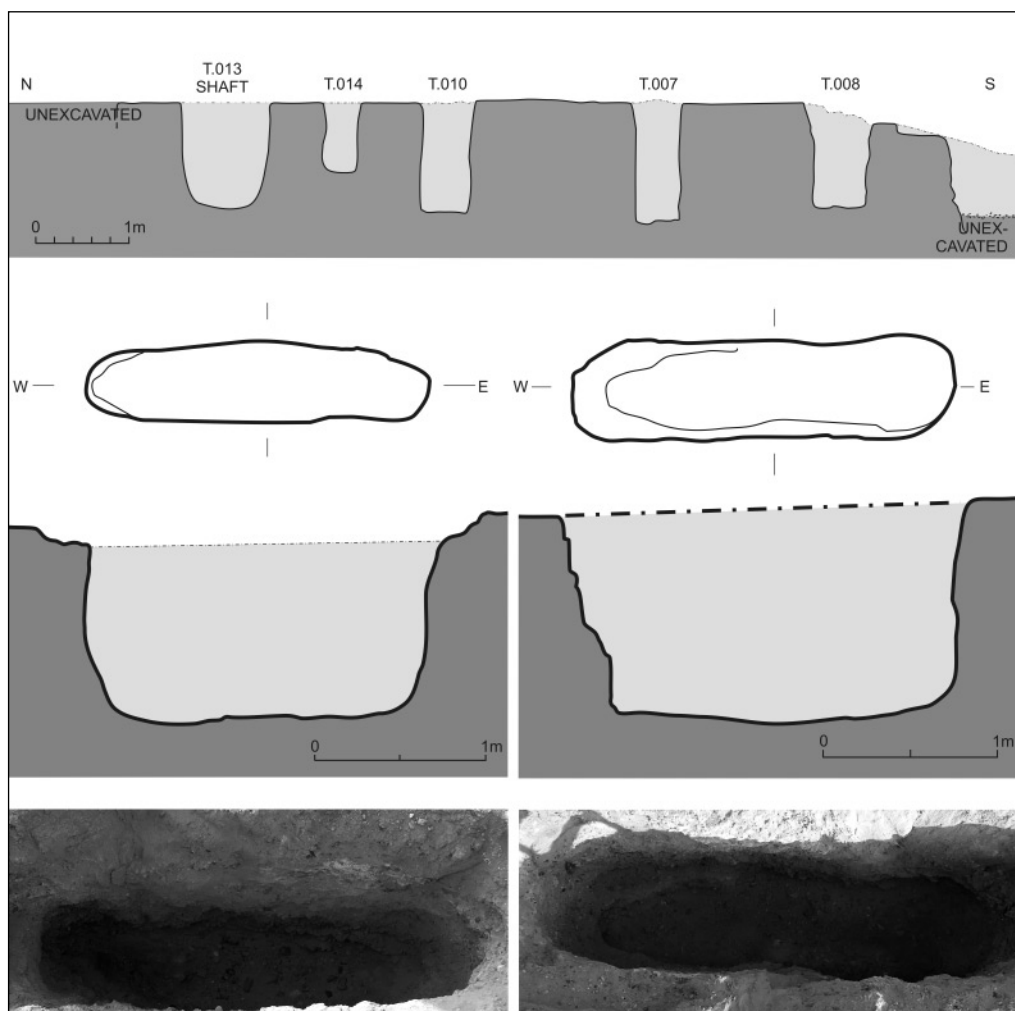


Fig. 4. Graves C.T.9 (left) and C.T.10 after exploration; at the top, N-S cross-section through the graves, looking east (Photo and drawing I. Zych; digitizing D. Dzierzbicka)

and which seems to be a product of sedimentary rock erosion. Once the surface was cleared, the grave pits and shafts showed up very distinctly, especially as all of them had been plundered. It also became clear that the gravediggers had made very prudent use of these cracks, which were easier to quarry than the rock itself [Figs 2,3]. Incidentally, gravediggers also appeared to have chosen carefully where to dig the bigger chamber tombs, looking for larger patches of solid rock, which promised a strong enough rock roof for the planned burial chamber.

ROCK-CUTTING TECHNIQUES

Cutting of the grave pits involved little technique beyond the selection of a spot. Beyond that, simple tools were sufficient to quarry the rocky ground. A generally oblong outline of the grave pit was achieved by picking and scraping at the rather crumbly stone. The sides of the pits are as rough or as straight as the easily crumbling rock allows, widening irregularly at the top, especially at the ends, rarely keeping a right angle, occasionally flaring out in a pseudo-niche at the bottom. The bottoms are roughly flat, in about half the cases presenting some form of shaping of the bottom into an anthropoid cut conforming to the shape of the mummy – an echo of the Egyptian tradition of anthropoid burial pits (as for instance in the Graeco-Roman necropolis in Saqqara, cf., e.g., Myśliwiec *et alii* 2008). The same can be said of the chamber tombs, which involved slightly more complex digging objectives but not technique. The project was successful, if a gravedigger managed to follow a stronger bed of stone in hollowing out a chamber, thus ensuring a stable roof covering. If he failed, or if other processes, like erosion, intervened, the chamber tended to collapse, burying everything.

GRAVE PITS AND CHAMBER TOMBS

The section of the necropolis uncovered in the 2006 trench contained two kinds of tombs: simple grave pits and chamber tombs with entrance shafts. Five grave pits were excavated and another five, possibly six potential pits were identified, intruding at the sides of the trench. Three, perhaps four chamber tombs were also identified, three of these collapsed and eroded away, one surviving intact, having even escaped the attention of robbers both ancient and modern.

The simple grave pits present a standard shape and dimensions: They are 0.50-0.60 m wide, from 1.70 to 2.20 m long, between 1.10 and 1.50 m deep (one case of a shallower pit (C.T.14), just 0.80-0.95 m deep, was determined by the presence of a burial chamber below it, which necessitated breaking off any further excavation). The pits are oriented invariably NE-SW, the head end being always oriented to the west. They are oblong in plan and rectangular in both sections, transverse and longitudinal [Fig. 4]. In three cases, graves C.T.7, C.T.9 and C.T.10 [cf. Fig. 4], the head end of the pit was carved into a roughly anthropoid shape, high enough to protect the mummy-cartonnage. In grave C.T.8, the foot end was narrowed down to fit around the legs of the mummy. Finally, grave C.T.7 clearly started out too short and had to be scooped out at the foot end to accommodate the legs of the burial. This particular grave also had a niche-like space hollowed out in the side wall, flush with the bottom of the pit; while this may have been entirely accidental, it should be noted that this niche appears immediately beyond the raised rock ledge protecting the upper part of the mummy, right next to the left hand of the burial.

Mummy-cartonnages were placed directly on the flat bottom of the grave pit and covered with crumbled rock detritus

and sand right to the top of the cut. Where the surface layer had not been disturbed by modern grave robbers, and especially around the edges of the pit, it formed a very hard crust that was deceptively like the surrounding rock. This effect is presumably due to water seeping in and naturally bonding the loose fill. It should be reiterated at this point that no evidence whatsoever, whether direct or indirect, has been found of any kind of superstructure or marker erected on top of the tomb. That some forms of remembrance were applied has been noted indirectly in the form of plaited palm wreaths found in disturbed contexts, almost invariably with the typical ceramic “scoops” (see below) commonly found discarded in burial fills throughout Egypt and Sudan.

The chamber tombs discovered in this section of the necropolis were oriented

strictly E-W with the entrance shaft located on the west. This is in accordance with the general orientation of these tombs recorded so far in cemetery C at Naqlun (although the orientation of previously discovered tombs of this kind tended to vary, possibly in view of the need to accommodate to available space and rock structure, that is, for instance, taking advantage of veins of more durable rock).

The intact chamber discovered in 2006 (C.T.13) measured c. 2.60 m in length and 1.10-1.35 m in width. The preserved height is c. 1.10 m, but it should be noted that some insignificant caving in of the sides and roof of this chamber has occurred. Examination of the ceiling and floor of the chamber suggested that its width followed the general principle of being no wider than the transverse diameter of the shaft. The hollowing into the sides of the chamber in

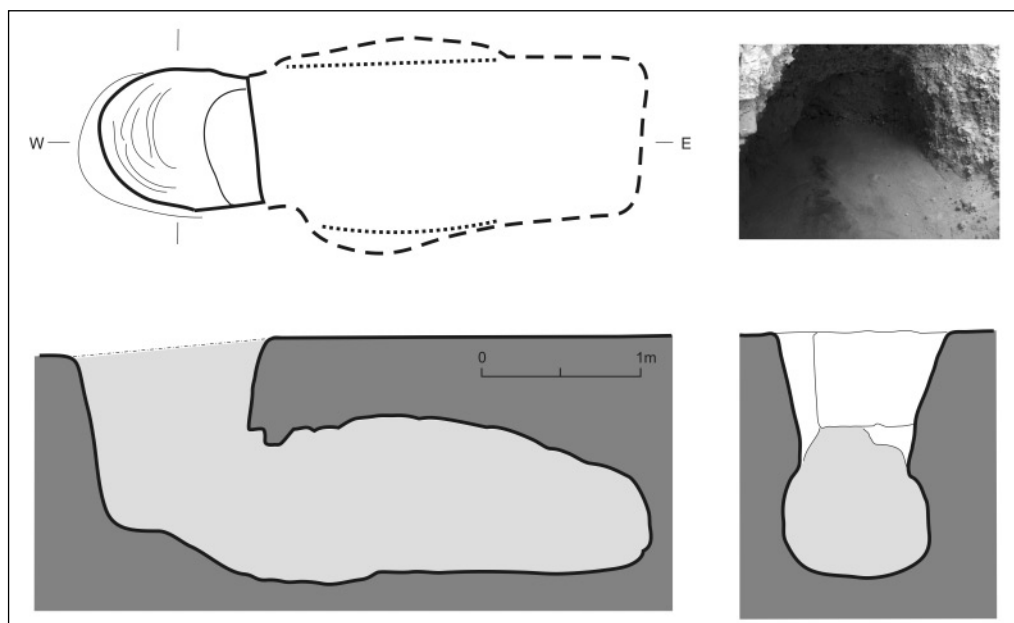


Fig. 5. Tomb C.T.13, plan and long section; inset, eastern end of the empty burial chamber with the break-in into the bottom of C.T.14 visible on the right (Photo and drawing I. Zych; digitizing D. Dzierzbicka)

the western end appears to have been intentional, adapting the chamber to accommodate two burials deposited side by side. The eastern end generally sloped down at the end [Fig. 5].

The entrance in this chamber tomb, as in many of the others, was narrowed as

much as possible to facilitate later sealing of the opening while not encumbering the introduction of the mummy-cartonnages. Hence the “lintel” observed at the top and the “step” in the floor of the shaft. The shaft itself was rounded in section, gradually narrowing toward the bottom, but deep and

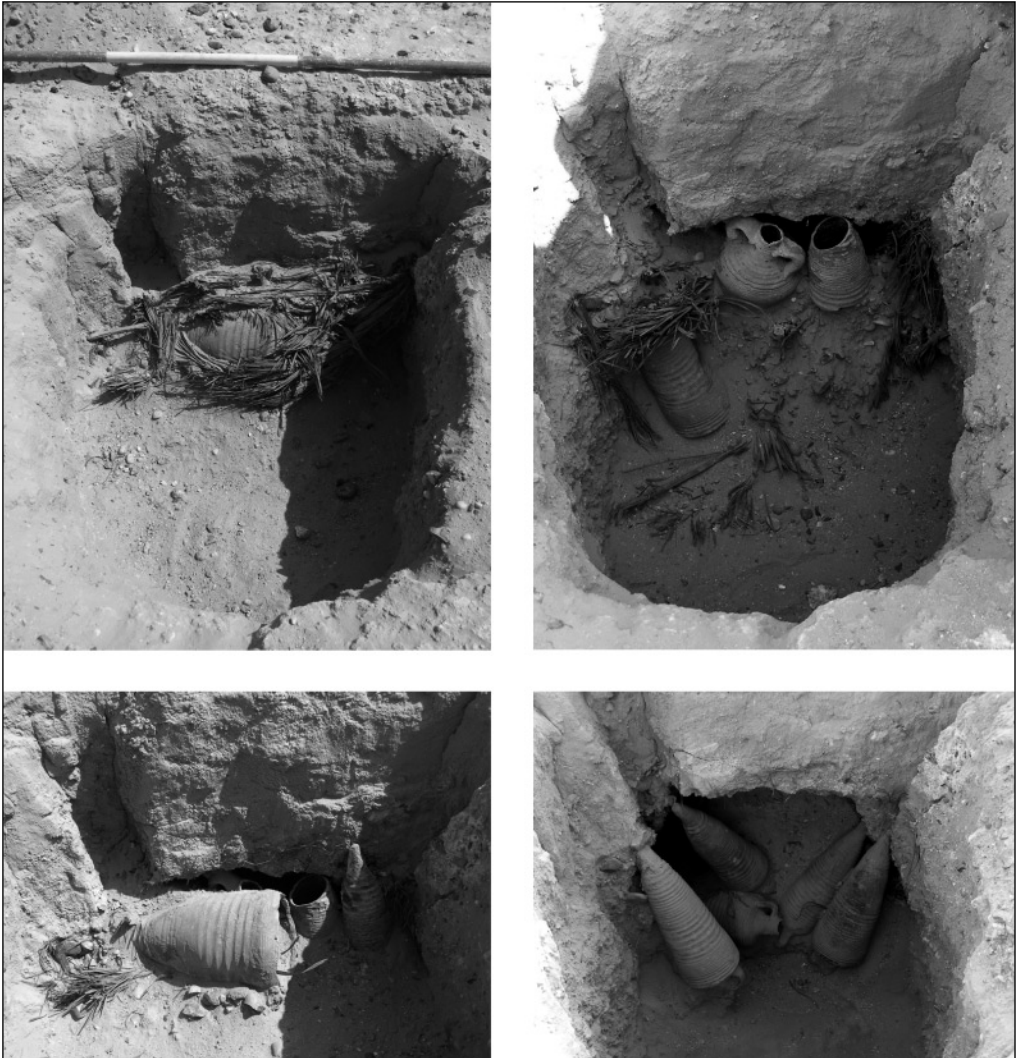


Fig. 6. Successive stages in the uncovering of the entrance blocking in tomb C.T.13 (counterclockwise from top left) (Photo I. Zych)

wide enough to permit the stiff form of the cartonnage to be lowered down from the surface and eased into the chamber. The shaft of the other chamber tomb found in this trench, C.T.12, followed the same general form.

BLOCKING OF CHAMBER ENTRANCES

To date, the chamber tombs discovered in cemetery C in Naqlun have yielded evidence of blocking of the chamber entrances in the form of empty amphorae placed in the entrance (C.T.3, cf. Godlewski 2005: 185-186 and *Fig. 6*) or poor brick



Fig. 7. Amphorae and palm leaves from the blocking of the chamber entrance of C.T.13 (Photo I. Zych)

walls. Chamber tomb C.T.13, fortunately unlooted by grave robbers, offered an intact example of such blocking of the entrance [*Fig. 6*].

The tomb appears to have been reopened to introduce the second mummy. The original blocking consisted of six empty amphorae, all of them damaged at the rim (and one also deprived of the foot) and characteristically missing one handle.² They were set upside down, the extant handle to the outside (demonstrating the technique in arranging the vessels in place) and palm leaves were stuck vertically into the ground on either side, intertwined with other palm leaves in a typical fence structure, fixing the amphorae in place. Obviously, after the reopening of the burial chamber, the amphorae were not returned to their original position, but carelessly pushed aside [cf. *Fig. 6*, bottom right]. The fill was dumped back in and the hole which appeared near the top of the chamber opening was filled with broken halves of amphorae and stones fitted in, fixed into place by more intertwined palm leaves [cf. *Fig. 6*, top right]. The bottom part of another amphora was placed sideways against the top of the entrance [cf. *Fig. 6*, bottom left] and intricately intertwined palm leaves were pushed into the sand around this vessel to seal the opening [cf. *Fig. 6*, top left].

BURIALS

The unwrapping of a partly preserved mummy from C.T.5 (discovered in 2004, see below, contribution by W. Godlewski and B. Czaja-Szewczak in this volume), demonstrated the way in which the bodies of the dead were prepared for burial. The

2 It has been noted that a substantial pile of empty LR 7 amphorae had been stacked on the site of the refuse dump at the southern end of the plateau on which the early monastery stood (Godlewski 1993: 44). It could have been, among others, a ready source of material for the blocking of tomb entrances, as it lies just northeast of the presumed eastern end of this cemetery.

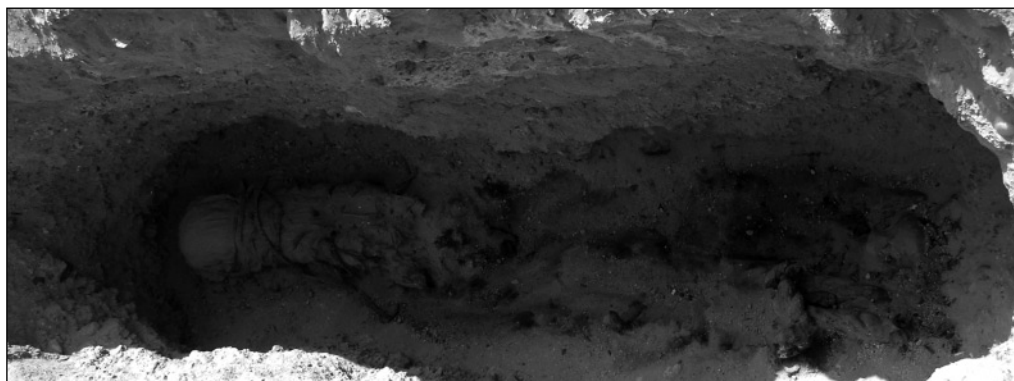


Fig. 8. Lower burial in C.T.7 and close-up of lower body with intact wrappings and sandals still in place (top and center left); burial in C.T.10, lower body with intact wrappings (bottom and center right) (Photo I. Zych)

presently uncovered burials, with the exception of two mummies from the chamber tomb C.T.13, were all disturbed by grave robbers, but they revealed the same general operating principles. The bodies were dressed in burial clothes and wrapped in linen burial shrouds with the characteristic band decoration of red and green wool, often with footwear attached on the outside of the wrapped feet (unlike C.T.5 which had boots on its feet, inside the wrappings) [*Fig. 8*]. In the lower burial from C.T.7, the left shoe was tied to the underside of the wrappings on the feet, the right one attached to the right side of the right foot. The same situation was recorded in the case of the burial in C.T.10 with the left leather sandal attached to the underside of the foot wrappings and the right one to the right side of the right foot. (A separate report on the footwear by D. Dzierzbicka is included in this volume.)

In the burials examined in 2006 (eight in all), individual elements of the wrappings differed in quality and number, presumably depending on the means of the deceased and his family. The least endowed of the burials studied this year, C.T.9, appears to have been wrapped in nothing but a shawl and a few burial shrouds, while the richest of the mummies (C.T.7) had all of three tunics, pants with leather belt, socks of some kind and 12 shrouds. However, the state of preservation of the textiles in these burials – due to burial conditions compounded by plundering activities – leaves us uncertain as to exactly what kind and how many textiles were included with each burial. Interestingly, the man buried in C.T.7 had a folded papyrus placed against the inside of the left thigh, a mortuary practice evidenced for the Ptolemaic and Greco-Roman periods in Egypt, as well as earlier.

The mummies in the chamber tombs evidently belonged to the richest class in terms of wrappings. All of the mummies were wrapped in a few shrouds and bound with ornamental linen and woolen tapes specifically made for these purposes, but those from chamber tomb C.T.13 were special. Like the previously discovered mummy from C.T.3 (Godlewski 2005: 186 and *Fig. 7*), these two mummies were veritable linen cartonnages, wrapped in extra shrouds and with extra padding above the head and feet, bound in ornamental tapes forming decorative patterns on the surface. The two mummies in C.T.13 appear to have been made in different workshops or at least by a different hand, as the pattern of mortuary ornamental tapes on the surface differs. Moreover, the southern of the two burials was placed inside an elaborate linen bag which protected the sides and bottom, but was open on the top (laced across the front), allowing the intricate patterns of wrappings to be seen [*Fig. 9*].

The human remains were examined by a combined team of archaeologist, anthropologist and textile expert, contributing data on the mortuary practices of the period. The skeletons were found to be in fairly good condition, often with well preserved skin, hair and organs (like brain and penis) in a process of desiccation. All were males, aged from maturity (c. 30-35 years) to late adulthood.

Examination of the remains revealed various details of the mortician's art. For instance, toes were intertwined with string and the big toes tied together (C.T.8) [*Fig. 10*]³. The bodies were laid out flat, the arms by the side, hands on the thighs or by the sides. In one case, C.T.8, the head was found face down (although this may have

3 I am indebted to Marzena Ozarek for pointing out this detail.



Fig. 9. Two burials in the chamber of C.T.13 during exploration and close-up of the northern one of the two mummy-cartonnages immediately after lifting from the grave; note the long jarid stiffening the side of the case (Photo I. Zych)

been a cruel joke of the grave robbers). Palm leaf midribs were used freely as a measure designed to add stiffness to the mummy forms. Long *jarids* could be inserted inside or between the wrappings, placed along the sides of a body (C.T.8, C.T.9), down the backbone (C.T.9), in replacement of a missing limb, to support the lower jaw in position (C.T.10) [Fig. 11, top left and bottom]. In C.T.7 (first burial) a board of palm-leaf midribs (*jarids*) was wrapped inside the outer wrappings in order to create a stiff mummy case. There were 19 such *jarids* laid together in this case, with the thicker ends alternating from side to side, tied with palm rope in an ornamental way; the width of this "board" was 24.5 cm, thickness 1.5 cm [Fig. 13]. Another presumed board of *jarids* tied together with brown linen cartonnage tapes, was found in C.T.8. Such *jarid* boards and loose *jarids*



Fig. 10. Toes intertwined with string from the mummy in C.T.9 (Photo I. Zych)

could be used concurrently in the making of a mummy-cartonnage (e.g. C.T.8).

Customary for the mummies of the period, the foot end is padded with folded cloth, while the head part is built up of characteristic padding elements made of twisted linen cloth or linen or palm fibers [Fig. 12]. These elements were placed around the head and over it, crosswise and lengthwise, in tiers forming a pyramid-like shape above the face. Short *jarids*, some 20 cm long, appear to have been used to create a skeleton for this construction. Wrapping shrouds enveloped this padding, the ornamental tapes keeping the structure in place and creating intricate and colorful patterns on the surface, not the least in imitation of the traditional coffered pattern of bandages on mummies from the Ptolemaic and Greco-Roman periods. More can be said about this particular form of wrapping once one of the mummies has been unwrapped under laboratory conditions.

Examples of the twisted padding, as well as loose bundles of fibers of various kinds (palm, flax in various stages) found next to the bodies and in the fill, indicate that the mummies in the simple grave pits, despite not being as externally ornamental as the mummy-cartonnages from the chamber tombs, also had the characteristic peaked padding above the face.

GRAVE EQUIPMENT

None of the burials in the present excavation had any grave equipment, but then all of them (with the exception of the mummies from C.T.13 and these were not unwrapped) had been more or less violated. That objects could have been included with the burials is proven by earlier finds of



Fig. 11. Jarid supporting the jaw in position, burial C.T.10 (top left); skull of burial C.T.9 with linen padding in situ (top right); palm-leaf midribs alongside the arms, inserted between the wrappings, burial C.T.9 (Photo I. Zych)

a comb (Godlewski 2005: *Fig. 8*), a string of dried fruit and the top of a wooden cane.

The only other find from the fill of the disturbed graves are ornamentally plaited “palms” (two different patterns) made of palm leaves, strikingly resembling the Coptic tradition of plaiting religious symbols to be blessed on Palm Sunday. Such “palms”, a symbol of victory over death, were found discarded in the fill of the shaft of C.T.12 and in the pit of C.T.14, in both cases covered with a “scoop” sherd [*Fig. 14*]. The latter (four of which were recovered from the present excavation, including one covering the head of the body buried in C.T.10) are rectangular sherds cut from amphora bodies, the long breaks rounded at the edges as if from long scraping of the stony ground.

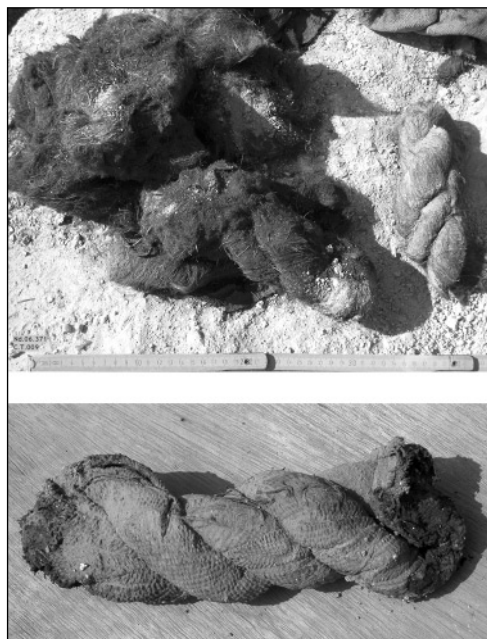


Fig. 12. Examples of body packing and padding made of twisted linen cloth (top) and twisted linen and palm fiber (Photo I. Zych)

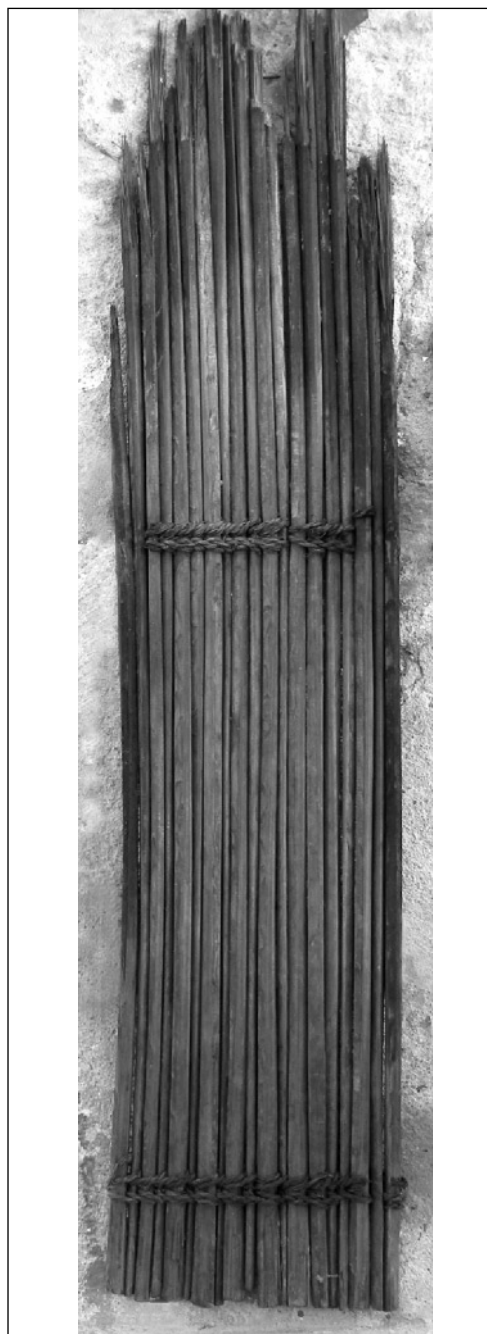


Fig. 13. Jarids tied together to make a board forming the top of a mummy case (from C.T.7) (Photo I. Zych)

GRAVE PLUNDERING

As mentioned repeatedly in the body of this report, only the chamber tomb C.T.13 was found intact. All the other graves were systematically plundered, quite possibly in modern times. The burials at the bottom of the grave pits were theoretically in place but, characteristically, the mummies were for the most part quite well preserved only in the lower parts of the body from the pelvis down (hence, the leather footwear preserved in the wrappings). The upper bodies and head parts were torn apart and disturbed, as if they had been searched for

whatever the robbers were looking for. Most likely, the prizes of this plunder were, among others, decorative textiles which the bodies were wrapped in. A piece of such textile with ornamental rosettes, neatly squared off, as if cut out with a knife, was found in the fill of C.T.14, apparently overlooked by the plunderers. It is this piece which suggests that the plundering is of fairly modern date, Coptic textiles from Egypt having always found a ready market among collectors. Corroboration for this comes from a scrap of Egyptian newspaper in Arabic found in the fill, as well as



Fig. 14. Examples of plaited "palms" (top); plaited "palm" with "scoop" sherd found in situ in the fill of C.T.14 (bottom left); the fill of the shaft of C.T.12 with evidence of plunder: remnants of packing, shrouds, amphora, "scoop" sherd and plaited "palm" (Photo I. Zych)

a discarded plaited basket of the kind commonly used to carry sand at various excavations in Egypt.

The fill in the upper parts of all of the simple grave pits was disturbed and contained torn and crumpled tunics, shrouds, some broken amphorae and a few other sherds, bundles of packing and padding coming from the destroyed mummy-cartonnages [cf. *Fig. 12*]. Moreover, the fill contained human remains, bits and pieces of dismembered mummies and loose bones, apparently pulled out from their graves and thrown back into a handy empty pit once the search for treasures had been completed [*Fig. 15*, also *14* bottom right]. Considering

the illicit character of this excavation, it cannot be said for certain which graves these remains could have originated from. One possibility is that the deeper grave pits had two tiers of burials, the lower one at the bottom, at a depth of c. 1.20-1.30 m, and the upper one at a depth of about 0.80 m, which is the depth of the shallower grave pits where single burials have been found. This would explain why the upper parts of the fill of these graves were found in complete turmoil and the burials mangled and destroyed, while the lower burials had been only spot-searched in crucial areas without even bothering to dig out all the fill.



Fig. 15. Example of disturbed fill with loose human bones and other objects in the upper part of a grave pit (C.T.7) (Photo I. Zych)

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