

ISLAMIC NECROPOLIS AT KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA: RESEARCH IN THE 2010–2013 SEASONS

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Abstract: Exploration of the Islamic burial ground at the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria continued from the 2010 through the 2013 seasons, uncovering more graves in different sectors: in area U (northwestern part of the site) tombs from the Upper (11th and 12th century) and Middle (9th/10th century) phases of the cemetery and in area CW from the Upper and Lower (8th/9th century) phases. The present text is a basic report of the finds and observations made in the course of the season.

Keywords: Alexandria, medieval cemetery, Islamic necropolis, funerary stelae

The Islamic necropolis located on the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria, discovered already in the 1960s and explored on and off with various degrees of intensity over the past half a century (Dąbrowski 1966; Kołataj 1972; Promińska 1972), has been the object of regular excavation work and anthropological studies for the past decade, in connection with a concerted effort to clear the western sectors of the site of medieval strata overlying the ruins of the late antique architectural complex comprising several auditoria and a huge public bath (for reports on this work and the project in general, see Majcherek 2007a; 2007b; 2011). The present author has been involved in the exploration of the Islamic cemetery in different sectors of the site, developing a standardized documentation

system for recording the graves and working together with anthropologist Robert Mahler from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw to study the skeletal remains. It is to be emphasized that there are few opportunities of this kind for researching the nature and development of historic Moslem burial practices in medieval Egypt.

The present summary report concentrates in detail on the results of excavations carried out in 2013 in area U, where tombs from the turn of the 10th century (Middle Necropolis) and the 11th–12th century (Upper Necropolis) were discovered. It also summarizes earlier work carried out in 2010 in the eastern part of auditorium O in area AS, where Lower Necropolis interments were found, and in 2011

in auditoriums R and T in area CW, where a few graves from the 8th and 9th centuries (Lower Necropolis) were explored. Anthropological examination of the bone remains

from the different parts and stages of the medieval cemetery on the site of Kom el-Dikka is underway and will be reported on separately.

LOWER NECROPOLIS

AREA AS, UNIT O

A total of 15 burials from the Lower Necropolis level [Fig. 1] was examined in the layer embraced between 8.42 m and 9.06 m a.s.l. Ten of them were pit burials (AS326, AS329, AS330, AS333, AS336, AS337, AS338, AS339, AS340, AS342) and five were burials laid in boxes (AS331, AS332, AS334, AS341, AS343). A flat cover of limestone slabs was preserved only in the case of grave AS331. The boxes of the remaining burials were preserved fragmentarily.

AREA CW, UNIT R

Lower Necropolis burials were contained in a layer between 7.90 and 8.25 m a.s.l., corresponding to the layer in unit O, but lying lower down on the presumed slope that is reconstructed in this part of the site [Fig. 2]. These were typical pit interments in narrow trenches excavated in the ground (CW310, CW 310a, CW312, CW314).

Typical of the Lower Necropolis were also burials in stone boxes CW313 and CW315. The walls of these boxes were

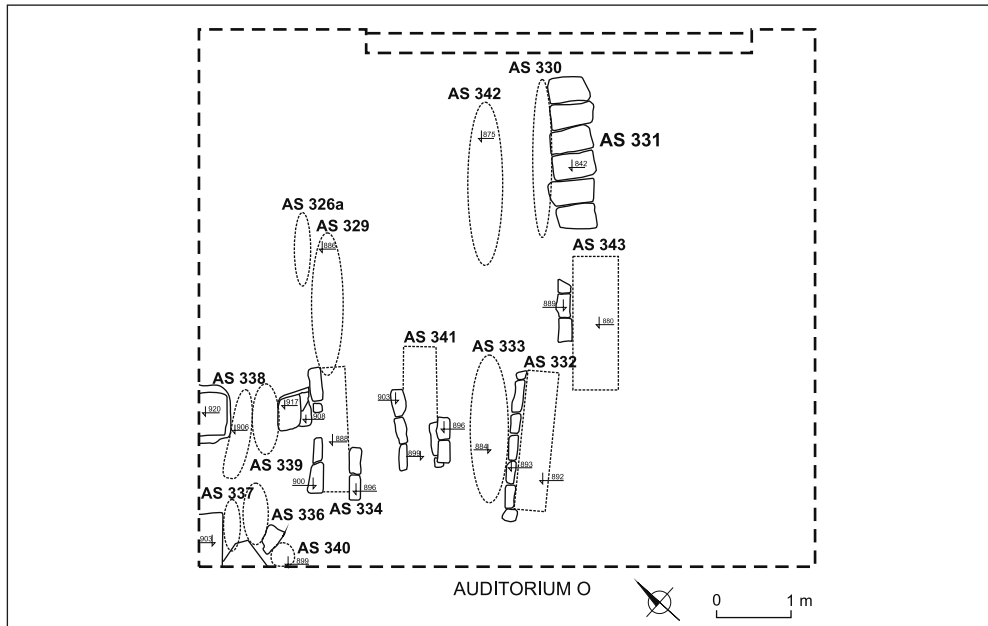


Fig. 1. Plan of the Lower Necropolis phase of the burial ground in unit O of area AS (Drawing A. Kotarba, E. Kulicka)

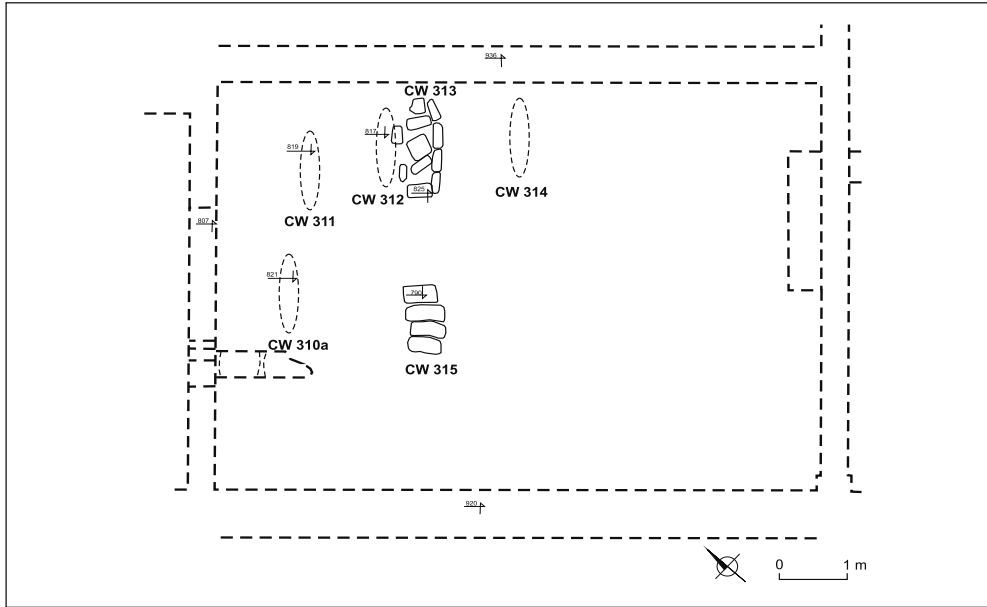


Fig. 2. Plan of the Lower Necropolis phase of the burial ground in unit R of area CW (Drawing E. Kulicka)



Fig. 3. Grave CW330 (Lower Necropolis phase) in unit T of area CW: left, exterior view of the structure and right, view of the burial preserved in anatomical order, seen after opening of the stone burial case (Photos E. Kulicka)

built of a single course of limestone blocks and covered with slabs. Grave CW313 was quite small, measuring 1.10 m by 0.35 m internally; it is presumed to have been a child's grave.

AREA CW, UNIT T

Only one grave (CW330) from the Lower Necropolis was uncovered. It was a typical single burial in a burial case covered flat with stones [Fig. 3].

MIDDLE NECROPOLIS

AREA U

In area U, a section of the Middle Necropolis was cleared, the graves occupying originally sloping ground at an altitude from 8.79 to 9.25 m a.s.l. The ground in the cemetery dropped in a southern direction, presumably reflecting the topography and state of preservation of the underlying Roman architecture. In total 16 fragmentary graves were explored (U210–U225) [Fig. 4]. In most cases, the tombs were destroyed by later burials of the Upper Necropolis. Rectangular tomb enclosures, measuring 2.00–2.20 m by 2.50 m on the outside, were built of one to two courses of large limestone blocks (averaging 0.25 m by 0.35 m). All superstructures carried traces of plaster on the outside of the walls, some even multiple layers (U211), but none whatsoever inside. Two phases were identified in the cemetery. Older superstructures

with stelae located in the west wall (U216) were overbuilt by later graves, less carefully executed, having funerary stelae in their east walls.

Grave U210 proved unique in terms of its size for it had the width of three standard superstructures. The walls were built of two courses of limestone blocks, the faces coated with plaster. There were traces of three funerary stelae being mounted in the east wall. A marble stela, most probably from the original burial, was found in secondary context in the southwestern corner of the enclosure [Figs 5, 6]. The Kufic inscription on this stela named the deceased as the mother of Kassem (Field Reg. No. 583.1.13). The grave may have belonged to a single family or a group of people who were kin.

A fragment of another stela was found near the superstructure of tomb U215 (Field Reg. No. 622.1.13). A slab

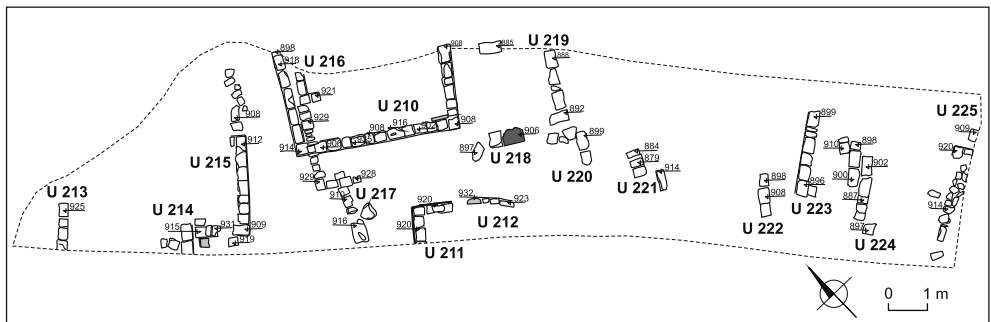


Fig. 4. Plan of the Middle Necropolis phase of the burial ground in area U (Drawing E. Kulicka)



Fig. 5. Middle Necropolis grave U210, seen from the southwest (early Roman architectural remains at a lower level in the background) (Photo E. Kulicka)



Fig. 6. Inscribed funerary stela on a marble slab from the Middle Necropolis tomb U210 (Photo E. Kulicka)

of nummulithic limestone set in the east wall of tomb U212 had one side smoothed; it could be what is left of a stela or the back part.

The occupation level of this phase of the cemetery consisted of sand/

earth mixed profusely with pebbles. The superstructures are the only material evidence of this phase of the cemetery. The burials were all earth interments and the bones of the skeletons have disintegrated completely.

UPPER NECROPOLIS

AREA CW, UNIT R

The floor of unit R, which was one of the auditorium rooms, found at 9.20 m a.s.l., was damaged by medieval burials. These turned out to be the substructures and pits of graves belonging to the Upper Necropolis, preserved in a layer between 8.30 to 9.03 m a.s.l., that is, already below the fragmentarily preserved late antique floor of unit R. The superstructures of these graves were not preserved. The layer in which these graves had been excavated comprised a dirty sand/earth with an abundance of pebbles, typical of the occupational level of the Middle Necropolis stage of the burial ground in Kom el-Dikka.

Sixteen burials were explored (CW71–CW86). Ten of these were pit burials (CW75, CW76, CW77, CW78, CW80, CW81, CW82, CW83, CW84, CW86). Two of the graves had stone cases covered with limestone slabs (CW73, CW74), while burial chambers of the remaining three (CW71, CW79 and CW85) had lost their covering of slabs. The boxes themselves were carelessly built of irregular stone blocks.

The bone material was poorly preserved, but in sufficiently good condition in the case of the graves with stone boxes (CW71, CW72, CW73, CW74, CW85) and one pit burial (CW75) ensconced between

boxes CW71 and CW74 to be selected for anthropological examination.

AREA U

The superstructures of 23 graves from the Upper Necropolis phase of the burial ground were investigated in the southwestern part of area U. They were situated more or less at the level of 8.90–9.56 m a.s.l., superimposed on top of the fragmentary grave structures of the Middle Necropolis phase [Fig. 8].

All the burials were traditionally oriented E–W, showing only a slight deflection from the axis. The dead were deposited on the side with their heads to the east and their faces turned toward Mecca.

The oldest and simplest superstructures followed the principles already established in earlier research on burial architecture of the Upper Necropolis at the medieval Kom el-Dikka cemetery (Kulicka 2011). They were made of enclosure walls built of upright limestone slabs on the plan of an elongated rectangle, measuring approximately 1.20 m in width and 2.00 m in length. The slabs were joined with mortar [Fig. 9]. The superstructures marked the location of pit graves containing a single burial (U116) or rectangular burial chambers built of small limestone blocks and covered with a roof of limestone slabs (U117, U118).

Equally characteristic of the Upper Necropolis were rectangular superstructures with stepped decoration and coated with plaster forming a sort of *mibrab* at the western end (U109, U128, U129) [Fig. 11]. Similar superstructures with stepped decoration can be found at the medieval cemetery on Kom A in Naqlun (Godlewski 2011). This type of tomb superstructure was constructed over rectangular burial chambers, covered with either flat or pitched roof of limestone slabs, built at a depth reaching up to one meter and a half below ground level. The more elaborate examples of this type were furnished with a shaft, like U123

where a shaft was located on the east of a large chamber with walls plastered on the inside (this tomb substructure had been dug into burials belonging to the Middle Necropolis phase of the cemetery in this area, see above). Chambers were middle-sized, measuring 0.45–0.80 m by 1.80–2.20 m internally. Their walls were built of small dressed stones, plastered on the inside. Eight of the chambers explored in 2013 had roofs of limestone slabs laid flat (U109, U110, U112, U115, U125, U126, U128, U129) and one was covered with pitched roof (U106). In two cases of superstructures of this kind (U122, U124), the burials had been made in

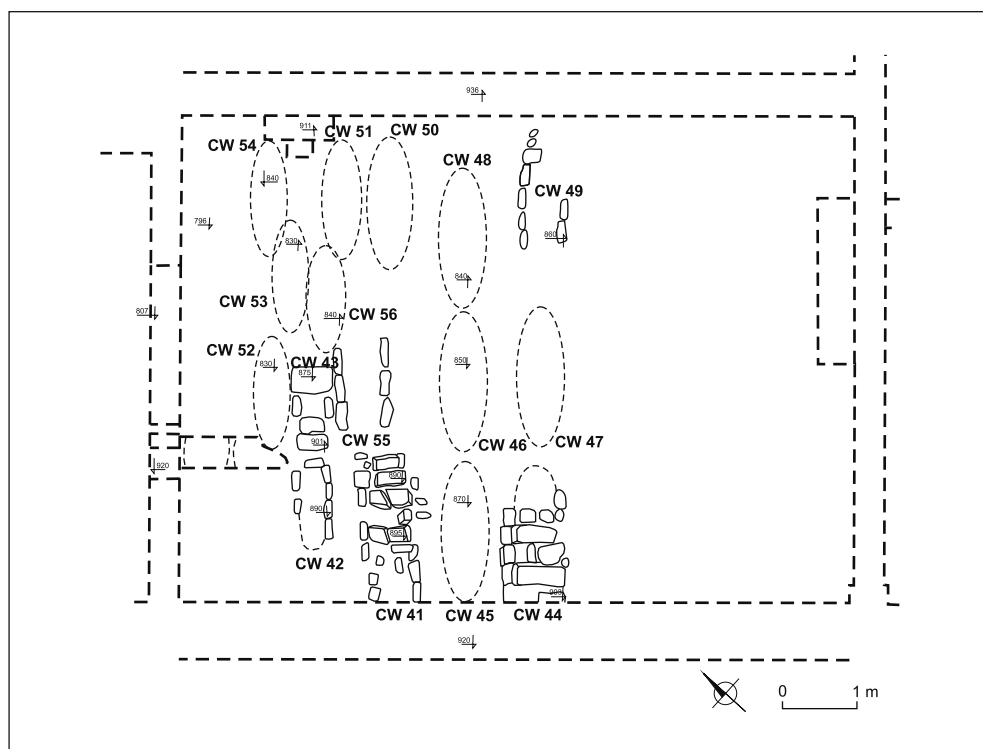


Fig. 7. Plan of the Upper Necropolis phase of the burial ground in auditorium R located in area CW (Drawing E. Kulicka)

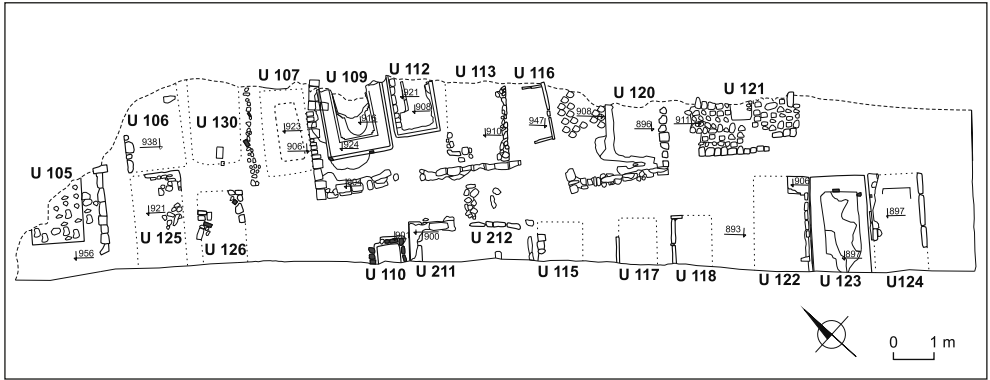


Fig. 8. Plan of the Upper Necropolis phase of the burial ground in area U (Drawing M. Kubicka, E. Kulicka, K. Majdzik)



Fig. 9. Simple form of superstructure with upright, mortar-bonded slabs (Grave U118) (Photo E. Kulicka)

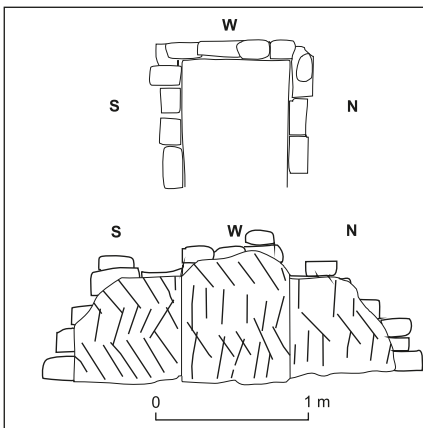


Fig. 10. The inside of burial chamber U121 with decoration etched into the plaster on the wall (Photo and drawing E. Kulicka)

simple grave pits; the skeletal material from these earthen interments had disintegrated completely.

The third kind of tomb superstructure was represented by graves U105, U106, U107, U113, U119, U120, U121, U127, U130. These comprised platforms formed of rubble, measuring approximately 2.20 m by 3.60 m, and plastered on the outside. A rectangular opening in the platform, 1.20 m by 2.20 m, was used presumably to introduce burials into a prepared burial chamber below, which was characteristically moved

about 1.50 m eastward in relation to the platform superstructure. These veritable shafts were filled with small debris. The burial chambers took on a typical form, the stone-slab roofs being either flat (U105, U113, U121, U130) or pitched (U120). The burial chamber of the western part of grave U121 was completely plastered from the inside; rows of diagonal lines had been etched into the wet plaster presumably as a form of decoration [Fig. 10]. In one case, there was a simple grave pit under the superstructure.

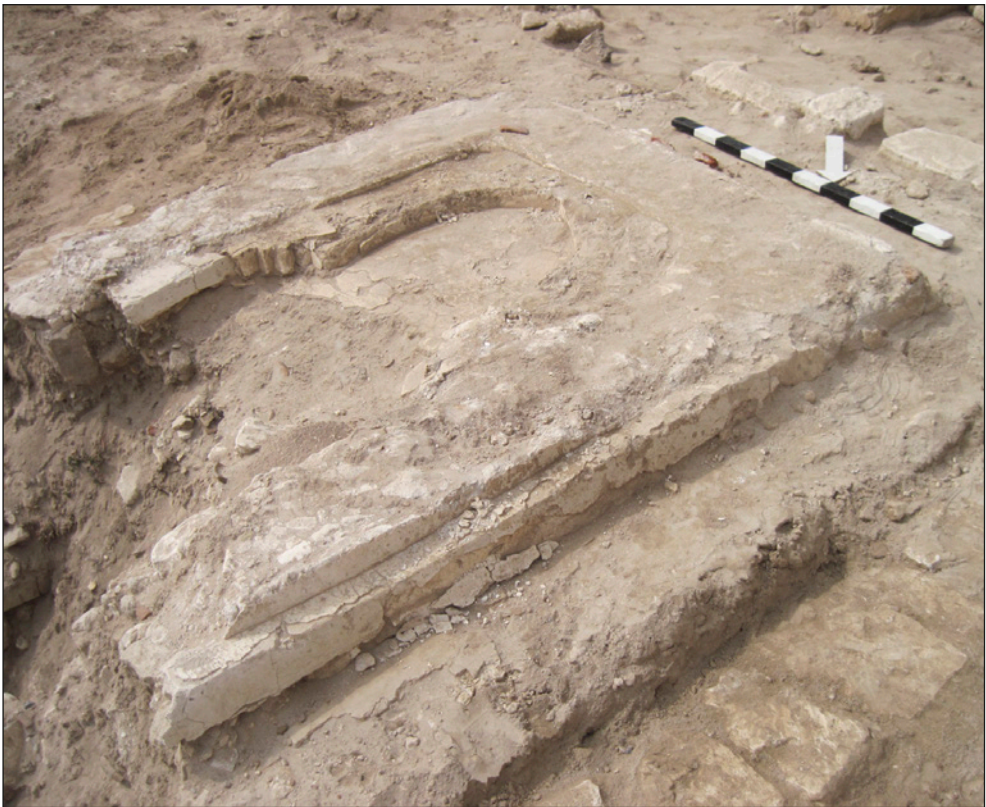


Fig. 11. Stepped superstructure of tomb U109 with decoration in the form of a mihrab (Photo E. Kulicka)

The “platform” superstructures are the latest type of grave found in the Upper Necropolis. They were built directly on top of other burials; platform grave U105, for instance, had been built on top of superstructures furnished with a *mihrab* (U128, U129). The platforms were frequently adjusted to fit already existing superstructures, using their separate walls to strengthen the construction.

Multiple use of burial cases was observed in the case of both graves with *mihrab* superstructures and with “platforms”. Single burials were recorded only in graves U128 and U129. In the other tombs, remains of earlier burials were

systematically moved aside. In one case (U126) jumbled piles of bones belonging to the primary interments were found at either end of the case, the most recent burial being found undisturbed and in anatomical order in the center [Fig. 12]. In grave U105 two burials in anatomical order were found next to each other, the second body having been added later. In the case of graves U109 and U123, the bones were inside the case; one burial in undisturbed position and two accumulations of bones, an additional burial was located above the case, directly beneath the superstructure. The practice of multiple burials in given chambers attests to the long use of the cemetery.



Fig. 12. Undisturbed burial in grave U126 with jumbled bones of earlier interments visible at the western end (Photo E. Kulicka)

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