

# THE ISLAMIC GRAVEYARD ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

## EXCAVATIONS IN THE 2006/2007 FIELD SEASON

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In the 2006/2007 field season, the investigation of the Islamic graveyard on Kom el-Dikka was continued in sectors E and H. Work began in December 2006 with the exploration of two phases of the cemetery in Sector E (which covers the extent of the Theatre Portico): the so-called Upper Necropolis, which dates to the turn

of the 11th and early 12th century, and the Middle Necropolis, which is assigned to the turn of the 9th and 10th century. With the start of 2007 fieldwork commenced in a zone 6 m wide and 32 m long, located to the east of auditoria G through M in Sector H (for a plan of the site with the marked sectors, see Majcherek 2007: Fig. 1 on 23).

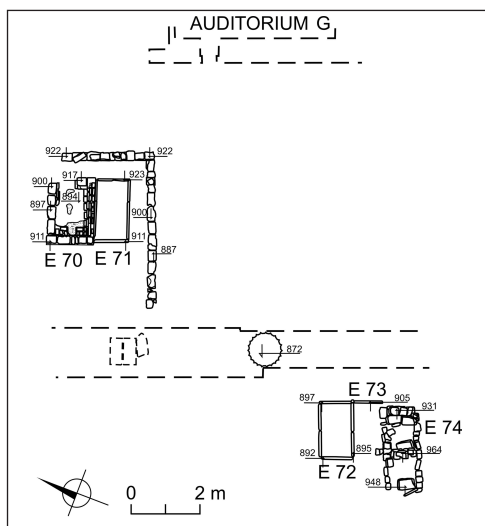
### SECTOR E — UPPER NECROPOLIS

The current work (the sector has been under exploration since 2002, cf. Majcherek, Kołataj 2003: 20–23; 2004: 27–29) uncovered another five graves from the latest phase of the graveyard: E 70, E 71, E 72, E 73 and E 74 [*Fig. 1*]. The tombs were raised directly on top of Middle Necropolis tomb superstructures and made use of the earlier masonry in their construction. There were no subterranean structures and the bones in the simple earth graves have disintegrated completely.

Three of these burials, E 71, E 72 and E 73, had surviving superstructures constructed of vertically positioned limestone slabs, all measuring in the whereabouts of 2.10 by 1.20 m. This kind of superstructure is apparently the oldest of the types known from the Upper Necropolis. It is frequently found in damaged condition, having more

elaborate tomb markers either added on or on top. The case is exemplified by E 71 and E 72, the superstructures of which were destroyed in part by those of graves E 70 and E 74 built later next to them.

The marker of grave E 70 was constructed of small (1.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 cm) regularly dressed stone blocks following a rectangular outline 2.00 m by 1.30 m. Both this border and the floor inside the marker were plastered as one and the *mihrab* decoration patterned in plaster on a framework made partly of baked bricks. This in itself is a rarity — limestone is much the more popular building material being easily accessible. The other superstructure, that of E 74, has not been preserved, but it should be presumed that it resembled the described one, either with or without the plaster ornament on it.



The latter tomb had a stone-built chamber, unlike E 70 which was a simple pit grave. The chamber is largely destroyed, but considering the remnants of the crosswise feature noted inside it, it is likely to have had an access shaft on the west. Shafts served the purpose of multiple burials. In E 74, one skeleton was excavated in anatomical order and some bones from an earlier burial were found pushed back toward the east end of the chamber. This counters the rule for shafts of this kind, which should be on the eastern side, with the end result being that primary burials are removed to the back of the chamber, that is, where the head lay in the western end.

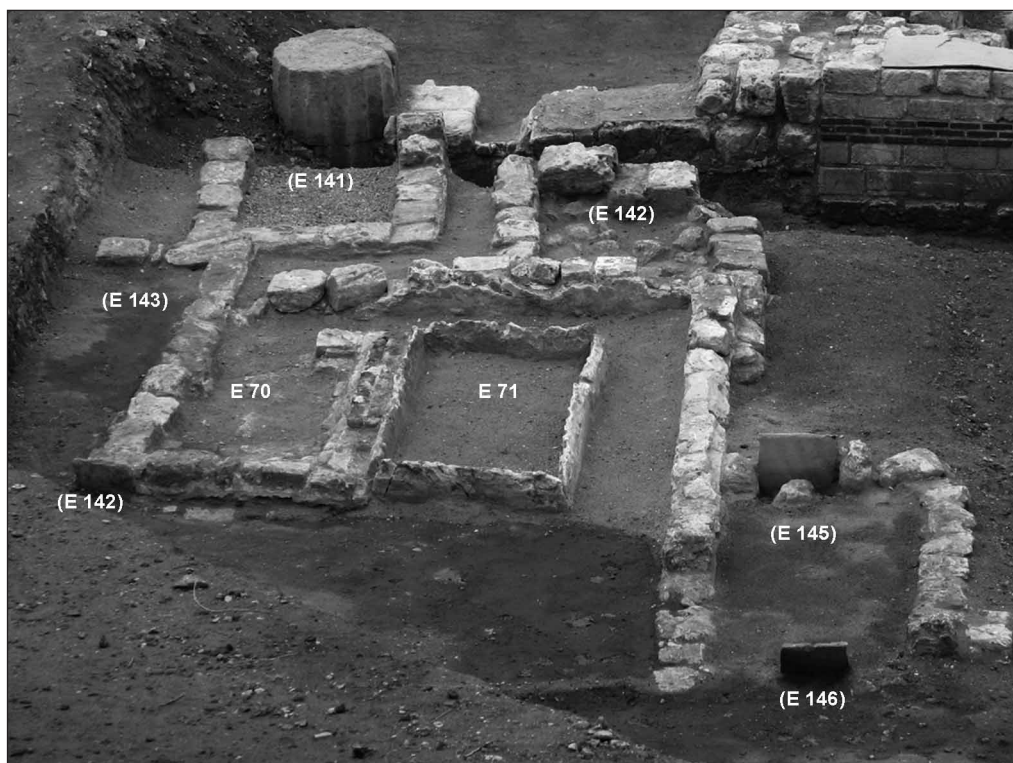


Fig. 1. Tombs of the Upper Necropolis in Sector E (E 70 and E 71), plan (top) and view from the west, surrounded by vestiges of Middle Necropolis tombs (numbers in parentheses) (Plan and photo E. Kulicka)

Tombs E 70 and E 71 are surrounded by a low stone wall which is interpreted as enclosing the burials of a single family. A

similar enclosure separated the group of tombs E 72, E 73 and E 74 from the rest of the cemetery.

## SECTOR E — MIDDLE NECROPOLIS

Excavation of the underlying layer attributed to the Middle Necropolis phase in Sector E revealed two levels of superstructures differing very little one from the other (for previous work, cf. Kulicka 2007: 37) [*Fig. 4*]. The extent of subphase II corresponds to that of the preceding subphase and individual graves frequently overlap. The graves were dug in what was already at the time a fairly sloping hillside with western exposure. Tombs in the western part are positioned an average 0.60 m lower than the ones in the east.

Middle Necropolis tomb superstructures were constructed of one or two courses of big and regular blocks of stone. The blocks were arranged in a rectangle, measuring on the whole from 2.00 to 2.20 m by 2.50 m. They were plastered on occasion.

All the burials were made in pits dug straight in the ground, fostering complete disintegration of all organic matter.

### SUBPHASE I

The first of the Middle Necropolis phases comprises tombs E 140, E 142, E 144, E 146, E 148, E 149, E 151 and E 150 [*Fig. 2*].

The blocks of stone used to build the superstructures of these graves were big and finely dressed, measuring mostly 25 by 30 cm and 25 by 60 cm. Long grooves in the western shorter sides of superstructures E 140 and E 148 constitute evidence of funerary slabs once marking these tombs.

In the case of E 142 and E 146, the slabs have remained in place, set in the west ends, the inscribed faces to the east. That of E 142

(Reg. No. 5155) was damaged. The Qufic text, fifteen lines of it (the upper part is now lost), gives the name of the deceased as ibn Hamda. It has been dated to the 9th/10th century. The text on the other slab (Reg. No. 5156), also from the 9th/10th century, is contained in 12 lines and gives the full name of the deceased: Surur Mawlab Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Tajj (all readings by arabist Dorota Malarczyk). The inscription is surrounded with a continuous line, ending in a scalloping design on top.

The inside walls of the superstructures preserved a plaster rendering, but in no case was the floor inside preserved. These floors must have been destroyed by burials made in the second subphase of the Middle Necropolis.

The surface of the graveyard in this phase was covered with sea sand containing shells and small pebbles.

The finishing of tomb superstructures differs substantially between the two subphases. Older examples are, by comparison, better constructed and they make use of bigger blocks of stone. Inscribed steles were placed on the shorter, western side, a tradition that changed in the next subphase, when steles started being placed at the eastern end.

### SUBPHASE II

Graves E 141, E 143, E 145, E 147 and E 152 have been assigned to the later subphase of the Middle Necropolis level [*Fig. 3*]. They were often raised immediately on top of the superstructures from subphase I, the latter

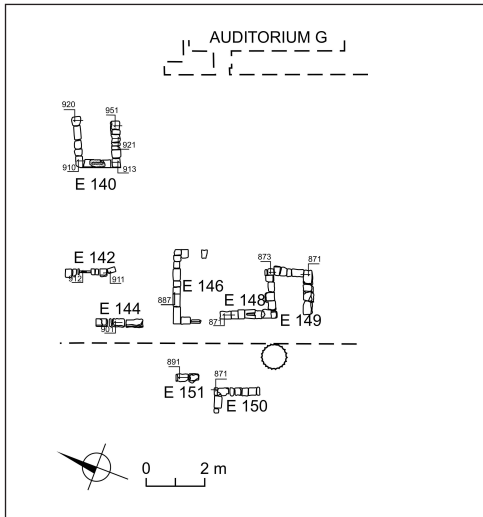


Fig. 2. The Middle Necropolis in Sector E, subphase I (Plan E. Kulicka)

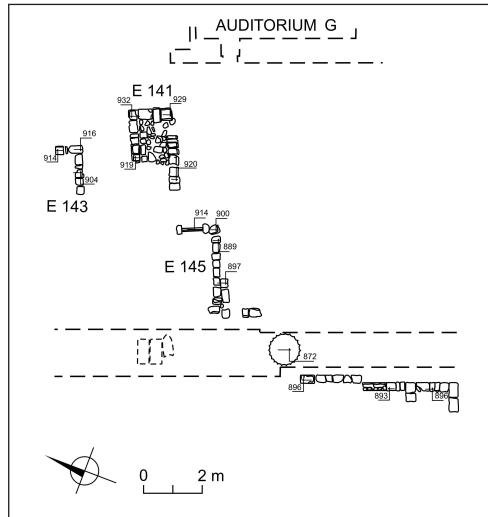


Fig. 3. The Middle Necropolis in Sector E, subphase II (Plan E. Kulicka)

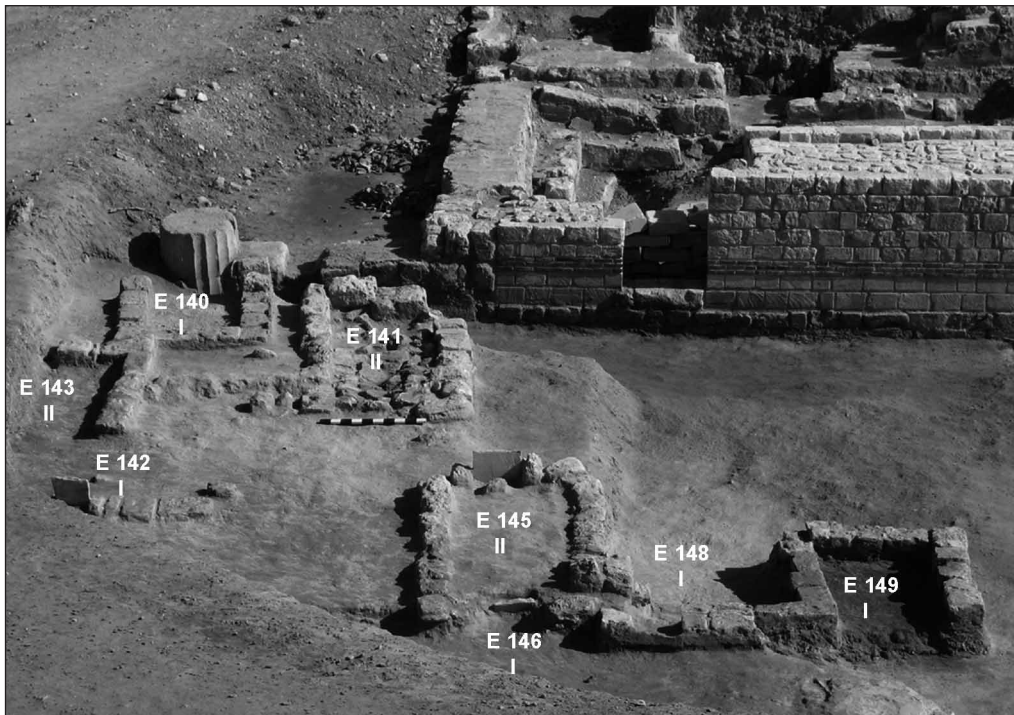


Fig. 4. Subphases I and II of the Middle Necropolis in Sector E (Photo E. Kulicka)



serving as a ready foundation. The stones used for their construction were 25 by 35–40 cm. In only one case, E 141, the inside of the superstructure was laid with a layer of irregular stones, possibly a bedding for the plastered floor inside the marker or else a stone casing for an earth grave below.

Grave E 145 had a marble stela mounted in the eastern, shorter side, its inscribed side facing east. It was fitted between two appropriately grooved stones and set with mortar. A third stone had been placed at the back of the stela to balance it upright [Fig. 5]. The Qufic inscription on the stela (Reg. No. 5154, Fig. 6), dated to the 9th/10th century, is surrounded with a line that turns into a

scrolling leafy branch at the top. Moreover, there are five rosettes decorating the slab. The cutting on the back suggests that the slab was salvaged from somewhere, its primary use having been in an architectural screen of some kind or as revetment.

On a general note, all successive levels of burials are positioned directly on top of earlier features: The Upper Necropolis superstructures are fitted into the walls of Middle Necropolis tombs of the second subphase, and these in turn stand directly on the older superstructures from subphase I. The Middle Necropolis as such is barely a meter above the level of the pavement in the Theatre Portico.



Fig. 5. Mounting of the funerary stela on grave E 145 (Photo E. Kulicka)

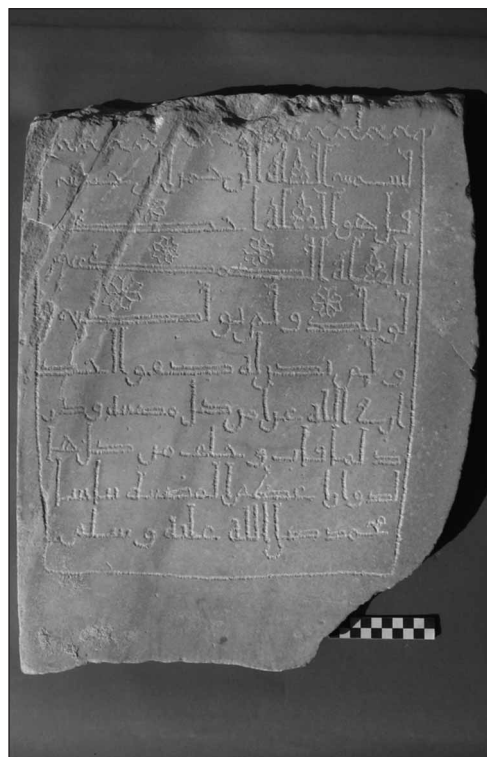


Fig. 6. Funerary stela, Reg. No. 5154 (Photo E. Kulicka)

## SECTOR H — UPPER NECROPOLIS

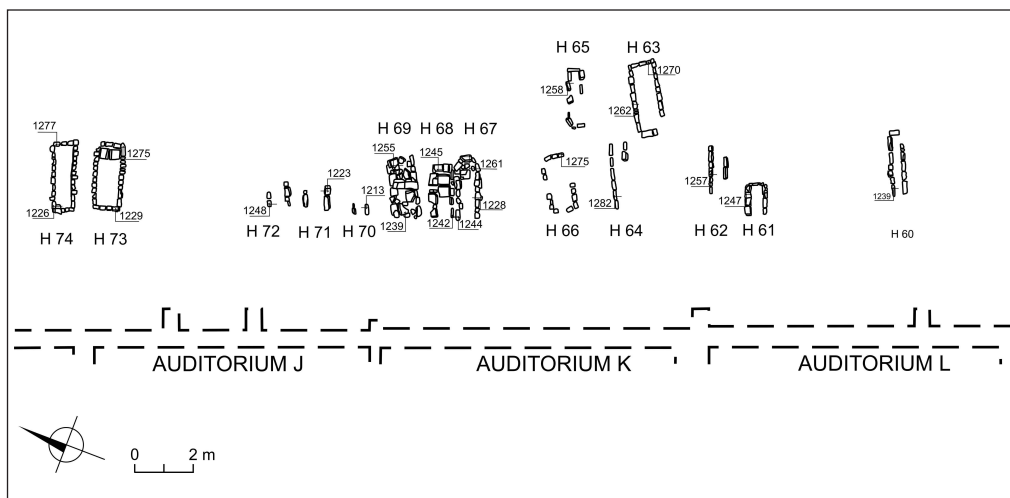
The trench excavated in the spring of 2007 in Sector H (6 x 32 m) runs longitudinally to the west of auditoria G through M [Fig. 7]. The layer corresponding to the Upper Necropolis (from 12.13 to 12.77 m a.s.l.) contained a total of fifteen burials, H 60 to H 74, damaged to the extent that only incomplete burial chambers remained. Hence, it is difficult to determine the type they belonged to. Most of the chambers were filled with earth and rubble. On principle, each contained one or two skeletons, any primary burial being pushed to the western end of a chamber. The sole exception was tomb H 69 where the bones of the earlier burial had been pushed to the eastern end and not as usual to where the head rested.

Tombs investigated in this part of the Upper Necropolis appear to fall into two distinct sizes as far as the subterranean chamber is concerned. The inside dimensions of the smaller chambers were 0.40 by 1.80 m, the bigger ones 0.80 by

2.10 m. The smaller chambers were constructed of roughly dressed oblong stones averaging 0.10 by 0.30 m in size (H 60, H 61, H 62, H 64, H 65, H 68, H 70, H 71, H 72). As far as can be observed (sections of no more than a single course of stones were preserved on the southern and northern sides), the bondwork in these walls was fairly irregular. The bigger chambers made use of small but well dressed cubic blocks, measuring 15 by 15 by 15 cm. The inside walls in these cases (H 63, H 66, H 67, H 69, H 73, H 74) were plastered smooth.

The chambers of graves H 67, H 68, H 69 and H 73 preserved a fragmentary roof of limestone slabs. In the case of H 73, it was a gable roof. In turn, tomb H 74 appears to have had an access hole as suggested by the ledges constructed to hold the trapdoor.

Not a hint remains of the superstructures of these tombs. It has to be assumed based on the results of previous excavations in the



Upper Necropolis that these markers would have been made of small stones arranged as a rectangle sporting a plaster finish inside, either plain or bearing *mihrab* decoration.

The chambers were devoid of any grave goods placed there intentionally. Finds from

the layer are innumerable: some potsherds, lamp fragments, glass vessels and weights, as well as bronze coins. In this situation, it has to be presumed that any objects inside the burial chambers must have gotten there by coincidence.

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