



**Remarks on the typology of Islamic graves from the cemeteries on Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria**

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# REMARKS ON THE TYPOLOGY OF ISLAMIC GRAVES FROM THE CEMETERIES ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

Emanuela Kulicka

**Abstract:** The article is a general characteristic of three Islamic graveyards, arbitrarily referred to as the Lower, Middle and Upper Necropolis (from after the Arabic invasion through the 12th century), and presents a typology of graves developed on the basis of results of archaeological excavations carried out by a PCMA mission for the past half a century.

**Keywords:** Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka, Islamic burials, Lower/Middle/Upper Necropolis

The exploration of the site of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria [*Fig. 1*] is a project of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw carried out in cooperation with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. The work, which has been ongoing since 1960, is currently directed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek of the PCMA. To date, the excavation of Islamic layers on the site has uncovered three phases of the cemeteries identified as the so-called

Lower Necropolis, dated to after the Arab invasion but prior to the great earthquake of 792, that is to say, the end of the 7th century, the Middle Necropolis from the 9th–10th centuries and the Upper Necropolis from the 11th–12th centuries (Majcherek 2004). The article is a general characteristic of the three graveyard phases and presents a typology of graves developed on the basis of archaeological excavations, in which the author has been involved since the fieldwork season in 2000.

## LOWER NECROPOLIS

The extent of the Lower Necropolis, which was the first Islamic cemetery to appear on the site known today as Kom el-Dikka sometime at the turn of the 7th century, seems to have been determined by the late Roman buildings. There is an apparent

correlation between the two burial phases, the boxes being cut most frequently into the ruined structures of an earlier age.

Building technique was fairly simple, not to say primitive, large blocks of limestone being used to construct the burial

chambers, covered on top with limestone slabs. The chamber could also be cut into the late Roman architectural ruins or it

could be a simple earth pit, in which case only the roofing would be of limestone slabs [Fig. 2]. The earth pits without stone lining

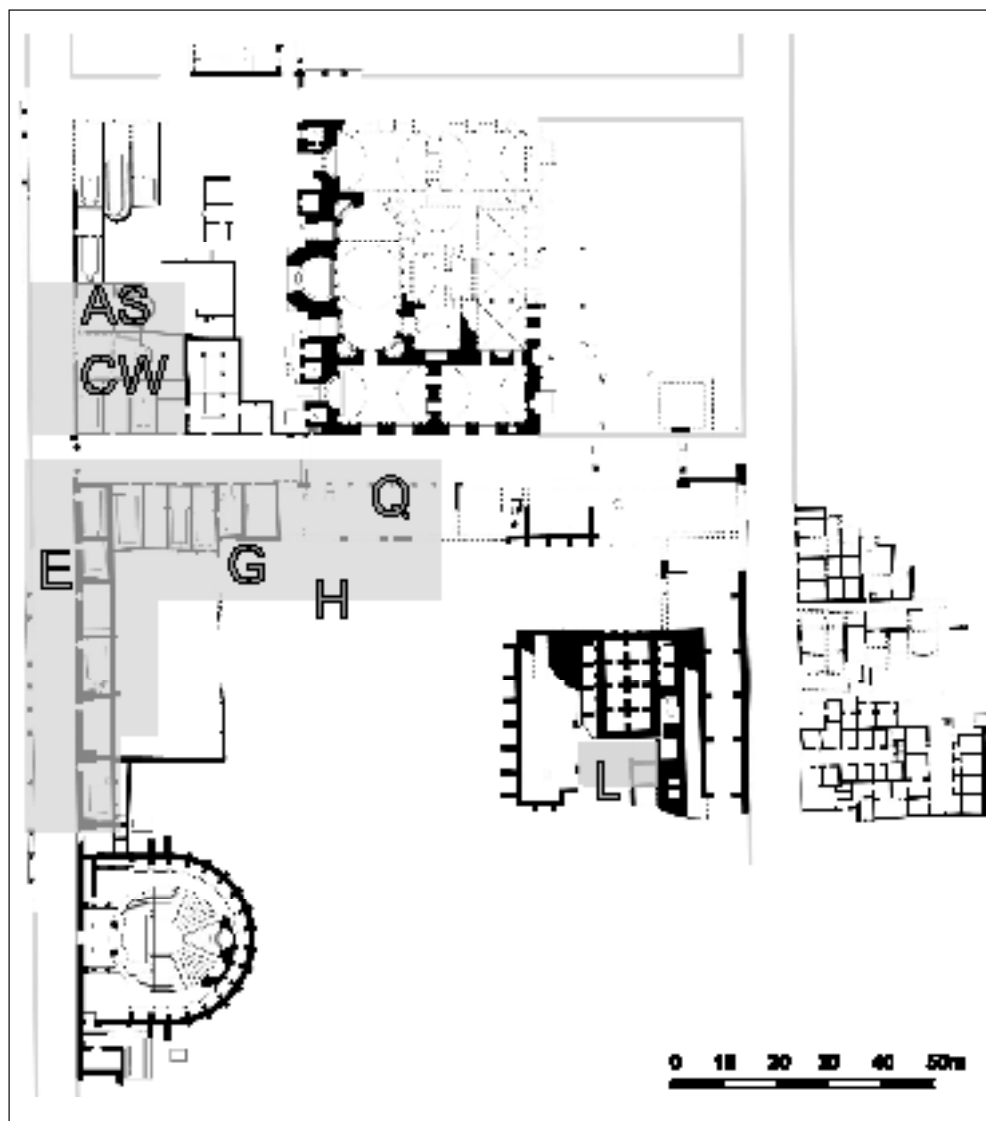


Fig. 1. Islamic graveyards explored on the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria (state in 2011). All three phases present in sectors AS, CW, E, F, G and H; only Upper Necropolis in sectors G, H, L and in the center of the site (PCMA archives)

were dug down to the same level as pits intended to hold a simple stone masonry structure. Such earth pits, occasionally covered with limestone slabs laid flat on top of the narrow pit, made up approximately half of the overall known number of burials made in this phase of the cemetery. Adult graves measured a constant 1.60 m in length and 0.80 m in width; children's graves had 1.30 m by 0.45 m. No tombstones of any kind serving as grave markers were recorded for this phase of the necropolis.

The alignment of the graves was just barely north of east in all three phases and the dead were laid out slightly turned on their sides, facing in the direction of Mecca. The condition of bones in burials from this phase is consistently poor; they disintegrate easily after being excavated.

Altogether 52 graves of this phase were explored between 2001 and 2011.

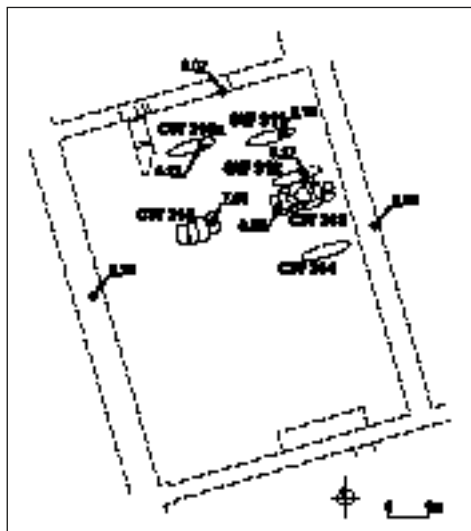


Fig. 2. The Lower Necropolis, plan of sector CW with four simple earth graves (Drawing and digitizing E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)

## MIDDLE NECROPOLIS

Depending on the location within the excavation area the layers separating the earliest phase of the necropolis from the later one, dated on the ground of archaeological finds to the turn of the 9th and the 10th centuries AD, differ in thickness. In the area above the Theater Portico [see Fig. 1], the newer tombs are practically on top of the older ones, but in the center of the excavated site, between the rising mounds of the Theater and the Cistern, the layers of fill between the cemetery phases can be quite substantial, reaching from 1 m to 3 m.

All the graves from this phase were simple earth pits and the bones have not been preserved. Changes in coloring of the fill and the smell of ammonia were often the only telltale evidence of a grave during

exploration. All the graves had superstructures marking their position in the necropolis, measuring 2.20 m by 2.50 m [Fig. 3]. These were constructed of large regular blocks of stone and plastered, including a central floor within the outer borders of the tomb. They were often furnished with marble funerary steles, which were fitted into either the eastern or western end of the superstructure depending on which subphase of the Middle Necropolis they came from. The inscribed text on the tombstones consisted of Quranic *suras* and occasionally also the name of the deceased and the date of death. The inscription was often decorated with simple flowers and the inscribed field set off with a straight or wavy engraved line (see below; also Redlak 2011, in this volume).

The cemetery has been found to consist of two subphases, both demonstrating the same territorial extent with later graves superimposed on earlier ones [Fig. 4]. The differences between superstructures from the two phases are minimal. The total count of graves from this phase recorded since 2000 is 110.

### PHASE I

The blocks used in the construction of superstructures of graves from the first sub-phase of the Middle Necropolis were

Fig. 3. *The Middle Necropolis, plan of sector G with the position of tomb superstructures (Drawing M. Woźniak, digitizing E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)* ➞

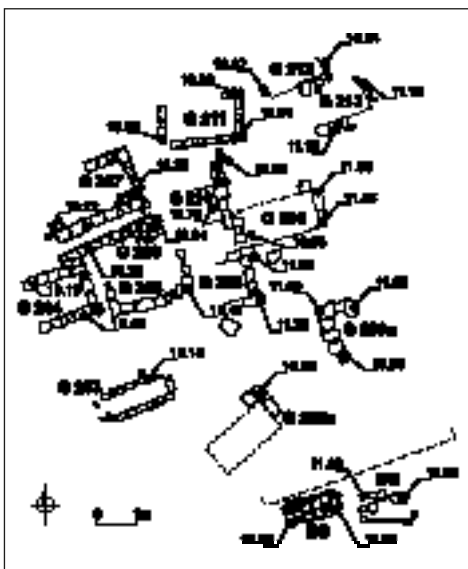


Fig. 4. *Superstructures from both sub-phases of the Middle Necropolis, showing funerary stelae in situ; viewed from the west; sub-phases marked below individual grave numbers (Photo E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)*

very big and well dressed. They measured mostly 0.25 m by 0.25 m by 0.30 m and 0.25 m by 0.60 m by 0.25 m. Steles facing eastward were mounted in the shorter west walls of the tomb superstructure. Most of the time the steles are missing, their position being evidenced by long grooves in the structure of the tombstone [Fig. 5,

top right; see Fig. 4]. One example found still in place is the stele from grave E 146 (Reg. no. 5156), bearing twelve lines of text and giving the full name of the deceased: Surur Mawlab Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Taji.<sup>1</sup> This stele has been dated to the 9th/10th century. Another surviving stele, Reg. no. 5155 [Fig. 5, top left], found in

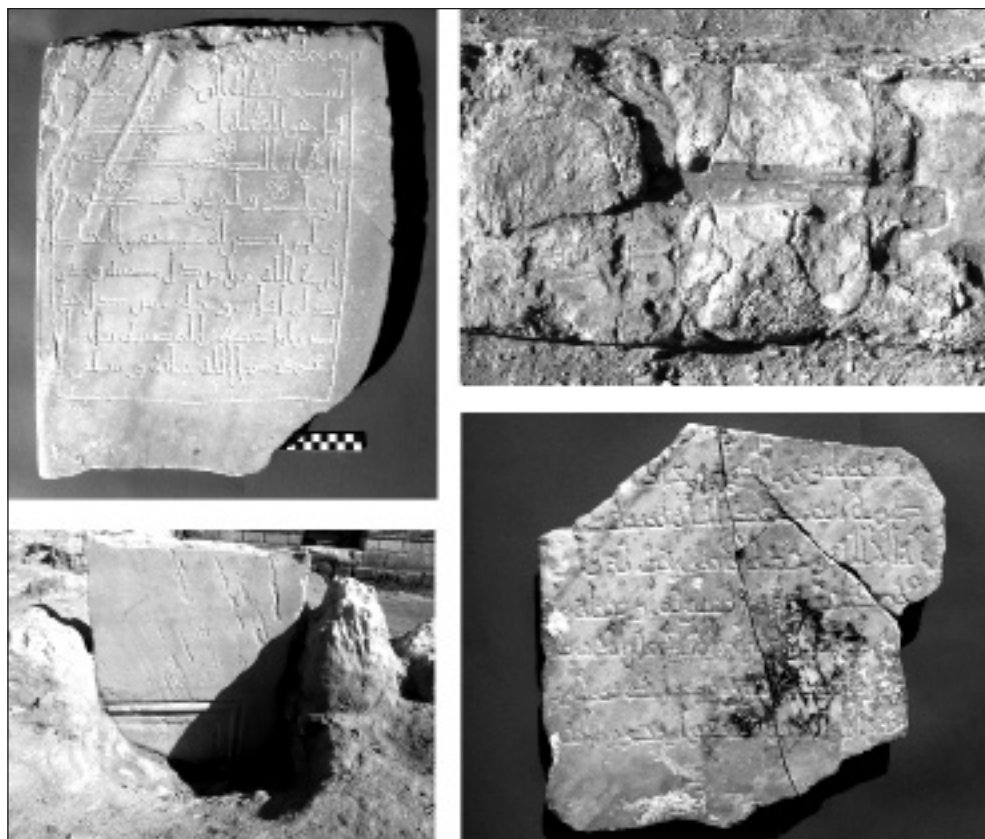


Fig. 5. Slot for mounting a stele in the west wall of the superstructure of grave E 140 (top right); Middle Necropolis funerary slabs: Reg. no. 5155 from grave E 142 (top left), tombstone made from reused marble slab originating from revetment or decorated screen with Qufic epitaph from the turn of the 9th century (bottom left); Reg. No. 5111, dated to AD 861, found reused as roofing in an Upper Necropolis substructure (Photos E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)

<sup>1</sup> This and other readings of Islamic texts in this article by Dorota Malarczyk (Jagiellonian University).



the superstructure of grave E 142, has an engraved line running around the inscription field and a floral tendril designed as a wavy line at the top. Displaced steles were found also in the neighborhood of the tombs.

## PHASE II

The superstructures from the younger sub-phase of the Middle Necropolis were constructed frequently directly on top of older ones, using the older walls as foundations. Roughly dressed and fitted blocks, measuring 0.25 m x 0.25 m x 0.35 m, were used in the construction. Marble funerary slabs were mounted in the superstructure wall, the side with the epitaph always facing east, but now positioned in the east wall instead of the west one [see *Fig. 4*]. They were slotted in the wall or placed between two stones with appropriate grooving and bonded with mortar. A stone against the west side of the funerary slab was intended as a means of preventing its unwanted tilting. The funerary slabs were of marble, occasionally reused [*Fig. 5*, bottom left].

The surface of the Middle Necropolis was intentionally evenly covered with

a layer of sea sand with large quantities of fragmented shells and small pebbles [*Fig. 6*].

A good parallel for the appearance of the Middle Necropolis from Kom el-Dikka is supplied by the Fatimid cemetery from Aswan [see *Fig. 14*]. Individual graves were made in similar fashion as the ones on Kom el-Dikka and there is good reason to believe that the general type was similar despite the fairly bold reconstruction of the superstructures at Aswan.



*Fig. 6. Occupational level of the Middle Necropolis (Phase I) with layer of sea sand containing fragmented shells*  
(Photo E. Kulicka) ➡

## UPPER NECROPOLIS

The stratigraphic situation was observed to be similar to that of the earlier phase in the Upper Necropolis on Kom el-Dikka with graves directly superimposed on top of Middle Necropolis structures in the area above the Theater Portico (cf. Kołataj

1972) (at an altitude of 9 m a.s.l.) or rising high in the center of the site, where the latest surface was at an altitude of approximately 13 m a.s.l. [see *Fig. 1*]. The maximum thickness of the Upper Necropolis layer was 2 m.

The typical grave consisted of a stone burial chamber with stone superstructure (for results of the earliest research on the graveyards, see Dąbrowski 1966). They were largely damaged or nonexistent and it is often difficult to determine the type of burial based on the remnants [Fig. 7].

Tomb substructures consisted of rectangular burial chambers of stone, roofed with limestone slabs set either in flat or in gabled position. They were dug down approximately one meter below the ground surface of the time and sometimes in slightly off alignment. An analysis of the available record (since 2001 a total of 409 burials from this phase of the cemetery has been explored) has produced a provisional typology of tomb construction [Fig. 8].

Regarding the substructure, of the tombs, three different varieties have been noted. The smallest variety encompassed small narrow boxes made of poorly dressed and irregular pieces of limestone (type A of the tomb substructure in Fig. 8). The inside dimensions of the box were 1.80 m by 0.40 m, while individual blocks of stone, which were simply stuck into the ground without any mortar bonding, measured on average 0.40 m by 0.20 m by 0.15 m. They were topped with slabs laid flat. For the most part, these roofs have been damaged or destroyed completely, resulting in the poor preservation of the skeletal material inside the graves. The overall impression is of shoddiness in the construction.

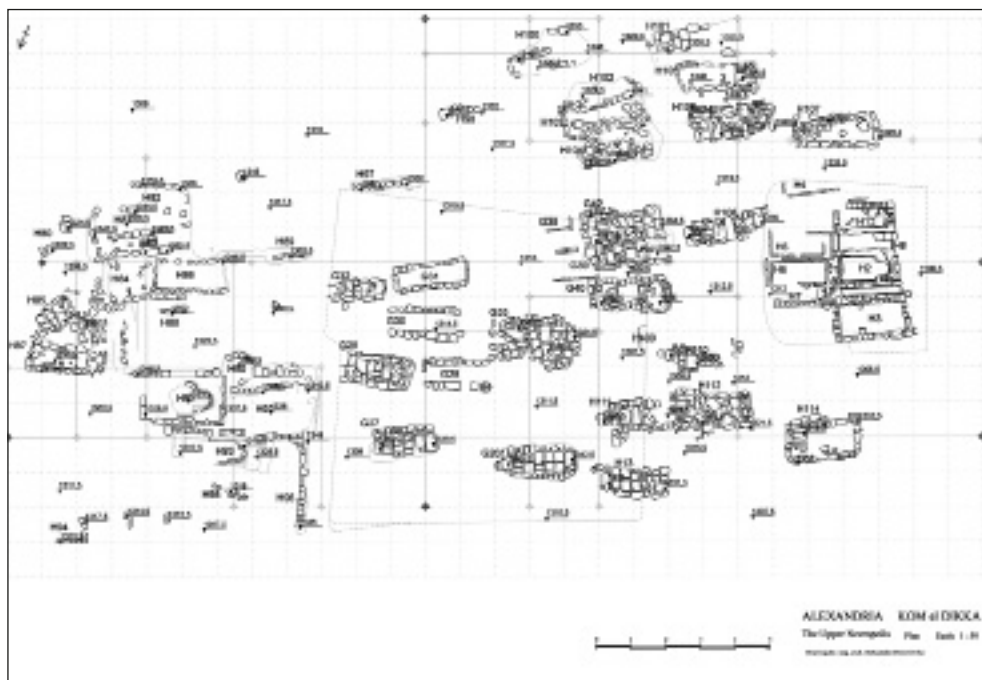


Fig. 7. Upper Necropolis in sector H; observable concentration of damaged graves with missing superstructures in the central part of the excavated area (Drawing A. Brzozowska; PCMA archives)



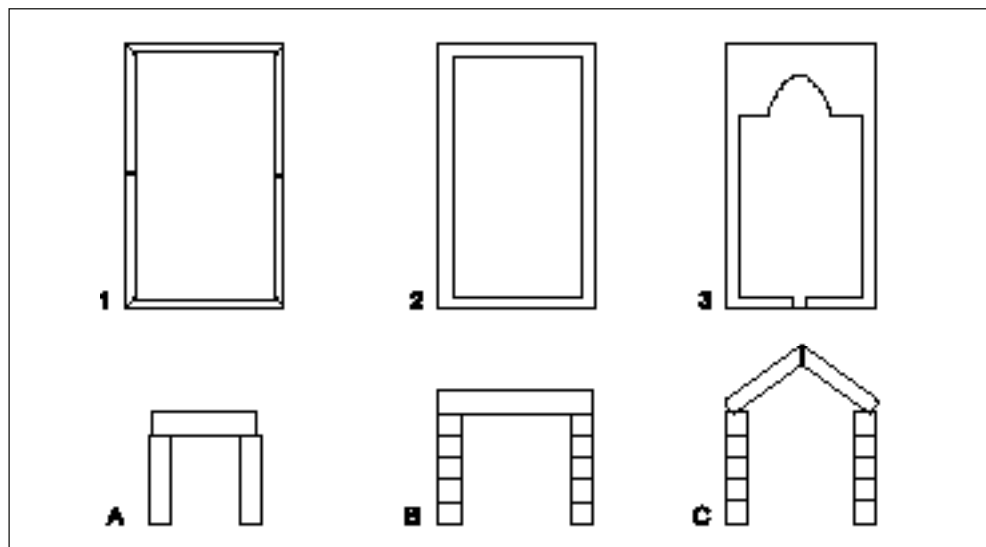


Fig. 8. Schematic typology of tomb substructures (1–3) and superstructures (A–C) from the Upper Necropolis



Fig. 9. Examples of burial chamber roofing from the Upper Necropolis: flat in CW 27 (left) and gabled in LS (Photos E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)

The larger box substructures (type B in *Fig. 8*) were better made, although they too have suffered considerable damages under the pressure of surrounding earth fill and the skeletal material from inside them is in poor condition or destroyed as well. The inside dimensions of these boxes were approximately 2 m by 0.60 m.

Finally, the largest substructures (type C in *Fig. 8*) were constructed of regularly dressed small cubic blocks approximately 15 cm to the side, using mortar for bonding and plastering the wall surfaces from inside. Baked bricks were also used as building material (about 10% in all). Remains of building mortar were observed repeatedly on the outside and at the base of the substructure walls, marking the level and width of the trench dug to build the burial chamber.

The roofing of the burial chambers consisted either of slabs laid flat or in a gable construction [*Fig. 9*; see also *Fig. 8*]. There does not seem to be a dependence between the type of roofing and the width of the substructure. The gabled roofs were frequently found collapsed under the load of overlying earth.

The most interesting type of substructure is a box with attached shaft allowing for repeated burials [*Fig. 10*]. In construction, these substructures were like type C with the walls made of small regular, finely dressed blocks and plastered on the inside, covered with a gabled roof of slabs. The shaft well was also sealed with a gabled roof of slabs, wedged against special offsets in the side walls [see section in *Fig. 10*]. The shaft was placed commonly on the east side of the tomb (although exceptions have been noted).

With regard to superstructures, two principal types have been distinguished

[see *Fig. 8*]. The simplest and generally the oldest of the recorded superstructures (type 1) consisted of upright limestone slabs forming a rectangle measuring approximately 1.80 m by 0.80 m, e.g., tombs H 4, H 5, H 6 [*Fig. 7*]. The later and more elaborate superstructures of the Upper Necropolis were frequently built on top of these simple forms, often incorporating the extant structure without damaging it. The stone slabs were either fitted together at the edges or slots were made in the joining sides and a fixing wedge fitted to hold the slabs in place.

The oldest form of superstructure usually marked an earth pit, in which the skeletal remains were very poorly preserved, if at all, because of the acidity of the soil.

The other form of superstructure (type 2 in *Fig. 8*) consisted of a rectangular stone box measuring approximately 2 m by 1.30 m, e.g. tomb H 3 in *Fig. 7*. These were constructed of finely dressed cubic limestone blocks and plastered. The inside floor of the superstructure was frequently found broken, indicating that the grave was reused at least once after the original burial.

Some of these rectangular superstructures took on a much refined and beautiful form with the plasterwork inside the superstructure formed into an ornamental *mihrab* [type 3 in *Fig. 8*, e.g., tombs H 2, H 91 and H 93 in *Fig. 7*]. A few of these *mihrab* superstructures were decorated with engraved linear geometric patterns [*Fig. 11*].

Small channels were occasionally introduced in the east wall of the rectangular form of superstructure in order to drain water from the plastered floor inside of it [*Fig. 12*].

Tomb superstructures in the Upper Necropolis were often superimposed, touching or else sharing walls. Limestone

was commonly used for the construction, fired bricks being used in a small percentage for the ornamental *mihrabs* and stepped sides. The floors of the superstructures were plastered. Damage at the eastern end is evidence of reuse for later burials.

The orientation of tombs in the Upper Necropolis did not differ from that in the earlier two phases, being principally east-west and slightly off to the north. The dead were laid on their sides looking in the direction of Mecca.

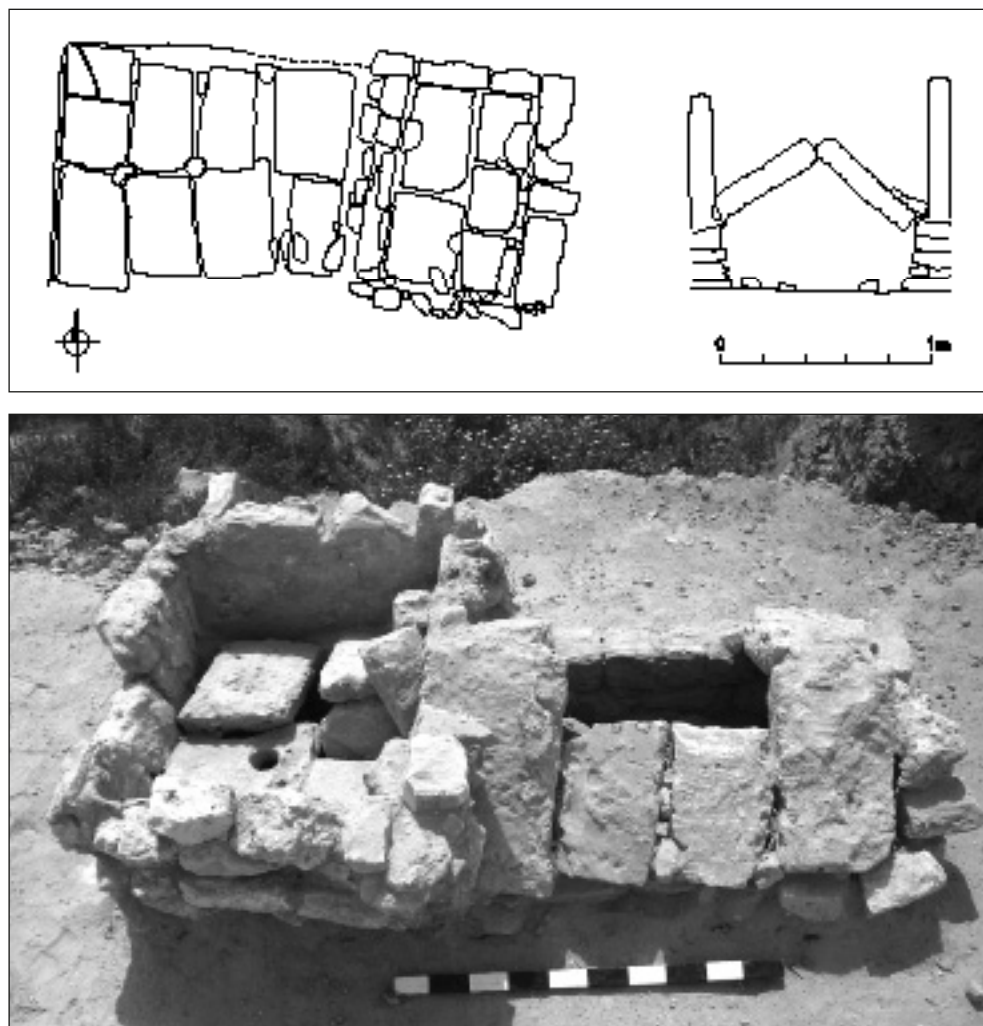
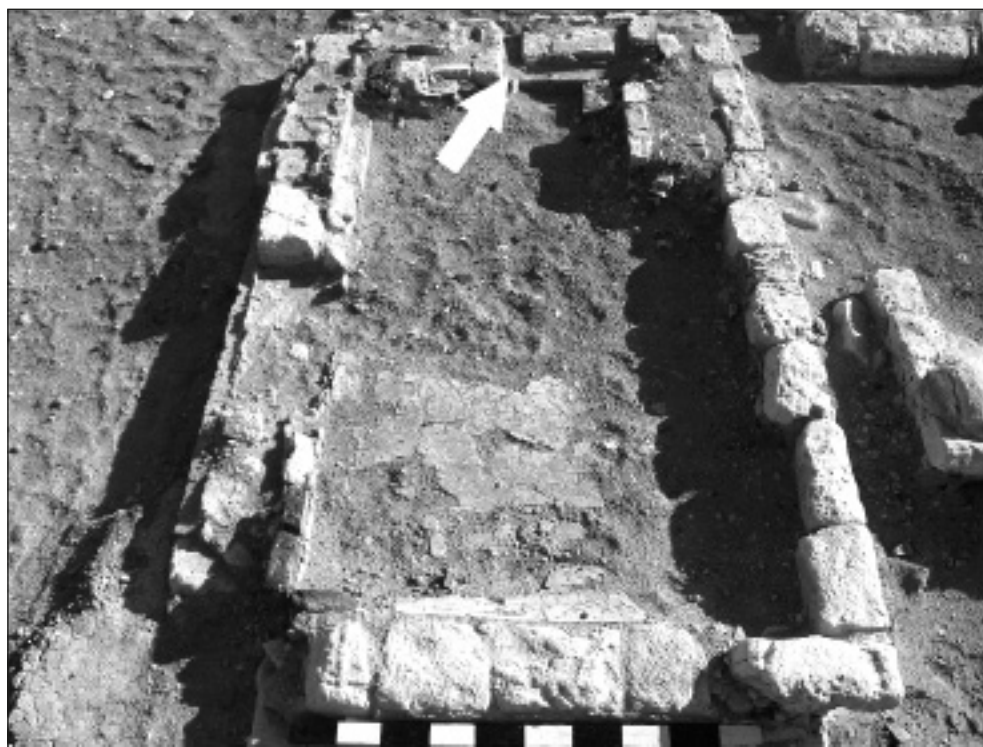
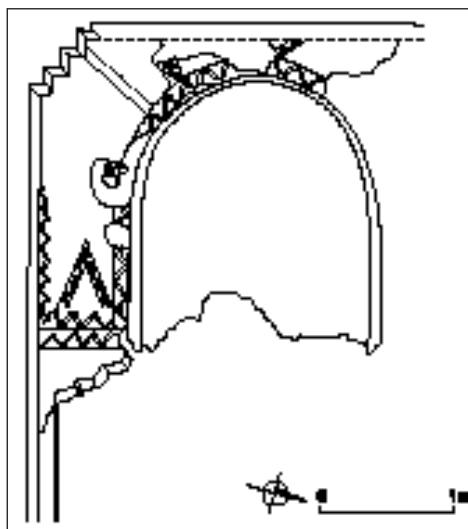


Fig. 10. Example of tomb substructure with attached entrance shaft: plan and section through shaft, M 256 (top) and view, L 11a. Upper Necropolis (Drawing and photo E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)

Most tombs were intended for reuse, hence the frequent damage seen in the eastern end of the superstructures. Burials were either on successive layers of earth, directly superimposed on top of one another or, most commonly, the earlier burial being pushed aside to the western end of the burial chamber (in 10% of the cases the older remains had been moved to the east). In the explored tombs the number of burials ranged from one to three. The evidence for reuse of the graves suggests that the cemetery was in use for at least 100 years.

*Fig. 11. Decorated mihrab superstructure from the Upper Necropolis  
(Digitizing E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)*



*Fig. 12. Example of tomb superstructure with drainage channel, Upper Necropolis, CW 5  
(Photo E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)*

Low enclosure walls have been noted encompassing groups of tombs in the

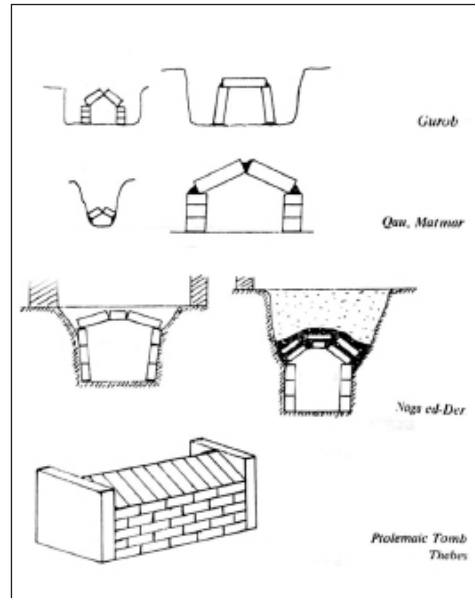
Upper Necropolis (e.g. H 90, *Fig. 7*). These could have been either family or clan plots.<sup>2</sup>

## ISLAMIC CEMETERIES OF THE AGE

Nowhere have investigations of Islamic burial grounds attained such a scale as on the Kom el-Dikka site for obvious reasons. Some idea of what this cemetery may have looked like to contemporaries comes from images of graveyards in Syria where one observes plastered superstructures with gabled tops and special places for mounting funerary stelae. The construction of these tomb superstructures apparently resembles that of the Upper Necropolis tombs. In type, however, the Kom el-Dikka tombs fall well into the Egyptian tradition of subterranean burial structures consisting of rectangular boxes with gabled roofs, occasionally with superstructures [*Fig. 13*]. The reconstructed substructure of a Ptolemaic tomb from Thebes is particularly good as a parallel, the only difference between it and the Kom el-Dikka substructures being the presence of end walls blocked with stone slabs. The other important difference is the material. On Kom el-Dikka limestone was used because it was more readily available than brick, being easily salvaged from late Roman ruins, especially the portico pavements.

Modern Islamic burial grounds are substantially different from one another. In Syria near Apamea small stepped grave superstructures of rectangular form can be observed. In Farafra Oasis in Egypt

there is a cemetery with different kinds of superstructures in use apparently contemporarily in the 18th and 19th centuries. The superstructures were constructed of readily available material, that is, small undressed stones formed in rectangular shape [*Fig. 15*]. At Hammamat in Tunisia the dead were buried under rectangular



*Fig. 13. Schematic presentation of box tombs from Old Kingdom, New Kingdom and Ptolemaic times (After Spencer 1979)*

<sup>2</sup> Recent excavations in sectors CW and H have uncovered enclosure walls that were higher than in other places in the cemetery and furnished with a *mihrab* in the southeastern side directed toward Mecca (see Figs 2–3 on page 54 in this volume). This may have marked a *mussala* or open prayer space (s.v., *EncIslam*: 658), in this case a cemetery chapel (Raymond 2005: 63, who mentions cemeteries being built near open prayer spaces).





*Fig. 14. View of the Fatimid cemetery in Aswan  
(courtesy Google Earth™)*



*Fig. 15. Islamic cemetery in Farafra Oasis, 18th–19th century  
(Photo E. Kulicka)*



superstructures with steles. In Jerusalem, in the Mamilla cemetery, superstructures are either rectangular or stepped and are furnished with steles. The tombs at the Kairuan necropolis in Tunisia are equipped with small flat superstructures with a small pyramidal tomb marker or else

a small mausoleum. In Alexandria today the dead are buried in aboveground stone box-like chambers roofed flat or furnished with a barrel vault. The funerary slabs are usually quite modest, bearing the name of the deceased but not always even the date of death.

## GRAVE GOODS AND RITUALS

Funerary customs and beliefs can be traced in the archaeological record solely through the type of burial and the nature of the grave goods. Further data come from marble funerary slabs, which are often discovered *in situ* on Kom el-Dikka.

Four graves of the Upper Necropolis, AS 144–147, discovered while clearing the portico stylobate in sector AS [see *Fig. 1*], had substructures covered with five marble funerary slabs. Two of these were in very poor condition with the marble breaking off and in one case the stele had been barely dressed and the letters marked, but the epitaph was never finished. The remaining two contain more or less the same fragment of a Quranic *sura*. On one of them the date of death of the deceased woman was given:

month of Rabiya el Awwal in the year 247 according to the Islamic calendar, recalculated as AD 861 [see *Fig. 5*, bottom right].

Islamic religion bans grave goods of any kind, the sole exception being shrouds wrapping the body, but traces of older beliefs are present. One example of an intentional gift is a coin found in the mouth of an individual buried in the Upper Necropolis (Q 45), another is a ring found in grave AS 143, also of the Upper Necropolis. More recent excavations revealed in grave H 95a of the Upper Necropolis a green-glazed two-handled jar with a charred organic substance inside it (see Kulicka 2011: *Fig. 4*, in this volume). The jar, however, proved to be cached away in a box substructure previously cleared of the original burial.

## FINDS

Various artifacts were found in layers associated with the graves in the Upper Necropolis. By and large, they represent the fill covering the cemetery and to a lesser extent its latest occupational phase; but their presence inside the burial chambers is for the most part accidental.

Fragmented glasses and glazed Islamic pottery are the most common [*Fig. 16*]; other finds include green-glazed oil lamps [*Fig. 17*, left], glass weights with texts, e.g.

“There is no God except Allah” [*Fig. 17*, right], game counters, often multi-colored and sometimes additionally decorated with impressed patterns like palmettes, and bronze coins. The concentration of finds in the layer accompanying the tombs can be taken as evidence for the continuation of an old habit of visiting the graves of the dead with gifts. Complete lamps are proof of intentional deposition and may even have been an integral part of the burial.



*Fig. 16. Islamic glazed ware finds  
(Photo E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)*



*Fig. 17. Islamic green-glazed lamp (left) and glass weights Reg. no. 5117 and 5119  
(Photo E. Kulicka; PCMA archives)*

## REMARKS ON THE STRATIGRAPHY

While the presence of three successive phases of the Islamic necropolis (with two subphases for the Middle Necropolis) is an established fact, interpretation of the stratigraphy becomes more difficult where the distribution of layers is not even. The relations between particular phases seem constant enough where the graves are fitted into the late Roman ruins, but in the area of the Theatre Portico, this relation appears to have been disturbed with the cemeteries being practically one on top of the other. The difference can be up to a meter and

a half in thickness of the cemetery layer (for remarks on earlier studies of the stratigraphy, see Kiss *et alii* 2000). Wherever such difficulties appear, issues of stratigraphy can be resolved by determining the grave type as discussed above in a sort of argument *à rebours*.

Continued exploration of layers associated with the Islamic cemeteries and study of the archaeological material will lead to a fuller reconstruction of the extent of each phase of the necropolis and a better understanding of the stratigraphy.

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