

Funeral practices at Tell Masaikh (Syria): Late Roman and Islamic graves

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The study of the site of Tell Masaikh is a part of a larger project of research on the occupation of the region of Ashara-Terqa.¹ The site of Terqa is located on the right bank of Euphrates, about sixty kilometres north of Tell Hariri (Mari) and c. hundred kilometres from the Iraqi border, while Tell Masaikh is situated four kilometres upstream from Terqa, on the left bank (Rouault 2001: 623).

The site of Masaikh contains many phases of settlement, from the Chalcolithic period (Halaf) until the modern and contemporary times, when the southern part has been used as an Islamic cemetery (for a presentation of the site, see Rouault 1996 and Masetti-Rouault 2001 and 2002).

The two main areas of excavations (E and F) are focused on the analysis of the Neo-Assyrian levels. During the seventh and the eighth seasons of excavations at Tell Masaikh more than one hundred graves have been excavated, most of them situated just below the modern surface. The study of the tombs of the ancient periods (Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian periods) was easier thanks to their clear relations with the stratigraphic levels and archaeological findings, such as pottery or other artefacts. However, in the two main excavations areas (E and F), it was hard to draw a clear chronology of the later inhumations. For a first time, most of the tombs in these two areas have been considered as Late Roman/Preislamic or Islamic mainly because they were intrusive in the Neo-Assyrian levels,² even if their stratigraphic relation with the levels of those periods was not always clear. Unfortunately, archaeological structural remains

¹ First of all I would like to thank Dr. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault (Directeur d'études, EPHE section V, Paris, France), responsible of the Tell Masaikh excavations, and Prof. Olivier Rouault, director of the Project "Terqa and its region" as well, for trusting me with the study of Tell Masaikh tombs and for her helpful supervision of this work. I am grateful to Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak (Institute of Archaeology, Warsaw University) for his proposal to write the present report and for his advice which allowed the best application of the anthropological methods during the excavations. And, lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Françoise Le Mort (Chargée de Recherche, CNRS UMR 5133, Lyon, France) for her useful advice and attentive correction of this paper.

² Neo-Assyrian graves will be treated in a forthcoming paper, containing the presentation of the funerary practices in all periods at Tell Masaikh.

from the Late Roman period were quite poor in those areas and did not permit to assert that the structures and the graves were strictly contemporaneous (Masetti-Rouault 2005). Furthermore, most of the inhumations were simple pits, without associated materials. However, through the observation and analysis of some taphonomic facts, which led us to propose a reconstruction of the original position, we will be able to present a more accurate history of these graves.

The present paper is linked to a larger project of study of the inhumations of both sites of Terqa and Masaikh. The first part of this work concerns the anthropological study of the buried populations by Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak. I am responsible of the second part, concerning the study of funeral practices with use of a typo-chronological classification of graves, based on methods of the “anthropologie de terrain”.³

The first aim of this paper is to present the data gathered during two seasons (2002–2003) in Tell Masaikh, namely the taphonomical information, with a precise description of some representative cases of deposition of skeletal remains which could inform us on the treatment of the body and the burial environment. Later, in the light of some previous anthropological studies together with available stratigraphical and archaeological data, we will try to draw a more accurate chronology of the graves. Anyway, as the ongoing excavations at Tell Masaikh will probably identify plenty of new graves, this presentation must be considered only as a preliminary study of the subject.

1. Methods of excavations and recording

Taking into account the extent of the funeral area, it is clear that the exploration of tombs was related to the general strategy of the excavation. We do not know the real boundary of each cemetery. Furthermore, it was quite difficult to locate the edges of the pits because of the hardly noticeable differences of the soil.

During the first days of excavations of the seventh season, with the support of Dr. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault, director of the excavations, we decided to apply a new way of recording the information about graves according to forms proposed by P. Courtaud (1996).

These forms are divided in four parts: the first one concerns the state of preservation of human remains (for infants, juveniles and adults); the last one, more interpretative, deals with the environment of a skeleton (funeral architecture, type of filling of a pit, deposits, etc.). The intermediate part of the form is based on “a description of the different skeleton segments”⁴ and contains a precise recording of the anatomical connexions (degree, side of appearance, etc.). Actually, we have developed a quick way of gathering and field recording of the significant features for our research. For example, we decided to take only

³ The some of the main rules of this method of studying graves are presented below. Let us just note that the field anthropology proposes a method of tomb analysis with an anthropological approach. According to its founders, the analysis focused on the skeletal remains in relation to other cultural components is necessary for clear and deep comprehension of funeral practices.

⁴ This is a free translation of the words of H. Duday (1995), who introduced the methods of the field anthropology.

three elevations from the head of the dead to the feet instead of the measurements of each bones. Also, in this archaeological context often pits can be clearly seen only when they are intrusives in built structures, such as walls or floors. For these tombs, we will point out in the following part their approximate size and shape.

So, the work on the excavation areas has been done according to the methods of the so-called “anthropologie de terrain” (field anthropology), based both on the archaeological and forensic methods.⁵ Now, we have to state the main rules concerning the *in situ* observations. The gathered information contains:

1. observation, during the excavation of the grave, of the inhumation’s environment: type and shape of the pit, composition of the filling, taphonomical remarks concerning natural or human disturbances,
2. identification of each part of the skeleton, its position, anatomical orientation, description of main anatomical joints, in order to reconstruct the original position of the body – which could give important information on the presence of a shrouding. Displacements of the bones, inside or outside the corporal space, had to be noted as well. The whole set of information contains not only the position, but as well those parts of the treatment of the body or of the burial (shroud, architecture), which have disappeared, through an analysis of the process of decomposition and decay of flesh, and of other perishable materials.

We have to note that during those campaigns accurate observations concerning sex and age of the skeletons, normally done *in situ*, were added afterwards by A. Sołtysiak. According to the rules of the “anthropologie de terrain” we have paid a special attention to the description of weak articulations, which usually break up during the first weeks after death or even before, that is metacarpals, me-tatarsals and phalanges, scapulo-thoracic and costo-sternal joints (Duday et al. 1990: 31).

It must be noted that due to the necessity of keeping the skull in a good state of preservation, the survey of cervical vertebrae below atlas-axis sometimes has not been done. Nevertheless, the repetition of inhumation type has allowed us to have a quite clear idea of this part of skeleton.

Since a large number of funeral remains was in a poor state of preservation, we have paid greater attention to specific parts of the skeleton. Although each of them has been systematically recorded with use of the form quoted above, we have chosen to focus the description on few anatomical relationships:

- skull,
- scapula and clavicle,
- thorax,
- pelvic belt,
- lower limbs.

⁵ These methods were described, among many other publications, in Duday et al. 1990 and were developed in 1980s (for history of the discipline see Crubezy 1992).

With use of above mentioned forms we made up a detailed data base summarised in the appendix. The use of the digital photography during of excavation allowed us to check some details later.

A special coding was used to describe the position of the skeletal remains, including:

1. Position of the body (i. e. the trunk):
 - back: B,
 - right or left side: L and R,
 - three-quarters posterior: P (in every case on the right side).
2. Position of the inferior limbs:
 - extension: e,
 - when the body is on the back, flexion of the right or of the left leg: fr or fl.
3. The description of the superior limbs is taken from a recent publication on the necropolis of Sainte-Barbe, Marseille, France (Molinier et al. 2003: 78). The main difficulty was the large variety of positions of the arms. For that reason we adopted another coding based on a grid of the body in three vertical and horizontal plans. So, in a transversal plan the thorax is noted 0, abdomen 1, pelvis 2. In a sagittal plan, the side of the limb in question is noted 0, the medial part 1 and the opposite side 2. For instance, when the body is on its right side, inferior limbs flexed, both hands in front of the face: R-f-01.

In order to illustrate and support our own chronological classification of the graves, we present a sample of some of the graves that allows us to draw a clear differentiation between at least two main periods of use of the site as cemetery. The dating of each burial is given in the Appendix, together with sex and age diagnosis provided by A. Sołtysiak (see Sołtysiak 2003).

2. Description of the excavated graves

2.1. Area E

This field is the most important area of the tell. Here 52 graves, assigned to the Late Roman and Neo-Assyrian levels, have been excavated in 2002. In order to make our point, only the best preserved graves, suitable for illustrating the previously quoted method, will be presented here.

Before description of the graves with anthropological methods, we have to say why we think that this kind of analysis is the most appropriate to draw a chronological classification. In fact Islamic graves are clearly dated through their orientation, usually toward Mecca,⁶ that is head toward the west or the north-west, and face turned toward the south or the south-east (Curvers 1987:

⁶ Some variation are known in the Islamic world, see Simpson 1995: 245.

13).⁷ As the systematic position of the head, turned in the case if the body was laid on the back, seems to be specific in the Islamic periods (see Jean-Marie 1999: 72–73 and pl. 178; Tunca 1987, pl. 25 (1–3), 26 and 27), we have to prove in Masaikh graves the same position of the head. On the other hand, some of the graves in Tell Masaikh seem not to present the same kind of deposition of the body. The aim of the following part of this paper is to describe the ways of deposition observed, in order to draw a typology afterwards.

Grave MK07 e 10 (Plate I)

Young adult, approximately 25 years old, whose skeletal remains were quite well preserved, except some disturbances after the total decay of the corpse, for instance destruction of the skull and both calcanei. The body was oriented with head towards north-west and face turned south-west.

Upper part of the skeleton: skull, thorax, superior limbs. We noticed first that the long bones of the superior limbs were lying on their anterior faces. The head of the left ulna, well preserved, could be seen only by its posterior face making a slight angle with the arm. Left humerus and scapula could be seen by their posterior part as well. We could also notice a compression effect of the right forearm with a slip of the right scapula down; the corresponding ulna was visible by its postero-medial face. Despite very poor preservation of the vertebrae, we could observe that, on the left side, the four first ribs remained in front of their relative vertebrae, whereas on the right side the ribs had slipped up. The iliac bones were visible only by their posterior side. After removing the pelvis, in very bad condition, we found the palms of the hands up: they have probably been put on the pelvis.

Lower part: inferior limbs. In spite of the poor preservation of the pelvis, we could remark that the femur was strictly in connexion with the pelvis. Stretching and parallel, both femora were visible by their posterior face. The left tibia appeared by its postero-lateral side and the right fibula was near the next tibia. The left calcaneus was seen by its lateral face, and the left foot was not connected anymore. The right calcaneus was presenting its posterior side like one of the cuneiforms, and, with a metatarsal, they remained both in connexion. So, we could argue that, despite the disturbance of the left foot after decay, the feet rest on their dorsal side.

Through this accurate observation of the anatomical orientation of the bones, we could state that the body was lying on the frontal side. Since the main weak articulations remained in a quite tight connexion (except the left metatarsals which were displaced during the excavation), it is clear that this deposition of the body had occurred early in the chronology of the decomposition. Actually, by the observation of the right side, especially the orientation and degree of humero-scapular connexion we could establish that, originally, the dead had probably been laid on the right side.

⁷ More ancient graves may present the same orientation of the head (except the face). Some graves were also orientated south-west, face toward the south-east. We have to note that in the Parthian graves of Nippur, for instance, the head is turned toward the east or south east, facing the sun (see Zettler 1993: 57).

Grave MK07 e 71

Female, approximately 25 years old, orientation east-west, face toward south-west.

Upper part of the skeleton. First visible part of the skull was the left parietal. The face of the dead was laid directly against the earth, and we can state that its displacement had strictly followed the rotation of the cervical vertebrae. The right arm was extended. The left scapula appeared by its postero-medial face, whereas the right one was visible by its anterior face. Contrary to the previous case, we can establish that the body was strictly on the right side. Moreover, the pelvis had no connection anymore and the left pelvic bones, fallen on the bottom of the pit, were visible by its posterior side, whereas the right one was still visible by its medio-posterior side.

Lower part of the skeleton. Lower limbs were extended. Due to the tight connection between the proximal part of the femora and the pelvic bones, there was no rotation or displacement of the lower limb. The left limb was over the right one, and it was visible by its lateral part, while the right one by its posterior side. No dislocation of the weak articulations of the feet has been noted.

The observations made during the analysis of this grave allow us to present some conclusions.⁸ First of all, since the main weak articulation did not move, it is quite possible that the decomposition of the body had occurred in a space progressively filled with the surrounding sediment (Roksandic 2003: 110ff).

In the case of the graves excavated in ruins of previous settlement structures, like this one, we can observe that the filling of the pit was composed of broken mudbricks. Actually, the material surrounding the body was pure clay, coming certainly from the decomposition of mudbricks due to corporal liquids. This material helped to keep bones in connection.

Grave MK07 e 89 (Plate I)

Female, approximately 40 years old, lying on the back. The pit seemed quite narrow (40x200 cm). Before the excavation of the body, we found above the pit a large quantity of shards, which might have been a marker. Furthermore, lower limbs were surrounded by some shards and upright *tabuks* (baked brick).

Upper part of the skeleton. The skull was visible by its left side, but without any connection with the cervical vertebrae. Nevertheless, the mandible was closed.

The right arm and forearm were set as an open angle, and the right hand was placed on the pelvis. The left forearm and arm formed a sharp angle, and the left hand was lying on the right humerus.

We remarked a constriction of the left arm and the scapula. The arm and forearm had no connection: the left humerus could be seen by its postero-lateral side, the ulna and radius by their medial face, with a clear displacement of the last one. Nevertheless, the metacarpals of the left hand were quite loosely connected, laid on the right arm. The right radius was visible by its me-

⁸ This hypothesis is working for all the graves of the site dating from Islamic times.

dial side. Bones of the right hand had fallen into the pelvis after the decomposition of soft tissues, so that the right hand might have been laid on the pelvis. We noted also the same constriction on the left side of the pelvis, whereas the right side was totally open.

Lower part of the skeleton. The same phenomenon of constriction of the left side has been remarked because of the slight rotation inside the corporal space, whereas the right side has been displaced toward the exterior of the corporal space. Displacement of the patellae would point out to a decomposition of the body in an empty space, but on the contrary we have remarked a quite tight connection of the metatarsals and phalanges, the right feet visible by its medial side and the left one by its dorsal side.

This last phenomenon could be explained by the narrowing of the space of decomposition due to the presence of shards and upright *tabuks*. In this way bones of the feet could have been held in their original position.

Unfortunately, the observation of the upper part, especially arms and shoulders, and the lower part of the body, has not permitted to determine in what kind of space the decomposition occurred. We suppose that the presence of shards above the pit had protected the dead and, in this case, it has also postponed the filling of the space surrounding the body. Through the disposition of the pelvic bones (see above) we also remarked that the bottom of the pit was not regular and slightly deeper toward the south; it is quite possible that the body had been laid against the left side of the pit.

Grave MK07 e 121 (Plate II)

Young child 1.5 year old, oriented west–east. The size of the pit was approximately 40x90 cm, but it may have been slightly enlarged by the excavation. The face was oriented toward the south.

Upper part of the skeleton. The skull was visible by its left side, the mandible slightly opened. Bones of extremities, feet and hands, were not discovered, and possibly they could have been moved, as in similar way of a case observed at Terqa.⁹ We could remark that right scapula was visible by its posterior side, and the left one by its postero-lateral side. The left forearm had no connection with the arm, and the ulna crossed the radius. Vertebrae were visible by their left side. The pelvic bones, visible by their posterior side, were totally dislocated.

Lower part of the skeleton. The rotation and the fall of the pelvis were highlighted by the position of the right femur visible by its posterior side.

The displacement and the loose connection of some bones, like the left fibula crossing the left tibia and pelvic bones, are due to the decomposition of the cartilages. Maybe for this reason some of the bones, as the scapulas and the

⁹ That fact was observed on the Area F of Terqa in a third millennium grave excavated in 2003. In this case, in a grave of a young child of the same age we noted that the tiny bones of feet, the phalanges, were displaced deeper than the metatarsals, despite the fact that the original filling of the pit showed no clue of perturbation. The study of the graves of Terqa will be published elsewhere.

pelvic bones, were visible by their posterior side, whereas the body had been certainly deposited on the right side.

Grave MK07 e 124 (Plate II)

Young man, approximately 20 years old, face toward the south-west. Feet missing from the ankle bones down. The excavation of this grave allowed us to make some remarks concerning the original position of the body.

Upper part of the skeleton. The skull was on its right side but face down. The left scapula was visible by its posterior side, and the humerus was visible by its latero-posterior side; the bones of the forearm were visible by their posterior side. The right scapula was visible by its latero-anterior side. We have been able to note a torsion of the lower part of the trunk, with no rupture of the connection of the lumbar vertebrae and the sacrum. For this reason the pelvic bones were visible by their posterior face.

Lower limbs. Outstretched, the left one visible by its latero-posterior side (left fibula missing), whereas the right one was by its medio-posterior side.

The position of this body was not strictly in three-quarters posterior. We remarked, after removing the pelvis, that the disconnection of the bones of the hands (the only weak articulations displaced) could prove that the rotation of the body was postponed, so originally it must have lied on the right side.

Grave MK07 e 126

Adult, sex unknown, approximately 50 years old, on the back, oriented north-west/south-east, face toward south-west. Stratigraphically, this grave can be dated from a Roman period, or maybe to Pre-Roman period. The pit was clearly covered by an Roman installation (MK07 E e 74), composed of a basin.

Upper part of the skeleton. Unfortunately the skull was excavated before the rest of the skeleton. Nevertheless, it seems that all the parts were in connection; the skull was lying on its right side, the cervical vertebrae in a quite slight extension; for this reason the mandible was closed. The main parts of the skeleton were strictly in connection, as well as the bones of both hands, which might have been put on the pelvis near the hips.

Lower part of the skeleton. The perfect closure of both pelvic bones allowed the lower limbs to be in their original position, without any rotation. It is also noticeable that the bones of both feet were in tight connection, visible by their dorsal face.

The strict connection of the main parts of the body shows that the filling of the environment of the body had occurred quite early. For this reason we can state that the decomposition had taken place in a filled space.

Grave MK07 e 175 (Plate III)

Adult, sex and age not yet determined, lying on the back, lower limbs outstretched. The pit was clearly located in the surrounding sediment composed of pebbles and compact sand (layer e 171, equivalent to the lower level of the Late Roman settlement); its dimensions were approximately 40x170 cm. The filling of the pit was made by green and silt earth, accumulated especially on the upper part of the body.

Upper part of the skeleton. No tight weak connection could be found. The body could have been placed on the right side, because the right pelvic bone was visible by its anterior side, whereas the left one was visible by its posterior side, and it could had fallen in the corporal space during the decomposition. We could note the tight connection of three of the thoracic vertebrae bringing the ribs. However, the axis of the other part of the spinal column was disposed perpendicularly, compared with those described before. We remarked also the presence of the sacrum located upside down. The silt earth in the pit could had been introduced by a disturbance occurred after the decomposition. Nevertheless, no observation confirmed that hypothesis. Furthermore, we noted also the presence of the left ulna and decubitus, disconnected but still in position near the pelvis.

Lower part of the skeleton. From the long bones, only the left femur and ulna have been found. The femur was visible by its posterior side and it could had followed the fall of the pelvis.

Even if we could note strong displacements in this grave, some bones, however disconnected, were still in their anatomical position. So we thought that, in this case, the decomposition took place in an empty space, even if the whole data do not let us deduce it.¹⁰ Even if some displacements, such as those of the vertebrae, remained inside the corporal space, we can deduce that during the decomposition, when not all the vertebrae were dislocated, a part of the vertebral column was disconnected from the rest. On the other hand, some studies have shown that Islamic traditions allow a protection of the body through various objects, like, for example, big pieces of pottery.¹¹ We could imagine the presence of this kind of material, which disappeared later, protecting the upper part of the body and postponing the filling of the pit. As for the type of fine sediment observed in the grave, in the light of the displacement of some bones, but without any archaeological evidence (and without any clue testifying to the presence of a hole), we thought of a presence of stagnant water.¹²

¹⁰ For an accurate explanation of the decomposition in an empty space: Duday et al. 1990.

¹¹ The previous excavations at Tell Ashara and Tell Masaikh unearthed many late Islamic graves protected by different systems. The digs at Tell al-Raqai (Curvers 1987: 8ff) also unearthed some graves covered by slabs or bricks. Some ethnological evidence shows that this practice was used to prevent the body to be disinterred by wild animals for instance: fragments of bricks, stones, earth or potsherds could be put usually on the top of the pit (see Musil 1928: 671, Granqvist 1965: 56, Simpson 1995: 245).

¹² Stagnant water seems to be frequent on the site of Tell Masaikh, because this hypothesis has been used to explain the stains observed on the skull of MK07 e 72 (see the forthcoming report by A. Sołtysiak), as well as the degradation of the body of the Neo-Assyrian grave MK08 Fe 49.

Grave MK07 e 207 (Plate III)

Adult lying on the back, lower limbs outstretched. This grave could have been dated to the Late Roman period or earlier because of the presence of a small glass vase, found near the skull, above the left shoulder.¹³

Upper part of the skeleton. Some remarks, similar to those already done for the grave MK07 e 126, could be made. The skull seemed to be held slightly elevated in the same way, the cervical vertebrae in extension, and for this reason the mandible was strictly closed. The right forearm formed an almost right angle with the arm, and it was placed on the belly. Whereas the left forearm formed an angle of 45° with the arm, the hand was on the sternum, but the metacarpals and phalanges had fallen after disappearance of flesh. Unlike the grave MK07 e 126, we could note that the ribs were laying flat.

Lower part of the skeleton. Despite the disturbance of the distal part of the lower limbs, we could note that the pelvis was widely open, and the femur was visible by its anteromedial part. The opening of the pelvis proves that the decomposition took place in an empty space. Unfortunately, no remains of any architectural structures have been observed, but under the bones we founded a kind of yellow powder, which could have been the rest of a quite solid material, such as leather, or wood (observed in a recent grave during the 2006 mission).¹⁴

2.2. – Area F

Grave MK07 e 22 (Plate III)

Infant, lying on the right side, oriented south-west/north-east, face toward the south.

Upper part of the skeleton. The position of the left scapula and humerus, visible by their posterior side, reminds to similar scheme, described above: a position on the right side, with bones falling on the left side. The right upper limb was missing. The left pelvic bone was on its anterior side, and on the related ulna and radius. We have also remarked that the right metacarpals were in connection.

Lower part of the skeleton. The left tibia was displaced by some centimetres from its original place, and from the left metatarsals.

The disturbance suggested by the disappearance of some bones, such as the right forearm, and of some connections, is proved by the presence of a fragment of a *tabuk* (that is a baked brick, originating probably from a more recent layer

Furthermore, we have to note that a recent study has shown that the dislocation of each part of the skeleton in a watery environment follows the same stages as the decomposition taking place in a dry area (see Haglund and Sorg 2002: 207–208, Fig. 10.2).

¹³ A kind of glass vase resembling one discovered at Dura Europos and dated from Hellenistic-Parthian period, has been found in MK06 (Masetti-Rouault 2002, Fig. 21).

¹⁴ Wood is so rare in the region that its use in sepulchral context seems quite uncertain, but the most evident fact is that no nail has been found.

than the sepulchral pit), which has also displaced the left lower limbs. Be that as it may, the state of preservation of the right metacarpals shows that, like in the graves described above, the hands were set on the pelvic bones.

Grave MK07 e 24 (Plate IV)

Adult, sex unknown, found in the surface layer, oriented south-west/north-east, face toward south-east.

Upper part of the skeleton. The rotation of the head on the right side, with an extension but without rupture of the connexion between C1 and C2, could be an effect of compression. The thoracic cage was totally laid flat. The right forearm formed an angle of 95° with the arm, and the right hand, in tight connection, was outstretched on the left humerus. The left forearm formed an angle of 70° with the arm, but the bones of the left hand were missing.

A remarkable fact is the upright position of the sacrum and of pelvic bones. The left ilio-pubic branch was inside the pelvic space.

Lower part of the skeleton. The proximal epiphyses were connected with the pelvis, and no rotation of the femora occurred. We could note a compression of the right foot visible by its dorso-medial face, whereas the left foot was visible by its medial side. A later perturbation (certainly due to a later pit) had destroyed the distal part of the right femur and the proximal part of tibia and fibula.

The body had been laid on the back. The preservation of some weak connections could show a progressive filling of the pit, with a slightly disjunction between the bones of the wrists and metacarpals due to the decay of flesh and the laying flat of the thorax. So it is quite possible that the dead had been wrapped in a shroud.

The disconnection between L5 and S1 could be caused by a deeper level of the pit under the pelvis, but the upright position is unusual. We could also note that the disposition of the skull, on the right side, is similar to the situation of the graves MK07 e 126 and e 207, with an extension of the vertical vertebrae showing certainly a deliberate position of the head.

Grave MK07 e 30 (Plate IV)

Young child, lying on the right side. This grave could have been localised by a *tabuk*, set on the edge, on the right side above the pit. The body was oriented south-west/north-east.

Upper part of the skeleton. The skull was at a higher elevation than the post-cranial skeleton: 191.80 m and 191.60 m respectively. The face was looking up, and the mandible had fallen. The left scapula and upper limb were visible by their lateral side. The left pelvic bone, seen by its posterior face, fell inside the corporal space.

Lower part of the skeleton. The feet have not been found. The lower limbs were slightly flexed and the bones of the left limb were visible by their latero-poste-

rior side because they had followed the drop of the pelvis. The right limb was visible by its medial face.

Concerning the position, the dead must have been placed on the right side. The left upper limb was slightly flexed and could have been placed near a side of the pelvis. The level of the skull and the fallen mandible shows that the head was higher than the rest of the body, maybe due to the irregular shape of the pit. Nevertheless, the skull had not overturn, base up, and it is quite possible that the pit, which we could not identify, was quite narrow in this part, allowing the head to be held.

3. Data analysis: reconstruction of the original body position and proposal of chronological classification

We have based our classification on the observation of the position of each part of the skeleton in order to reconstruct the original deposit. According to those observations we could determine three main body positions, based on the characteristics quoted in the first paragraph. A special case is the distinction between a body on the right side and that visible on three-quarters posterior. Three main factors have been chosen to describe a position of the body on the right side, or visible by three-quarters posterior:

1. the view of the skull by the nearest part of left parietal from the base together with a part of the occipital, and tight connection of atlas and axis as well,
2. the horizontal position of scapulas, especially the left one, visible by their posterior face, or postero-medial for the right scapula, with a slight effect of constriction,
3. the horizontal position of the pelvic bones, visible by their posterior side, and the tight connection of hand bones.

These factors show, according to the methods of the “field anthropology”, that the position in right three-quarters posterior had occurred early in the chronology of the decomposition. To sum up, we have generally described the position of the body in right lateral, upper limbs outstretched or slightly flexed, hands near the pelvis, lower limbs outstretched or slightly flexed.

This systematic way of deposition is attested only during the Islamic period. We know that during the Islamic times the normal position of the body was on the back or on the right side.¹⁵ The deposition of the dead in this last position

¹⁵ For the region of the Middle Euphrates, we know both cases for the recent graves of Terqa, Area A (Leprai 2001: 631) and Mari (see Jean-Marie 1999: 72–73, Pl. 178). D. Stein (1993) for Tell Karra-na described one of the graves dated to the 9th c. thanks to a coin. For instance at Tell Raqai (Curvers 1987), in Late Islamic cemetery, 21 tombs per 40 contained body laid on the right side and only 12 on the back (7 of unknown position). Furthermore it seems that the age or sex was not discriminatory.

has been described in the works of A. Musil about the Rwala Bedouins of the Arabic Peninsula (Musil 1928: 671).¹⁶ Even if the position in right three-quarters posterior has been rarely described,¹⁷ some constant facts have been observed in the both cases. Generally, the skull follows the position of the spinal column, without disconnection of the cervical vertebrae, the hands remain near the pelvis, and the feet stay very close.

Actually, it seems clear that both lateral positions require a similar way of preparation of the body. The strict connection of the main weak articulations in each case could show that, concerning the right three-quarters position, the body is laid originally on its right side.¹⁸ So, if the bodies have been laid this way, we have to assume that the dead have been deposited deliberately face downward, or, more probably, that the body has fallen because of the lack of balance of this position. The complete torsion of the body could be explained as the result of habits observed by the ethnologists. When the body is prepared, it is wrapped into a white shroud and tied in three places: around the head, the waist and the feet (Granqvist 1965).¹⁹ Concerning the upper limbs in most of cases heads seem to have been put on the pelvis (see Appendix). A large number of Syrian and Iraqi sites dated to the Islamic times show the same deposition of the body on the right side (Simpson 1995: 244–245).

Nevertheless, we have to note that, in some cases, even if the face of the dead has been turned toward south, the postcranial part of the skeleton is not strictly laid on its right side (See for instance Tunca 1987, Pl. 25; Jean-Marie 1999, Pl. 178).²⁰ It could prove that the orientation of the face is the most important characteristic of the deposition, and we observed in a large number of cases that the head was freely turned: the best evidence is that no disjunction was noted between the first cervical vertebrae.²¹ This observation allows us to class in the same group bodies on the right side (or visible by their three-quar-

¹⁶ The sites quoted in Simpson (1995: 244–245) show that in the Islamic tradition position of the body can vary according to the period or region. However, we can state that most of the time deposit on the left side hardly ever occurs.

¹⁷ However, during one of the communications given during the class organised at the University of Bordeaux I, H. Duday mentioned a Sicilian archaeological site which was a Hellenistic necropolis reused as an Islamic cemetery. All the graves were similarly orientated, the classification has been based on the observation of a right three-quarters posterior deposit for the Islamic tombs.

¹⁸ A. Musil mentioned also a position “right side downwards” (1928: 670). Moreover, the observation of an effect of compression of the right side seems to be characteristic.

¹⁹ In the case of MK07 e 135 we could note that left upper limb was across the trunk, backwards, and the articulations scapula–humerus and humerus–forearm were loose. This fact tend to prove that the limbs may have been hold in a shroud. In some Islamic societies, bonds could be loosed after the deposition (see Granqvist 1965).

²⁰ In the first case the main skeletal elements seem to be visible by their anterior side. In the second case, we can see that the lower limbs had been slightly flexed in order to keep the body in its original position (see tombs 859, 889).

²¹ We remarked in all cases (except MK07F e 30), that the jaw was closed. This is a common characteristic in Islamic populations (Simpson 1995: 244). Nevertheless, we have to assume that this fact cannot be relevant in our classification, because this practice also occurs in early periods, during the Hellenistic time for instance. According to the Prophet’s words, the dead must be buried on its side, face towards the Kaaba, so the axis of the tomb, and the body is perpendicular to the direction of Mekka (Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh 2003). Concerning our site, the bodies in Tell Masaikh are oriented west–east (or north–west/south–east), face toward the south.

ters posterior) and bodies on the back with the head freely oriented (second type described).²²

Table 1. Body positions in the area E (MK07–2002).

Position	Orientation				Total %
	W–E (S)	NW–SE (SW)	Other	Unknown	
Right side	19	2	–	–	40
¾ posterior	10	2	–	–	23
On the back	7	3	2	–	23
Unknown	2	–	–	5	13
Total %	73	13	4	10	100

Table 2. Body positions in the area F (MK07–2002, MK08–2003).

Position	Orientation				Total %
	W–E (S)	SW–NE (S or SW)	Other	Unknown	
Right side	14	4	3	–	53
Left side	–	–	2	1	7
¾ posterior	4	–	–	–	10
On the back	–	–	2	–	5
Unknown	–	–	–	10	25
Total %	45	10	17	27	100

The last type of observed deposition is the body on its back, with head hold upright (with a kind of extension of the cervical vertebrae)²³ maybe held in a shroud (Pl. V, MK08F e 163). Only this kind of inhumations was connected with some objects (see MK07E e 207 and F e 24), quite clearly dated as Pre-Islamic or Late Roman.²⁴ This rare fact, absolutely unknown for the graves with body in right side or in three-quarters posterior, and also their stratigraphical position (see for instance MK07E e 126), lead us to include them in another group, earlier than one described above. The ongoing excavations in Area F will give more information, and the osteological analysis is still in progress. Generally speaking, in this area – not considering the Neo-Assyrian graves – the positions and orientations of the burials are more varied. For this reason, in order to classify the tombs, we have decided to cross both data. However, we have to be very cautious in their linking to a group of graves determined on the base of Area E information. Furthermore, because of the erosion of this part of the site

²² The grave MK07E e 89 is an exception, for the position of the body and the presence of stones and shards. It is certainly a special person because it is the only tomb of this group with an object, as MK08F e 83.

²³ This position of the head was also observed during the last season, see MK08F e 163 (Pl. V). A similar position can be observed in the Parthian graves of Nippur, see the graves 32 (Pl. 52) and 46 (Pl. 54) in Zettler 1993. Nevertheless, the excavators did not say if this fact results from a compression of the head against the wall of the pit.

²⁴ See forthcoming publications of metallic objects by C. Lazzarini and F. Onnis.

in early periods, especially from west to east, some graves, not belonging to the same levels, have been found at quite similar elevations.

Summing up, we propose to divide all the graves in two quite large periods: the Late Roman (or at least Pre-Islamic) group, which corresponds to the third type of deposition we have described (back side, face up),²⁵ and the Islamic group, corresponding to two first types (right side, three quarters, or back, head turned south and down).²⁶

Because the Islamic graves contain no specific objects or artefacts added or associated with the body, a very broad dating has been proposed for these burials. Moreover, it is possible that the use of the tell as a cemetery during the Islamic period had lasted for a long time. One more time, we have to be cautious facing this classification: only the complete publication of the graves, with a plan of their topographical position, will allow us to draw a history of the use of the tell as cemetery. For this purpose, we think that the information presented in this report should be confronted with osteological research by A. Sołtyśiak.

In order to draw a transition to a forthcoming paper dealing with general funeral practices at Tell Masaikh, we have to introduce the question of the sepulchral space. If the wrapping of the body in a shroud is well attested in Islamic periods, even early,²⁷ we can suppose that also other materials were used to protect the dead.²⁸ As an example, we observed in the grave MK07 e 175 and e 89,²⁹ that the body could have been protected by some kind of resistant material, retarding the filling of the surrounding space. The presence of a shroud allows a progressive filling of empty space after decomposition, while the presence of other materials does not allow the sediment to fill the space of soft tissues, a fact leading to the displacement of the bones.³⁰

Potsherds were often used to protect the body.³¹ In case of other burials, it is possible, that the pit was narrow, fitting exactly the size of the dead (Granqvist 1965: 56).³²

²⁵ We have to remark that the last cases are rather rare, so we could suppose that it concerns peculiar contemporary tombs. But, the presence/absence of objects seems to be a discriminatory chronological characteristic.

²⁶ We have to precise that concerning the Islamic rules we have referred to constant facts (such as orientation of the body, container of the body, etc.) because the precepts can be varied according to authors and religious trend.

²⁷ The publication of the graves of Mari presents a Hellenistic example of a skeleton found with a rest of shroud on the head (tomb 829, see Jean-Marie 1999, Pl. 158).

²⁸ According to the Islamic rules, the body should be conserved as long as possible. For this reason, in the case of simple pit (as in Masaikh), the dead must be surrounded by stones and covered by stone slabs (see Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh 2003). From this point of view, the question of the presence of some burial pits in Neo-Assyrian walls (for instance e 47, 52 and 60), will be discussed in a paper concerning more generally the funeral practices at Tell Masaikh. The need to conserve the tombs demands a compact soil, and it is possible that sediments composed of fragments of mudbricks fulfil better this condition.

²⁹ The case of MK07E e 207, when we have thought of the presence of a coffin, is quite uncertain.

³⁰ For a useful summary of those different phenomena, see Roksandic 2003.

³¹ See MK07E e 89 and MK08F e 87.

³² In some cases we have observed that the presence of *tabuks* or shards put near the body could

There are not any specific observations concerning the average depth of the sepulchral pit during Islamic times. Simply observing modern cemeteries (just for example, those in Tell Ashara–Terqa, or in the southern part of the tell), it appears that graves can be marked by stelae, reused *tabuks*, upright stones and also by little heaps of earth covering the pit. In Tell Masaikh we have noted the presence of *tabuks* at the top (see MK07F e 30) only in few cases.³³ For these reasons it is difficult to reconstruct a chronology of the inhumations based only on the measurement of the depth of the pit.

The same habit is apparently attested in our site in the modern cemetery. Furthermore, during all the period considered, it seems customary for the lower classes of the population not to materialize or to mark the location of the tombs, if not by perishable materials.³⁴ Generally speaking, the chronology of the burials cannot be based on the elevation of the pit: erosion can change depth of the deposit.

Many questions have not yet found a clear answer, for example the reason of the choice to use only some parts of the site for inhumations, the relation between Late Roman graves and settlement. Considering that in their great majority the tombs belong to the Islamic period, we have to keep in mind two main points of Islamic funerary tradition: first of all, the proximity of the cemetery to a settlement, then its topography,³⁵ and also the fact that its area is not useful for agricultural production,³⁶ when the burials were associated with a rural settlement. Also, we do not know other rural settlements of the Late Roman period (see Masetti-Rouault 2003, 2004) in the region,³⁷ so it is difficult to explain the unusual proximity of tombs of adults in Tell Masaikh during this period.

What we have took up in this first report, is to study burials according to the methods of the field anthropology. Even if this kind of analysis does not give new information on the Islamic practices, we could draw useful parallel with the anthropological data through the examination of taphonomical observations, the reconstitution of the position of the dead and the sepulchral environment. With use of this method we can also define a chronology of the graves and in this way have draw a pictures of the dead population for each period.

make visible a part of the shape of the pit (see MK07E e 89 and F e 30). During the season 2003, fragments of *tabuks* were on the right side of the pit of MK08F e 74 and, for MK08F e 193, shards surrounded the pit. For this reason we can estimate the size of rectangular or oblong pits for adult of approximately 60 cm or less x 180 cm maximum. Both burials contained bodies laid on the right side, face strictly toward the south, so we may class them in the first group of tombs. A study of A. Musil has recorded the fact that, for the inhumations in a desert area, the pit was shallow (twenty or twenty-five centimetres), and covered by earth or stones (Musil 1928: 670).

³³ We have to note that a mudbrick had been set on the pelvis of the body of MK08F e 74 (PI. V).

³⁴ The Quran forbids, in theory, the use of grave-markers (see Simpson 1995: 247).

³⁵ Two highest point of the tell were used as cemeteries: the Area E, and the southern part of the tell.

³⁶ St. J. Simpson has noted (1995: 243) that usually the Islamic graves were located in a useless area “particularly on nearby desert tells”. But in the region, we have to remark the case of Terqa, used almost during two millenaries as a cemetery (Rouault 1997), situated very close to the center of the village of Ashara and the suq, the local market.

³⁷ Dura Europos is not this kind of site and there is no information about a settlement in Mari contemporary to the Parthian tombs (see Jean-Marie 1999: 62–72).

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Appendix: graves excavated in MK07 and MK08 (2002–2003)

Area	Ent. No	Type	Altitude min	Preservation	Orientation	Sex	Age	Position	Object(s)	Dating
MK07 E	4	P		very disturbed		M?	40			
MK07 E	10	P		quite good	W-E (S)		25	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	26	P	195.59	quite good	W-E (S)		6	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	33	P	193.62	disturbed	W-E (S)			R/e/0-2		I
MK07 E	34	P	195.88	bad	W-E (S)		2-3	B/e/0-2		I
MK07 E	38	P	193.80	lower limbs	W-E		A	f		I?
MK07 E	40	P	193.76	disturbed	NW-SE (SW)		5-6	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	41	P	193.97							
MK07 E	43	P	194.09	good	W-E(S)		30	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	46	P	195.78	only lower part	W-E	M	25	B		I?
MK07 E	47	P	193.93	only upper	W-E (S)	F?	30	B/1-2		I
MK07 E	50	P	193.58	bad	W-E (S)		20	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	56	P	193.91	disturbed	W-E (S)		20	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	57	P	193.62				A			
MK07 E	58	P	193.32	quite good	W-E (S)		20	R/f/0-1		I
MK07 E	68	P	194.14	bad	W-E (S)		1	R		I
MK07 E	70	P	194.56		W-E (S)	F??	A			I
MK07 E	71	P	194.08	only lower part	W-E (S)	F??	25	R/f/0-2		I
MK07 E	72	P	195.59	good	W-E (S)		A	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	75	P	195.26	good	W-E(S)	F	40	R		I
MK07 E	78	P	195.23		W-E (S)	F	40	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	89	P	193.27	quite good	W-E (S)	M	50	B/e/1-2 & 2-1	iron strip	I
MK07 E	102	P	192.89	quite good	W-E (S)	F?	25	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	109	P	194.81	good	W-E (S)		6	B/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	110	P	192.53	disturbed	W-E (S)	F	40	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	116	P	194.99	bad	W-E		2	B		I

Area	Ent. No	Type	Altitude min	Preservation	Orientation	Sex	Age	Position	Object(s)	Dating
MK07 E	118	P	193.25	good	W-E (S)	F?	30	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	121	P	194.78	good	W-E (S)		1,5	R/f/1-2		I
MK07 E	124	P	193.22	good	NW-SE (SW)	M?	20	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	126	P	193.25	very bad	NW-SE (SW)		50	B/e/1-2		PI?
MK07 E	127	P	194.95	bad	W-E (S)	M?	20	R/e		I
MK07 E	130	P		good	W-E (S)	M??	30	R/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	135	P	194.61	quite good	W-E (S)	F	35	P/e/0-2		I
MK07 E	136	P	195.50	very bad	W-E (S)		2	R		I
MK07 E	137	P	195.20	very disturbed	W-E (S)	M?	30	R		I
MK07 E	138	P		disturbed	W-E (S)		1	B/e/0-2		I
MK07 E	139	P	194.85	disturbed	W-E (S)	F?	25	R/f		I
MK07 E	142	P	192.64	upper part	W-E (up)	F??	A	B/1-1 & 1-2		PI?
MK07 E	150	P	194.74	bad	W-E (S)	?	30	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	151	P	194.90	quite good	W-E (S)	F?	35	R/f		I
MK07 E	157	P	194.53	very disturbed			1			I?
MK07 E	162	P	194.53	spare			2			I?
MK07 E	167	P	194.29	disturbed	W-E (S)		A	R/e		I
MK07 E	175	P	194.28	disturbed	NW-SE (SW)		A	R		
MK07 E	176	P	194.34	very bad	W-E(S)		C	R?		I
MK07 E	180	P	194.28	good	W-E(S)		C	R/f/1-2?		I
MK07 E	184	P	194.09	disturbed	NW-SE (SW)		I	B/fr/1-2		I?
MK07 E	190	P	193.94	quite good	NW-SE (NE)		C	B/e/0-2 & 1-2		PI
MK07 E	195	P	194.58	good	W-E(S)		A	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 E	204	P	193.79	upper part	W-E(S)		A	P/0-2 & 1-2		I
MK07 E	207	P	193.71	disturbed	NW-SE (SW)		A	B-e-02 & 01	glass vase	PI
MK07 E	209	P	193.86	bad	NW-SE (SW)		A	P/e/1-2		I
MK07 F	22	P	192.12	disturbed	W-E(S)		I	R/f/1-2		I

Area	Ent. No	Type	Altitude min	Preservation	Orientation	Sex	Age	Position	Object(s)	Dating
MK07 F	24	P	191.99	good	NE-SW(E)			A B/e/1-2	bronze bracelet	PI
MK07 F	29	P	191.61	quite good	SW-NE(SE)			C R/f		I?
MK07 F	30	P	191.61	quite good	W-E(up)			C R/f/0-2		I?
MK07 F	32	P	192.15	good	W-E(S)			C R/e/1-2		I
MK07 F	44	P		destroyed						
MK07 F	51	P	191.54	very disturbed	W-E			R/e/1-2		I
MK07 F	64	P	191.19							
MK07 F	78	P	191.34	very disturbed	W-E			R/e		I?
MK07 F	90			disturbed				A		
MK08 F	7	P	191.77		NW-SE(S)			A R/f/1-2		I
MK08 F	12	P		very disturbed				A		
MK08 F	35	P		very disturbed	SW-NE(SE)			A R		PI/I
MK08 F	43	P		disturbed	SW-NE(S)			I R		
MK08 F	50	P	191.76	piece of pelvis						
MK08 F	63	P		disturbed	SW-NE(S)			I R/f/1-2		I
MK08 F	71	P		disturbed	W-E (S)			A P/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	72	P	191.76	frag tibia						
MK08 F	73	P		very disturbed	S-N??			A L??		
MK08 F	74	P			W-E (S)			A R/f/1-2		I
MK08 F	76	J	192.33					P		PI
MK08 F	77	P		disturbed	SW-NE(up)			C B/e/1-2		I?
MK08 F	78	P	191.15	disturbed	W-E(S)			P R/f/1-2		I?
MK08 F	83	P		disturbed	W-E(S)			C R/f/1-2	pearl	I
MK08 F	87	P		disturbed	W-E (S)			A P/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	98	P		upper part	W-E(S)			I R		I
MK08 F	100	P		disrurbed	W-E			A R		I?
MK08 F	104	J	191.83	good				C L/f/1-1		PI

Area	Ent. No	Ty-pr	Altitude min	Preservation	Orientation	Sex	Age	Position	Object(s)	Dating
MK08 F	112	P	191.51*	very disturbed			C???			I
MK08 F	113	P	191.49*	very disturbed			P			I
MK08 F	119	P	191.95*	very disturbed	SW-NE		A?			I??
MK08 F	162	P		good	W-E (S)		C	R/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	163	P	191.18*	upper part	S-N(S)		A	R/e/1-2		PI
MK08 F	172	P	191.27*	disturbed	W-E (S)		C	P/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	182	P	191.37*	disturbed	W-E(S)		A	R/e		I
MK08 F	186	P	192.32*	upper part	W-E(S)		C	R/0-2		I
MK08 F	187	P	192.42*	good	W-E (S)			P/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	191	P	192.34*	very disturbed	NW-SE?			L??		
MK08 F	193	P	191.07*	good	SE-NW(S)		A	R/e/1-2		I
MK08 F	86	P		good	W-E(S)			R/e/1-2		I

Type: P = simple pit; J = jar.

Altitude: of the bottom of the pit; * – altitude of the skull.

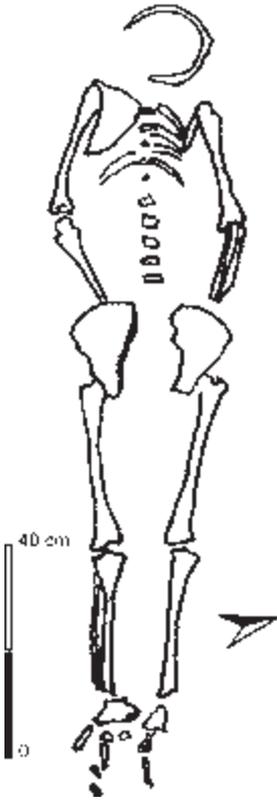
Orientation: from the head to the feet (orientation of the face).

Age: class of ages were defined preliminarily by the archaeologists, the osteological analysis is still in progress. A = adult, C = child, I = infant, P = perinate.

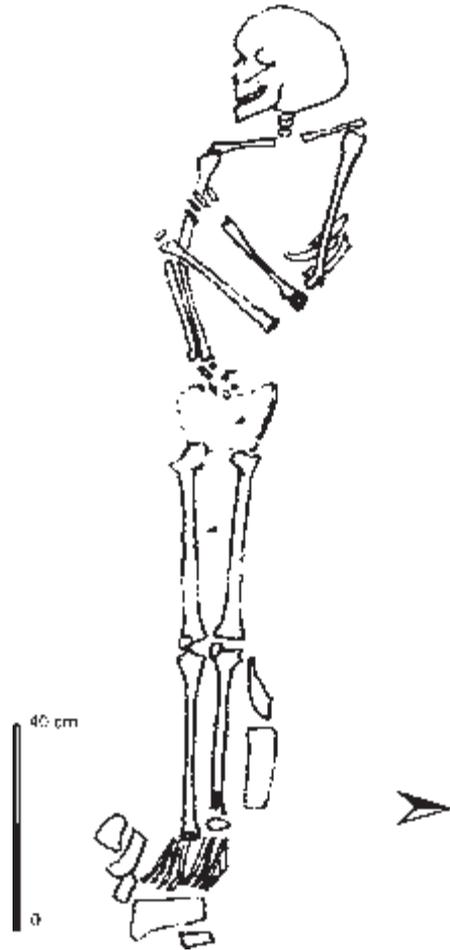
Position: see the first part of this account.

Dating: PI = Pre-Islamic; I = Islamic.

Plate I

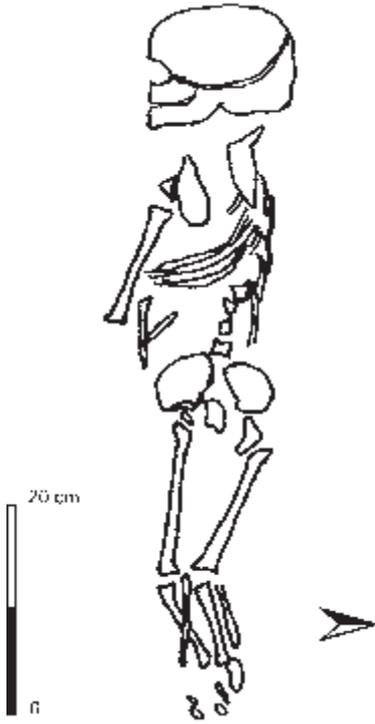


Grave MK07 e 10



Grave MK07 e 89

Plate II



Grave MK07 e 121

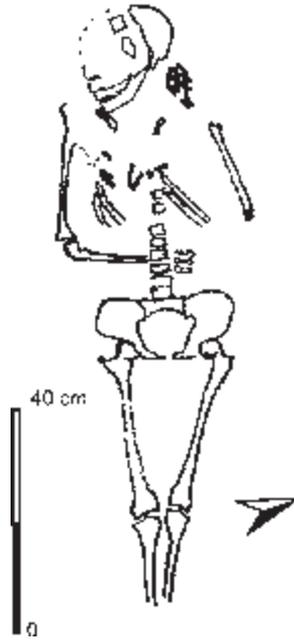


Grave MK07 e 124

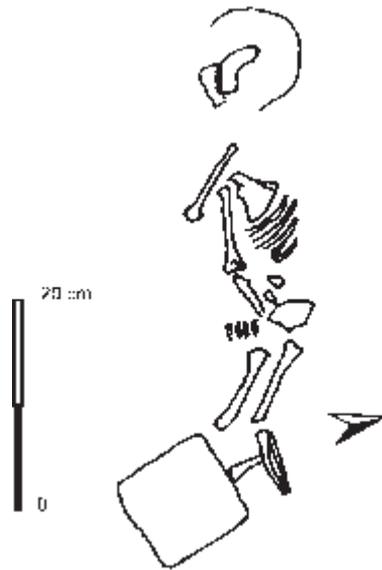
Plate III



Grave MK07 e 175



Grave MK07 e 207

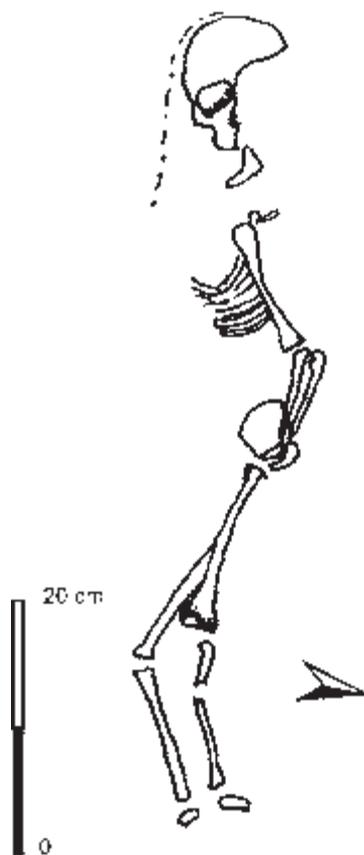


Grave MK07 e 22

Plate IV



Grave MK07 e 24



Grave MK07 e 30

Plate V

Grave MK08F e 163



Grave MK08F e 74