

THE MODERN CEMETERY ON SITE A/E AT DEIR AN-NAQLUN

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The modern cemetery at Deir an-Naqlun was identified in 1986 during the excavations of trial pits in sector A, on the spot of a tower and a monastery church built in its ruins. A total of 42 burials was excavated at the time. In 1997 work was re-started in this area on the nearby site E, just northwest of trench A, and was continued in 1998 in both sectors. Overall, 130 tombs were identified; of these, 122 were explored and 80 skeletons were moved to a new area of internment, with future anthropological research in mind.

The tombs at Naqlun may be divided into two principal categories: tombs with a masonry superstructure and tombs without a marker.

Examples of the first category are relatively few. Ten have been identified and of these three have been opened. Two kinds of superstructures have been recognized. One is simple, rectangular and three brick-courses high, flat and quite rough in execution. The other is a three-stepped mastaba-like structure with a rounded top, built of red brick and finely plastered. Tombs of this kind were located chiefly next to the northwest corner of Church A and along its northern wall.

The tombs without markers represent a considerable variety. Eight different kinds of coffins have been noted. The forms that predominate include coffins made of planks, identified as palm wood and a species of hard wood, and of palm leaf rods tied with rope. Other forms that have been recorded include boxes made of

planks with the lids of palm leaf rods, a cage-like box of thick palm leaf rods joined together with shorter rods (very much like modern boxes for transporting fruit), biers made of these palm leaf rods, coffins carved in a single piece of wood, casing structures of brick, and amphorae. Burials without coffins are also present. In most cases the coffin was covered with a mat, sometimes with a linen cloth that had crosses painted on it.

The question of grave furnishings is worthy of comment. In 24 cases various objects were found placed inside the tomb. Glass bottles (8 examples) are fairly popular as a burial gift, placed either by the head or by the feet of the dead person. Other finds include objects of everyday use, possibly connected with the daily activities of the dead: a school tablet and pen case in a child's tomb, two pen cases in an adult's grave, instruments of the weaver's trade put under a coffin, a casket of palm leaf rods and a clay bowl. In four cases henna was left with the bodies. Ten of the burials yielded evidence of mostly unidentifiable vegetal remains, found for the most part under the head of the deceased. These were aromatic plants rather than ornamental, like mint, for example. The idea may have been to stifle the stench of the dead body.

The most interesting tomb is T. 110. Two coffins (nos. 110 and 127) and an amphora containing the bones of an infant (no. 125) were discovered under a flat rectangular superstructure. A woman had

been buried in the lower of the two coffins; her burial was furnished with every imaginable object recognized today as tomb equipment – plants, glass bottle, very fine and relatively well preserved textiles. A child's coffin was placed on top of the woman's; the head of the child was positioned between two small planks and a bottle was found next to it. The two, presumably mother and child, were buried at the same time.

It seems that the earliest burial in this assemblage is a man's grave without coffin (T. 64), dated to before the tomb structures with rounded tops in the northwestern corner of Church A (T. 60; T. 62-63). These tombs are constructed on a similar level of the ground as the nearby Building E where a set of Arabic documents from the late 10th and early 11th centuries was discovered last year. All the constructed tombs respect the architecture of Church A and Buildings E and G, leading to the conclusion that these structures were still in use

at the time. A provisional dating of the textiles from tomb T. 110, which was built later than T. 60, allows the cemetery near Church A to be linked with the period when the church was functioning, presumably the 12th-14th centuries.

Another argument in favor of a relatively recent date for the cemetery in question is the occurrence of disturbed skeletal material found against the northern wall of the church. The bones belong undoubtedly to earlier burials that were destroyed when other tombs were built at a later date. Indeed, there was a kind of ossuary, a pit with the bones from at least five burials, by the tower wall. Incidental skeletal material was also found, albeit not in quantity, in the area of the church and Building E.

The cemetery continued in use uninterrupted until the early 20th century. This date is confirmed not only by the condition of the human remains, but also by a fragment of a machine-made textile that was excavated from one of the graves (E. 56).