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Abstract: Few early Christian cemeteries have been excavated in Egypt and consequently insufficient is known of the burial practices adopted by Christians in the late third and fourth centuries.¹ The cemeteries at Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis, in Dakhleh Oasis are an exception. To date, at least 560 graves in a large Christian cemetery have been excavated and their archaeology and the pathology of those interred well recorded. Christians established separate cemeteries from their pagan neighbours and were buried in simple pits aligned on a north-west axis, head to the west and without grave goods. During the 2000 to 2002 field seasons two large pagan mausolea were excavated: North Tombs 1 and 2. The remains of 35 individuals were retrieved from North Tomb 1 and at least 20 could be identified with confidence as Christian. The neighbouring North Tomb 2 preserved the remains of 34 bodies; none exhibited the burial traits that would identify them as Christian. This seemingly anomalous phenomenon of Christian burials in one pagan mausoleum but not its neighbour raised several questions relative to early Christian burial practices. In the 2003/4 field season, excavation was undertaken in a further six mausolea within the North Tomb Group; a major component of the research programme was to determine whether it was common practice for Christians to reuse pagan tombs for the burial of their dead and to consider the implications of the results. The results were conclusive; of the six tombs excavated, Christian burials were confined to North Tomb 1.

Introduction

Ancient Kellis, in Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt, was an agricultural village that developed in the late Ptolemaic Period and was abandoned at the end of the fourth century CE (Hope 2001).² As such, the community spanned the transitional period from paganism to Christianity. By the end of the fourth century the village had been Christianized. This is attested by: the abandonment of the pagan temple; the erection of three churches, a large, purpose-built basilica, another, a smaller converted structure, and what is now identified as a cemetery church (Hope 2001: 43-59; Bowen 2004); the development of separate cemeteries, one of which was associated with the cemetery church and located within the confines of the village (Bowen 2004: 175-77; Hope 2004:244-52). Documentary evidence retrieved from the fourth-century structures provides invaluable evidence for the nature and activities of certain members of the Kellis Christian community, which include Manichaeans and, to use an anachronistic identification, Copts (Worp 1995; Gardner et al. 1999).

Current research project

The study of burial practices is one of several research projects being undertaken in relation to the Christian community of ancient Kellis. As the excavations at Ismant el-Kharab are still underway, the results of the study are very much work in progress. The current project arose from the discovery of intrusive Christian burials within the largest of the monumental mud-brick tombs that flank the north-east of the village (North Tomb1). This was unexpected, especially as the larger Christian community made a conscious effort to distinguish itself from its

pagan neighbours, or forebears, by adopting different burial customs and segregating its members in death by establishing a separate cemetery some distance from the traditional rock-cut tombs and the monumental mausolea used by the pagan community. The excavation of a second mausoleum, adjacent to the first, provided ample evidence of secondary burials, but not for reuse by Christians. This raised several questions:

1. Was burial in select pagan tombs a common Christian practice in the village?
2. If so, were these family tombs and had those interred chosen burial with family over religious affiliation in death?
3. If not, who were the group that had opted for burial in the largest and most elaborate of all the mud-brick tombs, and why did they take this course of action?

In order to address the first research question it was necessary to excavate further mausolea within the North Tomb Group to determine patterns of reuse. The second question is facilitated, in part, by co-operation with Dr J. Eldon Molto, who co-ordinates the work of the physical anthropologists examining the human remains, and whose research has the potential to identify family groups. The third question will prove difficult, if not impossible, to answer. In order to place the current project within context, an overview of what is known of Christian and pagan burial practice at Kellis is included. This is essential in order to identify traits that are common to both groups. The discussion is arranged, as far as possible, in chronological order of excavation.

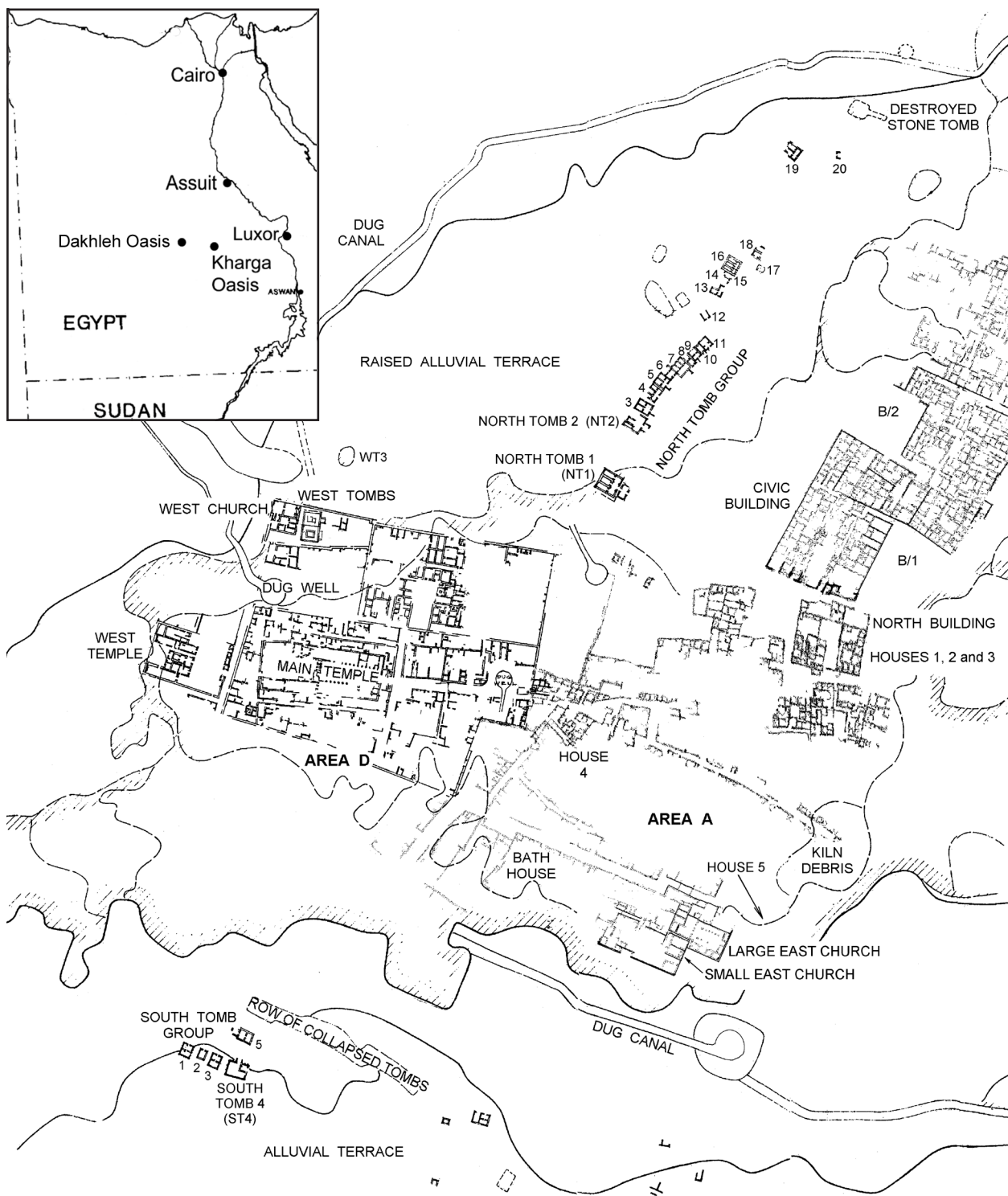


Figure 1: *Ismant el-Kharab: plan of the western half of the village (original drawing by J.E. Knudstad supplemented by J. Dobrowolski and B. Rowney and compiled by B. Parr).*

Christian burials in Kellis 2 cemetery

The principal Christian cemetery, Kellis 2 (31/420-C5-2), is located to the north-east of the settlement; excavation commenced there in 1992 and is ongoing. The cemetery is estimated to contain some 3,000 - 4,000 burials (Molto 2002: 241), and to date 565 graves have been excavated (Stewart et al 2004) ³ (Figure 2). All graves follow a

uniform plan. They are simple rectangular pits, aligned on a west-east axis, with minor deviations that reflect the position of the rising sun at the time the grave was dug. The pits are cut into bedrock to accommodate a single interment; consequently, the dimensions differ according to the age and stature of the deceased. There is some variation in design and five distinct types of grave have

been recorded. In the most elaborate, the pit was lined with mud bricks, placed on edge, and finished with a subterranean mud-brick vault. Rubble fill was placed over the vault and the grave was then covered with a mud-brick mastaba superstructure. Type 2 is a variation of type 1 but in these graves, the lower 0.35 m of the pit was not bricked but narrowed to form a ledge to support the mud-brick vault (Birrell 1999:40). This type was also covered with a mud-brick mastaba. The body interred within these graves was protected from the rubble fill by the vault. The third type is a pit that narrows towards the base. The body was placed in the grave and covered directly with rubble fill; a mud-brick floor was laid at surface level and finished with the typical mastaba. The fourth type is a pit with the mastaba built directly above the rubble. The superstructures have eroded and so the original height cannot be determined. The fifth type consists of a simple pit into which the body was placed and covered directly with rubble; there is no superstructure. This is the most common type in the cemetery. The depth of the pit varies according to the grave type. The average depth for types 1 and 2 graves is 1.35 m; the simple type 5 grave is shallower, reaching an average depth of between 0.80 m to one metre. There is no evidence to determine whether or not these graves were marked at the surface to enable the identification of the occupant.⁴

The cemetery also contained numerous infant and foetal burials.⁵ These bodies were interred in shallow pits, which on average reach a depth of 0.35 – 0.40 m. The burials were located between those of adults or cut just beneath the superstructures of graves. As with adults and children, infant and foetal burials followed the traditional west-east alignment.

There are a number of small tombs within the Kellis 2 cemetery. Two (Tombs 1 and 2), located two meters apart, were excavated in 1992 (Birrell 1999:38, 40; Bowen 2004:167-8) (Figure 2).⁶ They are single-room structures with dimensions of 3.5 and 4 m square respectively. The remains of a door pivot in the eastern wall of Tomb 2 indicate that these were closed off. Tomb 1 contained four burials: three adults and a child. One grave was of type 1, the mastaba was preserved to a height of 0.60 m; no superstructures were recorded for the remaining graves. Tomb 2 contained six burials but only three were excavated; two, Graves 3 and 5, were intrusive burials of infants placed in simple shallow pits. The third, Grave 8, although badly eroded, was of type 2.

Many of the graves have been desecrated; there are sufficient intact examples, however, to determine that



Figure 2: Ismant el-Kharab: plan of the excavated section of Kellis 2 cemetery with Tombs 1 and 2 on the western extremity (compiled by L. Cartmell).

the bodies were not mummified⁷ but wrapped in a linen shroud, which was secured by woven linen bindings. The quantity of linen used is difficult to assess as much of it had disintegrated. The wrappings of infants and foetuses were usually better preserved; these bodies were placed in a single linen shroud, which was wrapped around the body and secured, in a criss-cross fashion, either with narrow binding or two-ply linen cord. The bodies were placed in the grave with their head to the west; there have been no exceptions found to this rule, for even where the body has been desecrated, some of the bones were left *in situ* and attest the practice. The rationale behind this conformity is that the body would rise on the day of resurrection to face the Son of Man who would appear in the east (Davies 1999:199). Such an alignment seems to have been a standard practice amongst many Christian communities at this time, irrespective of the geographical location



Plate 1: *Ismant el-Kharab: Christian graves built against the outer east wall of the West Church.*

(Bowen 2004:171). Further examples within Egypt are the pit graves cut between the mausolea in the cemetery of el-Bagawat, Kharga (Lithgoe 1908:205-7; Hauser 1932:50), and the Christian cemetery at Apa Jeremiah, Saqqara (Martin 1974:19-21; Jeffreys and Strouhal 1980:28-34), both of which date to the fourth-century. In the well-recorded, fourth-century Poundbury cemetery, in Dorset, England, which contains some 4,000 Christian pit graves, the alignment is the same (Farwell 1993).

The bodies in the Kellis 2 cemetery were laid on their backs, supine, legs together, with hands either to the sides or over the pelvic region. The placement of the hands was not dependent upon the sex of the interred. By and large, the graves were devoid of goods although some had sherds

from large pots, or even complete vessels, placed over the body, and occasionally, a ceramic vessel was found in the grave (Birrell 1999:41). One body had been provided with a re-used glass vessel (Marchini; 1999:81-2) and two bodies have been recorded with items of jewellery: the first was a string of glass beads (Birrell 1999:41; Marchini 1999:81-2) and the second, a string of faience beads, discovered in the 2003 field season. Funerary bouquets were also placed in many of the graves. These comprised sprays of myrtle, rosemary and olive (Thanheiser personal communication).

Pagan burials in Kellis 1 cemetery

Burial practices in Kellis 2 cemetery differ markedly from those in the pagan cemetery Kellis 1 (Bowen

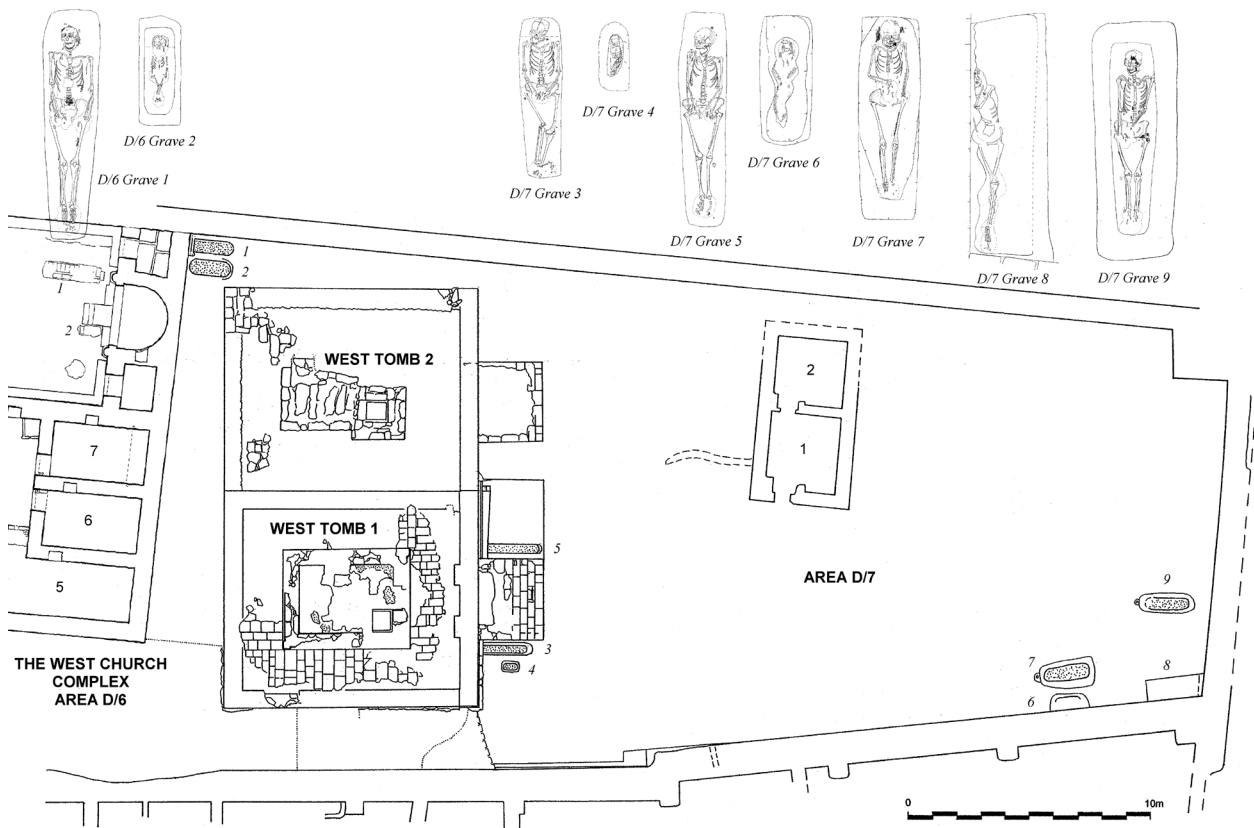


Figure 3: *Ismant el-Kharab: plan of the eastern part of Enclosure 4 showing location of the West Tombs and Graves 1-9, and the West Church, with Graves 1 and 2 (drawing by J.E. Knudstad supplemented by B. Rowney and D. Tuck; compiled by B. Parr). Scale of details of graves 1:50.*

2003:78). Kellis 1 cemetery (31/420-C5-1) lies some distance from Kellis 2, to the north-west of the village. The cemetery comprises a series of small, single-chamber tombs cut into a low sandstone and shale plateau; the tombs are approached by a short passageway. Excavations were undertaken in these tombs between 1990 and 1997. Each tomb contained multiple burials; the maximum number discovered in a single tomb to date is 42 bodies, which were found in Tomb 2 (Birrell 1999:33). The



Plate 2: *Ismant el-Kharab: Christian graves following removal of the mud-plaster.*

tombs were used over a lengthy period of time with the latest individuals placed either on top of earlier ones, or the earlier interments were simply pushed aside to make way for others (Birrell 1999:33). No attention was given to orientation and bodies, which were lain on the floor, side by side, head to toe, or against the walls. There is no evidence to indicate that the tombs were reserved for specific families or that people were buried in separate tombs according to wealth or social stratification. A number of bodies in each of the tombs were mummified and some were equipped with gilded and painted cartonnage body coverings, whilst other bodies were untreated other than being wrapped and left to desiccate (Aufderheide et al 2004:142). The mummified bodies were wrapped in several, purpose-made linen shrouds of varying quality; these often included a shroud that had been impregnated with red ochre. The shrouds covering those whose remains had simply been wrapped were fewer and, in many cases, comprised patched linen taken from garments that had been used in everyday life. Some of the bodies were secured to a palm-rib frame before being wrapped. During the unwrapping of the bodies for study, it was noted that some were a composite with parts taken from several corpses (Aufderheide et al. 2004:149 and plate 5). The mortuary goods that remained are representative of the traditional pharaonic repertoire such as *ba* birds, mourner figurines, and offering tables, as well as ceramic vessels. Sprays of rosemary were also found with the dead (Birrell 1999:38). The period of use for the Kellis 1 cemetery, based upon the evidence available to date, is Ptolemaic to third century CE (Hope 2001:55-6; Schweitzer 2002:279). The stark contrast in the burial practices adopted within the two cemeteries is itself indicative of a dramatic change in mortuary customs. Such a change can only be attributed to the Christianization of the villagers.

Burials within the settlement

During the 1992 excavation season two monumental stone tombs were discovered to the immediate east of the West Church: West Tombs 1 and 2 (Hope and McKenzie 1999) (Figure 1). These tombs, which were built within the classical tradition, are unlike any others to survive thus far in Egypt; their date of construction is uncertain, but Hope tentatively suggests that they were erected by the mid-third century, and perhaps as early as the second (Hope and McKenzie 1999:61). Eleven burials were found in West Tomb 1; West Tomb 2 had been robbed and the contained only a few human remains. The eleven bodies: five adults, and six juveniles, had been treated artificially and then wrapped in a number of natural linen shrouds, which were secured with narrow bands of linen, and placed on the floor of the tomb. The bodies lay in an east-west direction; the heads of all but two lay to the east when discovered, although whether this was their original orientation cannot be verified as the tomb had been disturbed (Hope and McKenzie 1999:55-6). Grave goods were present and included ceramics, a basket, several glass vessels, a pair of lead sandals and a funerary bed. One body had three finger rings another had two, and a sixth ring was found against the north wall of the tomb. There may well have been other funerary goods taken by the robbers. An examination of the grave goods indicated a date for the burials towards the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century CE (Hope and McKenzie 1999:60). The interments, therefore, were not those for whom the tomb was constructed (Hope and McKenzie 1999:61). There is no indication that the people buried within this tomb were Christian although this cannot be ruled out; Christian practices in the formative period of the religion are poorly understood.

In the 1995 field season two graves were discovered in the north-western corner of Enclosure 4, against the outer east



Plate 3: Ismant el-Kharab: Christian burial, Grave 9, Enclosure 4.

wall of the West Church and in close proximity to West Tomb 2 (Hope 1995:57) (Figure 3). The graves were simple pits, of the type 3 variety; they were undisturbed and their superstructures intact (Plate 2). The superstructure of the larger grave was constructed of seven courses of brick, each of which was laid in such a manner that the structure narrowed towards the top (Plate 3). The lower five courses formed a rectangle above the mouth of the pit and the core was filled with sand; the subsequent courses were solid. The smaller of the superstructures comprised six courses. The superstructures were covered with a layer of mud plaster. The dimensions of the larger superstructure were 1.96 x 0.82 narrowing at the top to 0.30 at the top; the height was 0.80 m. The smaller superstructure was 1.47 x 0.74 narrowing to 0.22 m. The dimensions of the pits are: 1.63 x 0.32 x 0.0.85 m and 1.47 x 0.32 x 0.80 m respectively

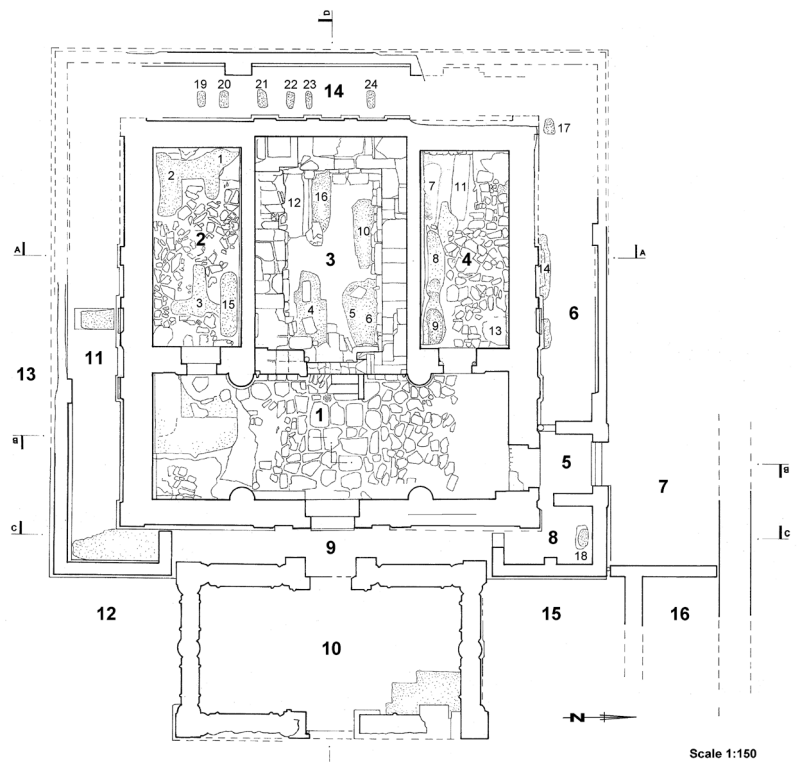
The graves contained the bodies of two females, who lay supine at the bottom of the pit, with their heads to the west, with hands across the pelvis. The bodies were skeletonised and there were minute scraps of fabric that suggests that they had been wrapped. There were no grave goods. The burials are characteristic of those in Kellis 2 cemetery and that fact, combined with the location of the graves: against the east wall of the church, identifies them as Christian.

In 2002 seven more burials were found within Enclosure 4: two males, three females, an infant and a foetus or perinate (Molto et al 2004:345-47) (Figure 3). The discovery of these graves went some way to explaining the purpose of the enclosure: to delineate a small Christian cemetery

located within the confines of the village (Bowen 2004:175-6; Hope 2004:244-5, 252). This innovative practice was unique to Christianity and is attested in Rome from the late fourth century (Davis 1999:193). Pagan cemeteries were located outside the settlements to separate the dead from the living. Deceased Christians, however, were regarded as sleeping, or lying in wait for the day of resurrection and so it was appropriate to include them in the world of the living (Davies 1999:193). West Tombs 1 and 2 were outside the confines of the village until the building of Enclosure 4. The church was an integral part of Christian burial practices and was built contemporary with the enclosure. The incorporation of the tombs into a select Christian compound indicates the importance of these structures to the Christian community. Their importance is further confirmed by the placement of three of the graves (Graves 3 – 5), which were dug on either side of the stairway to West Tomb 1 (Bowen 2003:82-4; Hope 2004:241-4). The function of the West Tombs within a Christian context is speculative: they could have served as martyria or they could have been family mausolea, belonging to the forebears of those buried within the related cemetery. Numismatic evidence, together with our knowledge of Christian practice, indicates that the church and the enclosure were erected sometime after the mid-fourth century (Bowen 2002: 83) and the cemetery was probably developed at the same time. Two more graves were found cut into the floor of the church either side of the apse (Bowen 2003:82-4; Hope 2004:244) (Figure 3). Their location, in front of the apse, indicates that they were interred after the erection of the church. Why they should

be singled out for burial in what might be considered a prestigious place cannot be determined.

All the burials within this cemetery were undisturbed allowing an unparalleled opportunity to study this select group of Christians. Although it might be assumed that those buried within the church and its associated cemetery represented an elite group, the burials themselves were simple and followed the same practice as that in the principal Christian cemetery. The graves were dug to a depth of between 0.80 m – 1.00 m and those interred were placed on the floor of the pit (Plate 3) and covered by rubble fill, which was sealed with a single layer of mud bricks; no superstructures have survived and it is uncertain whether these were ever present. The church burials (a male and an infant) were placed in simple pit graves, which were closed with a single course of mud bricks at surface level and the mud floor of the church was laid above. The infants and foetus all retained their linen wrappings but in the case of adults only scraps of fabric remained. There were no funerary goods placed within any of these graves. One interesting practice observed, and one that is not recorded elsewhere at Kellis, is the presence of two small bowls, one placed within the other and set into the ground at the west end of Grave 9. The lower bowl contained pieces of charcoal and the upper contained burnt remains; the impression for a similar bowl/s was found at the head of Grave 7 (Bowen 2003:82-4; Hope 2004:241-4). Whether or not this was associated with the eucharist cannot be determined. A small two-room building is the only other structure to be built within Enclosure 4 (Bowen 2003:82; Hope 2004:252); its purpose is unknown.



The identity of this group
Figure 4: *Ismant el-Kharab: plan of North Tomb 1 showing location of rooms and Christian graves (drawing B. Rowney, adapted by B. Parr).*

in terms of their Christian affiliation, Manichaean or Coptic, cannot be determined. A study of the bodies, undertaken by Eldon Molto and his team, however, revealed a rare genetic trait in three individuals: the male buried in the church (Body 10) and two females (Bodies 3 and 5) (Molto et al 2004:362)⁸ and evidence of spina bifida occulta was present in all three males; these occurrences suggest a family group (Bowen 2003:85; Molto 2004: 362).



Plate 4: *Ismant el-Kharab: North Tomb 1.*

North Tomb 1

A series of large mud-brick mausolea is located on the north-western edge of the village (Figure 1); this is known as the North Tomb Group (Knudstad and Frey 1999:208-11; Hope 2004:252). The tombs, which were probably erected between the first to third centuries CE, were undoubtedly built for the pagan community. Excavation commenced on the two southernmost of these mausolea, North Tombs 1 and 2, in 2000 and continued in the following field season. North Tomb 1 is the largest and most elaborate of these tombs (Figure 4, Plate 4). Hope's architectural description of the rooms is reproduced here in full for a better appreciation of the plan, the only modification being the omission of some plates and his plate numbers.

North Tomb 1 consists of a free-standing entrance porch (Room 10) on the east that leads into a transverse hall (Room 1) off which open three similarly-sized chambers to the west (Rooms 2-4); the core of the tomb is about 12 m square and stood about five metres in height (Hope 2004:252-7). Around the tomb is an inner corridor comprising three spaces (Rooms 6, 11 and 14) that could originally be accessed only from a small room (5) at the east end of the northern corridor (6). This room also provides a point of entry to the tomb through a door in the northern wall of Room 1, while another small room (8) at the north-eastern exterior corner of the tomb is reached via Room 5 also. None of these side rooms communicates with the corridor (9) separating the porch from the tomb. The whole complex appears to be set within a wall some five metres from the tomb. This wall can be traced on the north and extends for a considerable distance to the east of the actual tomb, approximately 37 m, at which point it appears to turn through 90 degrees to the south, but its full length on the east could not be determined and there is no clear trace of it on the south or west of the tomb. There is a semblance of a dromos leading to the porch that again awaits definition. The area between the porch and exterior enclosure wall is subdivided into at least two spaces (15-16) that block access to the northern entrance system into the tomb, via space 7, from this direction.

The tomb had been robbed in antiquity and the original occupants could not be identified amongst the skeletal remains that were found in profusion. Intrusive pit graves had, however, been cut into the floor (Figure 4). Although many of the interments had been disturbed, it was clear that the intrusive graves, cut on a west-east alignment, were for the express use of Christians. This was unexpected as other Christian burials at Kellis were segregated from those of the pagan community. In those graves that contained skeletal remains, the body had been placed in the pit with its head to the west; there were no grave goods, although a gypsum sealing with a *crux ansata* symbol on the seal was retrieved from the fill of Grave 3, in Room 2 (Hope

2004:264). The *crux ansata* is an adaptation of the Egyptian *ankh*, the symbol of life, and was used by early Christians in Egypt in both ecclesiastical and funerary contexts (Fakhry 1951; Bowen 2002:72). The human remains retrieved represented 35 individuals: 20 adults and juveniles and 15 infants and foetuses/perinates. Only 24 graves were found, which suggests that some of the skeletal remains belonged to the original interments (Hope 2004:264). The earliest interments were presumably placed on a funerary bed or on the floor. The graves were distributed accordingly: Room 2, 4 burials (Graves 1-3, 15); Room 3, 6 burials (Graves 4-6, 10, 12, 16); Room 4, 5 burials (Graves 7-9, 11, 13); Room 6, 2 burials (Graves 4, 17); Room 8, one burial (Grave 18); Room 14, 6 burials (Graves 19-24). Not all of the human remains from this tomb have yet been studied but a demographic profile is possible for those that were retrieved from the graves: three burials from Room 2 were juveniles; those from Room 3 were adults; Room 4 contained four adults and a perinate; a juvenile and an infant were buried in Room 6; an infant in Room 8, and two foetuses (third trimester), three perinates and two infants were in the corridor designated Room 16 (Dupras and Tocheri 2004:188). Again, burial practice followed the same formula as was encountered in Kellis 2, and the cemetery in Enclosure 4: the bodies were placed directly into the pit, which was cut on average at a depth of 0.75 - 0.80 m for adults, the rubble fill thrown on top; with the exception of the child buried in Room 6, there was no mud-brick cover over the graves, and no superstructure. All bodies retrieved from the graves displayed evidence of having been wrapped; the shrouds of the adults had disintegrated but those of the foetuses, perinates and infants were complete. Whether this phenomenon is due to the depth of burial and the fact that the infants are usually covered with sand, rather than rubble, is uncertain.

Of particular interest in relation to North Tomb 1 is that the central chamber (Room 3) was sandstone lined, gypsum coated and decorated with traditional pharaonic mortuary scenes (Hope 2004:254-7; Kaper 2004:323-30). Kaper (2004:239) refers to it as a cult chamber. Although the decoration is no longer preserved, Olaf Kaper (2002) has been able to reconstruct, on paper, some of the decoration from photographs taken by Winlock in 1908 and from the comprehensive record by B. Moritz, who undertook excavation in the tomb in 1900.⁹ The photographs, together with Moritz's description, indicate that the pharaonic iconography had not been desecrated by the Christians who reused the mausoleum.

North Tomb 2

North Tomb 2, located 25 m to the north of Tomb 1, is also multi-chambered but is smaller and less elaborate than its neighbour (Figure 1). It consists of three mud-brick chambers on the west which open off a transverse hall; the hall is accessed via an entrance porch on the east (Hope 2004: 272). The tomb had been looted in antiquity and two rooms (2 and 3) had suffered extensive fire damage

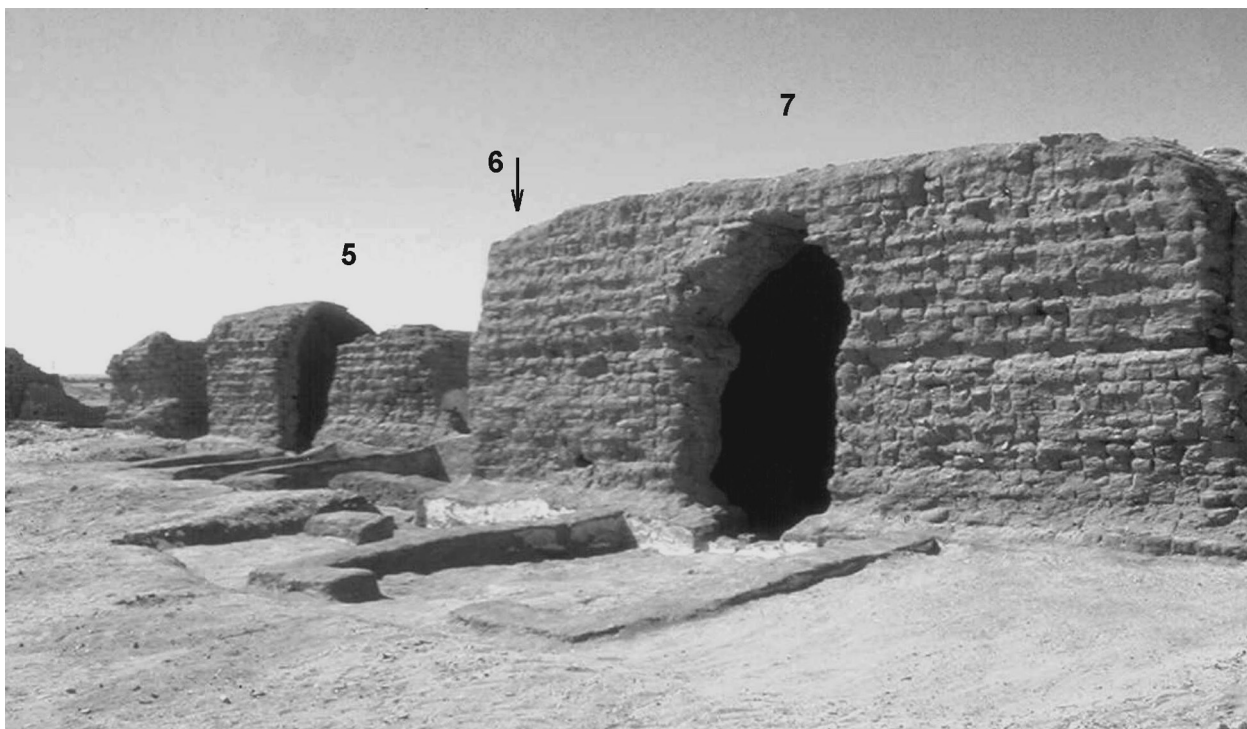


Plate 5: Ismant el-Kharab: North Tombs 5 – 7.

(Hope 2004:264, 272). This tomb was used exclusively for pagan burials. From the fragmentary remains of the burial assemblage found in the tomb, it would appear that after mummification the original occupants were either placed directly onto the floor or on funerary beds in the rear chambers.¹⁰ Intrusive graves were found in Room 4, the transverse hall; they comprised shallow pits cut into the foundation trenches against the northern, southern and western walls (Hope 2004:266, 277). Each grave contained a single ceramic coffin. The burial on the west was intact and preserved the mummified body of a woman (Hope 2004: 77-82).¹¹ The grave pits were shallow with just sufficient room to take the coffin, the lid of which was just below the surface; the paving stones from the floor had been replaced directly above the grave.

The remains of 34 individuals were found in North Tomb 2 and of these, 22 were adults and 12 were juveniles (Dupras and Tocheri 2004:188). The estimated median age of the juveniles ranged between 3 years and 15.5 years; only two individuals were under the age of 10 at death (Dupras and Tocheri 2004:191). The demographic profile of the bodies from North Tomb 2 and North Tomb 1 illustrates the different attitudes towards the burial of infants and foetuses/perinates by pagans and Christians. The burials in Kellis 1 cemetery confirm this conclusion (Marlow 1999:106; Dupras, personal communication, 2001; Aufderheide et al 2004).

The careful burial of these foetuses and infants appears to be peculiar to Christians and implies an expected resurrection. This has implications for early Christian beliefs concerning the nature of the soul.

South Tomb 4

Mention should be made at this point of another series of mud-brick mausolea located at the south-west of the village: the South Tomb Group (Knudstad and Frey 1999:211-3) (Figure 1). Only one of these tombs has been investigated, South Tomb 4, where excavation was undertaken in the 2000 field season. This tomb was plundered and although some disarticulated human remains were retrieved, there were no graves found in this structure (Hope 2004:282-4). This precludes re-use for burial by Christians, assuming the accumulated evidence for their practices was uniform throughout Kellis. **The 2004 research project and field season**

The 2004 field season at Ismant el-Kharab focused upon the excavation of a further six tombs within the North Tomb Group (Figures 1 and 5). The purpose was to record their architecture and attempt to determine their date of construction, but particular emphasis, as far as the current project is concerned, was on the possible reuse of these pagan tombs by members of the Christian community. The tombs excavated were Tombs 5-7 and 16, a fifth was a single chamber of a sandstone tomb, located slightly apart from, and to the north of the North Tomb Group, in the direction of the Kellis 2 cemetery, the sixth lies to the south of the main group of mausolea in the North Tomb Group and north of the West Tombs: the former was given the designation North Stone Tomb and the latter West Tomb 3 (Hope in press). Only the outer chamber of the North Stone Tomb was cleared. Tombs 5-7 and 16 all contained bodies, most of which had been disturbed but both the chamber of the North Stone Tomb and West Tomb 3 had

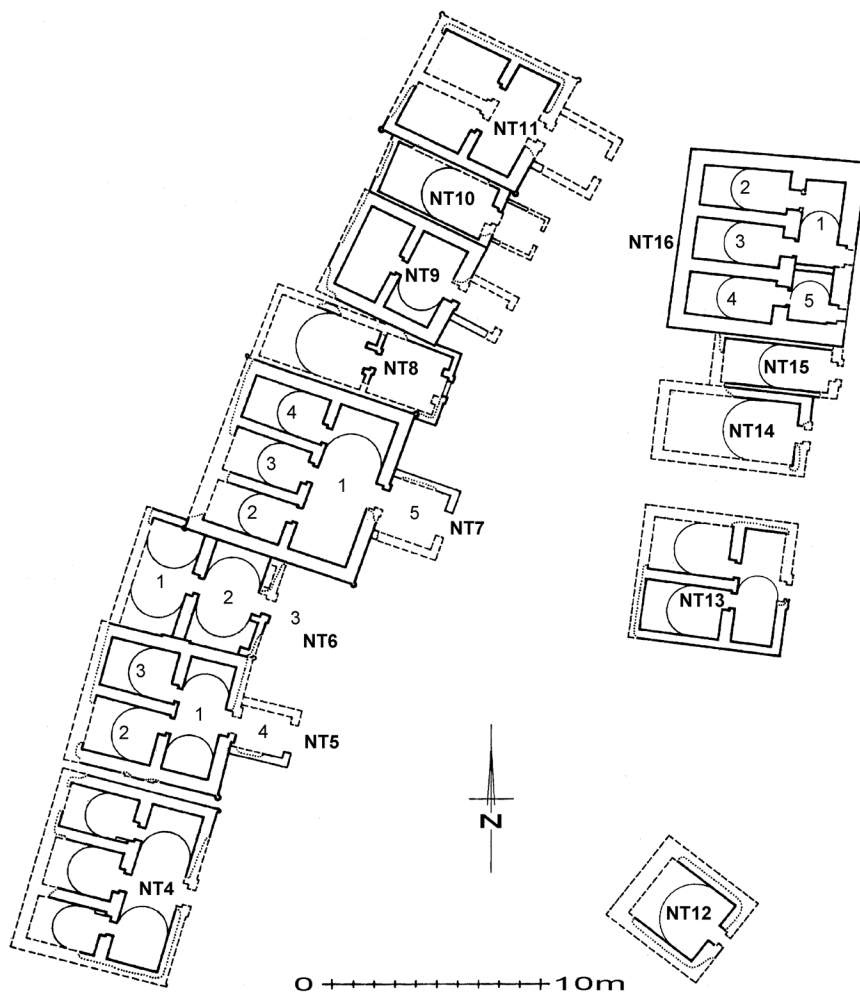


Figure 5: *Ismant el-Kharab*: plan of North Tomb Group (Tombs 4 – 11 and 12 – 16), see Figure 1 for correct positioning (original drawing by J.E. Knudstad, supplemented by B. Rowney).

been completely robbed and neither contained any human remains or graves.

North Tombs 5, 6, 7 (Plate 5) and 16 had all been robbed; all contained remains of intrusive burials, most of which had been violated, but none could be identified as Christian. Several of the intrusive burials were *in situ* and consequently, add to our knowledge of pagan burials amongst what might conceivably be the poorer social classes; this allows further comparison with Christian burials. The architecture and the human remains from these tombs have been described in detail by Hope (in press).

North Tomb 5

Tomb 5 is a small mud-brick structure, which comprises an entrance portico, a transverse hall and two rear chambers (Figure 5, Plate 5). Three intrusive mummified bodies were recovered from Room 1: one adult and two juveniles, as well as quantities of human bones. One juvenile and the adult lay supine in the fill, the wrappings torn from their bodies; the second juvenile was found in a

shallow pit, oriented north-south (Hope in press). Although human bones and quantities of textiles were retrieved from the other rooms, no intact bodies or graves were found. Artefactual remains retrieved span the first to fourth centuries CE (Hope in press).

North Tomb 6

North Tomb 6, a small, three-room, mud-brick structure, was inserted between Tombs 5 and 7 at some later date (Knudstad and Frey 1999:211; Hope in press) (Figure 5, Plate 5). This tomb had been utterly violated and the disarticulated remains of numerous individuals were found throughout the fill in Rooms 1 and 2. In Room 1 there were twelve skulls, as well as quantities of linen shrouds, which had been torn from the bodies; these skulls and disarticulated bones lay on a straw-rich deposit some 0.50 m above the floor (Hope in press). There were no graves cut into the floor. In Room 2 there was again an abundance of disarticulated human remains as well as intact bodies. These remains were found on two horizons: those in collapsed mud brick and windblown sand, some 0.50 m above the level of the floor, and

those which were found on the floor itself (Hope in press). Nine pits were cut into the floor of Room 2, aligned with the walls and oriented north-south and east-west. The pits themselves are shallow and range in depth between 0.20 – 0.40 m, which provides no more than a bare covering for the body, if that. Five bodies were found lying supine in these shallow graves; two individuals had been placed in a single pit, head to toe, another lay with the head to the north, one to the east and one to the west (Hope in press, Plate 6). There was no evidence that the bodies had been wrapped or that they had been provided with grave goods (Hope in press). One had its legs tied together with palm-fibre rope. Fragments from ceramic coffins and items of funerary equipment were found amongst the debris. As Hope (in press) notes, the disturbed nature of the context makes it difficult to distinguish the sequence of usage but concludes that the graves are probably secondary. The date of these interments is difficult to establish; Hope (in press) has identified parallels between the ceramic assemblage in the tomb with that in the houses from Area A, which date to the late third and fourth centuries; others fit into an early third or late second-century timeframe.

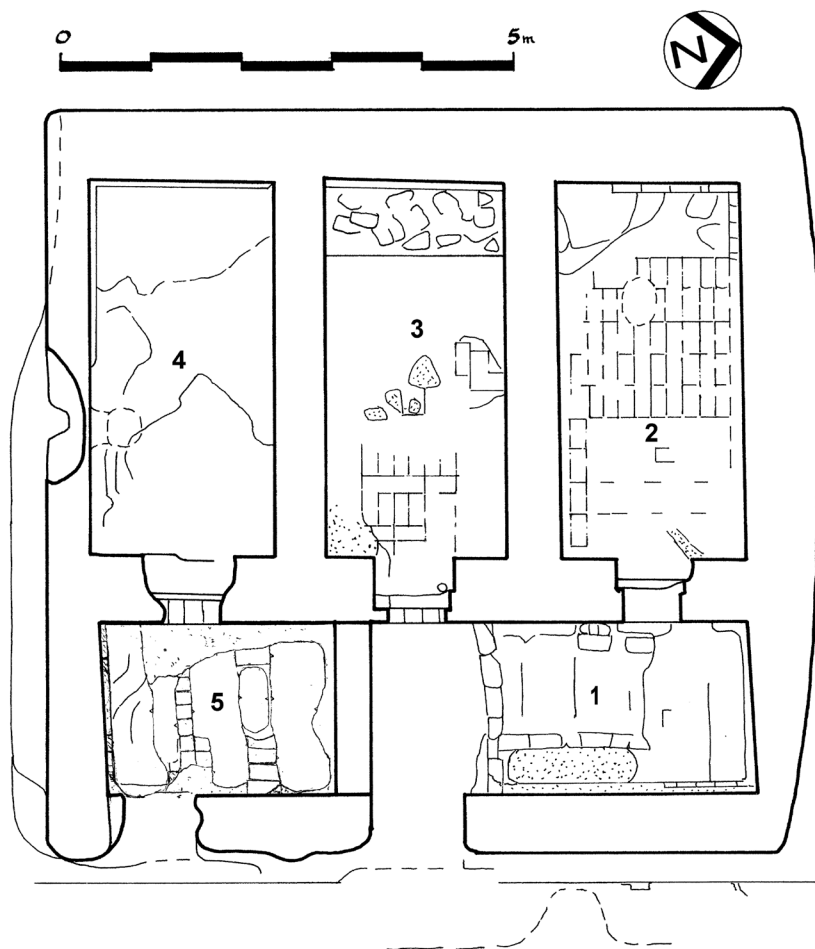


Figure 6: *Ismant el-Kharab*: plan of North Tomb 16 showing the position of the grave in Room 1 and the depressions in Room 5 (drawing by B. Rowney).

North Tomb 7

North Tomb 7 has five chambers and is similar in plan to Tomb 2 but without the stone-lined central chamber (Figure 5, Plate 5). The intrusive burial of a young juvenile placed in an irregular-shaped shallow pit in Room 1 was all by way of human remains found in this tomb; there were no graves (Hope in press).

North Tomb 16

North Tomb 16 lies some distance to the north of the other group (Figure 5); it is of a comparable size and design to North Tomb 7 but has no entrance portico (Hope in press). Room 1 had been subdivided by a narrow, low wall, one brick thick, laid parallel to the south wall. Six complete individuals, three adults and three children, were found *in situ* in this tomb, all in the northern part of Room 1 (Figure 6, Plate 7). Yet again, they were not the original occupants of the tomb but represent secondary usage. Four bodies lay upon the partially-disturbed floor: two adults against the north and west walls, one child to the south of the former and the other at right angles to the centre of the low south wall. The two remaining bodies, a young juvenile and an adult, were buried in a grave cut against the east wall.

These burials were undisturbed. The grave, which measured 1.70 x 0.40 x 0.30, was cut to take the body of the adult; he lay supine with his head to the south, his torso had been covered with a coarse linen tunic and rubble placed on top (Hope in press). There was no evidence of wrapping of the body and no grave goods accompanied the corpse. The juvenile's body lay on compacted rubble above that of the adult. The juvenile's grave was delineated by the south wall and a single row of bricks preserved to two courses, on the west. The lower course appeared to be part of the original mud-brick floor of the room. The body, which retained its wrappings, was placed with its head to the south.

Copious quantities of linen were found in this tomb; they had been taken from the bodies and disposed of in one of the rear chambers; some was impregnated with red ochre. The ceramics found within the tomb were dated by Hope (in press) to the first to third centuries.

Room 5 was originally part of Room 1 and was created when the latter was subdivided by an east-west wall (Figure 6). The dimensions are 2.46 m north-south x 1.88 m east-west. No bodies were found in this room; however, four shallow cuts had been

made through the mud-brick floor on an east-west axis and were probably intended as graves (Figure 6). The excavator reports that human hair was found in the east end of the smallest depression. Their alignment provides the closest parallel with Christian graves and consequently it is vital that they be considered in some detail. Three of the cuts could comfortably accommodate an adult body: their dimensions are 1.60 x 0.44 x 0.15, 1.50 x 0.45 x 0.08 and 1.80 x 0.50-64 x 0.10 m; the fourth was probably cut for a child: 0.70 x 0.32 x 0.08 m. The graves are extremely shallow and this is not compatible with Christian burial practice. For Christians it was essential for the body to be preserved to join in the resurrection. To this end, it would appear that the villagers buried adult bodies at a depth of at least 0.80 m to ensure protection. This is uniform in all graves excavated in Kellis 2, those in Enclosure 4, the West Church and North Tomb 1. One could argue that the graves were intended for Christians but were unfinished or, alternatively, that they were intended to take the bodies of pagans and were cut on east-west axis to maximize the space within the room. One depression, cut against the south wall, occupies the entire width of the room, that located parallel to the north wall has a mere 0.20

m between it and the west wall. The maximum area left for a grave to be cut against either the east or west walls is 1.40, which is too short to accommodate an adult body. Intrusive pagan burials in graves found within Tombs 2, 5 and 6 indicate that they were usually shallow and the body close to the surface (Plate 6). An exception was the double burial in Tomb 16, Room 1 and the coffin burials in Tomb 2: the original grave in the former was cut to a depth of 0.30m and that in North Tomb 2 was similar.

Conclusions based upon the results of the 2004 field season

Despite the limited sample, some tentative conclusions can be drawn. First, it should be reiterated that all Christian burials identified at Ismant el-Kharab to date conform to the same pattern: single interments in deep, pit graves aligned on a west-east axis, head invariably placed to the west with few, if any, grave goods. Foetus, perinate and infant burials were placed amongst those of adults and juveniles and were similarly aligned. The practice differs substantially from pagan practices.

Taking this as a yardstick, one can only conclude that it was not a common practice for the Christians at Kellis to re-use pagan tombs for the burial of their dead. There is no evidence for Christian burials in any tomb other than North Tomb 1. Why this group chose burial in this monument requires consideration.

There is nothing to distinguish the individuals buried in North Tomb 1, by way of status or sectarian affiliation, from other Christian burials at Kellis. One hypothesis to test is that it represents a family group. Familial relationship is difficult to determine; however Molto (2004:348, 362) has identified unusual pathology in two



Plate 6: Ismant el-Kharab: pagan burials in Room 2, North Tomb 6.

bodies found in Room 3. These individuals, both male, had chronic disease of the feet with sequel ankylosis of many foot bones plus osteoporosis of the lower limb, which caused severe debilitation; the younger man lost the use of his legs and was forced to propel himself while in a sitting position by using his arms (Molto 2004:362). This is the first evidence for such in the Kellis sample and could indicate a family link. Of further interest is Molto's (2004:362) identification of what he terms 'a rare, unique morphological trait, the suprescapular neurovascular canal' in two bodies. One was from North Tomb 1 and the other from the cemetery in Enclosure 4. Molto (2004:362) regards this as possible evidence that the two groups are genetically linked. If this is so, it can perhaps be assumed that the burials in North Tomb 1 are contemporary with those within Enclosure 4; that is, from the mid-fourth century.

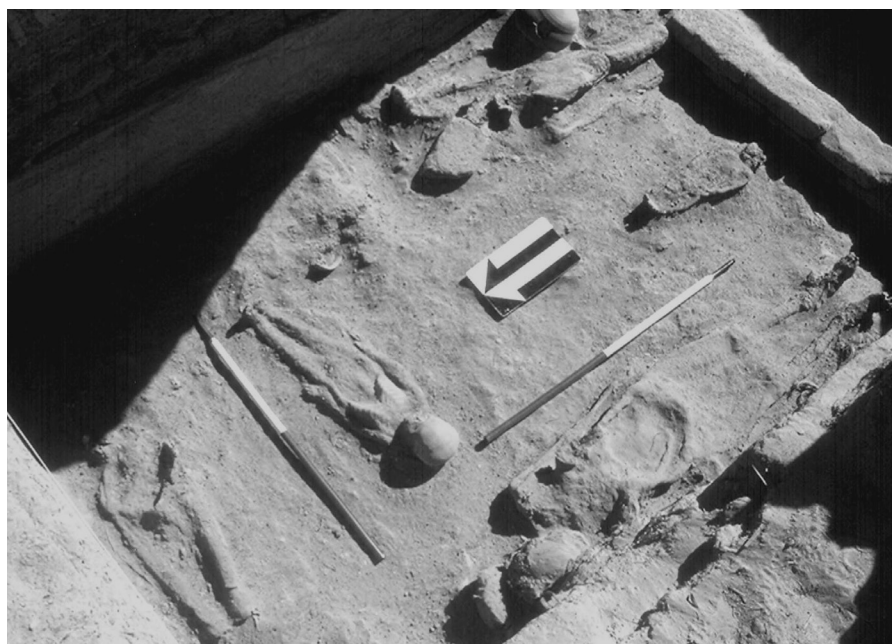


Plate 7: Ismant el-Kharab: pagan burials in Room 1, North Tomb 16.

The burials in North Tomb 1 raise more questions than they provide answers. Whether or not this is a family group, the question to be raised is why they chose this particular tomb for burial. There is no way of determining whether or not it was the ancestral tomb and so other possible reasons for use must be addressed. Was there something exceptional about this tomb? North Tomb 1 is the largest and most elaborate of the group and, with the exception of the North Stone Tomb, is the only one to preserve pharaonic funerary iconography in a cult room. Was this the attraction? Were these people still attached to traditional beliefs, in spite of professing Christianity; did they believe that their chances in the afterlife would be enhanced by burial within both traditions? A further point of interest is that the ratio of foetus/perinates and infants burials to that of juveniles and adults is high: 3:4. This far exceeds that in Kellis 2 or in the burials in Enclosure 4. To date, no explanation can be given for the placement of these foetal/perinatal burials, which were segregated from the adults and, with one exception, were in the corridor (Room 16) immediately to the west of the main burial chambers. Although it is unlikely that these questions can be answered, perhaps the current project would benefit from further excavation in the North Stone Tomb to determine whether the pharaonic mortuary iconography played a role in the re-use of pagan tombs for Christian burial.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Details of the archaeology and dating criteria of the Fag el-Gamous cemetery excavated by C. Wilfred Griggs, have not been published and his claims to have a first-century Christian cemetery (Griggs et al: 2001: 8) cannot be substantiated.
- ² Excavations are carried out for the Dakhleh Oasis Project under the directorship of Dr Colin A. Hope, Centre for Archaeology & Ancient History, School of Historical Studies, Monash University.
- ³ Excavation within the Christian cemetery is carried out on behalf of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, under the direction of Dr J. E. Molto, formerly of Lakehead University, Ontario, Canada. The number quoted by Stewart et al was 450 graves. Since that time, further excavation has been undertaken, with the current estimate being 565.
- ⁴ Several of the Christian pit graves in the cemetery at Bagawat had small stelae with the name of the occupant (Hauser 1932: 38-50).
- ⁵ An infant, as defined by the physical anthropologists, is under six months of age. Individuals aged between seven months and 16 years are classified as juveniles (Dupras and Tocheri 2004: 192-3).
- ⁶ A third tomb was excavated by the physical anthropologists at the end of 2003 but a description was not available at the time of writing this paper.
- ⁷ In the 2003 field season a powder-like substance was found with some bodies and is awaiting analysis.
- ⁸ Molto et al (2004: 362) describe this as 'precondylar tubercle, a rare and highly genetic trait...'
- ⁹ Winlock's photographs were reproduced by Hope (2004: 249-52, plates 36-40) and Kaper (2004: 324-5, plates 2 and 3).
- ¹⁰ Fragments of cartonnage and elements from funerary beds were found amongst the debris (Hope 2004: 272, figures 22-23; plates 64-5).
- ¹¹ The grave had been disturbed, the coffin lid broken but subsequently repaired (Hope 2004: 277-82). The head was disarticulated.