EGYPT

ALEXANDRIA KOM EL-DIKKA. SEASONS 2014–2015

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Abstract: The Polish–Egyptian mission at Kom el-Dikka, ran by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, stepped up the already advanced preservation processes aimed at establishing an Archaeological Park at the site. Conservation work was carried out in the theater portico, the bath complex and the residential quarter of late Roman date in the eastern part of the excavation area. In turn, the western part was the focus of archaeological research centered on the exploration of some late Roman structures located underneath. The early medieval/Islamic cemetery overlying these remains was explored first. A detailed report from this work is appended to this article. The human skeletal remains from the cemetery were examined by anthropologists. The western gate to the bath complex, leading from the theater portico, was fully exposed. Finds from present and earlier work at the site continued to be studied: glass vessels, pottery, lamps, bone objects, painted wall plaster, and a vast collection of coins.

Keywords: Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka, medieval/Islamic cemetery, baths, portico, conservation

A basic program of archaeological excavation and conservation work was carried out at the site of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria for two consecutive field seasons, balancing the objectives with the requirements stemming from the ongoing Site Presentation Project approved by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities.

Excavations were limited either to areas vital from the perspective of the Project or where the progress of work required only some additional research. The archaeological work was focused on excavation of two segments of the medieval cemetery in areas U and CV.

The Project also offered basic field training to a group of young archaeologists and conservators from the Ministry of Antiquities.

Ongoing documentation of all categories of finds ftom current and earlier excavations was coupled with dedicated studies by a team of specialists woking in the field storeroom on site.

Barbara Tkaczow pursued her studies on painted plaster fragments excavated in the 2009–2013 seasons.

Barbara Lichocka centered her research on coin assemblages mostly from the 4th–5th century AD from the Roman-age houses as well as the theater building. Numismatic

studies were also continued by Katarzyna Lach, who focused in turn on a collection of coins from current excavations. A large group of coins found in area U was thoroughly cleaned and identified. Most of the coins are low denomination issues apparently of late Roman age, but their poor state of preservation rules out precise dating.

Research on glass was carried out as before by Renata Kucharczyk, who studied finds from recent excavations, covering a span from the early Roman to the Mamluk period (see Kucharczyk 2016), as well as several other categories of glasses in the field store. Prominent among them was a group of mosaic glass representing either the early or late Roman period. Particularly important were pieces of wall panelling executed in glass to imitate *serpentino verde* (*lapis lacedaemonius*). Pieces of glass production waste, including large chunks of green and yellowish-green raw glass, as well

Team

Dates of work: 11 February–30 November 2014; 16 February–16 June 2015

Director: Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, archaeologist (PCMA UW; 2014, 2015)

Deputy director: Renata Kucharczyk, glass specialist (PCMA UW; 2014, 2015)

SCA representatives: Eman Mahmoud Hamdi Saleh, Ahmed Zakaria Khalil Abu El Enain, Walaa Mohammed Mahmoud, Mohammed Mohammed Mahmoud, Ramadan Hassan Mohammed Ahmed, Mohammed Ali Saleh, Mohammed Sobhy Tawfik Mohammed, Mohammed Ramadan Helal (all in 2014), Mohammed Faruk Agamy Abdel Halim, Safinaz Ali Mohammed Ali, Rehab El Sayed Mohammed, Hamdy Shaaban Mansour, Naglaa Abdel Gawad Ahmed (all in 2015)

Archaeologists: Prof. Barbara Tkaczow (Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences; 2014, 2015), Emanuela Kulicka (independent; 2014, 2015), Donata Pawłowska (independent; 2014), Alicja Wieczorek (independent; 2015)

Numismatists: Prof. Barbara Lichocka (Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences; 2014, 2015), Dr. Katarzyna Lach (independent; 2014)

Anthropologists: Robert Mahler (PCMA UW; 2014), Urszula Okularczyk (independent; 2014)

Small finds specialist: Iwona Zych, oil lamps (PCMA UW; 2014)

Student-trainee: Aleksander Misiurny (Institute of Archaeology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań; 2014)

Conservators: Ewa Parandowska (freelance, *emeritus*; 2014, 2015), Szymon Gąsienica-Sieczka, Zygmunt Nawrot (both freelance; 2014, 2015), Zuzanna Dudzińska (freelance; 2014)

Architects: Marcin Polak (freelance; 2014, 2015), Marta Grzegorek (freelance; 2014)

Civil engineers: Dr. Wojciech Terlikowski (Warsaw University of Technology; 2015), Piotr Bartosiak (freelance; 2015)

Documentalist: Agnieszka Dzwonek-Kozieł (independent; 2014, 2015)

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as fragments of glass with various stages of vitrification were also documented. The finds offered direct evidence of glassmaking at the site in various periods (from the late Roman to early Islamic).

A collection of oil lamps was documented by Iwona Zych. It included mostly fragments of lamps found during past excavations, ranging from the late Hellenistic to the early Islamic period. The same was done for a large group of decorated bone objects as well as production waste, exemplifying a well developed industry operating in the neighborhood in the late Roman period.

Anthropologists Robert Mahler and Urszula Okularczyk examined skeletal material (over 150 individuals) from the exploration of the medieval cemetery in area U in the past two seasons (see Mahler and Okularczyk 2016, in this volume). The documented remains are part of an ongoing study contributing data on the anthropological profile of the population of medieval Alexandria.

Pottery from the present excavations was documented and studied by the author. Some ceramic finds from earlier excavations, stored on site, were examined, special attention being given to Byzantine glazed wares from various production centers in the northeastern Mediterranean.

EXCAVATIONS

AREA U

Fieldwork in 2014 was limited to the northwestern part of the site [***Fig. 1***]. Area U was first investigated in the 1980s (Rodziewicz 1991), followed by a small-scale excavation in 1990–1991 (Majcherek 1992); the site was reopened in 2011 (Majcherek and Kucharczyk 2014: 24–37), uncovering several structures of early Roman date (1st–3rd century AD). In addition, a substantial part of the early Islamic cemetery overlying the ancient Roman remains was also explored.

Continued research in this area necessitated an extension of the present excavation area. Activities were focused in the western part of area U, where a trench measuring approximately 24 m by 5 m was excavated. The topmost layers of the medieval cemetery, comprising graves U210 to U220 from the so-called Upper and Middle Necropolis horizons, had been explored in this area during the previous season. In 2014, graves U300–U374 from the Lower Necropolis, dated to the 8th–9th century AD, were investigated (for details of the exploration, see the appendix below). Several simple inhumations from the southern part of the trench (U213–U218) were identified as belonging to the so-called Upper Necropolis phase of the cemetery.

The stratigraphy of the cemetery is quite clear, but a detailed phasing is impossible for lack of securely dated finds and recurrent disturbance of the explored contexts. A fragment of funerary stela inscribed in Kufic script from next to grave U213 unfortunately does not include a date. A typical array of pottery sherds came from the accompanying layers, but the only reliable *post quem* evidence was offered by several fragments of Early Lead Glazed vessels (usually dated to the 9th–10th century AD), found in the Middle Necropolis strata. Most of the finds,

however, belonged to the late Roman horizon and were apparently residual.

A substantial glass assemblage from strata associated with the cemetery covered a wide span of time, from early Roman to Ayyubid, although the overwhelming majority of the finds was typical of the late Roman/early Byzantine period (5th–7th century AD).

The late Roman layers cleared below the cemetery appeared to be accumulated levelling strata, deposited gradually sometime in the late 4th to 6th centuries AD. Two major stone collapses were identified in the southern part of the trench. Both included large blocks originating from unidentified walls. Quite a number of blocks retrieved from the collapse retained large patches of original plasterwork, accompanied by a substantial quantity of loose fragments of painted plaster. Several architectural elements: a limestone capital, fragments of cornices and column fragments were found in the debris [*Fig. 2*]. The whole collapse was found to be over 1 m thick in places.

The functional character of the area is still unclear. It was adjacent to a large public latrine excavated to the east, but

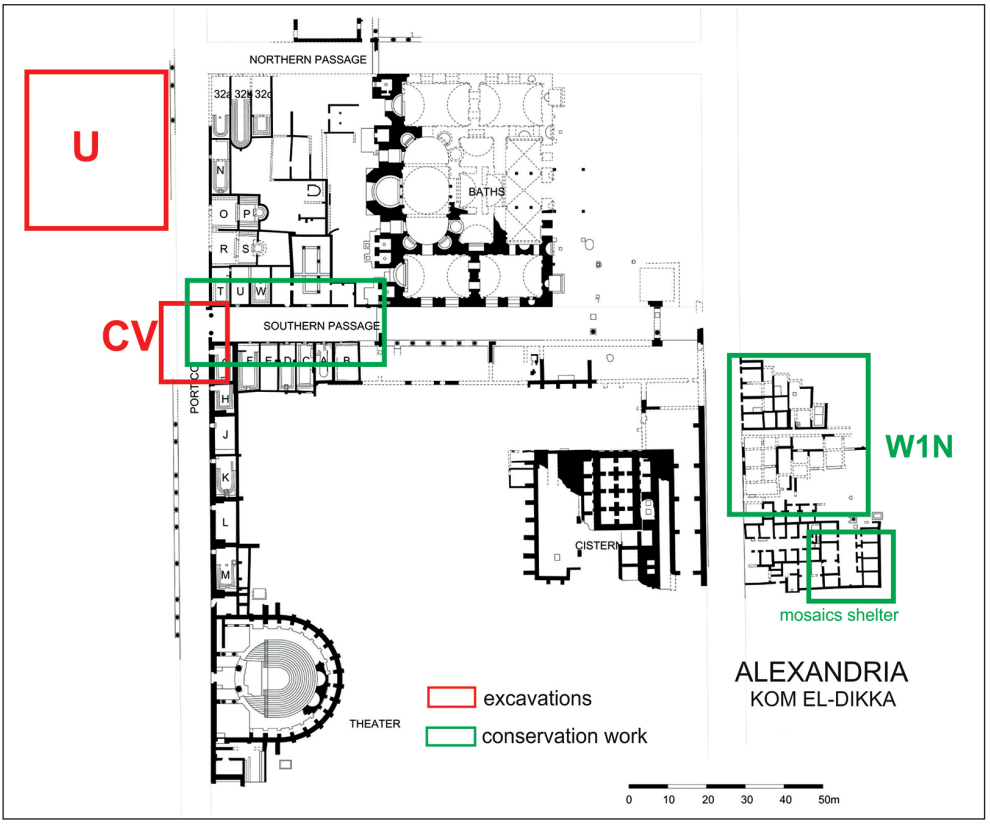

Fig. 1. Areas of work during the 2014 and 2015 seasons (Drawing W. Kołątaj, D. Tarara)

does not seem to be functionally related to it. The latrine excavated in 2012–2013 (Majcherek 2015: 31–40) was separated from this area by a huge wall of which only a small portion (0.60 m long) was preserved in the northern part of the trench. West to it a small, rectangular storage bin (1.20 m by 0.75 m) was found. It has been emphasized already that the most peculiar feature recognized in area U is the different orientation of the uncovered structures, aligned almost precisely N–S, unlike the ancient street network and other monuments of early Roman age discovered earlier on Kom el-Dikka. The reason for this is as yet unclear; it may be that it respected the alignment of the earlier pre-Roman structures in this part of the city. Importantly, the two small structures (wall and storage bin) discovered in 2015 follow the same orientation. The work was halted at this level and exploration of the early Roman layers will be continued in an upcoming season.

The artifactual material recorded during exploration provided a sound chronological basis. Beside pottery, a number of coins and lamps was recovered, including among the latter surprisingly common handles featuring Serapis [***Fig. 3***]. At this stage of research one can assume that the occupation of the area ended somewhere in the late 3rd or the first half of the 4th century AD at the latest. Most of the dateable items from the overlying layers were of 4th–5th century AD date, although earlier finds are also strongly represented. Pottery finds included a typical spectrum of Egyptian and imported fine wares, common wares and amphorae. Apart from several fragments of Red Slip Wares originating from Northern Africa (ARS) [***Fig. 4:1***] and Cyprus (CRS) [***Fig. 4:2,3***], a limited number of Egyptian ceramics was also recorded. The latter were mostly represented by bowls made of kaolinitic fabric (Egyptian Red Slip A) produced in the Aswan region [***Fig. 4:4***] and dated to the mid 4th–early 5th century AD (see Gempeler 1992: form 311a, 91–92, Fig. 34). Transport amphorae formed most of the recorded pottery material with imported containers

Fig. 2. Limestone capital, 4th–6th century (Photo M. Polak)

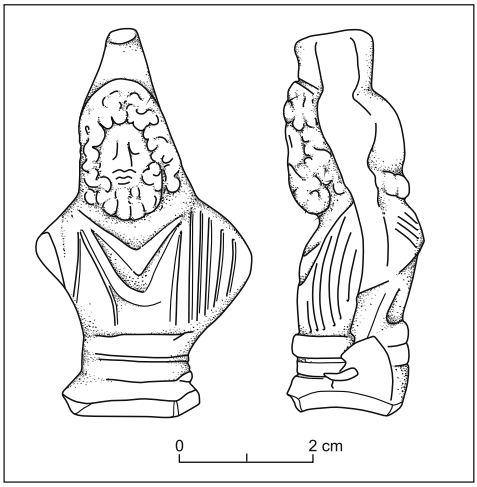

Fig. 3. Oil lamp handle featuring relief figure of the god Serapis (Drawing A. Dzwonek-Koziel)

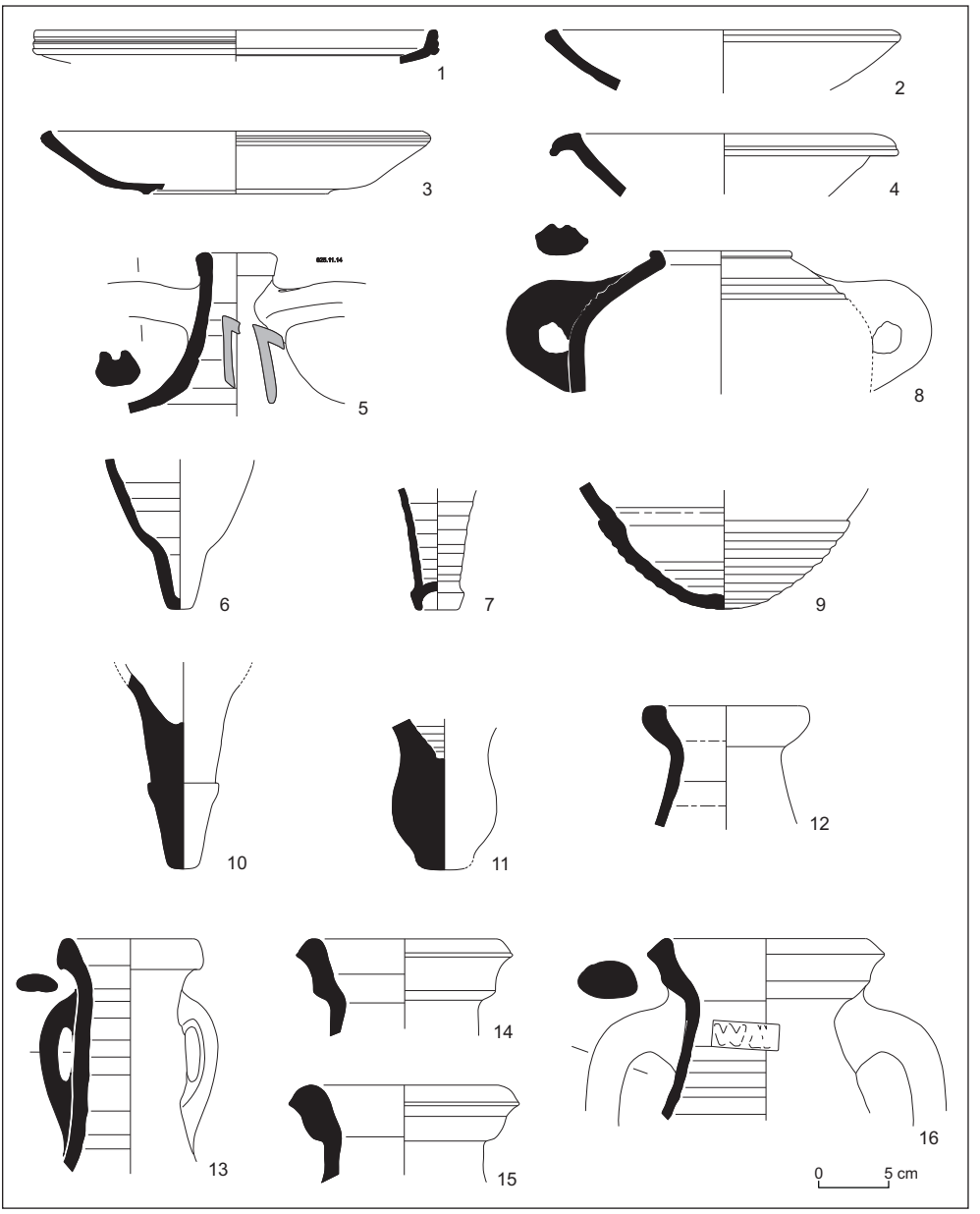

Fig. 4. Selection of pottery from area U: 1 – Red Slip Ware; 2, 3 – CRS ware; 4 – Egyptian Red Slip Ware from Aswan; 5 – LRA 1a; 6 – ARS Ware; 7 – LRA 3A; 8, 9 – LRA 4a; 10 – LRA 7; 11–13 – African amphorae; 14–16 – Tripolitanian amphorae (Drawing A. Dzwonek-Kozieł)

being the most abundant. The widely distributed Eastern amphora LRA 1 type is represented by a number of necks and bases belonging to the earliest type-form, LRA 1a (Pieri 2005: 70–75) [***Fig. 4:5***]. Quite a few of the recorded examples bear traces of notations in red ink, so typical of these vessels. Of great interest are several pointed and hollowed bases, signalling the presence of the immediate predecessor of LRA 1, dated to the 3rd century AD (Reynolds 2008: 70–72, Fig. 3) [***Fig. 4:6***]. Early forms of ubiquitous Aegean vessels (LRA 3A) with hollowed, open foot, although less common, were also identified [***Fig. 4:7***]. LRA 4 is traditionally the most frequently noted container. All the recorded fragments belong to the early wide bodied variety LRA 4A with massive handles [***Fig. 4:8,9***] (Majcherek 1995). Egyptian production was represented by fragments of an early version of LRA 7, characterized by solid spikes with a prominent ring [***Fig. 4:10***]. Of interest, similarly as in earlier seasons, is the unexpectedly high frequency of African oil amphorae, either originating from present-day Tunisia [***Fig. 4:11–13***] or from Tripolitania, including a stamped example (Bonifay 2004: 99–145) [***Fig. 4:14–16***]. The quantity and variety of recorded amphorae are particularly valuable for assessing the role that Alexandria played in the long-distance trade. While the relations with the Eastern Mediterranean are traditionally well evidenced in the ceramic material, the scale of the exchange with the West is still being probed.

The glass material from layers below the necropolis is mostly of late Roman/early Byzantine date, with only some residual finds dated to the early Roman period. Among rarely encountered finds one should mention several fragments of unguentaria with a low spherical body and long cylindrical neck, usually ascribed to the 1st–early 3rd century AD. Additionally, fragments of industrial glass debris, including chunks of raw glass of green, yellowish-green and aubergine color, were found, clearly demonstrating the operation of secondary glass workshops in the area (R. Kucharczyk, personal communication).

AREA CV

In 2015, fieldwork was limited to the western section of area CV which plays an important role in the planned visitors' itinerary. However, the necessity to keep open communication routes for future evacuation of earth and debris from the site had an obvious impact on the location and size of planned trenches, as well as the excavation strategy.

The area under excavation was located next to the western gate of the bath complex where a trench measuring 12 m by 10 m was set out. Investigations in this area started back in the 1997–1998 campaign, when a fragment of necropolis was explored and a trial pit was dug, revealing a section of the gate leading to the bath complex (Majcherek 1999: 30–34). The monumental entrance now explored in its entirety was flanked by two Doric columns (approximately 0.85 m in diameter) standing 3.50 m apart. The southern one (two drums high) was preserved to a level of approximately 1.10 m above the foundation wall, while of the northern one only a single drum has been preserved [***Fig. 5***].

Similar Doric drums often used in foundations were also found in several locations in the northern section of the stereobate of the theater portico (Majcherek

and Kucharczyk 2014: 24–26). It seems that these apparent *spolia* may have originated from some unknown monumental building of assumed Ptolemaic age, ruined and dismantled in the late Roman period. That such ruined buildings existed throughout the city is perhaps best evidenced by the remains of a Doric style building (stoa or temple), discovered approximately 50 m northeast of the Kom el-Dikka site (Riad 1967). Both columns stood on a massive foundation wall, approximately 1.55 m wide, built of large blocks in a manner closely recalling sections of the stereobate investigated earlier in front of the theater. The pavement adjoining the gate from the east was very poorly preserved, in fact only several isolated pavers have survived. But even in this state of preservation it was obvious that the flagging was laid on a markedly higher level (approximately 0.55–0.60 m) than the original pavement of the portico. Stairs were certainly needed to manage the difference in levels. Indeed, several blocks, apparently leftovers of steps, were cleared in front of the gate [***Fig. 6***]. Contrary to other structures, they were made of hard nummulithic limestone, their heavily worn upper surfaces pointing to prolonged use. The dimensions of isolated surviving fragments of the lowermost steps and their location with regard to the threshold suggested the presence of at least two steps. A fragment of walling

Fig. 5. Western gate of the baths (Photo G. Majcherek)

built later over the original threshold, was found still *in situ*. Several small patches of the portico flagging were uncovered in this area, mostly next to the portico back wall and the portico stereobate. Preserved fragments have markedly worn surfaces owing to long use. Lying immediately over them was a thick (0.15–0.20 m) layer of crushed pottery sherds, bricks and small rubble making up the final, late antique surface of the portico.

As could be expected, the exploration produced a rather mixed assemblage of pottery, consisting mostly of common-ware sherds: storage vessels and amphorae. LRA 1 and LRA 7, as well as the omnipresent LRA 4 predominated among the latter. Fine wares were recorded occasionally, being limited to a few fragments of Egyptian Red Slip Ware A, and African Red Slip ware of 6th–7th century AD date. Few of these sherds are of any dating significance in view of the widespread truncation and disturbance of archaeological deposits, which have made the whole evidence questionable.

Fig. 6. Remains of steps in front of the western gate (Photo G. Majcherek)

In the western and northern part of the trench, a part of the medieval cemetery was explored (see the appendix below). Several quite well preserved graves of the Upper Necropolis were uncovered, identifying in the process two principal sub-phases. Most of these graves were cleared within a large rectangular enclosure, of which only the southern part has been excavated (7.20 m to the side).

Similar enclosures, encompassing several graves, were recorded in the past also in other areas of the early Islamic cemetery on Kom el-Dikka (Promińska 1972: Pl. II; Majcherek 1999: 34; 2008: 31). However, two of the latest tombs stand apart (CV 161 and CV 163, see below, appendix, page 62), presenting fairly unusual architectural features. Both were apparently intended for multiple burials, hence their special design. They were equipped with vertical, rectangular shafts opening at ground level and giving easy access to the burial chambers. Both chambers were covered with stone-made barrel vaults built of small regular limestone blocks [***Fig. 8***].

Graves CV 201–CV 209, usually ascribed to the 9th–10th century AD (Middle Necropolis phase), were cleared in the western part of the trench [see below, appendix, ***Fig. 20***]. Two broken and fragmentarily preserved inscribed funerary stelae were found next to grave CV 207 [see below, appendix, ***Fig. 21***]. Both featured Quranic verses, engraved in Kufic script. No date was preserved. Both the crushed

pottery layer and underlying pavement were severely damaged by early Islamic burials (the Lower Necropolis phase). A number of graves belonging to this initial phase of the early Islamic cemetery, scattered all over the area, was mapped, but their exploration was scheduled for the next season.

The layers accompanying the cemetery produced a typical array of finds, mostly pottery sherds. The overwhelming majority of finds, however, belonged to the late Roman horizon and was apparently residual. Glazed pottery, which is the best chronological indicator, came mostly from layers overlying the graves, thus substantially reducing prospects of

Fig. 7. Inscribed fragment, cut from a bowl of Early Islamic Lead Glazed ware (Photo G. Majcherek)

Fig. 8. Tomb CV 161. Vaulted burial chamber (Photo G. Majcherek)