

## Byzantine and Muslim Cemeteries at Çatalhöyük - An outline<sup>1</sup>

Monika Kwiatkowska<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

The site of Çatalhöyük does not need a special introduction. It is known as one of the oldest Neolithic 'cities'. It was discovered by James Mellaart<sup>3</sup> and is currently being researched by the international team led by Ian Hodder<sup>4</sup>. Still, there is a less known Çatalhöyük, which does not enjoy such a high degree of interest and is significantly younger, namely the medieval Çatalhöyük.

The site of Çatalhöyük is composed of two mounds, the Neolithic East Mound and the Chalcolithic West Mound (Figs. 1-2). Both of them were in use long after the end of Chalcolithic. It is believed that the latest occupational episodes of both mounds comprised inhumation burials with distinctive features of the Byzantine burial rite. They were uncovered in various parts of the East and West Mounds but their detailed chronology and stratigraphic position have not yet been precisely identified. Their provenience and chronological position have been recognized to date as the Late Roman/Byzantine, Late Burials or Byzantine burials. These attributes are in most cases clearly inadequate. Excavations carried out by the Polish team<sup>5</sup> in the upper section of the East Mound brought about new discoveries.

The primary objective of the Polish excavations was to study the last phases of the Neolithic mound occupation dated back to the end of the seventh millennium BC. The crest of the East Mound was believed to be ideal for recognition of the late Neolithic structures. The tell late history turned out to be much more complex and longer than previously thought. The relatively small area excavated in the 2001-2002 seasons revealed a remarkable inhumation cemetery. It was defined as a major part of the Byzantine necropolis on the East Mound<sup>6</sup>.

The post-excavation analysis of available materials, archives and literature in addition to radiocarbon dates made it possible to reinterpret these preliminary conclusions.

A majority of inhumation burials excavated by the Polish team belonged to the Muslim population. The cemetery, located on the mound, was in use for a number of centuries from the late Seljuq period until the Ottoman Empire (from the second half of the 13th century to the 17th century). The Byzantine occupation of both mounds was continued in the Muslim period. In these two subsequent chronological episodes, both mounds were used as burials grounds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Polish by Arkadiusz Marciniak.

<sup>2</sup> Monika Kwiatkowska, a member of the Polish expedition at Çatalhöyük, e-mail: monikakwiatkowski@tlen.pl.

<sup>3</sup> Mellaart 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Hodder 2002; Hodder 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The Polish team (TP) started excavating the East Mound in 2001. The team directed by Prof. Lech Czerniak and Prof. Arkadiusz Marciniak is composed of scholars and students of the University of Gdańsk and University of Poznań.

<sup>6</sup> Czerniak et al. 2001; Czerniak et al. 2002; Czerniak et al. 2003

In the light of these observations, one remains curious about the nature of the relationship between both cemeteries. A number of questions also need to be raised, in particular in relation to the ethnic and cultural affiliation of both communities burying their dead in neighboring cemeteries. How did they use both burial grounds? What rules are responsible for selecting a place for a cemetery and then adopting forms of burials? As regards to the Muslim cemetery, one needs to address a transformation of burial rites from the Middle Ages to modern times. However, one also needs to explicitly discuss a set of criteria making possible to distinguish both types of burials. The article aims to address some of these issues.

### **Byzantine cemeteries at Çatalhöyük**

I would argue that two separate Byzantine cemeteries existed on the East and West Mounds. The Byzantine cemetery on the East Mound comprised inhumation burials being largely dispersed mainly in the northern and north-eastern parts of the tell. They were identified in two excavations areas known as BACH and 4040 (Fig. 2). This cemetery may have been continuously occupied since the Roman period. This is indicated by its continuous use in the period between the 1st century and the first half of the 5th century AD as proved by radiocarbon dates and burial forms.

Byzantine burials from the period up to the middle of the 5th century AD contained inhumated bodies and had no grave goods. Burial pits were usually relatively shallow (30-50 cm) and rectangular in their horizontal shape. Iron nails can sometimes be found in their fill indicating the presence of a wooden coffin or wooden casting. Stone slates set to support the grave walls are also reported.

Bodies were placed in an extended position with their heads facing west and hands alongside their bodies or folded on the pelvis. Their faces were facing east. The burials had no grave goods (Figs. 3-4).

Byzantine burials scattering on the West Mound, however, resemble considerably those on the East Mound. Most of them were devoid of substantial superstructures and had no grave goods. In some of them iron nails and traces of wood have been found that is indicative of coffin use.

It appears that the Late Roman burials existed mainly on the West Mound<sup>7</sup>. Three of them were of special character. They had a form of sarcophagus with walls and base made of fired brick or mudbrick, painted decoration, wooden coffins and rich burial goods. They may have been burials of a single family – probably of high social status. They were much richer than similar burials from the same period on the East Mound.

In the case of both mounds, it proved impossible to clearly demarcate the Late Roman from Byzantine cemeteries. Hence, this may imply that the spatial separation of both burial grounds was not significant as both of them were continuously used throughout the Roman and early Byzantine period.

Similar burial forms were identified in the youngest levels of Troy. They have been dated back to the first half of the 13th century AD. These are simple earthen constructions, sometimes with stone cists, but with no grave goods. Bodies are placed in extended

<sup>7</sup> These graves are tentatively interpreted by the excavation team as medieval Byzantine burials (Baldiran 2007: 145-146). Since no radiocarbon dates are available at the moment, their chronological position cannot be unequivocally proved. I would argue that these are the Late Roman in date.

position as in the Christian tradition<sup>8</sup>. Some of the Çatalhöyük burials also reminds one of those from Beycesultan that are dated to the 10th century AD<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Muslim cemetery at Çatalhöyük**

It is commonly believed that the burial rite of Islamic groups is highly standardized as it is based upon codified rules and regulations. At the same time, its detailed studies are very rare<sup>10</sup> as Islam does not allow autopsies on dead bodies. However, as indicated by available results of archaeological excavations of Muslim cemeteries, these general principles have been changing over time and space and it is hardly justified to claim an existence of any pan-Islamic rules in this domain<sup>11</sup>.

The Muslim cemetery at Çatalhöyük was established on the top of the East Mound. Highly dispersed Islamic burials were also found outside this area, in particular in the NE section of the tell. Some of them have been earlier identified as Byzantine. The necropolis on the East Mound was in use for a long time between the middle of the 13th century and middle of the 17th century. As indicated by detailed analysis of the burial rite on the West Mound, at least one burial is to be identified as Muslim.

Altogether, 63 burials have been recorded in the TP area in addition to numerous bone clusters with no anatomical order as well as individual human remains scattered in layers, probably originating from destroyed graves. Not all of them, however, can be identified as belonging to the local Islamic population (Fig. 5). Muslim burials are characterized by placing the bodies in an extended position with their faces facing east. One cannot rule out that burials of the unfaithful (e.g. Christian) can also be found among them despite the fact that Islam explicitly rejects such a possibility<sup>12</sup>.

Initially, this was most likely a row cemetery with burials in E-W alignment. According to Islamic rules, the layout of burials at the cemetery should reflect the ritual arrangement of believers during a mosque prayer<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, due to the poor preservation of individual graves and long use of the Çatalhöyük cemetery, this spatial arrangement has hardly been distinguishable.

Analysis of the Çatalhöyük cemetery reveals that females may have been buried in the same parts of the cemetery as males. This may appear to break the contemporary Islamic rules in this regard. However, this apparent discrepancy may also be attributable to the long use of the cemetery.

Among some Muslim groups, the depth of the burial pit used depended upon the sex of the dead. Child burials were dug 'up to the knees', those of men 'up to the waist' while those of women 'up to the chest.' According to more general rules, the grave must be deep

<sup>8</sup> Böhlendorf 1998: 265-273.

<sup>9</sup> Wright 1954: 154-165.

<sup>10</sup> Currently, a more liberal approach seems to prevail. Scholars are allowed to investigate various aspects of contemporary and past burial practices of Muslim communities, e.g. in Turkmenistan (Babel 1999), Sudan and Palestine (Granqvist 1965), Egypt (Promińska 1971) or Jordan and Oman. However, it is required that studied remains are reburied as e.g. recently happened at Çatalhöyük. For more information on temporal and spatial differences in the burial rituals see Grabar 1966; Granqvist 1965; Nasr 1993, O'Shea 1984; Ragib 1970; Simpson 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Despite expectations of today's ideologists.

<sup>12</sup> Ory 1991: 121

<sup>13</sup> Kołodziejczyk 1998: 25-27, 32

enough to enable a sitting position of the deceased while making it possible to listen to a muezzin call<sup>14</sup>. At the Çatalhöyük cemetery, these rules are only in place in case of children burials.

Burial superstructures at Çatalhöyük were not particularly elaborated<sup>15</sup>. They comprised mainly of rows of diagonally placed mudbricks located along the longer axis of the burial. They have been hardly visible above the ground surface<sup>16</sup>.

Children were most probably buried in shallow graves without respecting some elements of the ritual, such as placing their faces towards Mecca. The highest number of destroyed burials and displaced skeletons belonged to children. Hence, it is most probable that children burials were devoid of any kind of burial markers.

Bodies of the deceased were buried in individual graves<sup>17</sup> directly in the ground without any kind of coffin<sup>18</sup>. No grave goods or any other items of personal use were deposited. They were directly covered by soil and only in some instances some kind of burial architecture was in place.

At the Çatalhöyük cemetery, two forms of burials may be observed:

- I. Pit grave with niche<sup>19</sup> (Figs. 8-9);
- II. Pit grave, without niche<sup>20</sup> with the following variants:
  - Ila. Pit grave with no additional elements (Fig. 6);
  - Ilb. Pit grave with surrounding wall (Fig. 7);
  - Ilc. Pit grave with lid.

The pit grave with niche was characterized by a large-size pit, as seen from the top, and oval in cross section. C. 50 cm underneath, the pit transformed itself into a horizontal niche, located from the right side of the burial cut.

Human corpses were laid to rest in the niche<sup>21</sup>. Bodies of the deceased were placed in the grave in two variants: (1) an extended position, face up, with the head facing south towards Mecca; or more frequently (2) sideways position on the right side, with the head pointing towards Mecca; the back leaned against the wall of the grave niche so that the body would not slide down. After the body was placed in the grave, the niche was closed with the mud brick. Bricks closing the niche were laid horizontally, resembling plaster, tightly sealing off the cut; clay was also used. On the top, a vertical row of bricks was placed upon the plaster forming some kind of marker on the surface. Such a burial superstructure did not always protect the body of the deceased from being destroyed or crushed by earth.

<sup>14</sup> Tryjarski 1999: 187-191

<sup>15</sup> The Shiites and Sunnis permit marking the burial place by a stonewall or mud brick. Fundamentalist wahhabis prohibit any marking of the graves (Nydell 2001: 8).

<sup>16</sup> According to the Islamic tradition, a maximal burial superstructure is to be a half-palm high.

<sup>17</sup> Von den Driesh, ambassador of Vermond to the Ottoman Empire during 1719-20, expressed his surprise that "there are extraordinary number of graves in the courtyards of the mosques, because of their tradition of separate graves per one dead" (Görk 2002: 7).

<sup>18</sup> At present, coffins are only permissible in special circumstances when the body is marred or the grave is located on wetlands.

<sup>19</sup> The Medina type.

<sup>20</sup> The Mekka type - less popular.

<sup>21</sup> According to the Islamic tradition, the corpse should be placed inside the grave pit from the east head first, that is where the legs of the deceased would eventually rest.

According to the Islamic tradition, the niche was an important part of the grave. It was to let the dead assume a sitting position inside the grave, while he/she would report on the contemporary life to visiting angels<sup>22</sup>.

Although a pit grave with no niche was the most common form used at the Çatalhöyük necropolis<sup>23</sup>, it has to be remembered that its presence is often difficult to discern. Pit graves at Çatalhöyük are characterized by oval horizontal pits and a very differentiated depth ranging from 30 cm to 1.5 m. Beside a classical form defined here as type 2a, this type also appeared in more elaborated forms such as 2b and 2c.

Type 2b includes pit graves with surrounding walls, commonly made of mud brick. The body of the deceased was leaning against the wall and placed sideways on the right side to abide to the Muslim tradition.

Grave of type 2c with lid may simply be a shallow form of the niche grave, incorrectly recognized and recorded in the course of its exploration.

### **Chronology of the Çatalhöyük cemeteries**

A precise dating of the presented burial forms can only be provided by radiocarbon dates. These are, however, available at the present in a highly insufficient number.

A couple of radiocarbon dates from late burials in the TP area are now available. These have been compared with dates from three skeletons from burials in other areas on the East Mound (area 4040). More dates will be available for the final publication.

We have today in our disposal the following dates:

„40 40”:

1. F1407 (unit 10019): Poz-23826 - 1685 ± 30 BP, kalib. – 330 AD - 410 AD (95.4% probability);
2. F 1553 (unit 10225): Poz-23827 - 1885 ± 30 BP, kalib. – 60 AD – 220 AD (95.4% probability).

TP:

1. F941 (unit 6730): Poz-19073 - 650 ± 30 BP, kalib. - 1340 AD – 1400 AD (51.8% probability);

- 1280 AD – 1330 AD

(43,6% probability);

2. F906 (unit 6947): Poz-19070 - 540 ± 30 BP, kalib. – 1380 AD – 1440 AD (66.0% probability);

3. F903 (unit 6756): Poz-19072 - 335 ± 30 BP, kalib. - 1470 AD - 1650 AD (95.4% probability);

### **Who was buried at Çatalhöyük?**

The ethnic and religious attribution as well as social position of the deceased at Çatalhöyük are very complex. The community that buried their dead at the Byzantine cemetery at

<sup>22</sup> According to the tradition angels: Munkar and Nakir (Drozd, Dziekan, Majda 1999: 12-13) visit the deceased after their death and ask about their life. The answers provided are to determine whether they may enter the paradise (Insoll 1999: 167-9).

<sup>23</sup> Although graves with niches may be underestimated due to errors in the course of exploration.

Çatalhöyük has clearly been living in the Eastern Roman Empire. It was probably of a local and rural character. The area around Çatalhöyük was possibly occupied by multiethnic groups, in particular of Greek origin that later found itself under Roman influence.

Was the community buried at Çatalhöyük at that time Christian? A difference between the Late Roman and Byzantine (Christian) was discernible and manifest in the form of simplistic burial architecture, the lack of burial goods, extended position of the bodies in E-W alignment with face facing east<sup>24</sup>.

As regards to the later Muslim cemetery, the discussed issues seem to be much more complicated. It is not at all clear whether the deceased were formerly citizens of the Eastern Roman Empire, new Islamic believers or possibly the Turks arriving in the 11th century.

Large groups inhabiting the Eastern Roman Empire kept emigrating from Anatolia over centuries due to political turmoil (Arabs raids, arrival of the Turks, the Mongols invasion). Local groups, which remained in this territory after the 11th century, were eventually dominated by the Turkish population arriving in Anatolia. These local inhabitants, mainly Christians but also believers of ancient regions, found themselves living under the new regime. The Turks arriving to Anatolia were to large extent Muslim. The new state allowed a considerable degree of religious freedom; however a significant number of people were eventually converted to Islam. Causes of this process are complex and included spiritual decisions as well as economic ones such as e.g. taxes<sup>25</sup>.

The question emerges whether it is at all possible to prove a continuation of the old Turkish tradition and consequently to recognize ethnic affiliation of the community that buried their dead at the Çatalhöyük cemetery. It is worth mentioning here two elements of the shamanistic and old Turkish provenience, namely placement of the necropolis<sup>26</sup> and the niche burial construction<sup>27</sup>.

A number of issues of the medieval Çatalhöyük were briefly outlined in this short article. It was aimed at putting Çatalhöyük on the medieval map of Anatolia. A more detailed analysis will be presented in the monograph that is currently under preparation.

## Bibliography

<sup>24</sup> Bodies in Christian graves are placed in an extended position with heads facing west. The face should be facing east, that is the direction from which Christ is to come. Some other interpretations claim that this very position is aimed at symbolizing the readiness of the deceased to stand up and walk out from the west with its worldly concerns.

<sup>25</sup> The tax system was much more profitable for the latter group.

<sup>26</sup> In the old Turkish tradition, exposed prominences in the vicinity of rivers and lakes covered by trees or with a view onto the steppe or mountains were deliberately chosen. Furthermore, remote settings as well as ancient burial grounds were also preferred (Tryjarski 1999: 187-191).

<sup>27</sup> A tradition of niche graves dates back to the pre-Islamic period of the Turkish and Arab tribes. They are reported from the Turkish cemeteries at e.g. Zamān-Baba in the Kizyl-kum desert, west of Buchara in Turkmenistan as well as in the north-eastern Uzbekistan and Kirgistan. As reported by the Arab traveler ibn Fadlan, the tradition of niche graves has also been practiced by the Volga Bulgars before they were converted to Islam (Tryjarski 1999: 18-19, 190). The very similar tradition of burying the dead was also practiced by some Arab tribes. Muhammad himself was buried in a niche grave. The year c. 632 AD can then be regarded as the beginning of this type of grave among the Muslims (the Medina type) (Halevi 2007: 188-191).

- Böhlendorf, B., 1998 - Ein byzantinisches gräberfeld in Troia. In: *Studia Troica* 8, 265-273.
- Czerniak, L., M. Kwiatkowska, A. Marciniak, and J. Pyzel, 2001 - The excavations of the TP Area, Archive Report, Cambridge.
- Czerniak, L., A. Marciniak, and J. Pyzel, 2002 - The excavations of the TP (Team Poznań) Area in the 2002 season / 2002 Kazý Mevsiminde TP (Team Poznań) Alanýndaki Kazýlar, Archive Report, Cambridge.
- Czerniak, L. and A. Marciniak, 2003 - The excavations of the TP (Team Poznań) Area in the 2003 season / 2003 Kazý Mevsiminde TP (Team Poznań) Alanýndaki Kazýlar, Archive Report, Cambridge.
- Görk, R.V., 2002 - Death and funerals in Sunni communities of Turkey, <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/janazahstepbystep.htm>
- Grabar, O., 1966 - The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures. In: *Ars Orientalis* 6, 7-46.
- Granqvist, H., 1965 - Muslim Death and Burial: Arab Customs and Traditions Studied in Village in Jordan, Helsinki.
- Halevi, L., 2007 - Muhammad's Grave, New York.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2000 - Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology: the Example of Çatalhöyük. McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research/British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, Monograph No 28, London.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2004 - Inhabiting Çatalhöyük from the 1995-1999 Seasons, London.
- Insoll, T., 1999 - The Archaeology of Islam, Oxford.
- Kołodziejczyk, A., 1998 - Cmentarze muzułmańskie w Polsce, „Studia i materiały”, Warsaw.
- Mellaart, J., 1967 - Çatalhöyük Hüyük: a Neolithic Town in Anatolia, London.
- Nydell (Omar), M.K., 1996 - Understanding Arabs: A guide for Westerners, Yarmouth.
- Örnek, S.V., 1971 - Anadolu folklorunda ölüm. Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi yayınları, 218, Ankara.
- O'Shea, J., 1984 - Mortuary Variability: an Archaeological Investigation, New York.
- Prominska, E., 1971 - Paleopathology According to Age at the Moslem Necropoles at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria (Egypt). In: *Africana Bulletin* 14, 171-3.
- Ragib, Y., 1970 - Les premières monuments funéraires de l'Islam. In: *Annales Islamologiques* 9, 21-36.
- Siala, M.E., Authentic Step by Step Illustrated Janazah Guide, <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/janazahstepbystep.htm>
- Simpson, St. J., 1995 - Death and Burial in the Late Islamic Near East: Some Insights from Archaeology and Ethnography. In S. Campbell and A. Green (eds), *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*. Oxford, 240-51.
- Tryjarski, E., 1991 - Zwyczaje pogrzebowe ludów tureckich na tle ich wierzeń, Warsaw.



Fig. 1. Çatalhöyük East and West (aerial photo - Çatalhöyük Research Project).

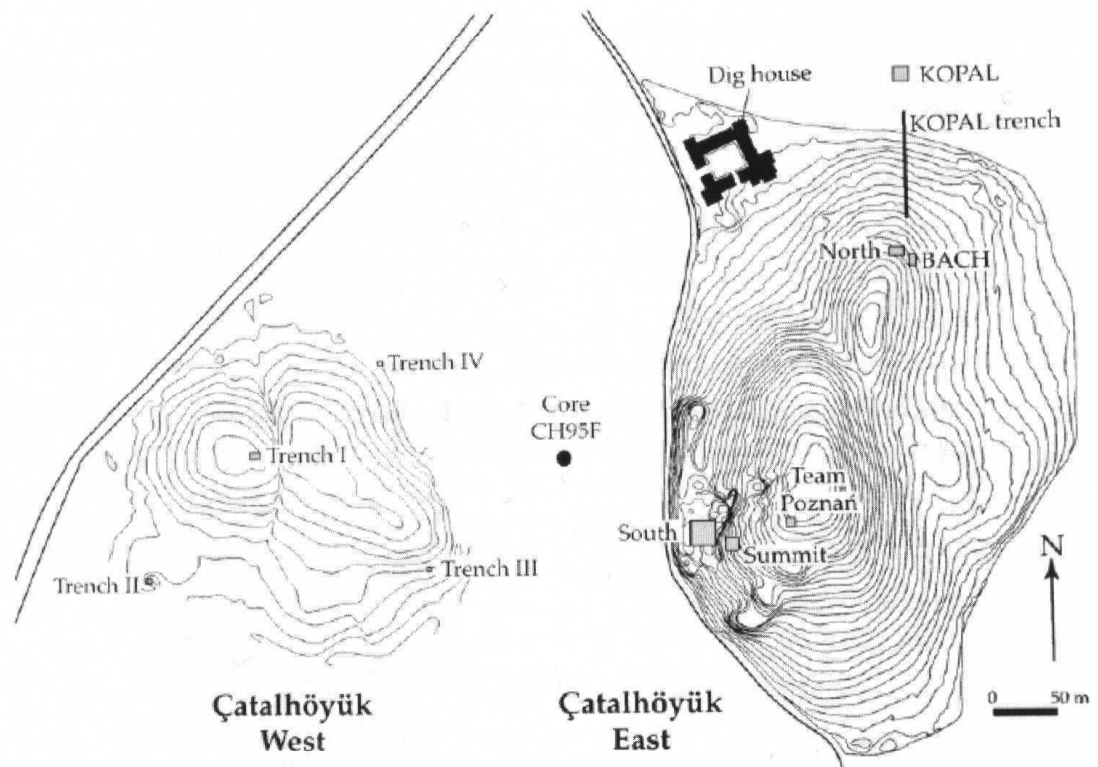


Fig. 2. Excavation Areas (Çatalhöyük Research Project).



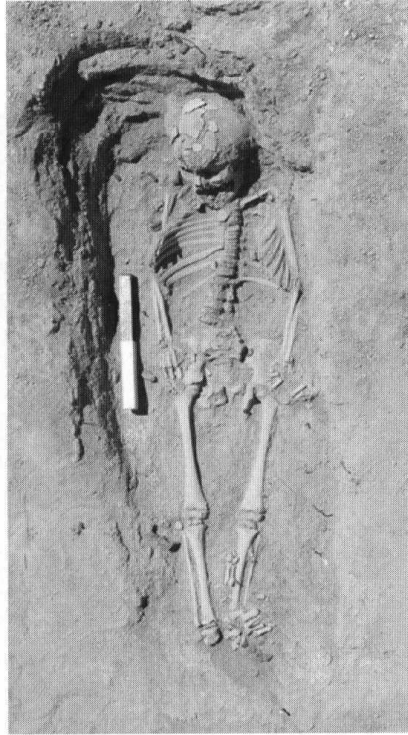


Fig. 3. Byzantine burial (4040 Area; photo by Jason Quinlan)



Fig. 4. Byzantine burial (4040 Area; photo by Jason Quinlan).

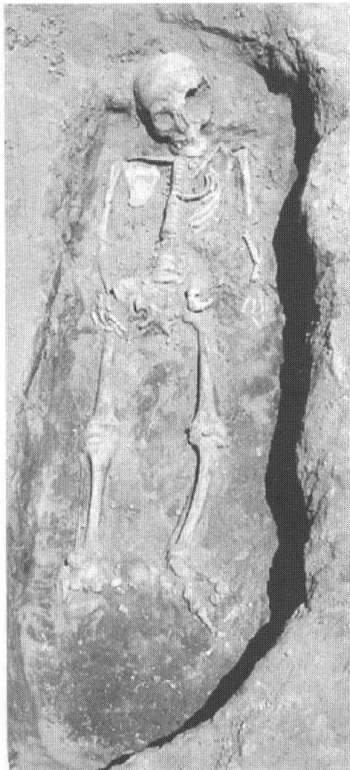


Fig. 5. Non-muslim burial (TP Area; photo by Lech Czerniak).



Fig. 6. Muslim burial (TP Area; photo by Lech Czerniak).

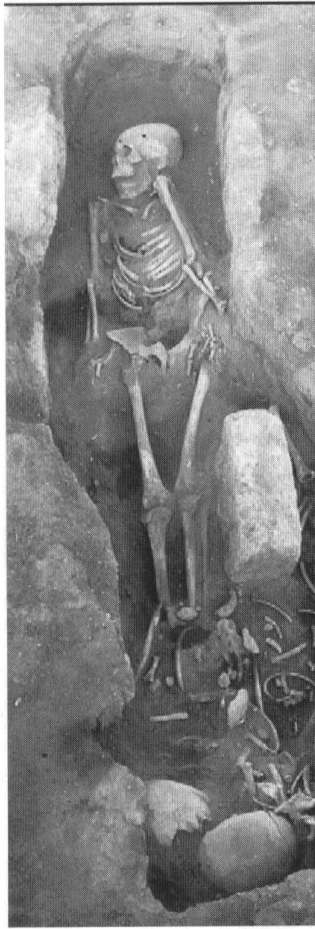


Fig. 7. Muslim burial (TP Area; photo by Lech Czerniak).

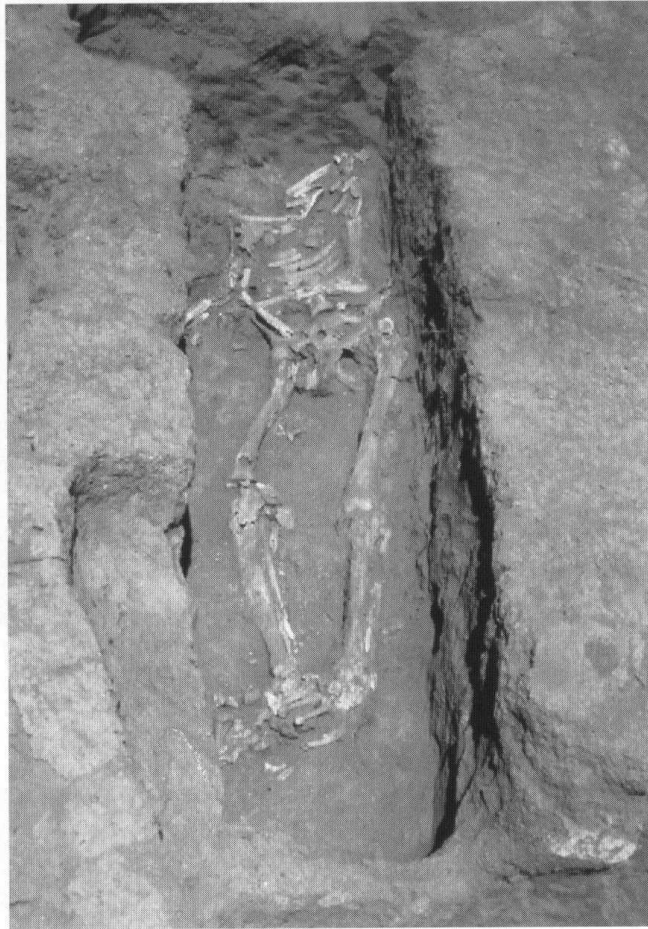


Figure 8. Muslim burial (TP Area; photo by Lech Czerniak).



Figure 9. Grave with niche and marker - Muslim burial (TP Area; photo by Adam Golański).