

Forgotten excavations in Sinai: Al-Qantarah Necropolis (season 1981)

Abstract

The current report related to the archeological work at Al-Qantarah Sharq necropolis in 1981 (17 May – 2 June), this funerary complex is located about 650 m to the east of Suez Canal, in a pure sand dune area. Due to the expansion of residential buildings of the city, SCA team started the archaeological investigations for a better understanding of the limits of the Greco-Roman necropolis. Since 1910, the archeological investigation started at different parts of the village. Season 1981 revealed different types of burials; these included double-vessel coffins, simple limestone grave, mud-brick lined grave, limestone anthropoid sarcophagi and a limestone tomb with vaulted ceiling and mud-brick shaft. The burials were very poor in conditions and funerary artifacts.

Keywords: Al-Qantara, Sila/Sile, Tell Abu Sayfi, ptolemaic and Roman period, North Sinai, mausoleum, Necropolis, Suez canal

Volume 7 Issue 2 - 2022

Mohamed Abd El-Samie,¹ Hesham Mohamed Hussein²

¹Former director of Sinai and Lower Egypt, Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt

²General Director of Sinai Archeology, Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt

Correspondence: Hesham Mohamed Hussein, General Director of Sinai Archeology, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt, Email heham.husein@gmail.com

Received: August 24, 2022 | **Published:** September 20, 2022

Introduction

Al Qantarah,¹ is one of the important archaeological sites in the north-eastern part of Sinai Peninsula. The modern city “Al Qantarah Sharq” was founded during the construction of the Suez Canal (1859-1969), on the east bank. Previously it was not even a settlement, but rather the name reflects of two or three consecutive bridges in the area.² Al Qantarah was established at the same location of a Ptolemaic and Roman necropolis.

During the Roman period “Al Qantarah” was known as “Sile³ - Tell Abu Seifi⁴”, which is located at a strategic position, guarding Egypt’s northeastern frontier.

The burials discovered at Al Qantarah are a part of the necropolis of the site of Sile and was initially identified early in the 20th century.⁵ The first important discovery was made by local Bedouins in 1911, they revealed a massive limestone sarcophagus inside a mud-brick tomb with vaulted ceiling. Some of the discovered sarcophagi were inscribed with hieroglyphic inscriptions, with segments from the Book of the dead,⁶ which dated back to the Ptolemaic period.⁷

The inscriptions further reveal that a number of elite inhabitants were buried at Al Qantarah necropolis, along with tombs belonging to middle- and lower-class people, the burials uncovered by sporadic excavations over the past century include various types, including those made of mud-brick tombs, large stone-vaulted tomb, limestone anthropoid sarcophagi, double-vessel coffins, simple single limestone graves and simple burials pits.

Forgotten excavation: season 1981: On 17 May 1981 the excavation started at the north-east part of Al Qantarah, located inside the urban zone, 2.8 Km to the west of Tell Abu Seifi and 650 m to the east of Suez Canal. What was unknown at the start of the excavation, was the full extent of the necropolis. The season began with a survey of an area (400m×200m), and some exploratory trenches were dug to ascertain whether there were any traces of archaeological materials. After reaching the depth of 1.30m below the surface, a mud-brick and limestone structures were uncovered. It is the result of the excavation in this area that will be described here.

Burial types in Al Qantarah necropolis: The SCA excavation team identified different types of burials, which range from a simple pit

burial dug directly into sand, to a large stone-vaulted tomb. The uncovered skeletons were in poor condition and most of them were devoid of any burial goods.

Burials descriptions

Burial I (Figure 1): a limestone grave (length: 2m; width: 55-35cm), built of a shelly limestone slab, tracing the outline of the body, which was laid directly on the sand. The pit for the grave was lined with three different parts (slabs) of limestone laid along the long axis of the skeleton. A skeleton remains were discovered buried in an east-west orientation, extended anterior up (with the body extended, lying on its back), head to the east and foot to the west, the arms extended along the sides.



Figure 1 Limestone grave.

Burial II (Figure 2): a simple rectangular coffin shaped mud-brick lined grave (length:2m; width:1m; height:90cm) in a poor condition, oriented east-west. There was evidence that the brick-built grave has a vaulted-door to the west part. The skeletal remains were uncovered, buried in east-west orientation, extended anterior up, head to the east and foot to the west, the arms extended along the sides.

The grave was constructed with eight courses height of mud-bricks, tracing the outline of the body, which was laid directly onto the sand. Burial II was capped with mud-bricks, sealing the body within.

Burial III (Figure 3): two different phases have been identified, the first phase (the oldest): was consisted of remains of four ceramic

(terracotta) coffins “a double-vessel type coffin” (length 1.76m; width 0.50:0.35m; height: 0.55m), oriented east-west. Coffin “A” has contained a skeleton, extended anterior up, head to the east and feet to the west, the arms extended along the sides, bones were in very poor condition.



Figure 2 Rectangular coffin shaped mud-brick lined grave.

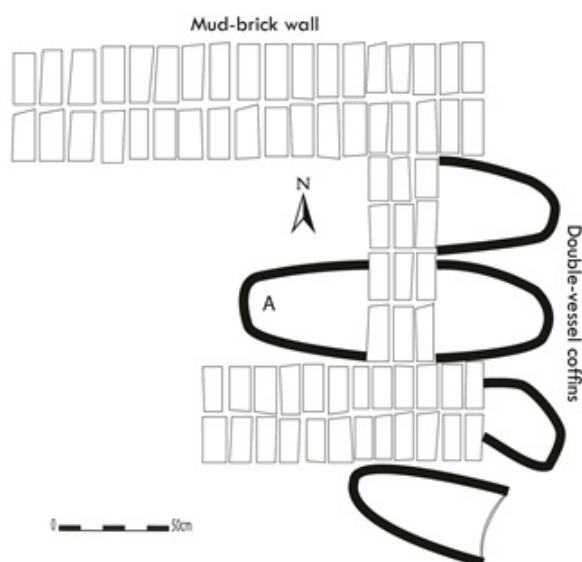


Figure 3 Mud-brick grave and a double-vessel coffins.

The second phase: seems to be remains of a rectangular mud-brick lined grave oriented east-west, the eastern wall was built over the center part of the double-vessel coffins of the first phase. The mud-brick grave was looted and destroyed in antiquity. The archaeological stratigraphy suggests that this area was used for a long period. Because of the stratigraphic position of the double-vessel coffins, were dated earlier than the remains of a rectangular mud-brick lined grave.

Burial IV (Figure 4): a fine limestone anthropoid sarcophagus without lid (length 2m; width 0.55m, height 0.35m), it was found laid directly into the sand, oriented east-west. Skeleton was placed with extended anterior up, head to the east and feet to the west, bones were in very poor condition. No building connected to the sarcophagus was identified.

Tomb 1 (Figure 5): a limestone vaulted tomb-oriented east-west, built of a shelly limestone block. This large burial appears to have the resting place of an entire family or social group. The tomb is rectangular in shape (8.5×2.45m), which clearly was divided into two parts; the shaft (2×2m) which was built of mud-brick and added to the western wall of the tomb.



Figure 4 Limestone anthropoid sarcophagus.

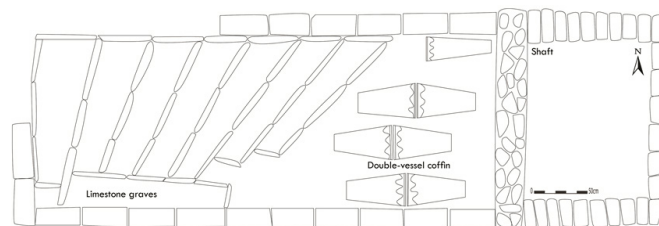


Figure 5 The uncovered tomb (drawing by Mohamed abed el Samie, Illustration by Hesham Hussein).

The shaft leads to a rectangular burial chamber through a vaulted door (Figure 6) (1.25×1m), which was closed with limestone blocks. The burial chamber (6.5×2.45m) was built of limestone blocks (0.55×0.45×0.40 m), the maximum height of the preserved walls is 1.45 m height, and no traces of the ceiling have been identified. The remains of the walls at the corners indicate that the ceiling was vaulted and may have collapsed and been destroyed in ancient times (Figure 7).



Figure 6 A vaulted door from inside.

During the excavation, in the north-east corner inside the burial chamber, two ceramic (terracotta) coffins “a double-vessel type coffin” (0.85×0.35 m), oriented east-west have been uncovered (Figure 5). The ceramic coffins laid directly on the sand at the depth of 0.75 m from the top of the tomb’s wall. Every ceramic coffin has remains of a skeleton, one of them; the body was in a flexed position, oriented east-west, with head to the east. The other coffin (0.80×0.35×0.20 m) has a body in an extended anterior up, head to the east, and feet to the west. The bones were in very poor condition.

At the depth of 0.90 m, seven limestone graves have been discovered in the western part of the burial chamber. It was oriented

northeast-southwest, built of shelly lime-stone slabs, tracing the outline of the body, which was laid directly on the sand. Another limestone grave was identified at the south end of the seven graves, it was oriented east-west with the body extended anterior up, head to the east, and the foot to the west.



Figure 7 Limestone tomb with vaulted ceiling.

All the limestone graves have remains of a skeleton, laid directly on the limestone slabs of the graves floor. Bodies are extended anterior up, heads to the north-east, and the feet to the south-west. The hands resting on the collarbone (clavicle). Some of the bodies have a gilded and painted stucco masks consists mainly of gypsum. A piece of gold leaf (3.6 cm – 700 mg) was found in the mouth of one of the persons buried.

At the depth of 1.15 m, in the southeast corner another two ceramic (terracotta) coffins “a double-vessel type coffin” (0.80×0.35×0.20 m), oriented east-west were discovered, lying directly on the sand. Every coffin has skeletal remains. Bodies in an extended anterior up, heads to the east, and feet to the west. The bones were in very poor condition.

Since twelve burials have been discovered inside this tomb, one can assumed that the tomb was used for a long period, the limestone graves appear to date earlier than the double-vessels type coffins.

Due to the proximity of the skeletal remains to the modern surface, all the remains uncovered from season 1981 were in poor condition, when initially exposed, the bones dry rapidly in the sun and begin to deteriorate.

Conclusion

Qantara one of the impressive necropolises in North Sinai, that was used for a long time during Ptolemaic and Roman period. Different types of burials have been identified. The majority of the bodies were buried extended anterior up, heads to the east and feet to the west, except the limestone coffins which were found inside the tomb, where bodies buried extended anterior up, heads to the north-east and feet to the south-west.

Because individuals of upper, middle and lower classes were interred in the Al Qantarah cemetery, it is indicative of the broad socio-economic status of the community living in around the military complex of Sile.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interests

Authors declares there are no conflicts of interests.

Endnotes

1. Al-Qantarah (Qantara - Kantara) East “Al-Qantarah Sharq el-Qadima – the old Qantarah east” (30.51° N – 32.19° E) is a northeastern Egyptian city, on the eastern side of the Suez Canal, located in Ismailia governorate, 50 km south of Port Said.
2. Herbert Verreth, *the Northern Sinai from the 7th century BC till the 7th century AD. A guide to the sources*, vol.1, (Leuven, 2006), p.822
3. Three Greco-Roman texts mentioned the city of Sile. (For more information: J. Y. Carrez-Maratray, *Péluse et l'angle oriental du Delta égyptien aux époques grecque, romaine et byzantine*, *Bibliothèque d'Etud* 124, (Le Caire, 1999), P.34
4. Tell Abu Seifi (Sile – Sele - Sila): located 3 km to the east of the Suez Canal, to the south-east of Al Qantarah al qadima (old Qantarah), the Egyptian archaeological mission at Tell Abu Seifi uncovered a city and two massive consecutive fortresses, dated back to Greek-Roman period. (For more information: M. Abd el-Maksoud et All, “The Roman Castrum of tell Abu Sayfi at Qantara”, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abt. Kairo* 53 (1997), 221-226.
5. Mohammed Effendi Chabân, “Fouilles exécutées près d'El-Kantara”, *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Egypte* (Le Caire) 12 (1912), 69-76
6. The inscribed sarcophagus is now in display at the Egyptian museum (CG 29318). (For more information: Chabân, *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Egypte* (Le Caire) 12, 69-76)
7. G. Daressy, “Sarcophages d'El Qantarah”, *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale* 11 (1914), 29-38