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BIFAO 101 (2001), p. 393-414

Sayed Yamani

Roman monumental tombs in Ezbet Bashendi.

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Roman monumental tombs in Ezbet Bashendi

Sayed YAMANI

At the northern edge of the modern village of Ezbet Bashendi in Dakhla Oasis lies a Roman necropolis which consists, as far as it has been cleared, of six monumental tombs. The tomb of Kitynos, discovered by Ahmed Fakhry, is already well-known, as it has been published by Osing.[1] The plan is that of a small mortuary temple (8,25 × 8,45 m). Entering from the East, an antechamber opens into the funerary chapel on the East/West axis and into secondary rooms on both north and south sides.[2] Architecture as well as decoration are in pharaonic style. According to palaeographical criteria, Osing dated the tomb of the 1st or 2nd century A.D. A monument now occupied by Sheikh Bashendi's tomb, which has already been visited by nineteenth-century travellers, is also mentioned in the publication of Fakhry's work in Dakhla with some pictures and a sketch of the necropolis showing three other tombs.[3] The Dakhleh Oasis Project led by Anthony Mills cleared and cleaned the tomb of Kitynos, which was then opened to visitors. At that time part of the area was cleared and surveyed.[4] In 1985, the CSA-Dakhla Inspectorate undertook a large scale clearance and excavation of the site which was covered here and there by modern houses and a layer of more than three meters sand.[5] This work revealed a new tomb preserved to the height of one to two courses above foundations, similar to Sheikh Bashendi's. Between Sheikh Bashendi and Kitynos two tombs were excavated. Another poorly preserved one lies to the West of this row. In December 2000 the monuments were thoroughly mapped and drawn in order to be published.[6] The aim of this study is to

1 J. Osing in *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla aus dem Nachlass von Ahmed Fakhry* , Mainz, 1982, p. 58-69, pl. 12-19, 64-69.

2 The plan of Kitynos in the general map is borrowed from Arnold, in *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla* , pl. 64.

3 Mohamed Moursi in *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla*, p. 57-58, pl. 12.

4 A.J. Mills, "Dakhleh Oasis Project. Report on the Fifth Season of Survey", *JSSEA* XIII, 1983, p. 131.

5 The excavations lasted out two seasons (1 April - 30 May and 1 September - 30 November 1985). The author was in charge of the work.

6 Mapping was done by theodolite, plans were drawn on the scale 1/50, elevations and sections on the scale 1/20 and 1/10. I thank my colleagues of Dakhla Inspectorate for their collaboration, Georges Soukiassian (Ifao) who surveyed and drew the monuments with me, Alain Lecler (Ifao) who took pictures. I thank Pr. Gaballa, President of the CSA who encouraged me in this study, Pr. Mathieu, Director of the Ifao who welcomed my paper in the pages of the *BIFAO*, and Anne Mathieu who revised the text.

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provide a documentation about a range of mausolea which have but a few parallels in Egypt and are even, in some respects unparalleled since, as far as we know, no stone dome tomb of the Roman Period is yet documented.[7]

Four of the five monuments at the north of Kitynos tomb have their fronts on the same East/West line, facing North. They are set close together, forming a 40 m long row. The fifth one, at the West, has a different orientation, 45° to the others. For sake of convenience we shall refer to Kitynos as 1 and number the other tombs of the main row 2 to 5 from West to East, Sheikh Bashendi being thus tomb 4. We shall leave aside the isolated western monument, numbered 6 (fig. 1).

Relative chronology is evident, as tomb 2 leans against tomb 1 and tomb 3 against tomb 2. Tombs 3, 4, 5 are so similar – same designs and dimensions – that they must be contemporaneous. No direct link allows us to assert in which order they were built. Nevertheless, it is likely that the range developed in one direction and, if so, towards the East, running from previous buildings to an empty area. A small clue seems to confirm this hypothesis : the pilasters of the west side of tomb 4 are unfinished while the pilasters of the east side are fully carved. Lastly, monument 6 being aside from the main layout cannot be classified in the range on archaeological grounds.

Tomb 2

[fig. 2, photos 1-4]

Tomb 2 (8,50 × 6,68 m) is built of sandstone. It leans directly against tomb 1, without a southern wall. Before the front lies a forecourt (inner measurement : 4,55 × 3,02 m) with a protruding narrower entrance (1,70 × 1,75 m). It is designed according to the usual pharaonic layout for entrance of sanctuaries. There was neither a door nor a ceiling but screen walls (0,35 to 0,50 m thick), only one layer of which is now preserved. Just as the walls, the slabs of the floor, cut in polygonal shape, were coated. Traces of it remain in the entrance. On the western outer side there is a foundation of three mudbrick layers casing the fill on which slabs are set.

The funerary chapel itself rests on two foundation courses (each 0,26 to 0,28 m high). The walls (about 0,80 m thick) are made of good horizontal layers of middle size sandstone blocks (average height : 0,25 m). As the corners of the front have torus, there must have been an egyptian cornice at the top. A low step (0,13 m) made of a broad slab precedes the doorway in which remain the sockets of a two leaves door.

Inside, only the eastern third is partly preserved. The remains of a brick wall coated with plaster can be seen. The bottom of an engaged column built with special quarter of a circle shaped bricks is still visible at the southern end, so that it is easy to restitute another one at the North. A door opens onto a narrow room (5,60 × 1,63 m) with a lime floor upon a layer of burnt bricks. Under this floor, which is now poorly preserved, lie two well carved, roughly

7 Cf. Salah EL-NAGGAR, *Les voûtes dans l'architecture de l'Égypte ancienne* , *BdE* 128, Le Caire, 1999, p. 315-316.

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anthropoid, limestone sarcophagi, head to the South. They were probably plundered already in the Antiquity and the flat lids are broken. These sarcophagi, sealed under the floor testify that the building was a familial tomb. Even though it is spoiled beneath floor level, the layout of the rest of the monument is easy to restitute. There must have been another North/South partition wall with engaged columns enclosing at the West a narrow room symmetrical with the eastern one. Otherwise the span to be covered would have been too wide. This leaves a convenient width of 2,50 m for the central room. Partition walls being made of bricks, it is not likely at all that the roof should have been made of stone slabs like in tomb 1. The eventuality of brick skew vaults does not fit with the pilasters. So it is almost certain that the monument was covered by a flat roof laid on wooden beams. This roof is supposed to have risen at the same level as the roof of tomb 1 (3,10 m up the forecourt level). So the rooms inside were about 2,80 m high, a feature comparable with the 2,42 m in tomb 1.

A mudbrick building coated with white plaster leans against the west wall of tomb 2. The area cleared shows a long narrow room (more than 11,50 m N/S × 3,20 m E/W) built along the western side of tomb 2 and 1. The entrance further South is now covered by modern houses. So the overall plan and the use of the building cannot yet be defined.

Tombs 3,4,5

[fig. 1, 3-12, photos 1, 5-14]

These three dome tombs have to be considered together as they are completely identical, except for very slight differences in dimensions :

tomb 3 : 7,50 m E/W × 7,55 m N/S (overall measurement without the pilasters) ;

tomb 4 : 7,33 × 7,75 m ;

tomb 5 : 7,05 × 7,55 m.

Tomb 5 being only preserved on one to two layers above foundations, we shall concentrate on tombs 3 and 4. Tomb 4 provides an almost complete model as the dome is perfectly preserved. Tomb 3, which is partly ruined, offers an opportunity to observe details of masonry and funerary layout in the substructure.

Monument 4 is now occupied by the tomb of Sheikh Bashendi, the holy figure of the village. A mudbrick dome, a *qubba*, has been built upon the Roman funerary chapel. It rises six meters over the ancient building so that there is a large room between the two domes, the extrados of the Roman one being the floor. The mudbrick dome has no squinches and the transition from square to octagon is managed by beams in the angles, an usual device for Islamic domes in Dakhla.[8] Sheikh Bashendi's *qubba* dates from the Ottoman Period. When the *qubba* was built the dome of tomb 4 was intact but the cornice and the doorway were surely partly ruined. Indeed the upper part was removed down to sound layers, at the top of

8 The matter has been studied by G. CASTEL in his study on Sheikh Hammuda in Balat, *AnIsl* XX, 1984, p. 185-190.

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the capitals or at their lower bed. As for the doorway, the original lintel remains inside, but on the front it has been replaced by wooden beams supporting a mudbrick wall.

As for the cornice one can assess that it was rising at the same level as the top of the dome. Beyond, we have no clue to draw its detailed shape. At least we can ascertain that it was of classical style from the rest of the outline. Indeed the pilasters show attic bases and capitals which could approximately be called tuscan. The bases come within a very common type, whereas the capitals are unparalleled and look a little unusual.[9] The pilasters show a comparatively low profile, protruding no more than 8 cm and usually 5 cm from the walls. Apart from bases and capitals, the pilasters were carved on the spot as it can be noticed on the unfinished west side and even on the front where some irregularities remain.

Traces of a thin white plaster here and there are sufficient to prove that these monuments were fully coated. Certainly some parts such as capitals and cornices were coloured.

A 1,20 m high space was left over the lintel. We could restitute here either a small arch, according to the style of the monument (niches inside), or an inscription, a *titulus*, probably written in greek, bearing the name of the owner.

In the first layout a second door was planned in the middle of the western wall, but was never completed : it has been blocked before reaching the level of the lintel.

Unlike the flat roof of tombs 1 and 2, the dome provides a very large square space inside (5,50 × 5,55 m). Built on pendentives, it rises to 5,35 m and shows a surbased profile. The thickness of the cupola, which can be observed thanks to a crack is about 25 cm. Voussoirs are hewn with a peculiar joint so that each layer fits into the other. This rather rare device has been noticed in stone arches from Ptolemaic Period and described as « joggled arch ».[10] The keystone is tronconical (diameter in the intrados : 0,84 m) and very slightly convex. The lower bed of the first layer comes 4 cm out of the edge of the wall.

In the middle of the south wall, there is a wide recess (2,20 × 0,95 m) covered by an apse 2,73 m high which is obviously the central feature of the funerary cult. This recess is framed by thin engaged columns (square section 34 to 30 cm) with capitals whose shape is roughly derived from the corinthian type. East and west of that recess two small niches show a similar design 0,75 m above the floor. Nowadays the walls and niches are coated with plaster so that the outline looks blurred. In the Roman Period there must have been a coating too, and even part of the present one might date back to the Antiquity.

The level of the modern clay floor is just under the offset of the foundations which make a skirting. If the Roman floor was made of stone slabs, as one could expect in a monument whose forecourt was paved, it has been removed. The place being till now considered as sacred, we gave up excavating under the floor.

Very few remains were left of the forecourt of tomb 4. Although it is poorly preserved too, the forecourt of tomb 3 shows traces of walls designed exactly as the screen walls of tomb 2.

9 Cf. P. Pensabene, *Elementi Architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani* (*Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto Greco-Romano*, serie C, vol. III), Rome, 1993, passim.

10 S. Clarke, R. Engelbach, *Ancient Egyptian Masonry* , London, 1930, p. 187, fig. 224.

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The front of tomb 3 being really the same as the one of tomb 4 deserves no comment.

In the substructure, the most interesting features are two North/South graves straight below each small niche. They consist of parallelepipeds made of sandstone slabs intended to house a wooden coffin. The relevant point is that these two graves are part of the original building. So the funerary design is clear : the small niches are linked with the graves. Was there another grave under the main recess ? Unfortunately we do not know because the place is spoiled. The dimensions of the recess (2,20 × 0,90 m) are sufficient to hold such a grave, but whereas the graves under the small niches have been half preserved as they were partly built under the south wall, the grave in the central recess, if there ever was one, may have been removed without leaving any trace.

Some details of masonry are more noticeable in tomb 3 than in tomb 4 as there is no coating left. The south-west pendentive of the dome is well preserved. A loose block from the apse of the main recess can be restituted in its original position. It shows a fitting device already noticed in the dome of tomb 4. In the middle of the first layer of the apse a mortise, although very small (10 × 8 × 4 cm), might be a putlog hole used to hold the framework necessary for assembling the apse.

Unlike in tombs 4 and 5, a secondary room is appended to the west of the chapel, leaning against tomb 2. At first sight it looks like an addition but it was made during the building of the main chapel. Indeed the western door is planned to open from East to West into this second room, and not from West to East as it should have been if the door had been originally planned to be a lateral entrance to the chapel.

The floors are not preserved. In the basement of the west room lies a stone sarcophagus head to the South. Under the main room were also found three stone sarcophagi upside down. As they were no longer in their original position, they are not drawn on the plan. If these sarcophagi are not a feature of a late occupation, as one might suspect, their presence suggests that a monument perhaps intended at first to be a mausoleum became a familial tomb. Whether the western room was designed to be a second funerary chapel or, much more likely, whether it was something like a storeroom then used for burial is impossible to assert.

As for these three dome tombs, there remains to determine what was framed in the main recess. Two hypotheses are plausible : a picture painted on the wall like in the tombs of Alexandria, or a statue. Indeed the occurrence of statues has been well documented in Egyptian funerary chapels since the Old Kingdom, and according to Roman use during the Empire it is the very object supposed to be found in the niche of a mausoleum.

Tomb 6 [fig. 13]

Tomb 6 is poorly preserved. Only two courses of sandstone foundations remain and, at the east and south sides, the outer line of the wall. The rectangular plan (overall measurement of the foundations : 6,95 m N/S × 5,85 m E/W) rules out a dome. Beyond, there is no clue that might help us to assess the style of the building, pharaonic or classic. The monument is defined here as a funerary chapel on the sole basis of its location in a necropolis.

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Lacking preserved burials and even loose objects to date the tombs, we have to rely upon relative chronology according to the horizontal development of the necropolis. The following sequence is settled : tomb 1, tomb 2, tombs 3-5. According to architectural grounds, it is likely that tomb 6, which is covered by a flat roof, is related to tombs 1 and 2. Actually there are two clusters : monuments of pharaonic style (tombs 1,2), monuments of classical style with a dome (tombs 3,4,5). In our opinion, the general layout of the necropolis provides a reliable argument to assess that tombs 3-5 were built relatively soon after the first cluster. Indeed their forecourt are identical to the forecourt of tomb 2 and are set on the same line. Obviously they were built along something like a processional way. It has already been mentioned that Kitynos's tomb has been dated of the 1st or 2nd century A.D. Surmising, however, that it comes early within this estimated span of time, it can be assessed that tombs 3-5 could not be later than the end of the 2nd century A.D.

The owners of such monumental tombs must have been wealthy people and such a necropolis points to Ezbet Bashendi as a significant settlement in the Roman Period. Indeed, if we look for comparison, the closest example is the necropolis of Ismant el-Kharab and the importance of Kellis as a townsite has been well demonstrated.[11]

Lastly the tombs of Ezbet Bashendi are further evidence of the expansion of Greco-Roman architectural patterns in Egypt during Roman Period and show a rather high technical standard.

11 J.E. KNUDSTAD, R.O. FREY, "Kellis : The Architectural Survey of the Romano Byzantine town at Ismant el-Kharab", in *Dakhleh Oasis Project : Monograph 2*, Oxford, 1999, p. 189-214 ; see especially p. 208-213.

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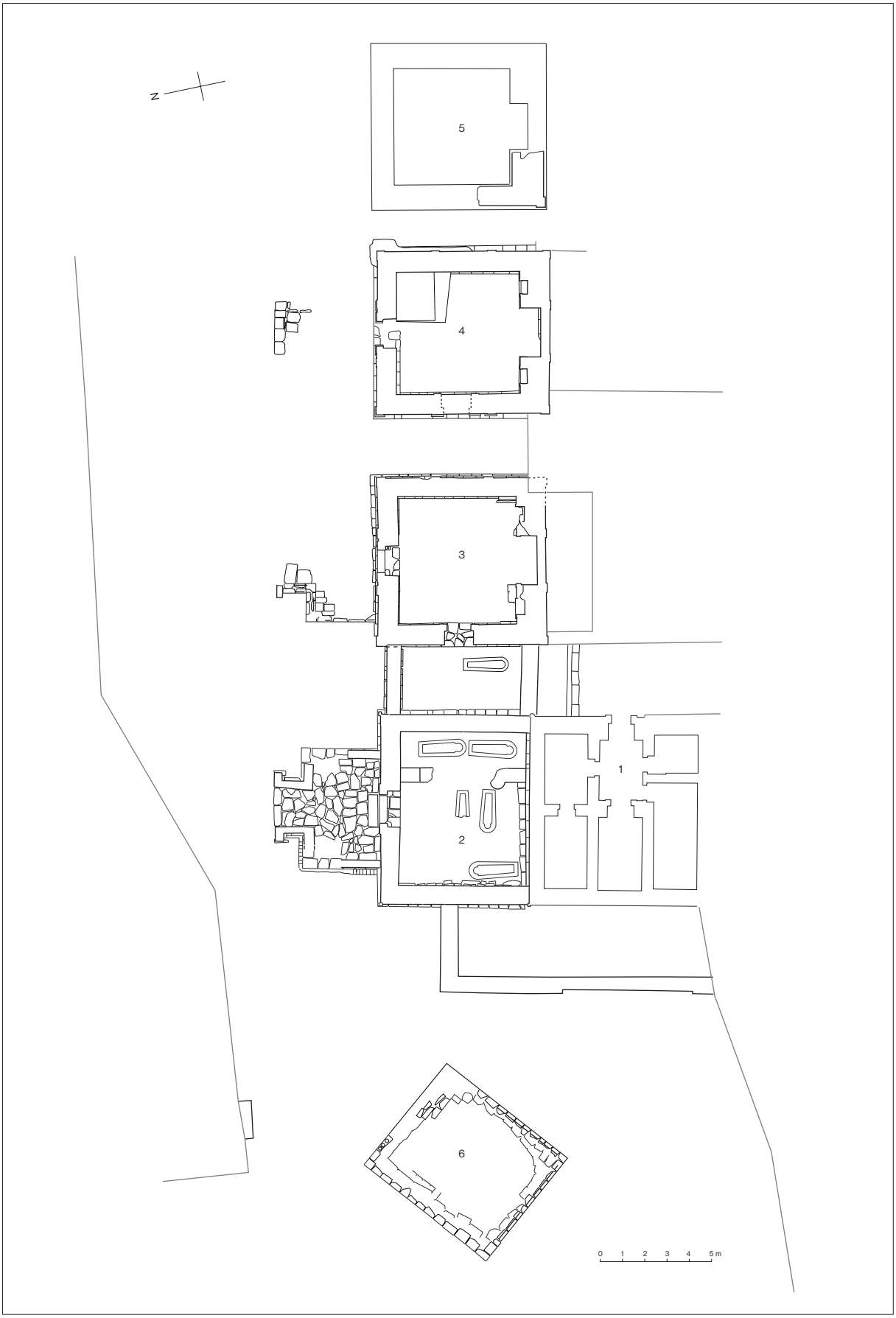


Fig. 1. Ezbet Bashendi. Map of the Roman necropolis, 1/250.

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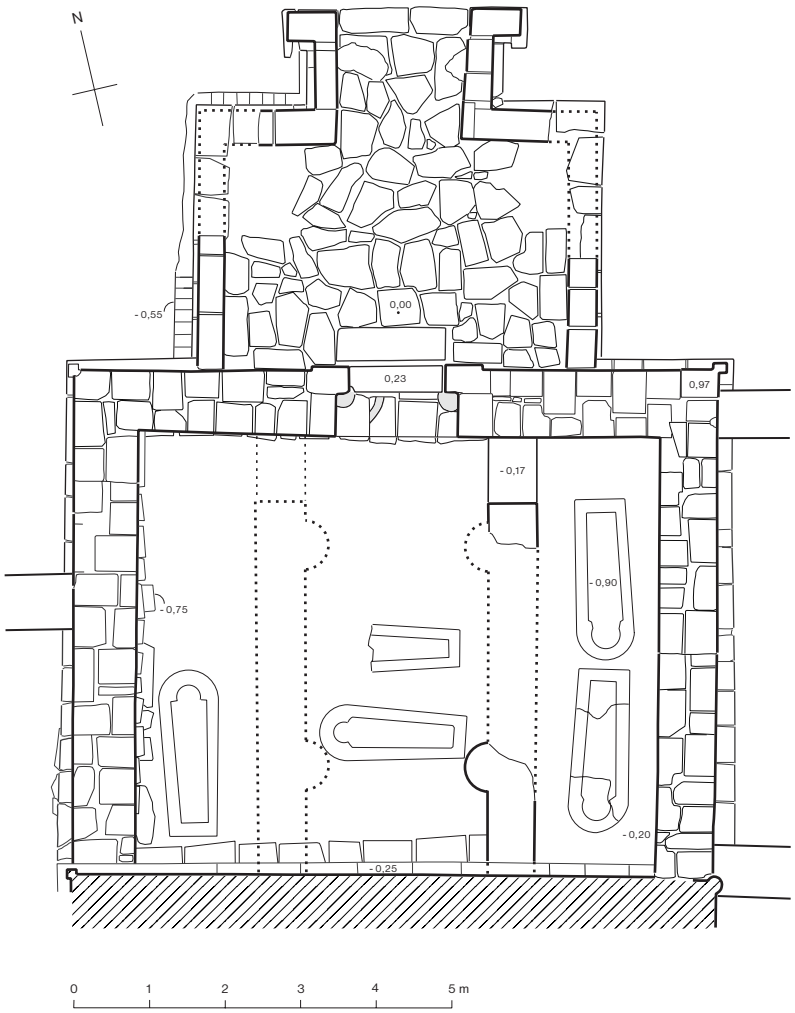


Fig. 2. Tomb 2, plan, 1/100.

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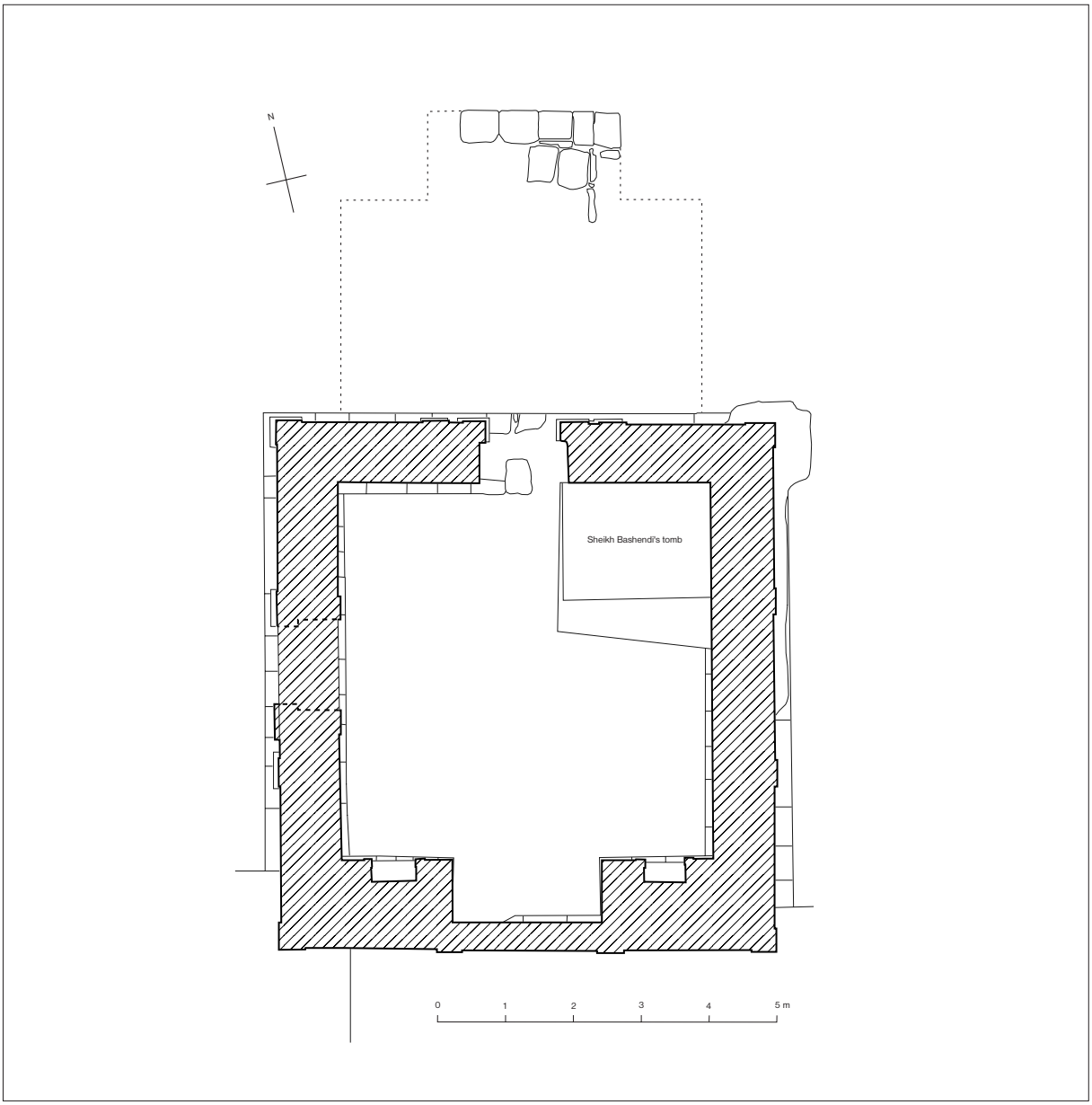


Fig. 3. Tomb 4, plan, 1/100.

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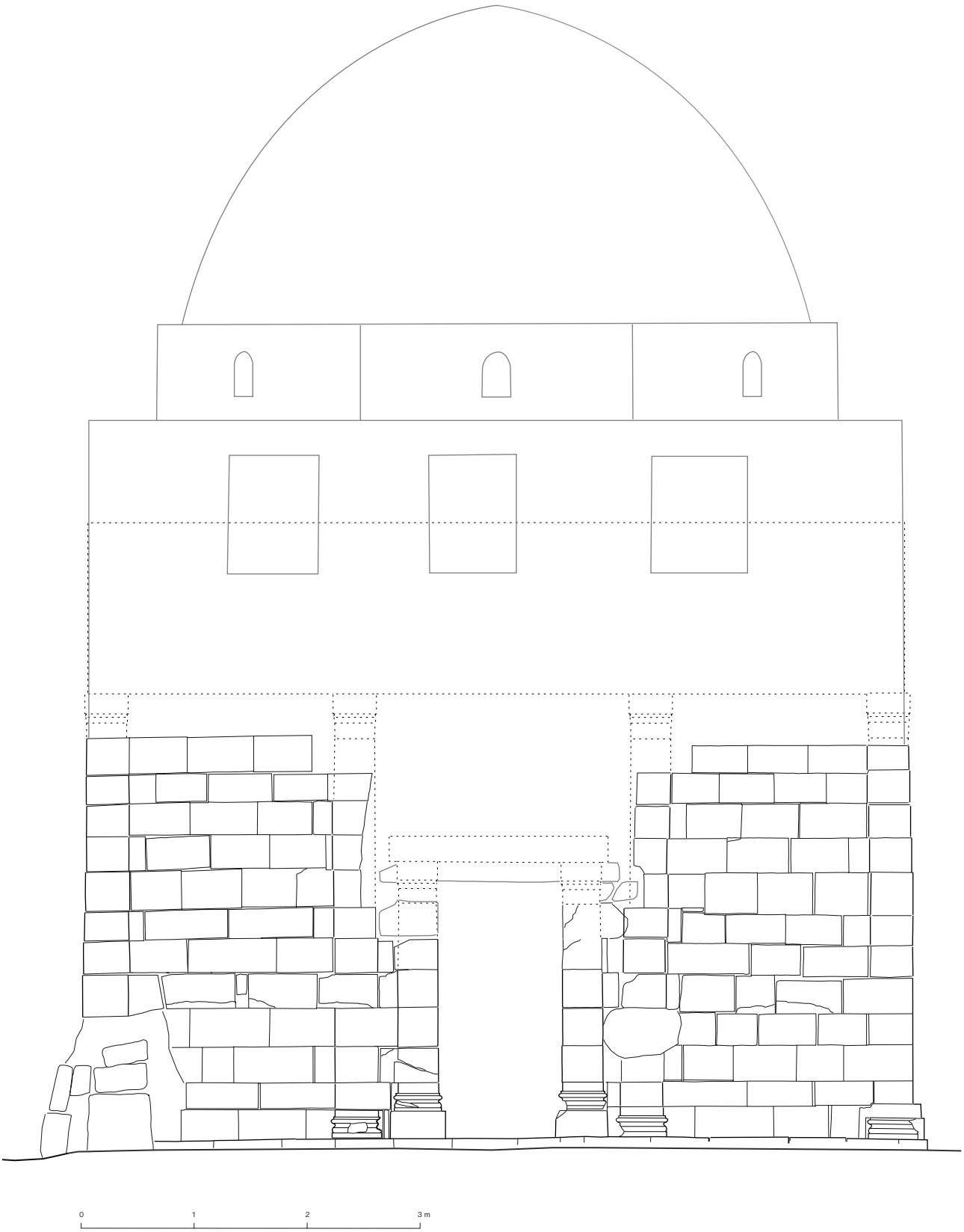


Fig. 4. Tomb 4, front, 1/50.

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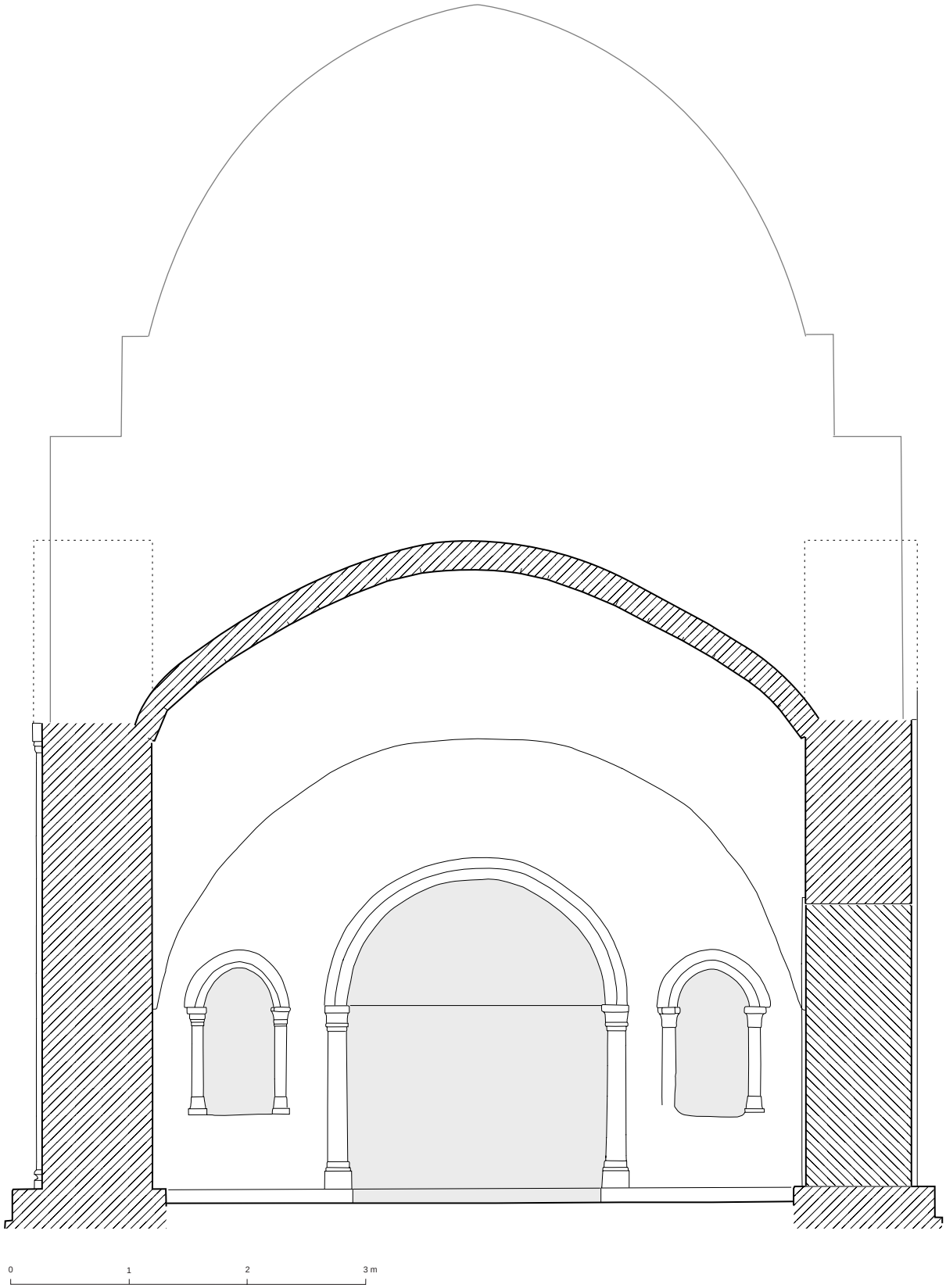


Fig. 5. Tomb 4, section E/W, 1/50.

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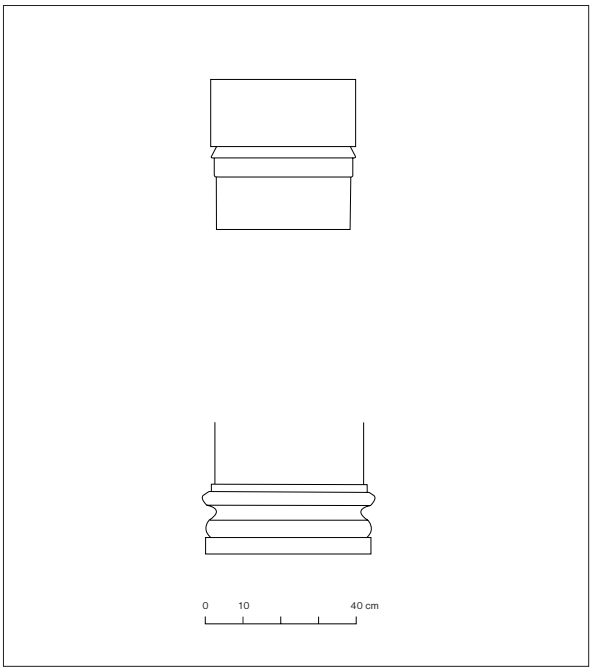


Fig. 6. Tomb 4, pilasters, details of bases and capitals, 1/20.

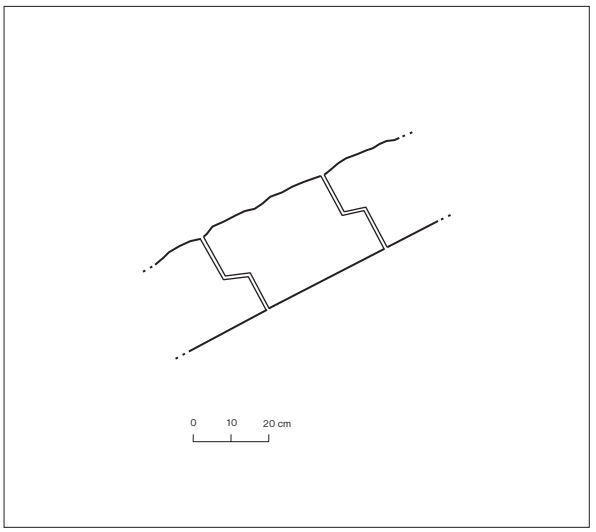


Fig. 7. Tomb 4, dome, sketch of the joints, 1/20.

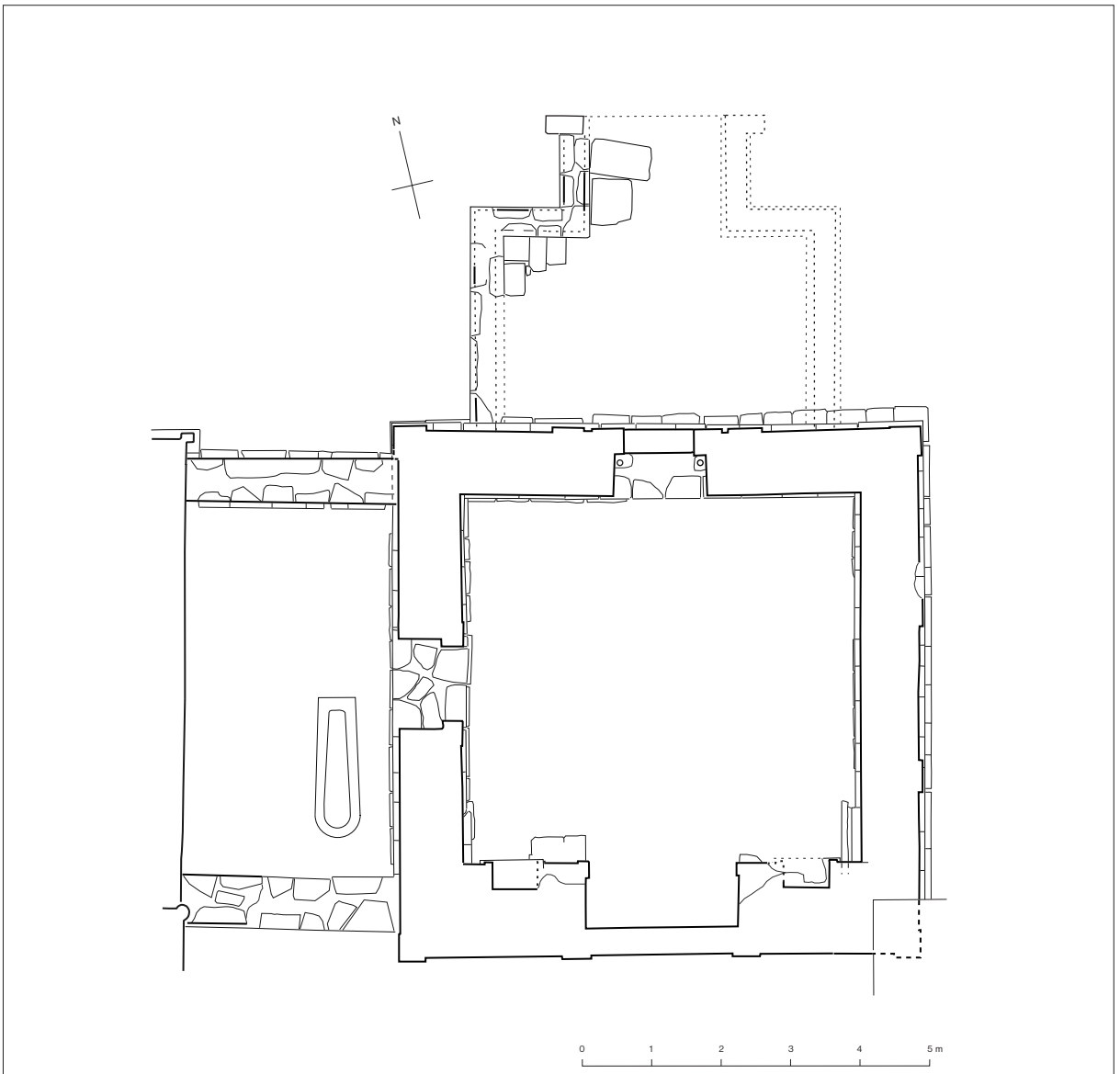


Fig. 8. Tomb 3, plan, 1/100.

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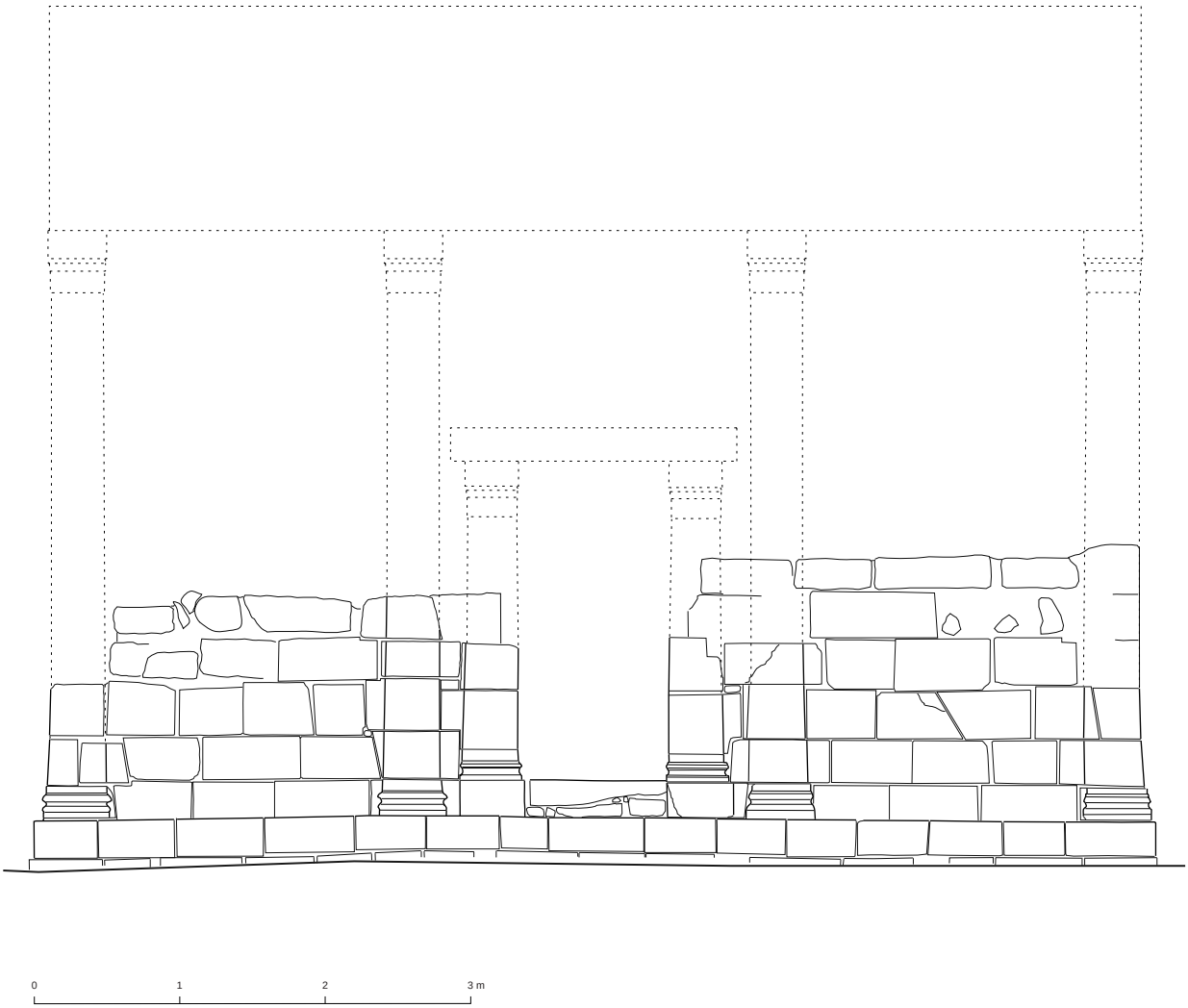


Fig. 9. Tomb 3, front, 1/50.

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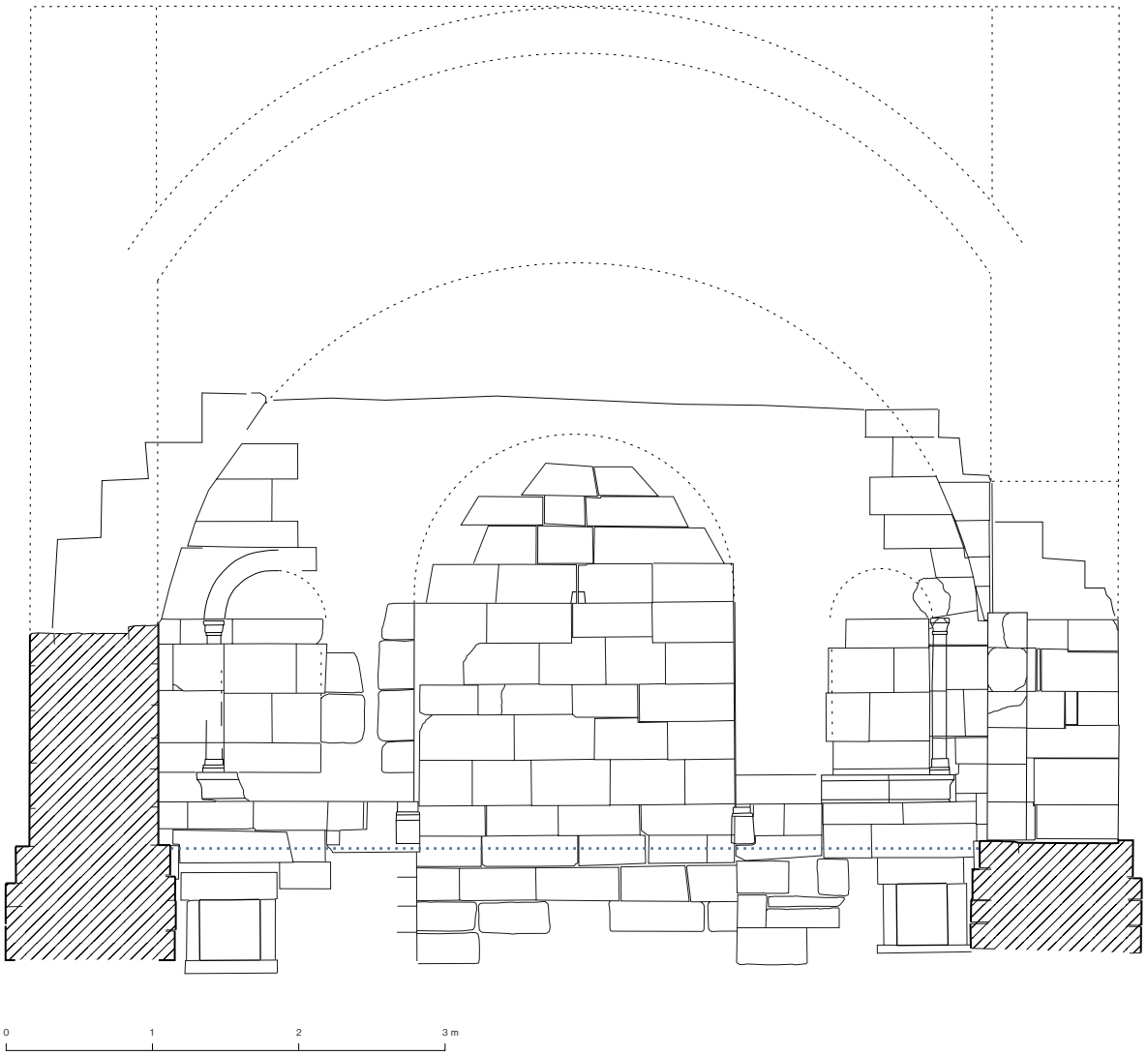
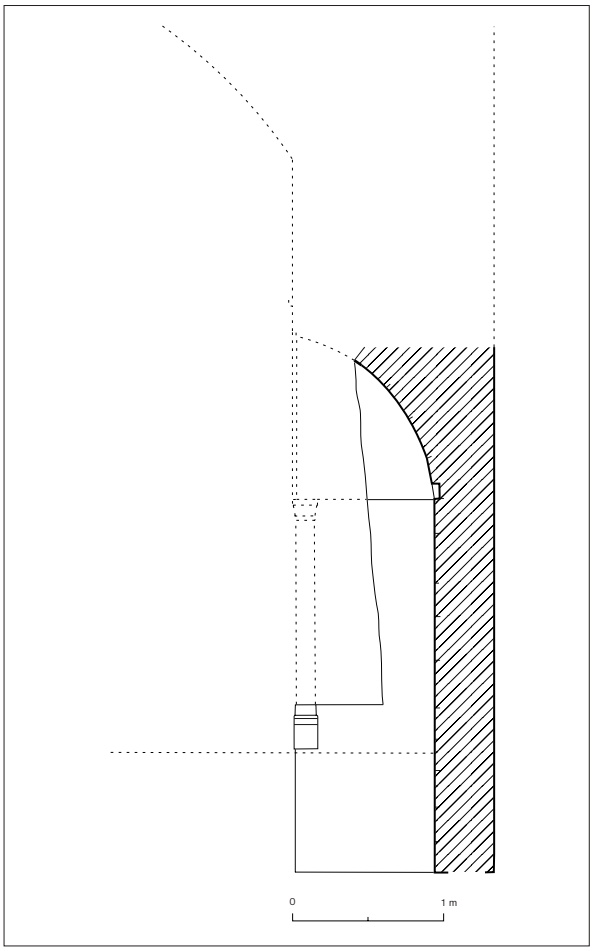


Fig. 10. Tomb 3, section E/W, 1/50.

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Fig. 11.
Tomb 3, section N/S of the apse, 1/50.



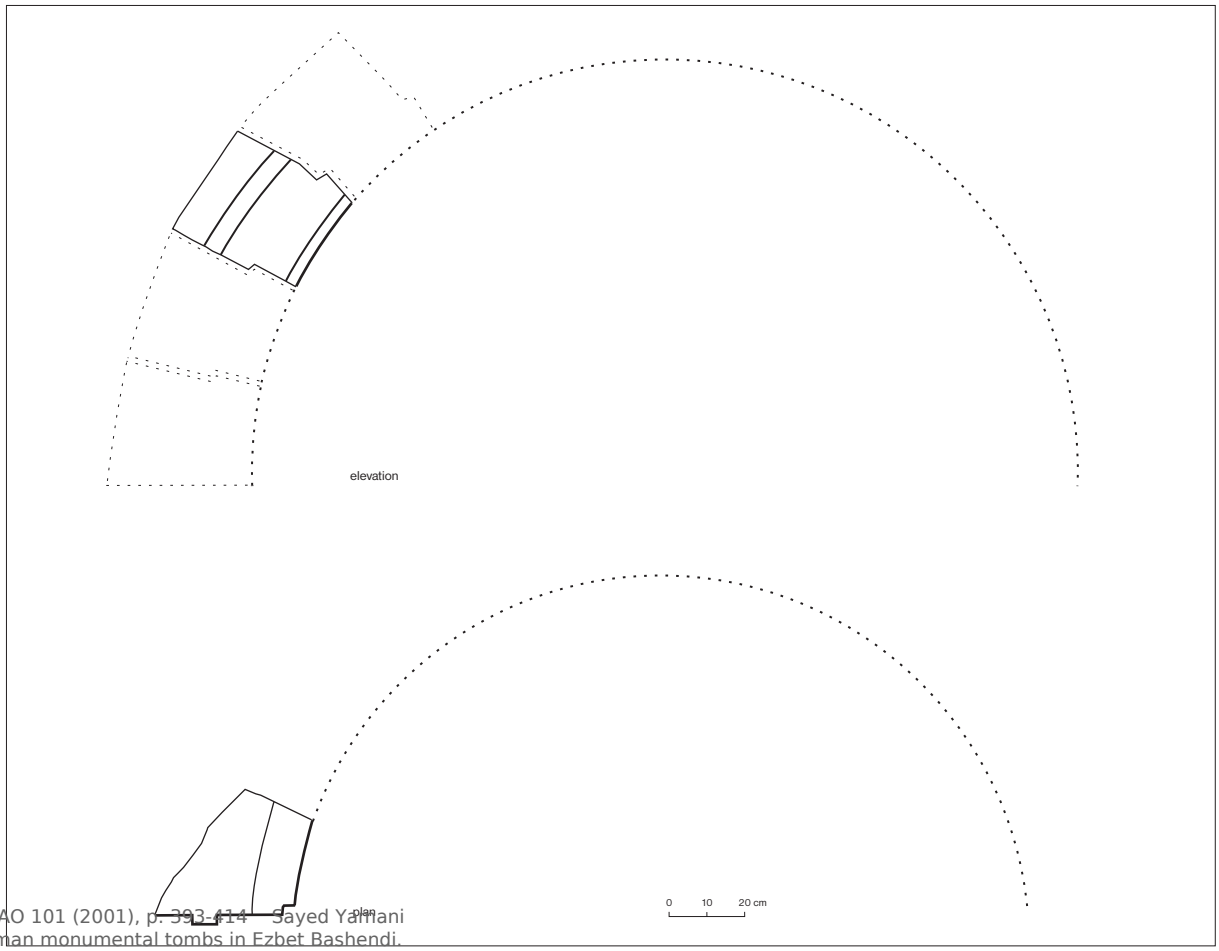


Fig. 12. Tomb 3, block of the apse restituted in its original position 1/20.

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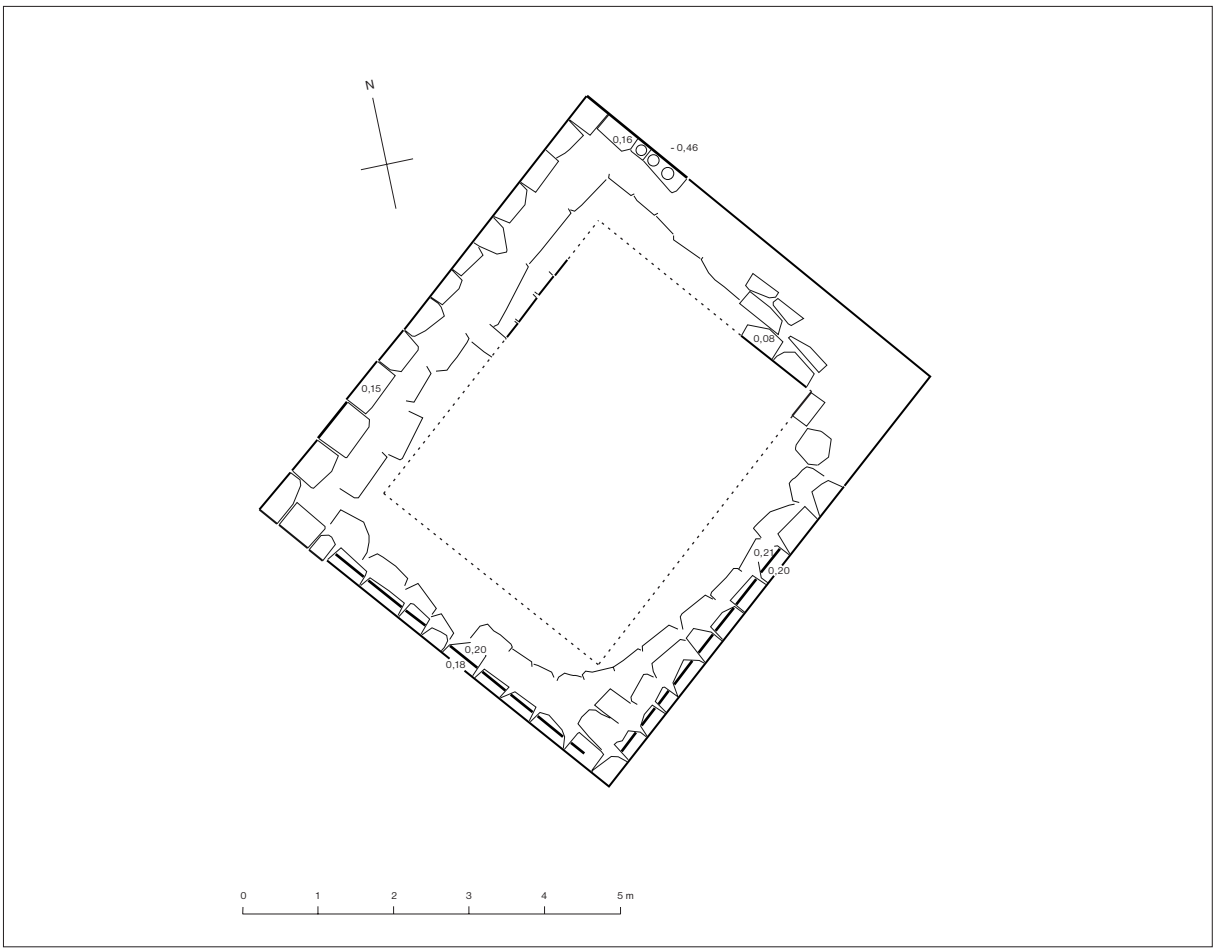


Fig. 13. Tomb 6, plan 1/100.

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Photo 1.
General view E/W from tomb 4. Foreground : tomb 3. Middle : tomb 1 (Kitynos) and 2. Background : tomb 6.





Photo 2. Tomb 2, view N/S. Forecourt. Background : tomb 1.

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Photo 3.
Tomb 2, NE corner. Torus and wall of the western room of tomb 3 leaning against tomb 2.



Photo 4.
Tomb 2, eastern room, view N/S. Sarcophagi and remains of the plastered floor.

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Photo 5. Tomb 5, view N/S.



Photo 6. Tomb 4 (Sheikh Bashendi), view NE/SW. At the left, corner of tomb 5 ; at the right, tomb 3.

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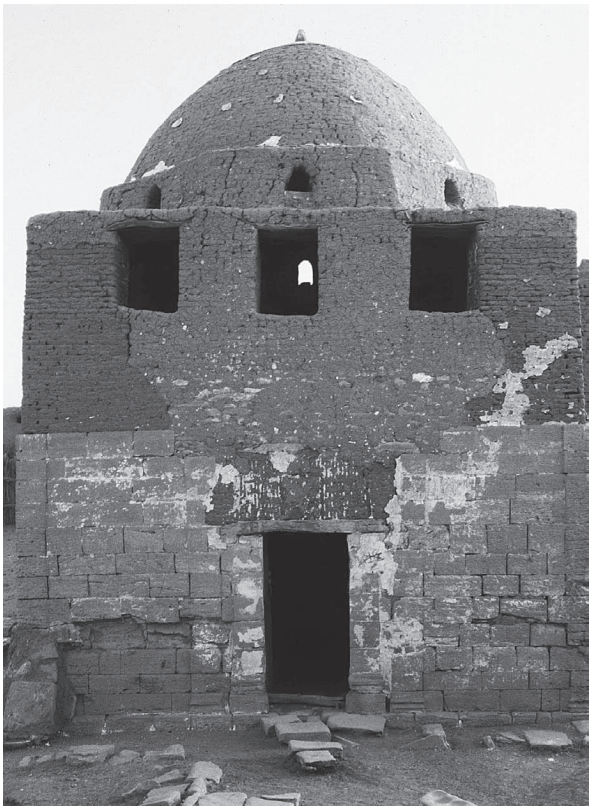


Photo 7. Tomb 4, front (North).

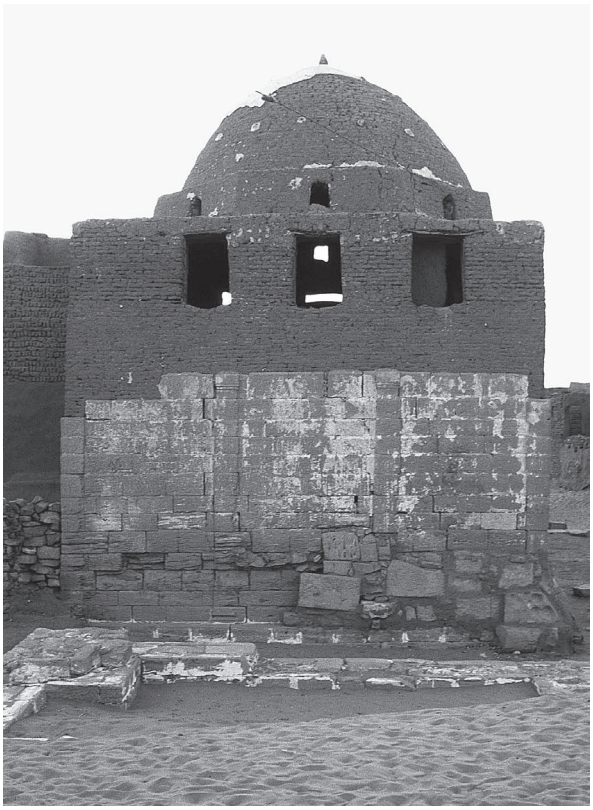


Photo 8. Tomb 4, east side. Foreground : tomb 5.



Photo 9. Tomb 4, east side. A pilaster. Traces of plaster.

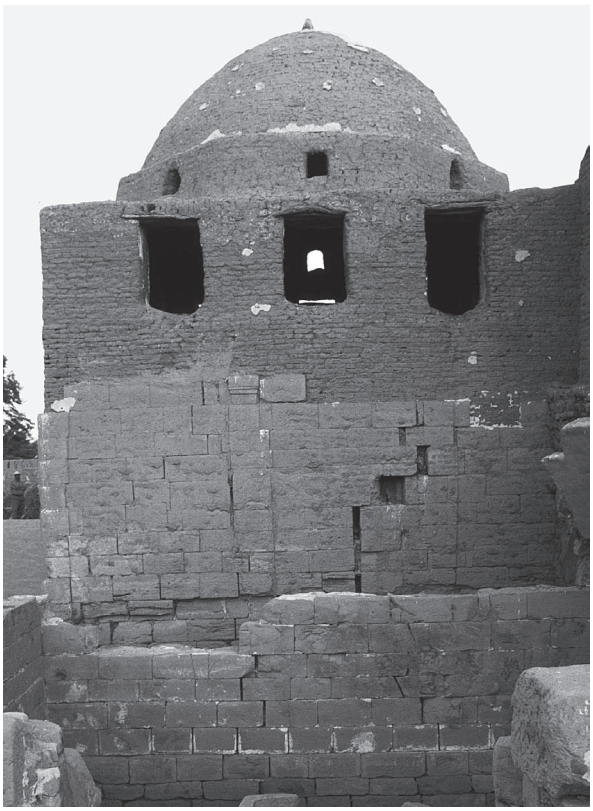


Photo 10. Tomb 4, west side. Foreground : tomb 3.

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Photo 11.
Tomb 4, inside. Dome, central recess and niches.

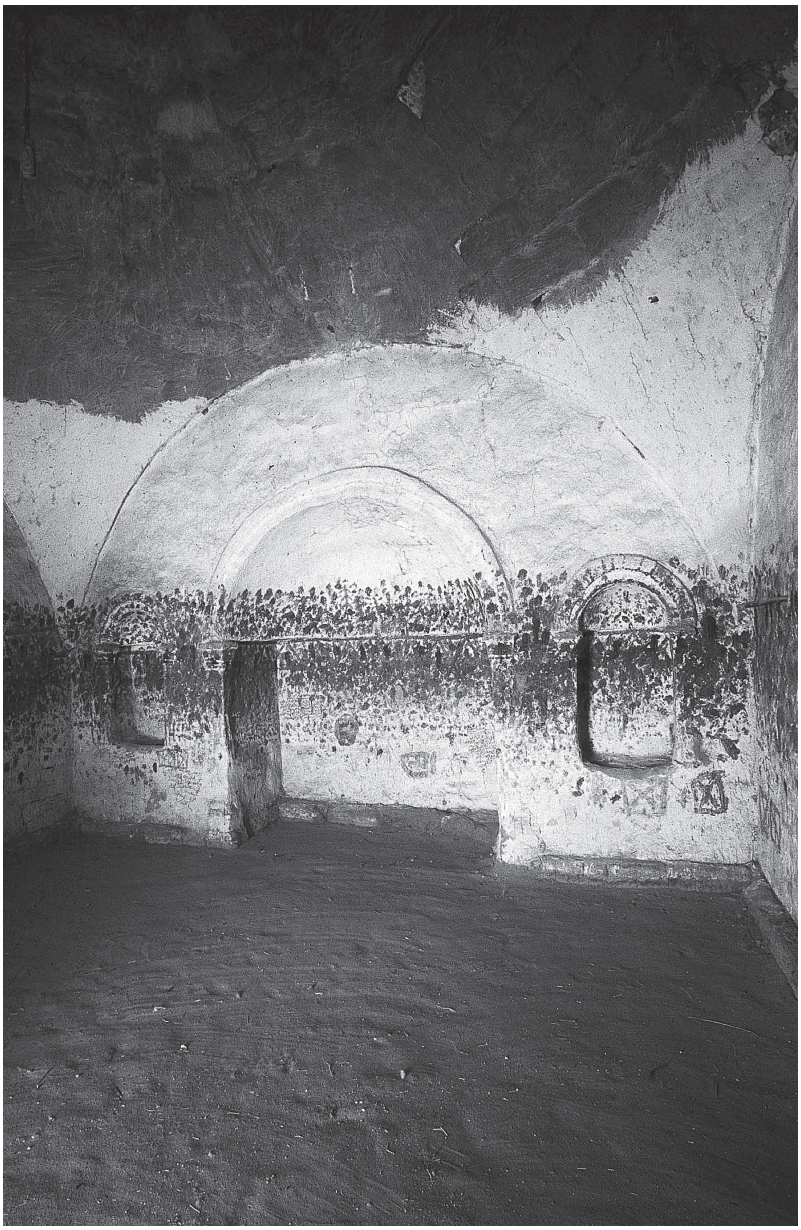


Photo 12.
Tomb 3, front (North).



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Photo 13.
Tomb 3, inside. South wall, central recess, niches and graves below the niches.



Photo 14.
Tomb 3, inside. SW angle.

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