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# FIRE IN FUNERAL CONTEXTS: NEW DATA FROM TELL AL-NASRIYAH (SYRIA)

Aline Tenu, Stéphane Rottier

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# FIRE IN FUNERAL CONTEXTS: NEW DATA FROM TELL AL-NASRIYAH (SYRIA)

ALINE TENU<sup>1</sup>  
AND STÉPHANE ROTTIER<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*In 2008, a cremation cemetery was found at Tell al-Nasriyah. Located in the lower city, it has so far yielded about 50 cinerary urns. First radiocarbon dates give a time range between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC for the cremation graves. They contained human bones usually well burnt, sometimes faunal remains also cremated, and very frequently shapeless residues of melted vitreous material. We also found a more recent (11<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> cent. BC) ashy layer with less cremated human bones. This new data allows for a relevant analysis of the role of fire in the cremation process and of its evolution.*

In 2008, the *Mission syro-française de l'Oronte* led by Dominique Parayre and Michel al-Maqdissi (Al-Maqdissi, Parayre and Sauvage 2010) resumed the archaeological exploration of Tell al-Nasriyah almost 80 years after the very first test trenches dug by the Danish expedition of Hama (Riis 1948: 26). Tell al-Nasriyah is a quadrangular site on the eastern bank of the Orontes River situated 15 kilometres north-west of Hama. It covers at least 70 hectares and is still surrounded by a huge earthen levee to the North and to the East. A citadel stands in the South-East corner. The cremation cemetery was discovered in the lower city (Area A) (Fig. 1).

The aim of our paper is to present these recent discoveries. They shed light on the cremation practice, which remains relatively rare in the Ancient Near East (Bienkowski 1982; Tenu 2005; Tenu 2009: 85-89),<sup>3</sup> and provide interesting data pertaining to the burning process associated to funeral contexts.

## I. GRAVEYARD PRESENTATION

During the first campaign in 2008, 4 areas 10 m square were opened yielding about 30 deposits in a context severely disturbed by medieval houses. In addition, the graveyard is situated at the bottom of a very steep slope. As a result, some tombs were in a very poor state of preservation. Twenty-five were however brought to the Hama Museum. There they were excavated in April 2009 as genuine archaeological micro-sites, in

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3 For the Phoenician practice, see Aubet 2004 and Aubet 2010.

order to understand the complete sequence of the deposit of each bone and each object (Duday 1990; Duday *et al.* 2000). In October 2009 and 2010, new field research took place, and so far 54 graves have been identified (Fig. 2) (Parayre *et al. in press*). Bone analysis has just begun, and as yet it has been completed for only 7 deposits (231, 214, 208, 204, 213, 201, 233, and 232 in progress). The data we are presenting in this paper are thus still very preliminary and must be considered with all necessary caution.

Generally speaking, grave composition is very simple: cinerary urns were never associated to offerings. No animal bone, vessel, or object, such as a figurine for instance, has been found. This absence betrays a deliberate choice because in the pits there was place enough to accommodate more than the urn. In reference to this issue, the Tell al-Nasriyah cemetery differs from those of Hama (Riis 1948: 27-28), Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Tenu, Bachelot and Le Goff 2005: 12), and especially Nebe Yunus north of Karkemiš, where jars were sometimes associated to figurines and covered by kraters or even large bath tubs (Woolley 1939: 14-16).

We have been able to identify two different situations for the jars. Some urns were placed in natural holes of the bedrock, which outcrops on the surface almost everywhere in that area. These small cavities were sometimes widened to allow a complete burial of the jars. Urns, often found leaning against the back of the hole, were afterwards surrounded by stones roughly squared (404, 407, 408, 425, 431) (Fig. 3) or by fragmentary mudbricks (429). The holes were then filled, and probably sealed. But interestingly field observations and taphonomic analysis indicate some others were not buried, but simply placed on the bedrock. As a result, they remained visible (204, 207, 225, 230, 231, 232, maybe 206 and 224, among others). The presence of two different uses is to our knowledge unique in the Ancient Near East, and all the more interesting since they certainly coexisted. Indeed, the non-buried tomb 421 for instance was later than the tomb 433, which was buried and later than 447 which was non-buried. On the contrary, 404 – one of the latest graves of the graveyard – was interred. For the time being we have no explanation for this phenomenon.

In any case, the question of the presence of a closing system – whatever it is – should be asked. On the field two jars were still closed: 407 with a body sherd and the 404 with a stone. But in five cases (201, 204, 209, 212, 222), we cannot reject the assumption that jars were closed in the same way. In addition, we observed that many urns were not filled by earth before their destruction, which is attested by points of impacts clearly visible on 208, 209, 212, 225, 228, or 230, for instance (Fig. 4). Sherds removed during these impacts are found on the surface of the ossuary, giving evidence of the available space at that moment. The destruction of at least a part of the cemetery took place before urns were filled with sediments, and as a result we can put forward the hypothesis it took place before the medieval period. This event remains so far very difficult to tackle because we still do not have any idea of its date but we cannot rule out the idea of deliberate destruction, maybe linked to military campaigns.

From a typological point of view, cinerary urns belong to three main types: painted urns without handles (type 1), painted urns with two handles and a specific motif on

them (type 2), undecorated jars with rounded bottoms and a single handle (type 3) (Faivre 2010a and 2010b). No jar is completely identical to another, but some are morphologically or stylistically closer. Jars 214, 215 and 224, for instance, show morphological similarities and were all used to contain bones of 'robust' individuals – compared with other subjects found in this cemetery – or of those presenting masculine traits. This observation may indicate urn type depends on gender, but it has not been confirmed yet.

The general stratigraphy of the cemetery remains difficult to establish for the reasons already mentioned (the slope and the medieval houses), but despite these reservations, a careful observation of the different types of interaction between the deposits allows for the reconstruction of a relative chronology: the easiest situation occurs when a deposit cuts an older one, as clearly in the case of 224 and 225. In other cases, the sequence is less obvious, but for instance 209 is later than 208, 214 is older than 206 and 207. 404 is later than the mudbrick basket 466 that sealed 429 – older than 427, while 427 precedes 426 (Fig. 5). In the cemetery, we also discovered a large slab (Fig. 6) roughly worked with cupules. It has not been lifted yet, and its function remains unclear (it was maybe used as an offering table or as a game board, see Tenu 2012), but its installation clearly followed the first graves since it crushed at least two of them (435 and 437).

On the field, it is not possible to get at first glance a good appraisal of the chronology of the cemetery but we hope in the future to be able to do it better thanks to cross checking with pottery types, studied by Xavier Faivre who is in charge of the pottery.

On bones treated in 2009, we proceeded to radiocarbon dating on five ossuary, two from urns of type 2, and 3 from urns of type 1.<sup>4</sup> They confirm our first impression of the long-lasting use of the cremation graveyard. Interestingly, the oldest date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC, which means cremation cemeteries appear before the beginning of the Iron Age. Residual inhumations discovered at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Bachelot, Le Goff and Tenu 2003: 97) may even indicate the custom to bury the dead in cemeteries rather than in houses may have preceded the adoption of cremation (Tenu *in press a*). On the other hand, jars are not later than 1000 BC.

## II. FIRE AND PYRE

Work has just begun at Tell al-Nasriyah but preliminary observations on the bones and on the urns' contents have delivered relevant clues pertaining to the burning process, and more generally to the dead themselves. At Tell al-Nasriyah, the youngest children identified so far are between 5 and 10 years old (222, 232 and 233). In this respect, the Tell al-Nasriyah cemetery is distinct from others because at the neighbouring site of Hama, non-cremated remains of babies were discovered in cinerary urns, sometimes

4 Tomb 201 (type 2): 1263-1052 BC; Tomb 233 (type 2): 1389-1212 BC; Tomb 210 (type 1): 1257-1021 BC; Tomb 212 (type 1): 1445-1320 BC; Tomb 230 (type 1): 1417-1269 BC.

alone, sometimes with the burnt bones of an adult (Riis 1948: 29-30). At Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, on the other hand, cremated remains of a very young child between 6 and 9 months old were deposited in an urn (Bachelot, Le Goff, and Tenu 2003: 101-102). At Tell al-Nasriyah, the complete absence of young children is still to be confirmed, but – if proved to be right – it may indicate the youngest deceased were buried elsewhere or/and even not cremated. Anyway, children are interred in the same type of urn as adults. Once again we may notice a difference with what has been observed at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni: there children's bones were deposited in smaller jars than in the case of adults (Bachelot, Le Goff, and Tenu 2002: 20; 2003: 100).

For adults, sexual diagnosis is difficult to establish first because bones were cremated (Duday *et al.* 2000; Lenorzer 2006), and above all because pelvis bones were often broken to enter the very narrow neck of cinerary urns (Fig. 7). Generally speaking, bones are usually well burnt, then carefully – and extensively – deposited in urns starting with the bigger pieces. No selection was made on the pyre; and small bones from the hand or the foot were found. We however observe a slight trend to an over-representation of the head (231, 204). In at least two cases – 229 and 230 – cremation seems to have not been completed. These two deposits are rather recent in the graveyard, and we wonder to what extent they would not reveal a real shift in the burning process. Another element supports this assumption: north-east of the cemetery we discovered a badly delimited area of bones at least 1.50 m long and 10 cm thick. Bones are more fragmented and less homogeneously burnt than elsewhere in the cemetery, and they were mixed with ashes and heated stones. The dating (1003-841 BC) is the most recent of the series. This area may have been constituted when pyre(s) was (were) cleaned out. But because of its late date, it could be linked to an evolution of the cremation performance: combustion was incomplete, and bones were less systematically collected.

Apart from bones, combustion residues have so far been very rare,<sup>5</sup> in only one grave (224) charcoal and ashes were retrieved from the pyre. Some objects were also placed on it, and afterwards put in the urns. We found associated to the bones burnt sheep astragals, iron tools or weapons (Fig. 8), bone *plaquettes*, but also shapeless remains of melted vitreous material, sometimes very small, stuck on the bones (Fig. 9), more precisely often on the skull, the hip and the foot. They are maybe remnants of beads sewn on the shroud, or on the veil, on the belt, and on shoes worn by the deceased. Interestingly, larger residues were sometimes deposited in urns as well, the best example being tomb 230, at the bottom of which we discovered an unusually big piece of melted material (Fig. 10). We can hardly imagine it was mistaken for bones, so its deposit in the urn, before the bones, is clearly significant. In others cases, unburnt objects, such as faience beads for instance, were also placed in the grave. Interestingly melted and non-melted faience objects were sometimes found in the same jar, showing that even if they are of the same nature, they certainly have different functions in the ritual.

5 This is also the rule at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Bachelot, Le Goff and Tenu 2002: 19). At Hama, P. J. Riis mentions only heated stones collected with the bones (Riis 1948: 30-31).

In 8 urns we identified, mixed with human bones, scanty faunal remains. They were not separated from human bones so they were maybe collected by mistake. Further analysis may reveal possible prevalence in the choice of animals and maybe butchery traces. The meaning of these discoveries is still being discussed: are they food offerings perhaps associated to meat consumption during funerals or 'real' animal sacrifices, the smallness of the pieces revealing they were perhaps considered as *pars pro toto*? In any case, the animal bones we have found so far were all burnt. Burnt faunal pieces seem to be the rule also in the other graveyards. The only exception is grave G IV 99 from Hama where non-cremated bones of a horse and of a sheep were found (Riis 1948: 30).

#### CONCLUSION

The number of graves already found while the graveyard limits remain unknown show this practice is deeply rooted despite its old dating. In addition, radiocarbon dates and field observations indicate a long-time use of the burial ground. Some deposits were clearly broken when new pits were dug to accommodate new burials. For instance, the upper part of urn 433 is missing and the bones come out of it. On the contrary, jars lying very close by were not damaged. Interred deposits were thus certainly locatable on surface, as suggested at Hama (Riis 1948: 28) or at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, but when memory of the oldest graves died out, new burials may have disturbed them. The use of the same necropolis for two or three centuries without noticeable changes in practices may reveal the population did not really change either.

From the Late Bronze Age onwards, cremation was thus well mastered. The dead were well burnt. Their bones were then extensively, carefully collected and never mixed. Indeed no plural grave has been identified so far. These observations reveal significant discrepancies with the Tell Shiukh Fawqâni practice where cremation is sometimes not complete and bones not wholly retrieved from the pyre, even if no prevalence in the choice of the skeleton parts appears (Le Goff 2007: 280-281). In addition, we noticed motifs painted on cinerary jars are never exactly the same. Jars were thus not identical, and the dead they contained continued to be identifiable after cremation (see also Tenu, *in press b*).

Interpreting the cremation practice is all the more difficult since its spreading coincides with the famous 'dark ages' which surround the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age. We may suggest its diffusion could have been related to the necessity to bury the dead together in a special space even if they died far away: burning the cadavers allowed carrying remains in good condition to an appropriate place. Or cremation was perhaps performed to avoid decomposition of the body, perceived as unbearable. However, we cannot rule out it betrays shifts in religious or cosmologic beliefs, leading to a new conception of fire as a privileged means to enter the Afterlife. Unfortunately, no textual source provides information on this matter, but fire

– apparently not destructive for the deceased identity – may have facilitated the passage from this world to the other.

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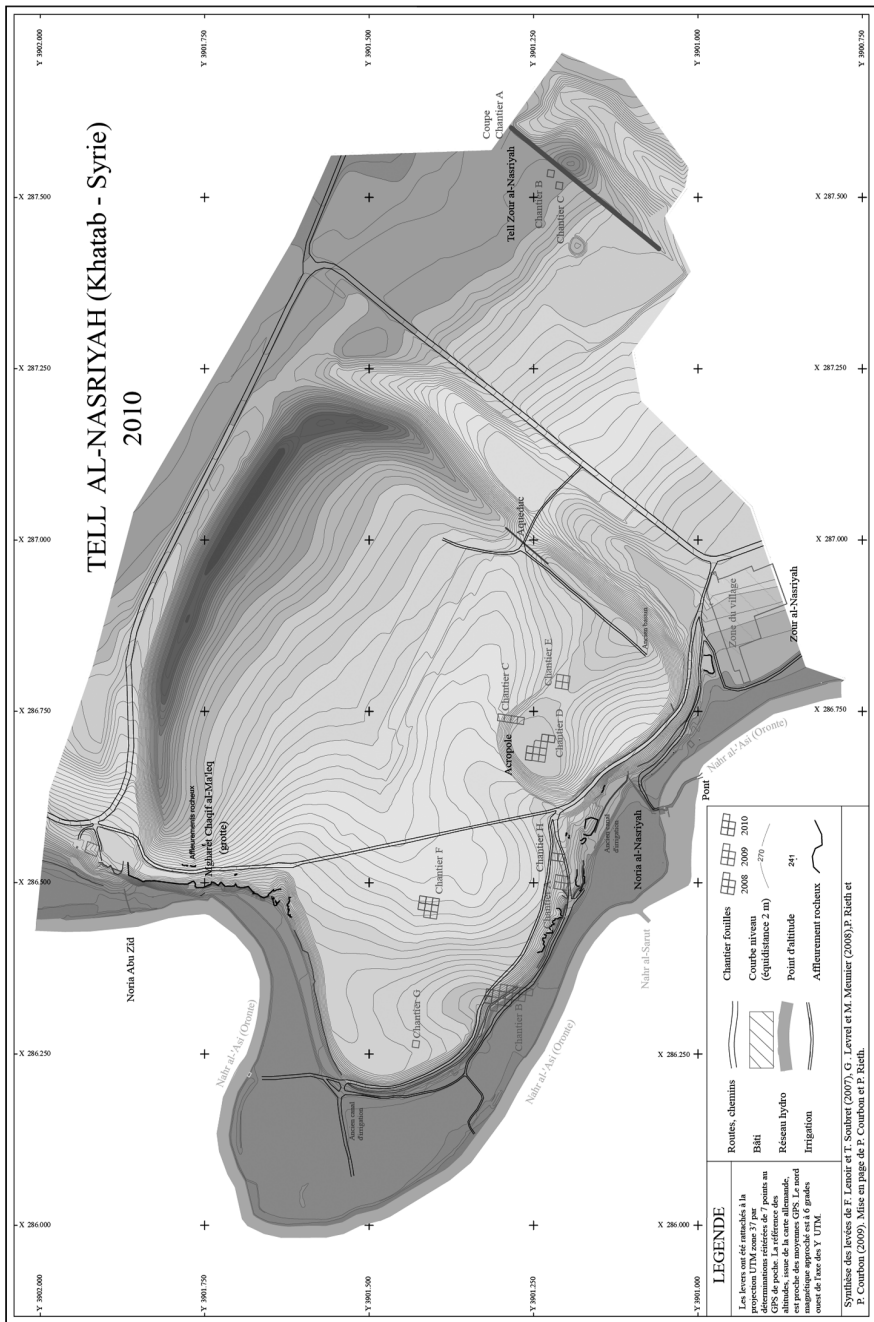


Fig. 1: Site map and location of the cremation cemetery. (M. Sauvage)

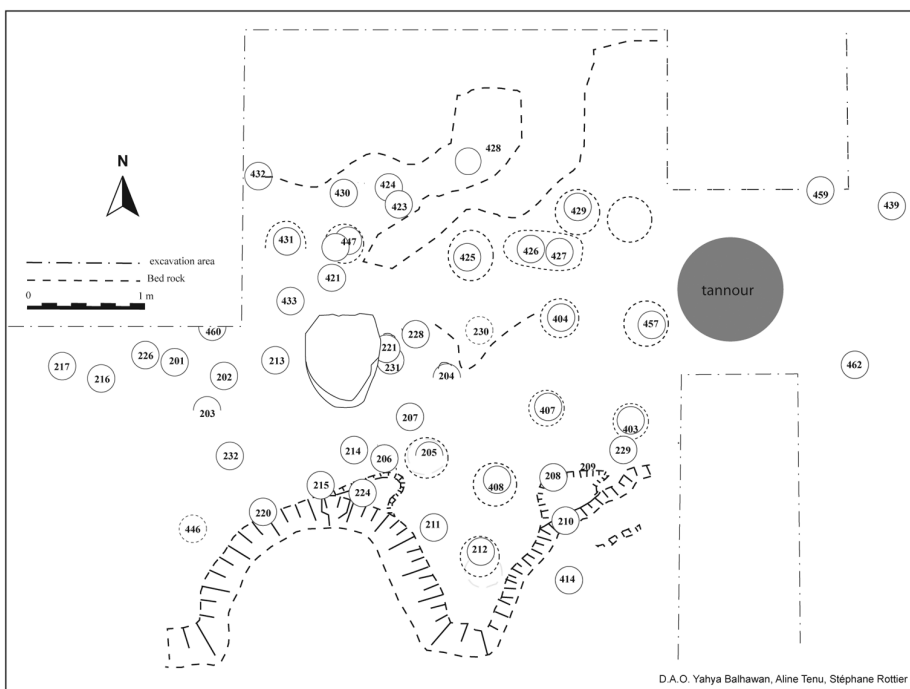


Fig. 2: Preliminary sketch map of the cemetery.  
(A. Tenu & S. Rottier)



Fig. 3: Grave 408: The wedging of the vase and the closure of the alcove are assured by small blocks.  
(S. Rottier).

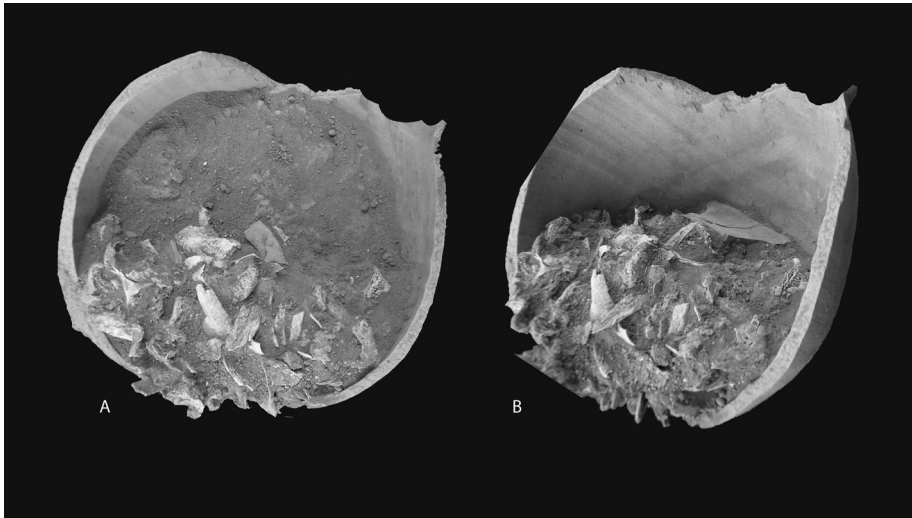


Fig. 4: In lab, excavation of grave 230. To the right, a sherd on the ossuary indicates the urn was broken while still containing only bones.  
(S. Rottier)

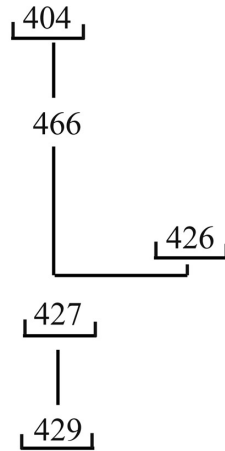
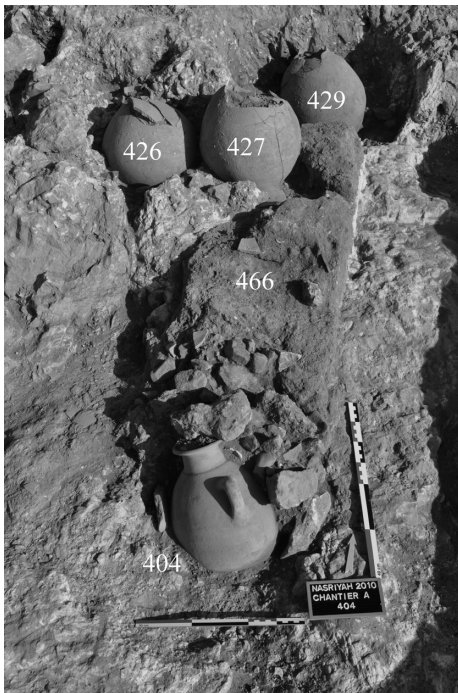


Fig. 5: Relative chronology of the graves.  
(A. Tenu)



Fig. 6: Stone slab 436.  
(A. Tenu)

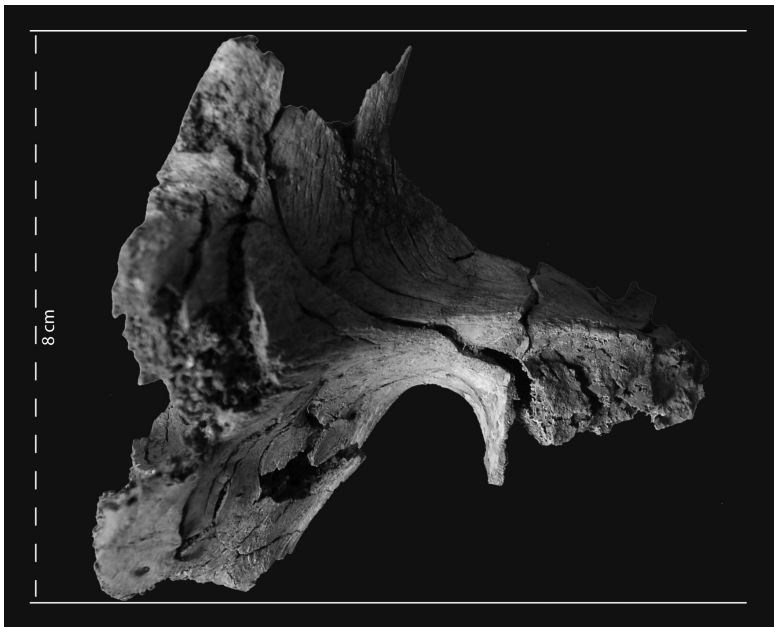


Fig. 7: Grave 213: Right hip bone broken after its introduction in the urn.  
(S. Rottier)





Fig. 8: Grave 201: Iron object and astragals.  
(A. Tenu)



Fig. 9: Grave 214: Red vitreous residues stuck on bones.  
(S. Rottier)

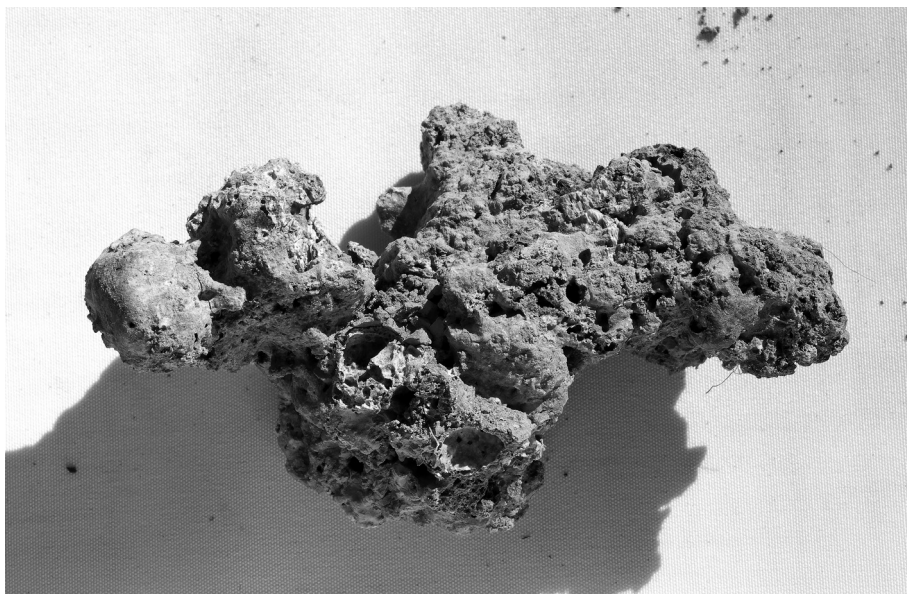


Fig. 10: Grave 230: Green vitreous material deposited in the urn before the bones.  
(G. Naessens)