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Re-evaluating the State of Mortuary Studies in the Near East

Review by Michael Brass

Remembering the Dead: Recent Contributions from Bioarchaeology and Mortuary Archaeology

by Benjamin Porter & Alexis Boutin (eds)

University Press of Colorado, 2014

As stated in the introduction, there is a dearth of holistic and “comprehensive treatments of mortuary contexts” in Near Eastern archaeology, which here includes Egypt and Nubia. The point is made that usually only one or occasionally two datasets are used, be they writings, grave assemblages, or descriptions of the graves and/or skeletal remains. There is a move underway in the Sudan to buck this trend and to bring the study of Sudanese cemeteries (Brass 2014, 2015, Brass and Schwenniger 2013; Dann 2009; Salvatori 2012; Salvatori and Usai 2008; Usai et al. 2014) in line with mortuary archaeology conducted outside of the Near East (see, for example, Rakita et al. 2005, McHugh 1999, Sullivan and Mainfort 2010). Consequently, a session was organised at the 2011 Society for American Archaeology conference from which these publications arose.

The book is organised into seven chapters. Each chapter is co-authored by different scholars and examine mortuary complexes across six countries. The first chapter, by the editors, is an introduction to how mortuary archaeology is conducted more thematically outside of the Near East, while pointing out that rarely are grave goods, tomb construction, architecture, ceramics and chronology treated together. While usually site reports contain chapters on each by their own specialists, holistic attempts to integrate and cross-correlate the disparate data remain in the minority. The publication looks at settlement, regional and grave context; dental and skeletal data; visual and, where appropriate, written sources; and the inscription and redefinition of memory from the perspective of non-elites. Four of the remaining 6 chapters concern the third and second millennia BC which suggests potential for scholars dealing with periods on either side to rise to the challenge.

Chapter 2 looks at Domuztepe in south-eastern Turkey. It dates from the first half to the middle of the 6th millennium BC, within the Halaf period. There is a Death Pit, a Red Terrace and a ditch in the Red Terrace with burials which the piece focuses upon. Buildings were sometimes deliberately dismantled and rebuilt in relatively short bursts, which is in contrast to the three discussed features containing burials. The Red Terrace was a structure which was continually renewed and expanded; a shaft was dug down to the water table towards the end of the life of the Red Terrace and subsequently carefully refilled. Within the burial contexts, dogs and humans received similar treatment, while artefacts were also deliberately buried sometimes separately from any human remains or in association with fragments such as teeth. Food was also buried: in the Death Pit, animal food remains were deposited in a layer before being overlain with human bones. The author suggest that food associated with feasting was given special attention and deliberately deposited, creating a link in social memory between eating, dying and memory. They also suggest that there are traces of artefacts being accessed after originally buried and state that this may have been a means to connect past and present, and that it could have been a mechanism whereby anything potentially dangerous could be controlled. Finally, the authors point out that burial is not simply a disposal of individuals but rather part of a culturally constructed entity, a socially powerful material through which meaning is gained and ascribed in multiple contexts, including the use of actions and artefacts.

Chapter 3 looks at how Akkadian identity was constructed at Kish (Iraq) during the late 3rd millennium BC. “A” cemetery was a mound featuring the “A” palace, which was destroyed and replaced by buildings which were the scene of multiple activities, including disposal of the dead. The destruction and building activity are ascribed to the ruler Sargon, who defeated the previous (Sumerian) ruler. The authors analysed how the bodies were treated, including the nature of the burial assemblages, and combined it with the results of their biodistance analysis. The latter took into account the demographic profile of the buried individuals in determining the degree of biological affinity of those interned within “A” cemetery and elsewhere in the city. Sadly, the authors also state that biodistance studies to calculate “the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between a priori groups (here, burial mounds and sexes) using the relative frequency of expression of the various nonmetric traits observed in each group” is uncommon in Mesopotamian studies, particularly when looking at the effects of biological diversity at a local rather than regional level. The results showed that the males in “A” cemetery were biologically distinct (either different population history or descent), while its females and males and females from elsewhere were similar. However, the mortuary treatment of all the individuals were similar. The authors interpret the data as showing that some Akkadian males settled in the city after its conquest by Sagan, males drawn from different genetic stock but not necessarily with

undue distinct cultural traditions. Alternatively, the authors also point out that perhaps any ethnic distinctions in life were not strong enough to warrant being represented in death by non-perishable artefacts, although there may have been differences elsewhere in the mortuary rites. The decision to have (semi-)homogenized mortuary treatments may thus have been a coping mechanism at a time of great political flux.

Chapter 4 moves to Bahrain, in particular to the Bronze and Iron Age polity of Dilmun. The authors re-analyze material excavated by a deaf graduate student, Peter B. Cornwall, especially the skeleton of a disabled young woman who lived circa 2050-1800 BC. The aim was to examine how the respective above individuals managed their conditions in life and to juxtapose them in death in order to see how their respective societies commemorated them. Essentially, the chapter is a bioarchaeology of livelihood or personhood where physical attributes are embodied socially in a variety of ways which need to be teased apart. The Western assumption that disability may have been less tolerated in general in the distant past is not necessarily true. The woman was buried with an unusually rich array of goods compared with her contemporaries but it may not have been on account of her disability as she may have held status in life unrelated to her physical condition.

Chapter 5 looks at biological group identity during the Early Bronze Age (EBA I-IV) at Bab edh-Dhra', Jordan. The authors look for changes in mortuary patterns and incorporate the results of dental morphology with the wider social archaeology denoting more intensive occupation of the site in EBA II-III. In the latter period, the occupation became more permanent. A large wall was constructed, orchards were expanded and chanel houses for the dead were constructed above ground outside of the settlement. Previously, the dead were buried in shaft tombs. In the latter, family members were buried together. The former likely held extended kin. The numbers of interned individuals are argued to be more accurately determined by "most likely number of individuals" (MLNI) rather than the older "minimum number of individuals" (MNI) technique through better addressing biases introduced by taphonomic processes. Overall, the study "looked at changes in [social and biological structuring forces] as a means of determining who represented the dead and by whom they were remembered" (p. 176).

Chapter 6 moves into Africa, notably into Nubia. Specifically, Tombos which was founded circa 1400 BC along an Egyptian colonial frontier and saw an entangled identity emerge which incorporated both Egyptian and Nubian mortuary ideals. These ideals were re-conceptualised through multivocal commemorations that emphasised different cultural memories reinterpreted in the present. The authors therefore explore the immediate term lived experiences versus longer-term interpreted cultural memories. Furthermore, the authors state (page 185) that

a consideration of inscribed versus incorporated memorialization can help distinguish between conscious and unconscious remembrances reflected in the archaeological record. We suggest that like the distinction between inscribed and incorporated memory, commemorative practice and cultural memory at Tombos do not represent contrasting forms. Instead they indicate intersecting social fields that apply to varying degrees in different cases, reflecting choices conditioned by individual predispositions as well as larger social and political contexts. (p. 185)

$\delta^{18}O$ data supported the proposition of intermarriage between locals and colonists, while the bioarchaeology revealed the presence of a great number of trauma wounds, particularly to the cranio-facial area. The presence and reuse of pyramids, after they had stopped being used in Egypt, is also used to show how cultural symbols were used in long-term cultural memory to the advantage of local political elites.

Chapter 7, the last, looks at the newly discovered South Tomb Cemetery at Tell el-Armana, which the authors term “a cemetery of forgotten souls.” While there was a portion of the cemetery for more elite elements of the population, the nature of the grave goods, osteological analyses, the structure of the graves and wider social archaeological knowledge of the town Armana itself show how the diverse population was attempting to maintain their cultural connections to their home regions over the course of two decades. The authors conclude that the living robbed the cemetery when the site was abandoned not as an act of robbery per se but rather as commemoration through the removal of objects or parts of individuals to repatriate back to their home towns or villages.

Overall, the editors achieve their stated aim with the articles. More Near Eastern archaeologists should pick up the challenge and run with it. It is no longer enough to have separate chapters on mortuary and settlement patterns, grave structures, grave goods, and isotopic and osteological analyses without extensive cross-referencing and integration in order to answer specific questions to determine how the dead were commemorated and remembered, and what their social interactions were with the living.

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Michael Brass is completing his doctorate in Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. He focuses on the site of Jebel Moya (south-central Sudan), the largest mortuary locality in sub-Saharan Africa which bordered the Meroitic state.



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