

THE DIGNITY OF THE DEAD. THE CASE OF ANCIENT URKESH AND MODERN TELL MOZAN, SYRIA (2000-1600 BC)

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Abstract: *The site of Tell Mozan lies tucked in the northeast corner of modern day Syria, located between the Tigris and the Euphrates River, an area known as Mesopotamia. Evidence recovered inside the royal palace identified the site as the ancient city of Urkesh, an important urban centre of the ethnic group known as the Hurrians. This paper focuses on the graves of the Middle Bronze Age showing signs of bone manipulation likely linked to ritual gestures (respect for the ancestor, kispum, etc.). Our analysis, based on the taphonomy of burials, shows that re-opening of some burials occurred, which is not fully in accordance with Middle Bronze Age texts discovered in Mesopotamia.*

Résumé: *Le site de Tell Mozan, dans le Nord-Est de la Syrie, se trouve au sein d'un espace situé entre le Tigre et l'Euphrate, en Mésopotamie. Les observations effectuées à l'intérieur du palais royal ont permis d'identifier ce site comme la ville antique d'Urkesh, un centre urbain important d'un peuple connu sous le nom des Hourrites. Cet article met l'accent sur les tombes de l'âge du Bronze moyen, qui présentent des signes de manipulation des os, probablement liés à des gestes rituels (respect des ancêtres, kispum, etc.). Notre étude, fondée sur l'analyse taphonomique des sépultures, cependant, montre que la réouverture de certaines tombes, pour une raison ou une autre, est un acte qui n'est pas complètement en accord avec les sources textuelles contemporaines en Mésopotamie.*

Keywords: *Burials; Archaeoethanatology; Funerary practices; Bone manipulation; Mesopotamia; Middle Bronze Age.*

Mots-clés: *Sépultures; Archéothanalogie; Pratiques funéraires; Manipulation des ossements; Mésopotamie; Bronze moyen.*

PRESENTATION – THE ANCIENT PERCEPTION

In the archaeological record, a grave generally presents a rather unique typological characteristic, in that its purpose and function are self-declared and immediately apparent. For the most part, it can in fact be readily recognized as such during excavation; it can be safely presumed that it was intended to receive the particular person or persons that are buried in it (even in the case of a secondary burial, or in the case of subsequent manipulation of the kind discussed below); and we can further presume that it was built, and then immediately used, within a narrow and circumscribed period of time (even for multiple burials). It goes without saying that this is not universally the case, but the difference from other excavated struc-

tures is significant. The definition of a building as a temple, a palace, a private residence, a storehouse is more complex; the specificity is never as sharp; and the tenure of its use is generally protracted in time.

The perception of graves by the members of the community within which they were situated was conditioned by these factors. A grave stood apart because it was immediately recognized as such and elicited the special attention of anyone who came in contact with it or even just knew about it: “it signalled a special presence”. We can, again, safely presume that even an infant burial hidden below the floor of a house was not a discard to be forgotten, but an item with a unique dignity of its own, one that commanded both attention and memory. This article illustrates well several specific cases in Tell Mozan in Syria, that give special evidence of such reverence and respect (fig. 1).

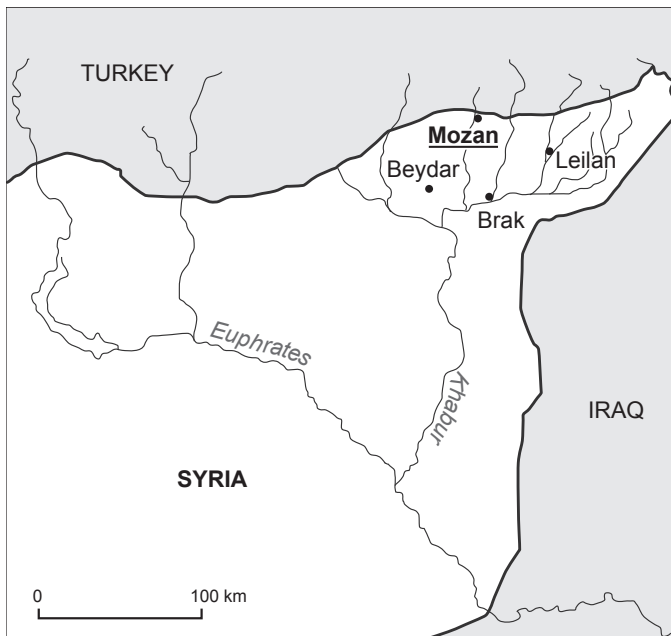


Fig. 1 – Location of Tell Mozan with the dark line indicating the Northeast border of Syria (map adapted from Buccellati 2003).

TELL MOZAN

One indication of the special status of a human interment is that the inside of a grave emerged in the consciousness of the Mesopotamians as the very image of the world of the dead. The scene depicted for us in the myth about *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld* (7-10) is the description of just such a setting, the inside of a grave:

“[...] the house where those who enter are deprived of light, where dust is their bare nourishment and mud their food, where they see no light but dwell in darkness, are clothed like birds with feathers for garments...”

Opening a simple Mesopotamian grave, at a minimum, one would generally find a small bowl and goblet, suitable for dust and mud; and the curious comparison, in the citation above, with birds (curious because we are in the Netherworld where there are no birds) makes perfect sense when one realizes that, inside the grave (fig. 2), the garments have disintegrated to the point of looking exactly like the scattered plumage of a bird (in Akkadian the text reads: *šubat kappi*, which literally means “the clothing of the wing”).¹

1. While excavating burial A8a8 at Tell Mozan, one of us (G.B.) was struck by the repeated observation of the person in charge of the excavation, Rick

The grave, then, is viewed as the Netherworld itself, and thus a place with an aura all its own: here, one has crossed the threshold to a wholly different landscape, one that induces respect and reverence. One that signals an ultimate loss, as the myth to *Ishtar* also tells us: “[...] the house whence those who enter cannot return” (v. 5), with words reminiscent of *Hamlet* (v. 1772 f.): “The undiscover’d country from whose bourn / no traveller returns.” A threshold to a distance, then. But also one that signals, through the emblems of food and clothing, the continuity of a presence.

THE EMIC DIMENSION

There is also a special perception of the graves from the archaeologists who excavate them. They signal a presence for us as well. And we must calibrate our sensibility accordingly. It is true that, on an excavation, each find has, so to speak, an absolute dignity of its own: every single piece deserves the full attention of the excavator, and the primary role of the record is to provide a full definition of the emplacement of these pieces. We have argued forcefully the case from a theoretical point of view and have implemented it in practice in the *Urkesch Global Record* (Buccellati 2017).² This, however, does not mean that a perception of relative value must be set aside. Coming across a whole vessel commands, understandably, more attention than a plain body sherd. The point we wish to make here is that this heightened perception of value does not depend exclusively on our instinctive response to the beauty of an object, as might be the case with a well preserved ceramic vessel; it depends also, and especially, on the recognition of the meaning that the ancients attributed to it.

A human burial is a classic example. It naturally commands our greatest attention, and it elicits a strong commitment to identify the minutest details not only of the morphology of the structure and its contents, but also the very special taphonomic clues that can enlighten us about deposition (Duday 2009).³ This is dictated by the need for precision and accuracy in confronting a special kind of ‘specimen.’ But, if there has to be a consonance between the ancient perception

Hauser, that there was “feathery material” in the ground. This brought to mind the passage of the *Descent of Ishtar* that we quoted. The burial, containing the body of an adolescent between 10 and 14 years of age, is published: Kharabi 2015 (vol. II): 190-191.

2. See also the website www.urkesch.org.

3. For a detailed description of these taphonomic clues as evidence of the displacement, in the matrix of the soil, of the “original equilibrium” which had been intrinsic to the anatomical connections, see H. Duday 2009.

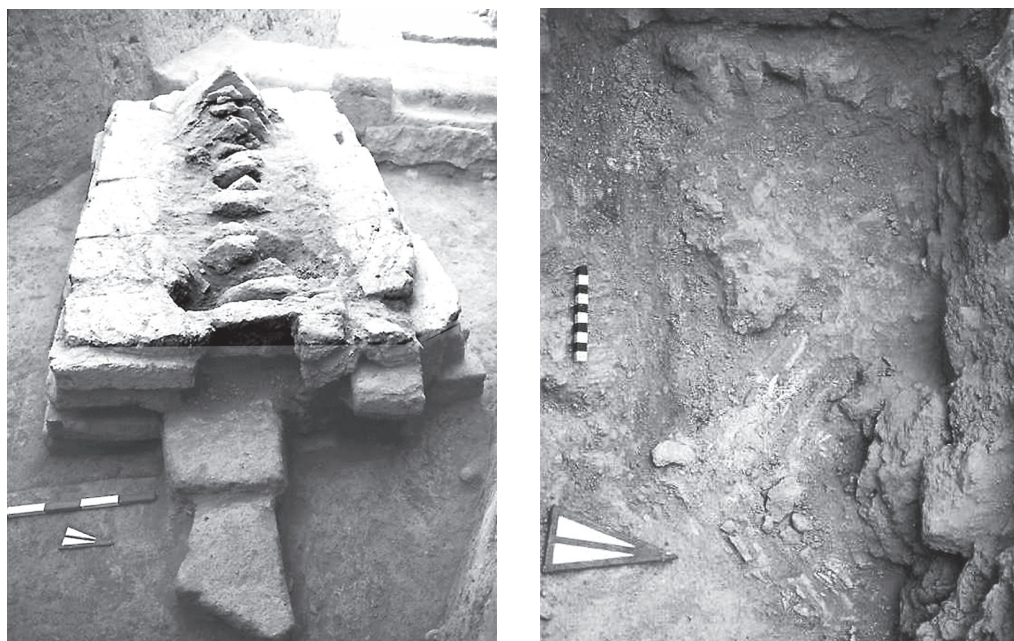


Fig. 2 – Burial A8a8. A grave in the appearance of a house; detail of decomposed garment inside the grave, looking like bird's feathers on the right.

and our own, then the recognition that a feature we are excavating is a human interment should be accompanied by the even greater respect for a reality that held the ancients' attention – obviously for quite a different reason than the concern for the quality of the scientific record. The dignity of the dead is such that we should not treat the 'specimen' with a mere technical attitude, and facing it with that in mind has important consequences.

Our experience at Tell Mozan has been important in this regard, and we will mention two particular cases. The first has to do with a very simple detail in the collection and storage of human remains. While every other sample, including animal bones, was placed in a plastic bag, for human bones instead, even if few and disarticulated, we would use a cotton cloth which was in turn placed inside a wooden box, as if a small coffin. This communicated to everyone that we paid, so to speak, a special honour to an ancient son or daughter of this very soil which we are disaggregating today. It may seem needlessly sentimental. But it was not so, and the second procedure we will mention now bears this out.

THE TERRITORIAL LEGACY

The city of Urkesh was abandoned a little over three thousand years ago, and there is no cultural continuity with the local people of today. That of the ancients is a broken tradition precisely in the sense that there are no living carriers today of that once deeply felt way of life. Yet the largest ethnic group of the area, the Kurds, had come to assume that this was an ancient Kurdish city, and they would each year celebrate at our site the festival of No Ruz. After the first few seasons of excavation, it became necessary to stop this tradition, and to explain at the same time why the site had never been Kurdish. Not only that. We also had to remove the small modern cemeteries that had been placed at the top of the tell.

That is when our attitude towards the human remains of the distant past spoke as if with an eloquent voice about our deeper human concerns. It was a shared concern that rested on the recognition of the dignity of the dead—the ancient dead, in the first instance, but then, as a natural corollary, the modern dead as well. In other words, a sense of trust had developed, trust in the fact that our need to remove the modern graves could not be imputed to a cold disregard for a deeper human level of feelings, but was instead accompanied by a full appreciation of these feelings. As a result, there was no objection to our

excavation of the modern burials. We carried it out with the same respect with which we had excavated the ancient remains except that in this case we were accompanied by the respective relatives, who joined in the relocation and helped turn it into a moment of warm solidarity.

A new inner outlook had developed, which we like to define as territorial legacy. What the local stakeholders of Mozan have in common with the ancient inhabitants of Urkesh is not culture in the form of language, religion, customs, let alone biology. It is the territory. This is as important a legacy as those other factors, and all the local people today are the guardians of the territory. The commonality they experience in the phenomenon of death and of the interment in the same soil, seemed to bring this out more forcefully than anything else. It is in no small measure that we can attribute to this newly emerging sense of identity the fact that Tell Mozan, in the midst of the terrible Syrian crisis of the last six years, at times within 60 km of the border with the so-called Islamic state, remains in perfect conditions, without the slightest incident of neglect, degradation or vandalism. The site is indeed felt as a legacy that the ancients have handed down to them. And the dead, ancient and modern, who share the same soil, the same burial grounds, are as if the silent witnesses to this commitment that even the war has not been able to shake.

OBJECTIVES: FUNERARY PRACTICES IN URKESH

Around 2300 BC, King Tupkish built his royal palace on the upper town of Tell Mozan (ancient Urkesh). Two centuries later, this palace was abandoned and part of it was used to bury the dead (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2001). The burials were included in pits which were dug down to the foundations of the palace walls in a space reserved solely for a funeral purpose. This latter covers an area of 1860 m² for a total of 120 grouped tombs housing skeletons of 82 non-adults⁴ and 69 adults⁵ comprising 15 females and 15 males⁶ (Kharobi 2015). It corresponds to what we call the funerary space of the upper town of Urkesh (sector A of the palace)

4. Age for non-adults was estimated using the following methods: Moorrees *et al.* 1963a and b; Maresh 1970; Fazekas and Kosa 1978; Adalian *et al.* 2002.

5. Age for adults was estimated using Schmitt 2005.

6. Biological anthropology methods were used to determine sex, namely Bruzek (2002) and Murail *et al.* (2005). The sex of the other 39 adults could not be estimated since the pelvis is only slightly dimorphic or poorly preserved.

with two successive phases of occupation: 1) Early Khabur phase, assigned to the Isin-Larsa culture, from 2000 to 1900 BC, and 2) Late Khabur phase, assigned to the Old Babylonian culture, from 1900 to 1600 BC. These two phases, attributed to the Middle Bronze Age, are separated by a brief period of abandonment.

The deceased, mostly in flexed position, were placed on their side (58%), back (28%) or stomach (14%). Pottery was the most common type of grave goods, with some tombs containing over 50 vessels each. Other goods included bronze tools and jewellery. As novelties, we can mention a few built tombs (*e.g.*, three graves with a double-sloping roof) and a unique vaulted tomb, while some older simple ones (*e.g.*, simple pit graves [38%], jar burials [32%], and arranged pit graves⁷ [23%]) remained in use (Kharobi 2015).

The tombs were typically used for single burials (87%) and rarely for plural⁸ ones (13%). Although primary burials were the most common (79%), the practice of secondary interments (21%) was attested (Kharobi 2015). Those graves were reopened, reused, robbed and manipulated in various ways. From our point of view, the absence of bones, body parts or the whole body can be an inadvertent act explained by:

- 1) the disturbance of an old, unremembered burial, during the inhumation of a new individual;
- 2) the intention to bury new individuals within a specific old grave;
- 3) the intention to empty a pit in order to move the bones to re-bury them elsewhere;
- 4) the recovery of certain bones as relics or memorials.

Manipulations resulted from options 2, 3 and 4 attest to an intentional act and are generally interpreted as being part of some kind of death cult or burial ritual, and will be discussed in this paper.

The goal is to examine those burials by reconstructing the process of the bone manipulation and understanding the ancient Mesopotamian ideology of death. To this end, the burials in question are compared to cuneiform documents from Bronze Age Mesopotamian ancient cities which are expected to reveal new insights and expand our understanding of ancient practices (Alster 1980; Katz 2003; Tuskimoto 2010). Therefore, this paper

7. A term given by the author to define a grave type which has walls built with either clay or brick with no elevation elements on the surface. The bottom of these graves could be natural soil or a prepared layer paved with ceramic sherds or pebbles.

8. Plural burials define the remains of several bodies within the same structure (Schotsmans *et al.* 2017) regardless the simultaneity or not of the deposition of the cadavers. Some examples will be discussed later in this paper. For more details about the definitions of multiple and collective burials, please see Castex *et al.* 2014.

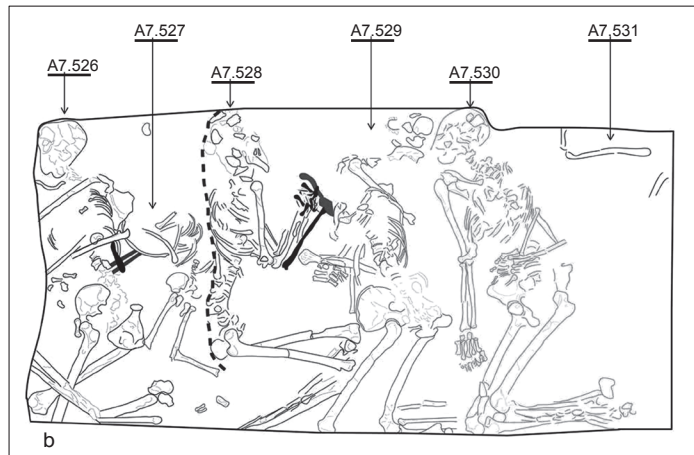
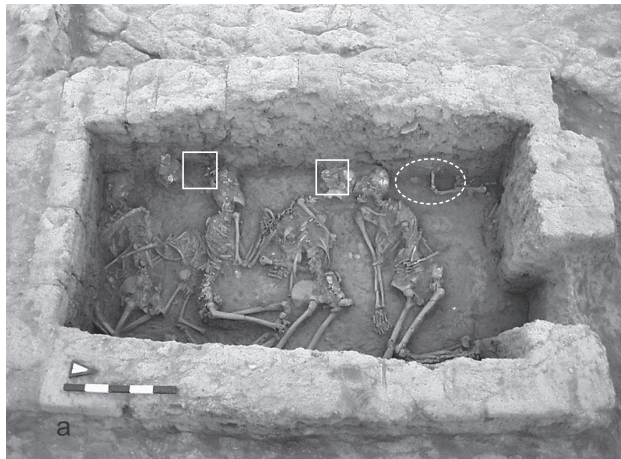


Fig. 3 – Burial A7.526/530. **a**) Overhead view showing the five individuals in situ (photo O. Khalsa 1999, © Archives excavation Urkesh) [the circle shows the cluster A7.531 in the northeast corner of the grave, while the two squares show the two skulls of individual A7.527 and A7.529 removed to the eastern edge of the grave]; **b**) burial A7.526/530 bodies layout (drawing by A. Kharobi).

proceeds under the assumption that cuneiform texts are as accurate indicators of cultural groups as mortuary practices, and that evidence of bone manipulation will be seen.

RESULTS: ANALYSIS OF GRAVES WITH MANIPULATION OF BONES

THE INTENTION TO BURY NEW INDIVIDUALS WITHIN A SPECIFIC OLD GRAVE

Grave A7.526/530

This grave (fig. 3) consists of a single rectangular chamber (5.50 x 3.75 m) with an entrance to the north. The walls are built of mud brick rows. It is the only example of this tomb type known to date at the site. It includes five individuals buried alongside each other. There is one child (1-4 years old), two young adults of which one is female (20-29 years old), and two male adults (20-39 years old). In addition, there are four isolated bones clusters, of which one is at the northeast corner A7.531 (see the circle, fig. 3) and three are against the eastern edge of the chamber. The minimum number of individuals (MNI) is estimated as nine. The presence of numerous small bones and the maintenance of anatomical order attest to the primary character of the five primary burials. Individuals A7.527 and A7.529 were buried first; corresponding to phase I of inhumation. In the second phase, the tomb was re-opened to deposit the bodies of individuals A7.526 and A7.528. This cre-

ated the disturbances observed in the thorax and upper limbs of the two skeletons of phase I.

This scenario is based, on one hand, on the fact that the bones of the upper part of skeleton A7.526 rest on the skeleton of the neighbouring child A7.527. On the other hand, the forearms of skeleton A7.528 rest on the upper part of the skeleton A7.529 to the north. It is impossible to estimate the time interval between the deposits of phase II and the initial burials. The last individual A7.530 could correspond to phase II, or to a later one called phase III.

These disturbances had to be accompanied by displacements of the cranium (see the two squares, fig. 3) of the phase I to the eastern edge of the chamber to facilitate the deposits corresponding to what we have called phase II of inhumation. Moreover, circulation in the burial chamber was not easy since its whole width is occupied by the skeletons and the movement had to be done while crouching, given the estimated height (0.80 m) of the chamber.

Finally, the cluster A7.531 in the northeast corner may be the partial remains of an individual who was buried in the chamber subsequently disturbed and partially removed. Most of its bones were removed to make room for later inhumations. The other hypothesis would be that it represents an individual whose body has decomposed in another place and whose bones were then brought into this grave. In this case, A7.531 might be a secondary burial.

Our observations of the burial taphonomy lead us to finally propose several successive inhumation phases with an indeterminate time interval between each of them. A7.526/530

is a plural burial context that would have hosted both simultaneous and successive deposits involving the reopening of the grave. The hypothesis of kinship or genetic ties among these individuals could be proposed. Nevertheless, only geochemical (*i.e.*, radiogenic isotopes) and molecular genetic (*i.e.*, aDNA) analysis could confirm or invalidate this putative family relationship.

THE INTENTION TO EMPTY A PIT IN ORDER TO MOVE THE BONES TO RE-BURY THEM ELSEWHERE

GRAVE A6F206

This rectangular grave is lined with elongated mud brick pieces in which six individual burials were uncovered: one perinatal (36-38 weeks old), two infants (1-4 years old and 5-9 years old), two female young adults (20-29 years old) and one male adult (20-39 years old). The skeletons are disarticulated and partial, with several proximal femur portions, metacarpals, metatarsals, and a lot of small fragments not exceeding two centimetres in size. The bones are dispersed in the grave with a large pile in the eastern side and some mixed bones to the west. The space in between has no bones but only grave goods. These include four stone beads, one metal bead, one bronze dagger, one bronze pin, two ceramic bowls and one ceramic jar.

Our observations based on the burial taphonomy lead us to propose that the bodies were first placed inside the grave, the grave goods arranged therein and the pit was filled in. It is impossible to determine if all six individuals were placed at the same time. Hence, most of the human bones were removed leaving some that were pushed aside leaving a space in between for new body/bodies. However, no other burials were found in this cleared space. Apparently, it was re-opened to retrieve the bones of the former burials rather than for the introduction of new ones. The grave goods in this case were either recovered in primary context or were deposited for an unknown reason at the same time as the bone removal. This raises some interesting speculations pertaining to ancestor reverence.

THE RECOVERY OF CERTAIN BONES AS RELICS OR MEMORIALS

This category includes a single bone (*e.g.*, grave A16.78) or several ones (*e.g.*, grave A15.51). The two graves allow us to recognize the same behaviour from two different points of

view, since A16.78 represents the grave in which bones are found as a secondary disposition while A15.51 represents a grave from which the bones were taken.

GRAVE A16.78

It consists of an infant (1-4 years old) jar burial found lying on its side oriented east to west with the mouth opening to the south-east. The jar was intentionally cracked at the top, which enabled the deposition of the infant inside the vessel (fig. 4). The burial was accompanied with many grave goods both inside and outside the jar. One of these objects is a miniature bowl, labelled A16.62, which yielded a unique discovery in Urkesh, a partial human thoracic vertebra of an adult (fig. 4). Clearly, it was retrieved from another burial and deposited in this small bowl with an opening diameter that corresponds perfectly to the size of the vertebra.

It is important to mention that this grave contains the largest quantity of artefacts recovered from a grave in the funerary space of Urkesh along with the unique find. The presence of a human bone that does not belong to the infant A16.78 attests to the manipulation of bone practiced in this burial. A bone from perhaps an ancestor was intentionally placed with the remains of this small child who was given a lavish burial with a number of offerings quite unusual for an infant. A large fireplace of *tannur*⁹ type is associated with this burial. It is located 30 cm over the burial and appears to have been used repeatedly. Other evidence of fireplaces associated with burials which contain eight infants and adult females has been identified at the site. Traces of thermal modification have been identified in both the filling of the burials and the bones. The question of ritual activity related to fire pertaining to those tombs been raised (Kharobi *et al.* 2014).

GRAVE A15.51

This rectangular grave is lined with elongated mud brick pieces. It contains the skeleton of a child aged between 8 to 10 years. The skull, disarticulated from the upper thorax, is located at the northern part of the grave and near the lower body elements (*i.e.*, femur, tibia, fibula, and metatarsals) which are roughly articulated in the northern half of the grave. The

9. The Arabic name 'tannur' which means 'oven' is given to define a type of fire structure discovered in the Near East since the Neolithic and used until now in the region.

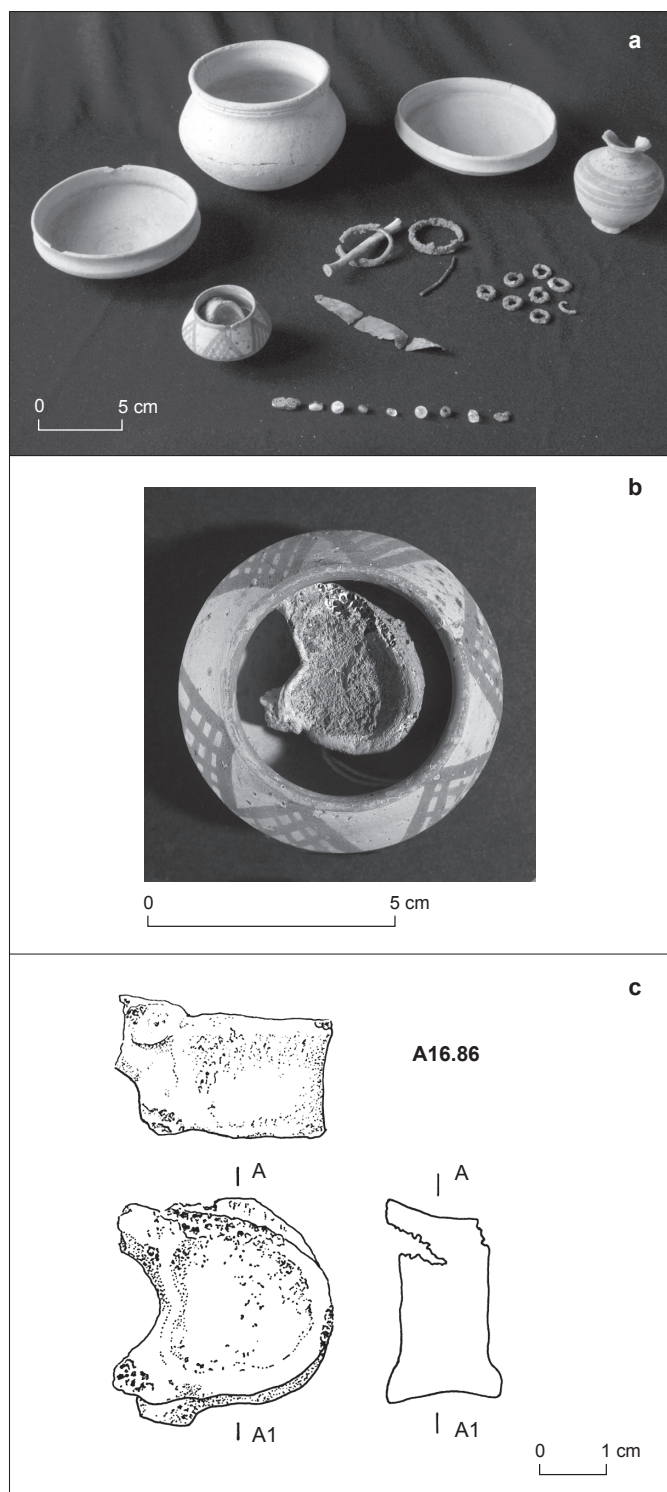


Fig. 4 – Burial A16.78. **a**) The grave goods found (photo G. Gallaci, © Archives excavation Urkesh); **b**) the miniature bowl A16.62 with the human vertebra inside; **c**) the vertebra (drawing by CW © Archives excavation Urkesh).

bones of the upper body are scattered in the other (southern) half (fig. 5). No grave goods were found with this burial, though some animal bones were found on top of it. This could be interpreted as remains of a food offering associated with a particular rite such as the *'kispum'*.¹⁰ *Kispum* is a post-funerary ritual meal that called forth the deceased from the Netherworld to eat and drink with the living. It was usually offered monthly in the family context, and celebrated annually in a public, communal festival of the ancestors (Durand 2012).

The first and most plausible interpretation of this grave is that A15.51 is a primary burial with the body oriented east to west in a flexed position. The body would have lain in the extreme southern end of the tomb facing north, with the arched back touching the southern wall but elevated so that the upper body is propped up by the western bricks in a nearly seated position (fig. 5). After decomposition of the ligaments, the bones were naturally displaced with the head rolling down to the location where it was recovered. The distance between the head and the thorax suggests that the head was angled substantially higher with more momentum to roll off once decomposed. However, the absence of a significant number of bones (*i.e.*, the mandible, left humerus, and right radius) attests to the re-opening of the grave. For one reason or another, these bones were picked up and reburied elsewhere. That is when the skull had probably been moved from its original position.

DISCUSSION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS VS 'FUNERAL' TEXTS

Archival texts in cuneiform are a rich source of information about Mesopotamians affording a wide-ranging exploration of different aspects of their culture. For this, our attention here is focused on the 2nd and the 1st millennia BC 'funeral'¹¹ texts coming from different sites in Mesopotamia (*i.e.* Kalḫu/Nimrud and Aššur/Qal'at Šerqat). This corpus consists only of some twenty texts so far which is very modest if one takes into account the total quantity of cuneiform inscriptions discovered in the Near East (estimated at nearly one million tablets).

According to these written sources, death does not mean total annihilation for Mesopotamians, but is perceived as a

10. G. Buccellati and O. Khalsa, A15 MZ14, *Cybernetica Mesopotamica*. Urkesh Global Record. 2001 (www.urkesh.org).

11. The inscriptions described as 'funeral' were texts found in graves and that were written in Akkadian on different tablets, shelves, cones, cylinders, architectural elements or objects.

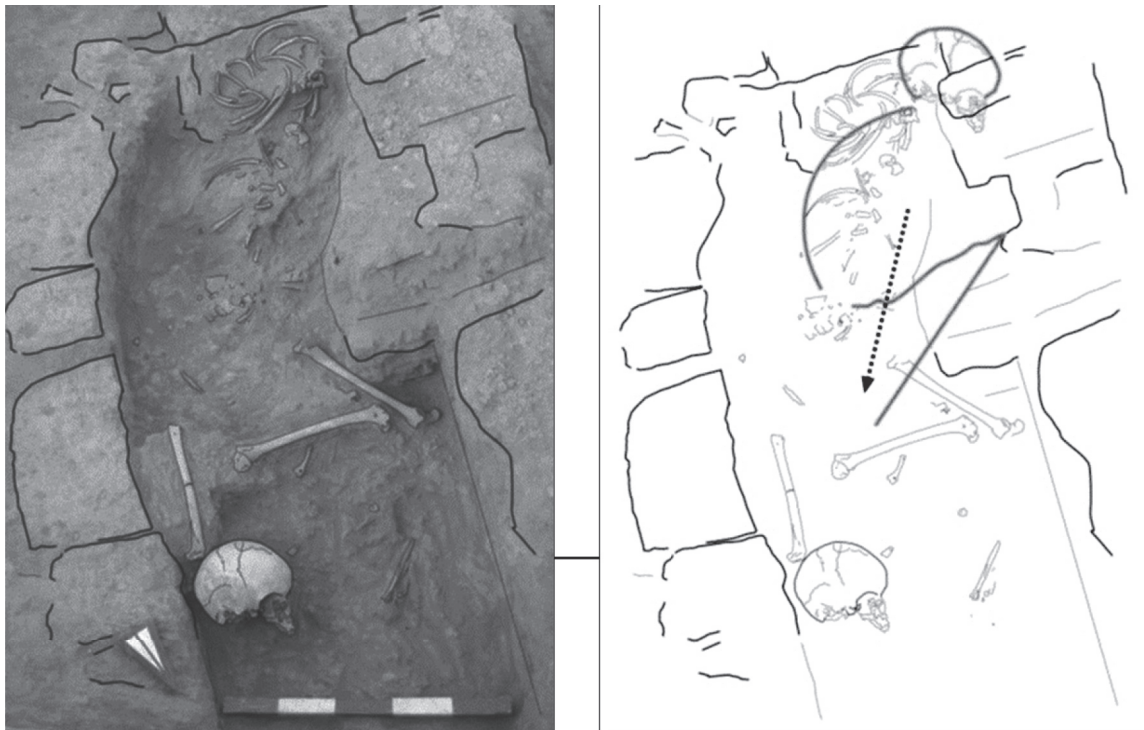


Fig. 5 – Burial 15.51 (© Archives excavation Urkesh) and a reconstruction of a possible body positioning of A15.51. Solid outline indicates presumed location of the body with the black dotted arrow highlighting skull movement after decomposition (drawing by L. Ramos).

rupture leading to another form of life. Respect for the integrity of the corpse was a rule; it is argued that corpse abandonment and abuse are known to be deployed (Bottero 1980; Cassin 1982). Therefore, following the death of an individual, the body should be carefully buried (Van der Stede 2007). It is necessary to bury a complete body to ensure a serene transition into the Netherworld as related in one of the versions of the epic of Gilgamesh (Cassin 1982; Scurlock 1995; George 1999).

Part of these texts include curses and were thus drafted in order to ensure the protection and respect of the burial. They usually call on passers-by who would be led to find the inscription, and thus the grave that contains it, in order to prevent any destruction, as the following Palaeo-Babylonian text inscribed in a cylinder from Kis (EK 34/2):¹²

“[He who] opened [this] tomb, (instead of) restoring it that (it persists) eternally, that Anu, Enlil and Ea suppress its offspring; [T]he Annunaki in the Netherworld defeat his/her [pro] carnage!”

12. V. Muller, *Corpus des inscriptions funéraires Akkadiennes*. ArchéOrient – Le Blog 16 juin 2017 [<http://archeorient.hypotheses.org:7597>].

Some of these curses were employed to develop fear of the deceased and the desecration of their tombs. The text YOS I 43 and its duplicates, relating to the burial of Samas-ibni, enumerate several types of desecrators, certainly related to the personality of the deceased and the political context (YOS I 43, l. 4-7) (see note 12):

“Whoever you are, a governor, a chief, a judge, or a prince who has been installed in this country, do not act badly with regard to this grave and these bones! Watch the location, stretch on (your) favourable protection!”

The desecration of the tomb, the dislodging of the body, the plundering of the funerary goods, and the introduction of a second body in the burial constitute the fears of Mesopotamian facing death. The reopening of the tombs was then most probably prohibited/forbidden since it would have permitted the dangerous and rancorous spirits of the dead to circulate among the living (Kharobi 2015). Our analysis bears testimony that the latter prohibited had not been respected. In the case of Tell Mozan, reopening graves for successive multiple interments or bone manipulations were made. Sources in cuneiform exhibit, however, a biased discourse on traditions relevant to the death

and burials. We suggest that the common practice of secondary burials at Urkesh is related to a section of the population that might spent parts of the year away from the site and brought their dead to be buried at the settlement. We argue that these people had rights in the settlement.

These practices are not new and are known in contemporary sites of Northern Syria. At Tell Arbid (Middle Bronze Age) for example, secondary burials were common, but not to the extent to be considered as the normative form of burial (Wynanska 2012). D. Bolger (2008) has further suggested that active participation in mortuary rituals and the manipulation of the deceased at sites such as Jerablus Tahtani (Early Bronze Age) was an important means by which the living members of society could negotiate and affirm their own social identities (Bolger 2008: 241-242). Conversely, the practice of burying the dead in residential houses reflects the fascinating topic of necromancy. The possibility of communicating with the deceased is represented in Ugaritic sources which also attest to the practice of burying the dead in residential houses (Durand 2012).

In the Southern Levant, tombs with disarticulated skeletons indicating tomb reuse from the Early Bronze Age were identified in the site of Bab ed-Dahra in Jordan (Loh and Ji 2000). Archaeologists suggested that a tomb was reused either to bury a person who was related to those buried before, or to save time expended in digging new burials (Al-Shorman and Khwaileh 2011). Secondary deposits were a regular feature of funerary practices in this region since the Chalcolithic (Rowan and Golden 2009). This was seen in the appearance of an ossuary graveyard outside the living site whereas the deceased is first buried inside the settlement, and after an indefinite period of time, the recovered human remains are deposited in a new location (Gilead 1988).

At the sites of the Northern Levant, mass secondary burials were found at PPNB Ugrat el Mehed, South Sinai (Hershkovitz *et al.* 1994). At 'Ain Ghazal, about half of the individuals were in secondary burials, while at Alit-Yam, secondary burials are few (Rollefson and Köhler-Rollefson 1989 and 1993).

CONCLUSIONS

In Tell Mozan, in spite of the small number of secondary and plural graves showing manipulation of bones relative to the primary and individual tombs, there were in some cases re-openings of certain graves in order to deposit new bodies or to recover some bones for transport to their final place of deposit.

All in all, excavations in Mesopotamian sites had both confirmed and revised this perspective of funeral practice. Indeed, the majority of findings incorporate primary and individual burials (Forest 1983; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003). However, secondary and multiple deposits clearly indicating manipulation of bones are also documented. The reasons behind re-opening some graves and bone manipulation seem to be related to some cultural or ritual gestures. These practices do not apply to all the burials of Urkesh but only to some. A high social status of the individuals concerned by these practices is suggested.

Hence, our archeothanatological approach and interpretations provide additional evidence of mortuary practices in the Middle Bronze Age in Northern Syria, which is not fully in accordance with the textual records.

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Maquette : Bleu T | Tell Hama (Syrie), gobelets peints représentatifs du Bronze ancien IVB © Musée National de Copenhague. Photo : G. Mouamar.



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