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Meredith S. Chesson

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Early Bronze Age IA mortuary practices and difference on the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain, Jordan

Meredith S. Chesson

Early Bronze Age I mortuary practices present a fascinating opportunity to consider how archaeologists approach the question of regionalism, a task rooted fundamentally in the identification and assessment of difference. This paper discusses the intellectual scaffolding in archaeological approaches to assessing variation and homogeneity in our social, economic and political reconstructions of the EB IA by focusing on the cemeteries of Bâb adh-Dhrâ', Fifa and Naq' on the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain, Jordan. A communities of practice approach is employed to understand the nature of variation in EB IA mortuary practices. By framing mortuary practices as a craft, embedded in the sociality of technology and learning, alternatives to understanding the similarities and differences of treating the dead, and how mortuary practices on the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain offer insights into EB IA society, are considered.

Keywords Early Bronze Age, mortuary practices, Jordan, community of practice

Introduction

Early Bronze Age I–III (*c.* 3600–2500 BCE) mortuary practices present a fascinating opportunity to consider how archaeologists approach the question of regionalism, a task rooted fundamentally in identifying and assessing difference. How is heterogeneity in archaeological burial contexts measured, and in which lines of evidence are variations meaningful or meaningless (Ilan 2002)? For over a millennium, EB I–III peoples buried their dead in shaft tombs, cist tombs, rock-cut tombs and caves, cairns, dolmens, charnel houses, and even under house floors (Greenberg 2019). While identifying general patterns helps to establish a comparative framework, often this effort creates normalizing models and erases breadth of variability. How can cases when dolmens are found outside their 'regular' range (Fraser 2018), such as at Tall Umayri (Dubis and Dabrowski 2002), be understood? How can we understand why excavators found two cist tombs at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' (Schaub and Rast 1989), when we

associate shaft tombs with that cemetery and cist tombs with the neighbouring cemeteries of Fifa and Naq'? To craft better understandings of life and death in EBA communities, the general models of overall trends need to be fleshed out to embrace the full scope of difference.

This paper explores the expression of variation through an analysis of mortuary practices within one sub-region and time period: the EB IA cemeteries of Bâb adh-Dhrâ', Fifa and Naq' on the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain, Jordan (Fig. 1). Through this lens, the intellectual scaffolding for understanding how archaeologists document and interpret difference in EB IA mortuary practices will be examined. This paper argues that archaeologists can enhance their understanding of the EBA by combining well-honed etic approaches, such as ceramic typologies, with more emic sensibilities that recognize the existence of peoples' worldviews and understanding of their places within communities.

Presented here is one option for combining emic and etic components by utilizing a communities of practice approach, originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991; Lave 2011; Wenger 1998). Their

Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. Email: mchesson@nd.edu

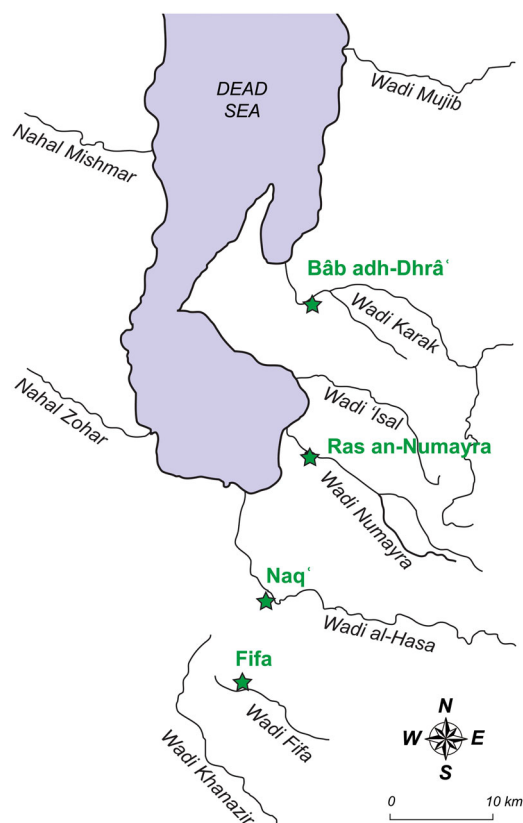


Figure 1 Map of south-eastern Dead Sea Plain EB I sites.

model offers a powerful tool to assess variation across physical, economic and social landscapes where difference emerged from multiple variables, including localized histories, personal lived experience and naturalized notions of how humans should behave in specific contexts. For this case in particular, where surveys and excavations have found no EB IA settlements near these three very large cemeteries, the communities of practice approach provides a helpful alternative for understanding shared and disparate EB IA mortuary practices on the Dead Sea Plain.

Archaeological thoughts on differences and homogeneities

David Ilan (2002: 94) offered the intellectual kernel for this paper by employing a linguistic analogy, *koiné*, for understanding variation in EB IA burial practices from northern Israel compared to other areas of the southern Levant (see Dietler 2017 for discussion of *koiné* models). While Ilan did not describe the model or why it fits, the idea spurs us to consider the suite of varied EB IA mortuary practices as a shared *lingua franca*, understandable by all and referencing combined, mutually intelligible differences and similarities. Simultaneously, Richard Wilk (2004) argued persuasively that archaeologists must consider

more emic perspectives as they investigate and explain variation and similarities, in this case Olmec material culture and late 20th-century Belizean beauty pageants. Wilk (2004: 89) noted the difficulties in analysing relatedness between archaeological assemblages, especially those that share similarities while displaying more distinctive elements. Like Ilan (2002), Wilk drew upon linguistic approaches to consider cultural idioms as foundations for understanding convergences and divergences in order to propose his model of common difference. He (2004: 91) argued that there must be some shared culturally constructed concept, through which two groups can assess similarities and differences. Through this relational process, people compare and assess two practices, highlighting certain divergences while ignoring or erasing others. Wilk proposed that this assessment is structured by power in two contexts: upfront, immediate judgment and what he calls the backstage arena, where a group of people define or contest naturalized concepts of difference and alignment.

While not referencing Bourdieu's (1984) analytical framework for taste and capital, Wilk's discussion of upfront and backstage forms of power and judgment seems to resonate strongly with his notions of taste. While a full discussion of Bourdieu's approach lies outside this paper's scope, one key element is emphasized: people assess valued or devalued behaviours as they choose to follow, or to challenge, unwritten, naturalized ideas about how to be a human being in a given context. Wilk's ideas of both upfront judgments and backstage work to establish the boundaries of appropriate behaviours evoke Bourdieu's notion of taste, as people face consequences for their decisions to act in preferred or censured ways.

In the southern Levant, Abu-Azizeh *et al.* (2014) tackle the challenge of difference as they examine variability and similarities in Late Neolithic and early Chalcolithic mortuary practices recorded in the al-Thulaythuwat area of southern Jordan. They propose that consistencies in tower graves and tumuli/cist graves reflect the sharing of symbolic logics, while differentiation between and within clusters of these mortuary features emerged from specific life histories of the people interred and those burying them (Abu-Azizeh *et al.* 2014: 181–83). In particular, they cite differential practices associated with life course, sex, gender, kinship, social status, the actions of mourners and the wider socio-economic and political context of the society. These possible explanatory categories linked to differential mortuary behaviours are commonly cited by archaeologists as alternatives for why people did x, y or z: unspecified cultural

forces, habitus, or structure made them do it. As this situation can never truly be parsed, my interest is to consider the front end of the equation: how did people learn these alternatives, and why might they have employed some but not others?

The underlying question here, whether one talks about how one dresses or deals with the dead, remains the same: how and why do people choose to comply with, or break, the rules of good and bad taste? How and when do they push the naturalized boundaries to innovate, contest, or perform different practices? EBA people worked through this same tension within the structure of their cultural context as they interacted with each other and engaged with their material world. The archaeological record represents the material footprints of EBA peoples' decisions in the past to act within the realm of good taste or bad. The material culture excavated, including pottery vessels, buildings and tombs, reverberates with emic notions of appropriateness, competence, and even beauty in producing and consuming the material world. EBA archaeologists may not be able to travel back in time to interview people, to directly hear their emic perspectives, but that inability should not preclude the acknowledgment that culturally constructed notions of taste and capital influenced the production, consumption and distribution of archaeological material culture. As typological analyses are conducted, a strongly etic process (Fig. 2), on material objects that emerged out of emic lived experiences in the past, how people decided to engage in valued, or devalued, behaviours and objects in specific contexts should be considered. Combining etic and emic approaches to producing archaeological knowledge offers a helpful grounding when considering what variation and similarity in EBA mortuary practices meant, where they occurred and how they emerged.

Communities of mortuary practitioners: funerary practice as craft

To combine etic and emic parameters, this paper employs a communities of practice approach (Lave and Wenger 1991; Lave 2011; Wenger 1998) to investigate variation in EB IA mortuary practices on the south-east Dead Sea Plain. Lave and Wenger (1991) originally presented this model using five examples in which people learn skills to master a craft: midwives, tailors, naval quartermasters, non-drinking alcoholics and butchers. Emphasizing the sociality of learning and technical practices, Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) define a *community of practice* as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and



Figure 2 Paul Lapp recording tomb pottery at Bâb adh-Dhrâ', April 1967 (EDSP Archives).

world, over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. Communities of practice encompass master practitioners, those well-trained and working towards expansive mastery, learners and novices, all of whom interact and negotiate their membership and status within the community while teaching, learning and practicing their craft.

This practice-based framework provides a tool to understand how people learn, practice, teach and innovate any formalized task or technical practice, including mortuary practices. The approach emphasizes that learning takes place in many places and formats, always situated in a social and spatial context. In some cases, people learn in formalized settings, such as schools; in other instances, they learn by observation (*legitimate peripheral participation*), rudimentary trials (*way-in*) and practice. People learn through being a member of a community, as novices observe, interact with, and negotiate relationships with those whom they name 'old-timers' (cf., Keller and Keller 1996). *Situated learning* is embedded inextricably within social relationships and influenced by power and status within the community. Learners negotiate their position based on how well they

practice the relevant tasks to gain a body of knowledge, skills, experience and expertise. Wilk's (2004) notion of backstage and upfront structures of assessment touch all members of a community of practice to varying degrees, as do culturally constructed notions of taste, whether centred on aesthetics, competence, or some other criteria. Learning requires relationality, with learners and practitioners interacting through and within practicing a technical craft. In learning and completing tasks, practitioners enact, cement and negotiate their membership within a community of practice.

Since the original publication, Lave (2011) and Wenger (1998) have refined the community of practice approach, which has been employed by other ethnographers (e.g., Keller and Keller 1996), ethnoarchaeologists (e.g., Gosselain 2016; Wallaert 2008) and anthropological archaeologists (e.g., Crown 2001; Hendon 2006; Hosler 1996; Logan and Stahl 2017; Michelaki *et al.* 2015; Mills 2016; Roddick 2016; Stahl 2010). In Roddick and Stahl's (2016a) edited volume, contributors use the model to explore the social contexts of production, circulation and consumption of varying categories of material culture and technical practices, including ceramic production (Crown 2016; Roddick 2016; Stahl 2016), foodways and cuisine (Mills 2016), and ritual practices (Schoenbaum 2016).

Roddick and Stahl (2016b) argue that all material culture embodies knowledge, skill and practice, and that distributions of things across space and time offer lines of evidence for investigating the social context of consumption and production. They describe how a communities of practice model can enhance archaeological knowledge production, especially the investigation of variation across space and time. In particular, they demonstrate how it facilitates analyses of object biographies and peoples' decisions to bundle certain things with others in specific contexts (Stahl 2010). Citing linguistic anthropologist Keane (2003; 2005; 2010), and archaeological adaptations (Joyce 2011; Pauketat 2013), Roddick and Stahl (2016b: 18) invoke the powerful semiotic nature of things and argue that as people decide to combine things, technologies, materials and bodies of knowledge, they craft not only new material objects but also novel juxtapositions of signs, qualities and value systems (cf., Mills 2016). This attention to semiotic bundling, artifact biographies and difference offers a potent tool with which to consider two important concepts in archaeological research into mortuary practices: landscapes and material association.

Ceramic ethnoarchaeologist Gosselain (2016: 52) argues that 'landscape is not just "background" but a key element in the history of practice'. In his research in the Niger Delta, he outlined how practitioners draw on two geographically situated sets of knowledge: *space of experience* which the potter knows through practice, and *space known* that circumscribes practices that the potter knows to exist, but which they have never themselves learned or practiced (Gosselain 2008). These two indexed landscapes of knowledge correlate quite closely to production and consumption of pottery vessels in his study area, and his distributional maps resemble archaeological maps for tracking items through space and referencing material culture, and the knowledge to produce, distribute and consume across varying contexts (e.g., Gosselain 2008: fig. 8.6). For example, following Gosselain's landscape-embedded approach, Michelaki *et al.* (2015) track distributions of style, form, decoration and technology over millennia to conduct a diachronic analysis of prehistoric pottery technologies in southern Calabria, Italy.

Within synchronic analyses, many archaeologists utilize Wenger's (1998) model for *constellations of practice* to examine variation across space in the production and consumption of material items, such as ceramics, beads and foodstuffs (Roddick and Stahl 2016a). Constellations of practice describe multiple communities of practice linked together across space, time and histories of practice. Wenger (1998: 126–27) described constellations as groups of practitioners too diverse, or geographically removed, to interact within a single community of practice, more in line with Gosselain's (2008; 2016) notion of potters sharing spaces of knowledge rather than the more immediate spaces of experience. Constellations of practice allow archaeologists to scale up and out of their unit of analysis, from a specific workshop, house, community, or region, to trace variation through both space and time (Blair 2016).

Members within constellations of practice meet, literally and figuratively, through engagement with *boundary objects*, which can include material culture, raw materials and places that resonate with personal and local histories. Roddick and Stahl (2016b: 10) emphasize that boundary objects do not establish dividing lines. Instead, they act as bridges to bring people, and more broadly communities of practice, together in places like markets and raw material sources, or in objects and foodstuffs which connect different communities (Mills 2016). As practitioners within a constellation encounter each other and their products, they assess others' work, expanding their

bodies of knowledge and frame of technical references.

Existing on the edges of communities of practice, *brokers* introduce innovative and revised practices (Roddick and Stahl 2016b: 10–11). Their social, economic, and even geographic positionality facilitate their engagement in different communities of practice while not fixing themselves in any one permanently: they act as insider-outsiders or non-member-members, sharing new ideas, technical knowledge and value systems across a constellation of practice. Change may also emerge when community members broaden their understanding of practice through attempting new practices through *imagination* (Roddick and Stahl 2016b: 48) and decide whether to conform to current standards (*alignment*) or to continue with the new. Gosselain (2016: 55) describes this process of innovation as moving from ‘good to think’ to ‘good to adopt’.

Scaling up from communities to constellations of practice allows scholars to explore social, economic and political networks across space, and to track continuities and discontinuities over time. Mortuary practices represent a powerful set of behaviours imbued with social, moral, economic, political, emotional and ritual gravitas framed by technical knowledge, local histories and peoples’ decisions (Bloch and Parry 1982; Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966; Gilchrist 2008; Hockney *et al.* 2012; Ilan and Rowan 2019; Kuijt 2008; Kuijt *et al.* 2021; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Murphy 2011; Rosaldo 1984; Sillar 1996; Tarlow 2015). This potent combination situates culturally structured ways of dealing with the dead as a craft, involving both production and consumption of material culture and performances, open to innovation and alignment within communities of practitioners (Chesson 2015).

During the EB IA, this craft, like any other, required the teaching and learning of technical knowledge embedded in social relations and grounded in practice settings. EB IA peoples learned, taught and practiced the necessary body of knowledge to fulfill social, economic, ritual and moral obligations to the dead and living. Some practitioners likely developed well-honed skills and expertise through practice, but all practitioners initiated their membership in this community of practice as novices, situated within specific social and physical practice settings. Younger members learned through legitimate peripheral practice, observing and aiding as appropriate. More skilled and competent members participated in and completed necessary tasks, while those with the most skill and practice attained a mastery of this

craft, lending an artistry and depth of engagement by leading and organizing performances of all elements.

In this paper I propose that the southern Levant contained a constellation of EB IA mortuary practitioners, in which different communities of practice conducted their funerary rituals in mutually intelligible but varying formats, which often, but not always, were linked to local histories and specific practice settings. Large and small cemeteries acted as boundary objects, linking members of different communities of practice physically and conceptually. Whether amidst fields of dolmens or in cemeteries of rock-cut, cist, or shaft tomb cemeteries, bundling tombs, human remains, grave goods, technical tasks and ritual practices produced desired and appropriate performances to fulfill obligations to the dead and living community members while consuming labour, knowledge and materials. This approach aids the investigation of variation in EB IA mortuary practices at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘, Fîfa and Naq‘, situated within roughly 30 kms of each other on the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain.

EB IA mortuary practices and the cemeteries of the south-east Dead Sea Plain

Scholars have explored southern Levantine EB I mortuary practices through a variety of lenses, including landscape approaches to investigate settlements and their geographical relationships with EB I cemeteries (Al-Shorman 2010; Bradbury and Philip 2017; Fraser 2018; Philip 2008; Prag 1995; Schaub 2009; Scheltema 2010), social complexity (Bentley 1991; Bentley and Perry 2008; Harrison 2001; Nai‘mat 1998; Rast 1999), and social memory (Chesson 2001; 2007). A key underlying question to this research centres on mobility and the geographical relationships between the living and the dead: where did people who buried their dead in dolmen fields and cemeteries actually live? For instance, Fraser’s (2018) recently published analysis of dolmens in the northern portion of the Jordan Valley in Jordan presents a thorough analysis of the geographical relationships between dolmen fields and EB I settlements. He discovered that small dolmen fields were often located near small EB I settlements and large dolmen fields situated near larger EB I settlements, but this linkage between cemeteries and settlements was not universal. Though challenges of associating EB I settlements and cemeteries may limit our understanding, Bradbury and Philip (2017) emphasize the visibility of the EB I dead in the southern Levant, particularly in the south-east Dead Sea Plain’s

cemeteries at Fifa, Naq' and Bâb adh-Dhrâ', where excavation and looting have identified thousands of tombs (Fig. 3; Braun 2020; Contreras and Brodie 2010; Kersel and Hill 2019; 2020; Lapp 1966; 1968a; 1968b; McCreery 1996; Nai'mat 1998; Ortner and Fröhlich 2008; Papadopoulos *et al.* 2000; Politis 2002; Rast 1999; Rast and Schaub 1978; 1980; 1981; Schaub 1981a; 1981b; 1996; Schaub and Rast 1984; 1989; Waheeb 1995).

Surveys in Jordan's southern Ghor and Wadi Arabah have not identified contemporaneous EB IA settlements (MacDonald 1992; Rast and Schaub 1974). The nearest excavated EB IA settlements are located at Wadi Fidan 4 (Adams and Genz 1995), Halaf Terrace (Alon and Yekutieli 1995; Dessel 2009), Tall Um Hammad (Betts 1992; Helms 1984; 1986), and EB I sites on the nearby Karak Plateau, identified by Miller's (1990) survey. For the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain EB IA cemeteries, no easy correlation between settlement and cemetery exists, and this preoccupation with residency acts as an analytical red herring.



Figure 3 View of Fifa following the 2001 excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (photograph by Meredith S. Chesson).

Bradbury *et al.* (2014) argue persuasively that traditional archaeological approaches to Late Chalcolithic and EBA settlement patterns may over-emphasize the primacy of settlement and residency over mobility. They suggest that by considering evidence for how a landscape was inhabited and used in a taskscape approach (Ingold 2000), archaeologists dismantle the theoretical scaffolding that prioritizes permanent settlement sites (such as tells). They propose that the spatial, temporal and cultural rhythms of daily life require mobility at a variety of scales: the movement of people and objects within buildings, settlements and landscapes, on daily, monthly, seasonal and yearly schedules. They demonstrate that mobility undergirds the connectivity that archaeologists evaluate as they discern similarities and differences in all aspects of life, including architectural practices, resource use, agricultural and pastoral production, craft production, exchange, demographic trends and mortuary practices.

Bradbury *et al.* (2014) reference Bâb adh-Dhrâ's EB IA cemetery as an exemplar of mobility, with the site acting as a gathering site highlighting the intertwined relationship between connectivity and mobility. Nicolle and Braemer (2012) argue that aggregation sites like this EB IA cemetery acted as arenas in which people connected with each other, exchanging goods, marriage partners and information. Researchers agree that the EB IA cemeteries of Fifa, Naq' and Bâb adh-Dhrâ' drew people together for mortuary rituals, requiring a journey from their homes located outside this immediate region (Chesson 2001; 2016; McCreery 1980: 279–302; Ortner and Fröhlich 2008; Schaub 2009; Sheridan *et al.* 2014; Ullinger *et al.* 2012). Over the years researchers have offered varying estimates for numbers of tombs in these cemeteries. Schaub (2009: 748) estimated that Bâb adh-Dhrâ' contained more than 56,000 EB IA and IB tombs, Fifa 2000–4200 tombs and Naq' 10,000 tombs. He (2009: 748) describes Bâb adh-Dhrâ' cemetery as 33 hectares, four times the size of Fifa. Using drone photography to map tombs and looters' pits, Kersel and Hill (2019: 316–17) estimate that there are more than 17,600 tombs at 8-hectre Fifa. In Schaub and Rast's test excavations at Fifa, bioarchaeologist Littleton (*n.d.*) documented MNIs ranging from two to six individuals in 16 excavated tombs. All told, thousands of EB IA people were buried in the southern Ghor during the EB IA.

At Bâb adh-Dhrâ' two types of subterranean shaft tombs dominated the EB IA mortuary landscape: vertical tombs in Cemetery A and shallower tombs in

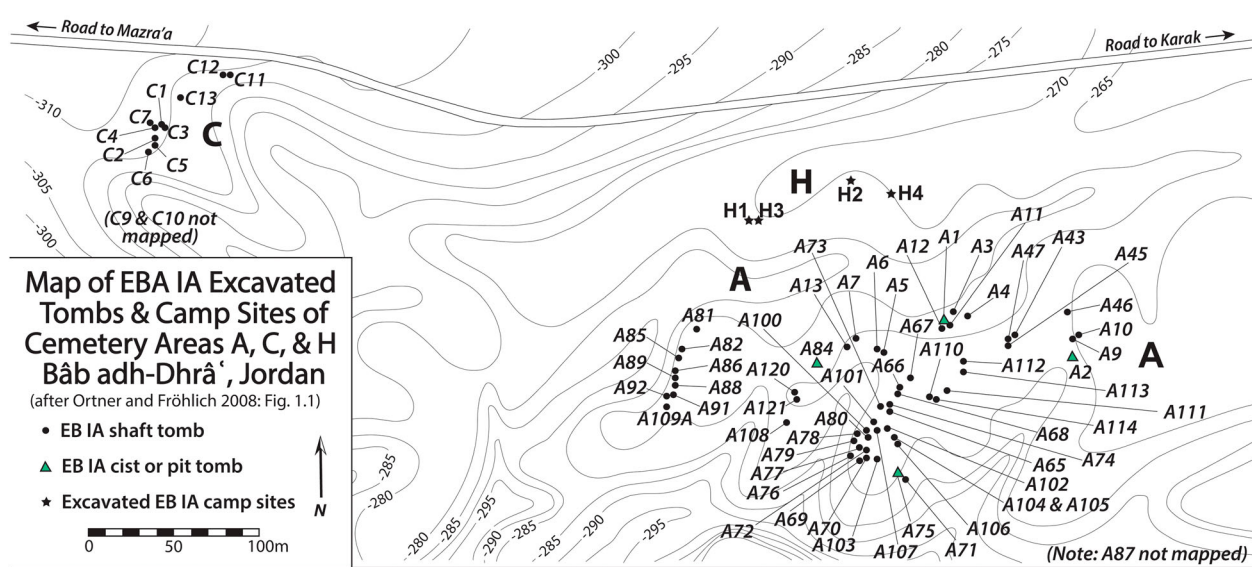


Figure 4 Map of EB IA tombs at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' cemetery (after Ortner and Fröhlich 2008: fig. 1.1).

Cemetery C (Fig. 4; Schaub and Rast 1989). In Cemetery A, people constructed vertical shaft tombs by tunnelling down 2–5 m through the Lisan marl from the surface, and carving out one to five chambers off that shaft (Figs 5 and 6). Each chamber was entered through a carved entrance which was closed with blocking stones when not being used for depositing the dead. Over generations, more people and grave goods were added to each chamber.

In Cemetery C, people dug shallower shafts, sometimes at a diagonal direction from a sloping hillside. Instead of a distinct doorway and blocking stone, they constructed a narrow stone wall that blocked each tomb chamber (Fig. 7; Schaub and Rast 1989: 185).

Mortuary practices in both Cemetery A and C demonstrate alignment with secondary deposition of disarticulated human remains of multiple individuals, with few exceptions. People placed skulls, often in a line, to the left of a pile of post-cranial elements. Both Cemetery A and C shaft tombs housed the remains of neonates, infants, subadults and adults (Ortner and Fröhlich 2008): mortuary practitioners left no one behind and took great pains to collect the smallest bones. Ceramic serving vessels were placed around the chamber's edges, often stacking bowls or placing jars and juglets into large bowls. The vast majority of the ceramics showed no usewear (Schaub pers. comm.). Variation in mortuary practices arose with the inclusion or exclusion of articulated human remains, reed matting below post-cranial bone piles, beads of various materials, stone

maceheads and bowls, ceramic skeuomorphs of stone bowls, Cemetery C-type vessels in Cemetery A (and vice-versa), ceramic figurines, *Lambis* shell bracelets and wooden objects (Table 1).

Fifa's EB IA tomb builders constructed thousands of stone-lined cist tombs (Figs 8 and 9), capped with massive limestone slabs. Like at Bâb adh-Dhrâ', mortuary practitioners followed general guidelines for burying their dead over several generations, depositing disarticulated skeletal remains with ceramic vessels in each tomb. Generally, human remains were deposited in the centre of the cist tomb, whether in disarticulated or semi-articulated form. Due to site formation processes, like silting and water flow, it cannot be determined if post-cranial skeletal remains were always discretely separated from skulls, as clearly shown at Bâb adh-Dhrâ'. *Lambis* shell bracelets, beads and maceheads were the most common grave goods in addition to ceramic serving jars, juglets, bowls and handled cups (Table 1). Excavators found no evidence of Bâb adh-Dhrâ's woven mats, ceramic figurines, or wood objects, but admittedly taphonomic conditions and sampling issues may influence this pattern.

With fewer than 30 km separating these two contemporaneous cemeteries, both differences and similarities in EB IA mortuary practices raise intriguing questions of how to understand this variation (Table 2). Nai'mat (1998) argues that each site's underlying geology made shaft tombs possible at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' but impossible at Fifa or Naq'. Although environmental affordances were important, the cultural values and ideas attached to these tomb

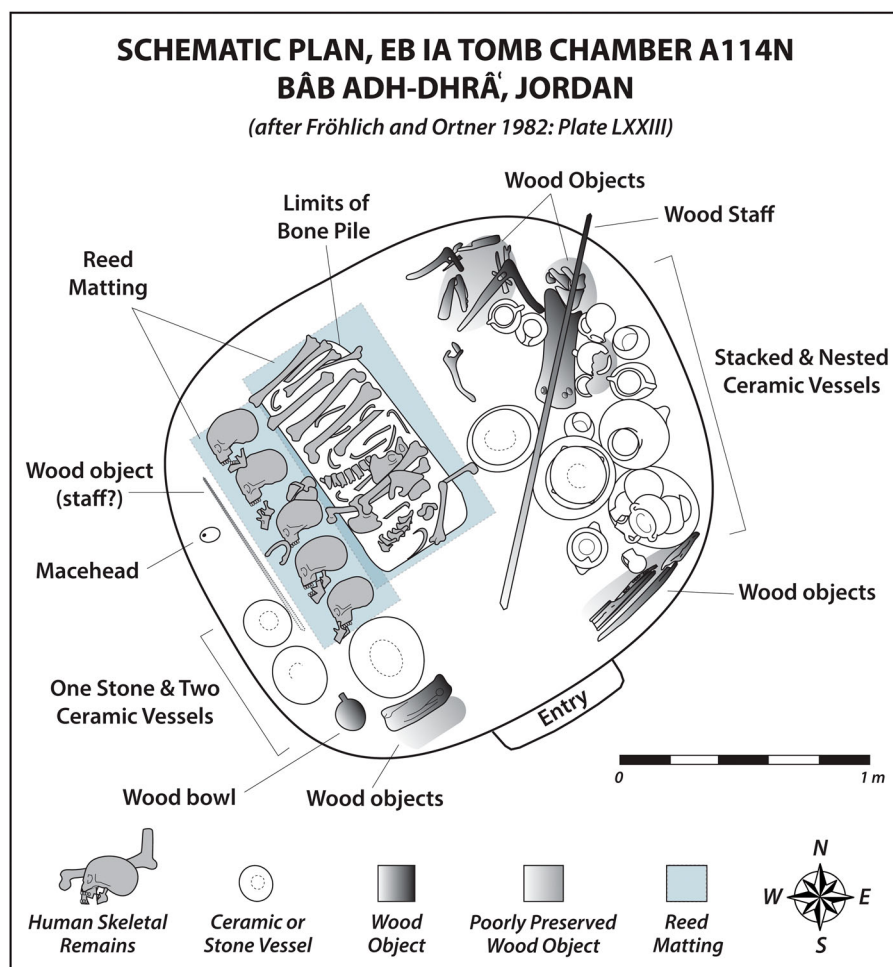


Figure 5 Schematic plan of Bâb adh-Dhrâ' shaft tomb A114N.

types and the work of dealing with the dead over many generations must be considered. Bâb adh-Dhrâ's cist tombs A2 and A84, and pit tombs A1 and A75, beg the question of why their builders chose these different tomb forms, especially as they were surrounded by thousands of shaft tombs as far as the eye could see. It is possible that these exceptions



Figure 6 Central portion of Bâb adh-Dhrâ' A114N during excavation (EDSP Archives).

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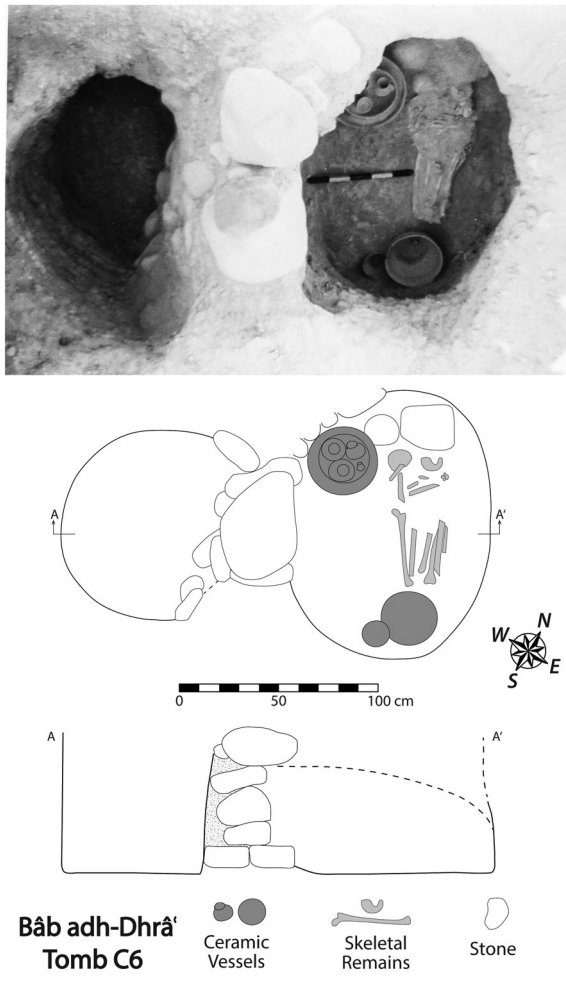


Figure 7 Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Shaft Tomb C6 (EDSP Archives).

and boundary objects where archaeologists find the material footprints of a constellation of EB IA mortuary practitioners.

Communities and constellations of EB IA mortuary practitioners

Utilizing a community of practice approach, these cemeteries could be characterized as *boundary objects* associated with a constellation of EB IA mortuary practitioners, including evidence for *alignment*, *brokers* and *practice*. With a *chaîne opératoire* format, EB IA mortuary practices can be walked through, in order to see how different communities of mortuary practitioners came together on the Dead Sea Plain to form a constellation of practice (Fig. 10). Located in as-yet-unidentified sites outside this region, initial practice settings allowed people to learn how to conduct the primary processing and burial of the dead to de-flesh the body in preparation for secondary rites, to know how long to keep a body buried to completely de-flesh, and then how to complete the technical steps in retrieving the skeletal remains, no matter how small, for transport to a Dead Sea cemetery. Travelling to these cemeteries required a variety of bodies of knowledge and practice in order to successfully complete the journey: knowing the path and key landmarks; where and how to acquire food and water for human and non-human animals during the trip; what and how much to bring to sustain the travellers; deciding which grave goods to place with the dead; and proper methods for carrying human remains and grave

Table 1 Comparison of EB IA tomb construction, treatment of human remains and grave goods in EB IA tombs excavated in Bâb adh-Dhrâ's Cemeteries A and C (Ortner and Fröhlich 2008; Rast and Schaub 1989; Schaub 2008; 2009) and Fifa (unpublished 1989–1990 EDSP Excavations)

Mortuary Evidence		Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery A		Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery C		Fifa	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
Tomb Architecture	Shaft tomb chambers	104	96.3%	10	100.0%	0	0.0%
	Cist tomb	2	1.9%	0	0.0%	16	100.0%
	Pit or rock-cut tomb (?)	2	1.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Total Excavated Tombs	108		10		16	
Human Remains	Chambers with only secondary (disarticulated) human remains	103	95.4%	10	100.0%	13	81.3%
	Chambers with full or partial primary articulated and disarticulated human remains	5	4.6%	0	0.0%	3	18.8%
Grave Goods	Chambers with ceramic vessels	107	100.0%	10	100.0%	13	100.0%
	Chambers with stone bowls	37	34.3%	4	40.0%	0	0.0%
	Chambers with ceramic skeuomorphs of stone bowls	13	12.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Chambers with maceheads	16	14.8%	4	40.0%	2	12.5%
	Chambers with ceramic figurines	8	7.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Chambers with beads	20	18.5%	6	60.0%	5	31.3%
	Chambers with <i>lambis</i> bracelets	2	1.9%	0	0.0%	2	12.5%
	Chambers with wood objects and staffs	12	11.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%



Figure 8 Aerial photograph of Fifa EB IA Cemetery with location of 2001 Department of Antiquities excavations by Mohammad Najjar indicated in the red box (reprint of Kersel and Hill 2019: fig. 2, courtesy of Austin (Chad) Hill).

goods (Chesson 2016). Learning and practicing these initial primary and secondary mortuary tasks likely involved old-timers, less experienced practitioners, novices and observers (engaging in legitimate peripheral participation). Early learners could attempt duties that allowed them a ‘way-in’ in multi-stage practices: digging a grave for a primary burial, retrieving tools to collect de-fleshed skeletal remains, or choosing and packing grave goods for secondary interment. While the necessary steps and associated sets of technical knowledge and material resources are surmised, no verifiable evidence of these practice settings have been found.

Practice contexts become more visible archaeologically at the cemeteries themselves. Excavations at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ found ample evidence for constructing and reusing tombs, as well as for a series of temporary camps in nearby Area H, where Rast and Schaub (2003: 69–71) interpreted over a metre deep of ashy layers containing ceramic sherds, faunal remains, charcoal and at least two ‘spoon handles’ as indications of food production and consumption. Citing Ortner’s (1981: 130–31) and their earlier calculations (Schaub and Rast 1989: 548–49), Rast and Schaub (2003: 73) estimate that people camped in Area H for weeks, or even a few months, as they constructed shaft tombs in the cemetery. Less lengthy sojourns were required to bury the dead if people had finished tomb construction on an earlier occasion. Building and reusing tombs over decades involved repeated journeys for experienced tomb builders, accompanied by more junior practitioners, novices and observers. As practice

landscapes (Gosselain 2008), the Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ and Fifa EB IA cemeteries contain the material residues of decisions by mortuary practitioners to align with established practices that they themselves have learned and practiced (space of experience) or to adopt other practices that they know of generally and could imagine (space of knowledge).

As a boundary object, each EB IA cemetery linked different communities of practice as thousands of people returned periodically to bury their dead over a 400-year span. Tombs, skeletal remains and grave goods represent a constellation of practice arising from decisions by practitioners from many communities of practice, spanning generations and living communities. At Fifa, excavations and surface surveys discovered only cist tombs; the people who buried their dead displayed a high degree of alignment with established mortuary practices in this regard (Fig. 11). Cemetery C at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ shows a similar pattern of alignment in terms of tomb construction. Admittedly, tomb sample sizes in Cemetery C and Fifa are much smaller in comparison to dozens of excavated tombs in Cemetery A, which also includes four pit and cist tombs. Regardless of sampling or site formation processes, the majority of excavated tombs at both sites demonstrate a fidelity to general guidelines of mortuary practices.

In completing their technical and ritual tasks, mortuary practitioners literally and figuratively bundled appropriate objects and materials together. This potent combination of items, people, practices and landscapes indexed social, economic and political

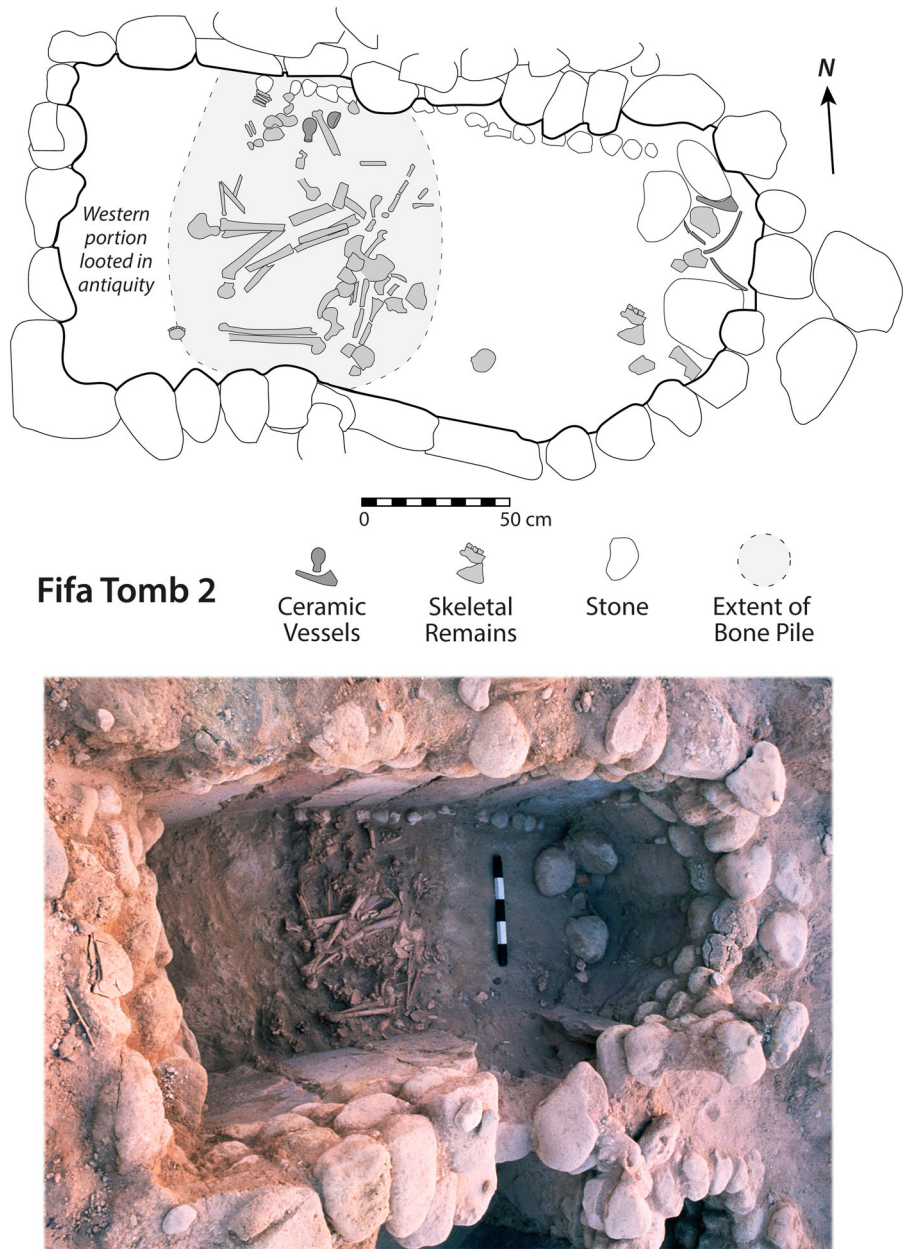


Figure 9 Cist Tomb 2 at Fifa (EDSP Archives).

relationships, kinship obligations and cosmological understandings of what it meant to be a living and dead human being. When considering biographies of associated humans, objects, materials and tombs,

especially in cases where the tombs have been reused over generations, we see how communities of practice can span generations and achieve varying degrees of alignment.

Table 2 Summary of EB IA multi-scalar variation in mortuary practices (see also Rast 1999: 171)

Scale	Variations
Regional: between cemeteries	Tomb construction
Site: within cemeteries	Tomb construction between Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemeteries A and C); tomb construction within Cemetery A (pit, cist and shaft)
Tomb: between and within chambers	Numbers of primary and secondary burials; grave goods (numbers and types of ceramic, stone, wood, and textile objects)

Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery A	Defleshed in Unknown Location	A-Type Shaft Tombs	Ceramic Serving Vessels (including Cemetery A-Types)	Skulls to Left of Post-cranial Bones in Pile in Center of Chamber	ALIGNMENT Space of Experience
Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery C	Defleshed in Unknown Location	C-Type Shaft Tombs	Ceramic Serving Vessels (including Cemetery C-Types)	Skulls to Left of Post-cranial Bones in Pile towards Back of Chamber	
Fifa	Defleshed in Unknown Location	Cist tombs	Ceramic Serving Vessels	In central area of tomb (separation of elements unclear)	
↕					
Chaîne Opératoire	Primary Burials	Tomb Reuse or Construction	Deposition of Grave Goods & Secondary Burials		VARIATION (BY BROKERS?) Space of Knowledge
Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery A	Pit Tombs A1, Shaft Tombs A71W & A83	Pit Tombs (A1, A75), Cist Tomb (A2), Cist Tomb with Niches (A84)	Cemetery C-Type Vessels, 1 or 2 Stone Bowls, Maceheads, Beads, Matting below Bone Pile, Wood Objects, Ceramic Skeumorphs, Shell Bracelets		
Bâb adh-Dhrâ' Cemetery C	No Variation	No Variation	Cemetery A-Type Vessels, 1 Stone Bowl, Maceheads, Beads		
Fifa	Cist Tombs 4, 7, & 12	No Variation	Maceheads, Beads, Shell Bracelets		

Figure 10 Constellation of EB IA communities of mortuary practitioners at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' and Fifa.

It is also possible to track the emergence of variation through time and across space, which we attribute to different communities of practice, decisions to employ different practices that seem ‘good to think’ and ‘good to adopt’ (Gosselain 2016), and/or the presence of brokers. Even accounting for sample sizes, differences in tomb construction, inclusion or exclusion of Cemetery A- and Cemetery C-type

vessels, and the absence of ceramic imitations of stone vessels, shell bracelets, matting and wooden objects in Cemeteries A and C, tombs represent varying technical and moral frameworks for burying the dead in at least two identifiable communities of mortuary practitioners (Fig. 12). Learners and novices likely worked together, with opportunities for early learners to witness as old-timers and more

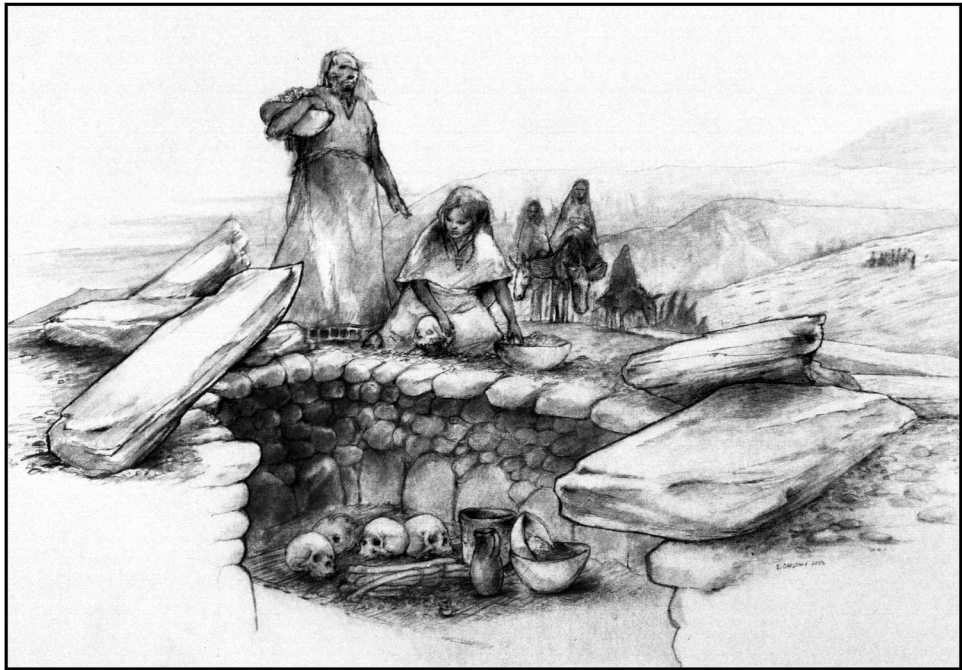


Figure 11 Reconstruction of Cist Tomb burial at Fifa (by artist Eric Carlson, image EDSP).



Figure 12 Reconstruction of Cemetery A shaft tomb burial at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' (by artist Eric Carlson, image EDSP).

experienced practitioners made decisions of what to include in the tombs, where to place objects and the appropriateness of different choices within the affordances of the general 'recipe' for mortuary craftwork.

Alternatively, these variations may evince influences of brokers, especially decisions to include different items, such as ceramic figurines, beads, maceheads, ceramic skeuomorphs, or stone bowls; occasional primary burials at both cemeteries; or construction of different tomb types, like Cemetery A's four cist and pit tombs. Cist tomb A2 is a classic cist tomb like those at Fîfa and Naq'. Could the builders have spanned more than one community of practice: those who buried their dead at Bâb adh-Dhrâ' and those who buried their dead at Fîfa and Naq'? More intriguing is Tomb A84, whose plan differs significantly from the usual cist tomb and was constructed with four stone niches in its side walls (Schaub and Rast 1989: 170–72). Tomb A84's builders chose to construct a unique burial chamber, despite being surrounded by thousands of shaft tombs. Did the tomb builders act as brokers from their position on the fringes of generations of communities of mortuary practitioners who had buried their dead on the Dead Sea Plain?

Regardless of whether mortuary practitioners followed the general 'recipe' for tomb building, secondary burials and inclusion of appropriate grave goods, cases of alignment and non-conformity resonate with important concepts of taste and the sociality of learning and practice. People wanted to get this work done properly, and they valued the structural guidelines of practice established by their communities for several centuries. A well-built tomb, properly deposited disarticulated skeletal remains, and inclusion of appropriate numbers and types of grave goods materially indexed a series of responsibilities linked to kinship, emotion and spiritual obligations. Assessments of how well they fulfilled their duties through the craft of mortuary practices spanned across generations, with those reopening tombs witnessing the actions of their forebears and those constructing new tombs employing specialized technical knowledge while considering which practices they wished to continue or change. Regardless of their decisions, they and others appraised the profound quality of this work.

Within this relatively small region, affordances from the environment and localized cultural histories of inhabitants shaped how the materialities of EB IA

funerary rituals aligned or differed within the broader constellation of mortuary practice. While EB IA people followed a general ‘recipe’ for mortuary practices, the fascinating differences in cist and shaft tombs cannot simply be reduced to geological determinism. Geology may have influenced the original design and development of these practices, but over the centuries and generations people undoubtedly associated specific values and meanings to these tomb types. They worked hard to fulfill their mortuary responsibilities properly and to satisfy their obligations to themselves and to the dead, balancing agency with structure.

The Dead Sea Plain communities of mortuary practice encountered significant changes with the establishment of late EB IB settlements at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ and Ras an-Numayra (Chesson *et al.* 2020; Rast and Schaub 2003). Late EB IB and early EB II mortuary practices encompassed a wide range of alternatives, from the abandonment of Fifa’s cemetery, the construction of slab tombs at Naq’ (Nai’mat 1998), the reuse of EB IA shaft tombs, primary burials and construction of circular charnel houses at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ (Chesson 1999; 2007; Harrison 2001; Rast 1999; Schaub and Rast 1989). Over time, as peoples’ relationships with the Dead Sea landscape changed and daily rhythms transformed with the establishment of fortified towns, they introduced and refined new mortuary technologies and practices, reconfiguring their communities of mortuary practice. With the beginning of the EB III, around 2850 BCE, inhabitants of the walled towns of Numayra and Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ established an entirely new form of burial context, rectangular charnel houses. While they maintained some of their ancestral mortuary practices, including deposition of disarticulated skeletal remains with a suite of ceramic, stone and textile grave goods, variation between numbers and types of grave goods and tomb sizes increased (Chesson 1999; 2007; 2015).

Concluding thoughts

A communities of practice model affords a more nuanced tool for assessing variations and homogeneities of EBA mortuary variation, because it encompasses the overarching behavioural patterns as well as the outliers. By casting mortuary practices as a craft, embedded in the sociality of technology and learning, similarities and differences are considered as emerging from learning and practice communities, a line of inquiry which combines the comfortable etic methods with emic understandings of social, economic and political relations and networks.

It also provides the opportunity for archaeologists to rethink what is meant by EBA regionalism as a lens through which to understand the past. For instance, if the two neighbouring cemeteries of Fifa and Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘ were found in different sub-regions, would their different tomb types be considered as evidence for EBA regionalism? If yes, how does that reasoning stand when analysing different practices in the same area? The bedrock of our profession requires scholars to track variation in material culture across time and space, but I wonder if some of our foundational assumptions in certain contexts, like mortuary practices, act more as blinders than heuristic tools. If residency were not linked to variation in any practices and behaviours, how can the notion of regional variation in an already very small area be considered?

For the south-eastern Dead Sea Plain, casting these cemeteries as boundary objects decouples analysis from the unanswerable questions of residency, reframing the interpretive endeavour as one grounded in mobility and connectivity. Following Bradbury *et al.*’s (2014) and Nicolle and Braemer’s (2012) task-cape-like approach to documenting activities, these cemeteries flip the script and allow us to re-evaluate traditional understandings that overvalue sedentary communities and tired tropes of a desert-sown dichotomy. Instead, mobility is prioritized as the primary grounding force in maintaining connections and communities while recognizing that life is and requires movement, whether that involves daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, or yearly journeys to fulfill economic, social, ritual and political obligations.

Prioritizing mobility resonates well with the nature of EB IA culture, which Greenberg (2019: 25–35) describes as characterized by small villages dispersed across the region, with little evidence of pronounced social hierarchies and long-distance exchange. Greenberg argues that most EB IA people may not have inhabited their villages year-round; rather, groups of people may have moved between different villages seasonally to engage in a diversified approach to Mediterranean agropastoralism that emphasized risk reduction. Mobility at both the settlement and individual scale underpinned the economy, daily life and social frameworks for EB IA peoples, and therefore, it is no surprise that people travelled to the Dead Sea Plain to bury their dead. With the vast majority of individuals buried in these cemeteries interred as secondary burials, mortuary practitioners may have conducted their work at Bâb adh-Dhrâ‘, Fifa and Naq’ seasonally, with mourners from many communities convening to practice their craft simultaneously.

With funerary rituals offering a dynamic arena in which people reconnected, these cemeteries acted as boundary objects for a constellation of mortuary practice, where practitioners could observe variations in rituals and technological knowledge, experiment, learn, teach and engage in social, economic and political networks. In considering mortuary practices as a craft through a communities of practice lens, different scales of mobility, of the living and the dead, are highlighted as the key to understanding EB IA society, connectivity and the foundation for the emergence of the large, fortified communities of the EB IB–III.

More broadly, the communities of practice approach, emphasizing the sociality of learning, teaching and connecting with craft practitioners, encourages archaeologists to rethink how we analyse and interpret difference, regionalism, and the human- and material-based networks linking people, things and landscapes. Considering how people learn and innovate craft practices, like funerary rituals, combines etic and emic approaches for understanding difference and facilitates the development of stronger and more humanistic archaeological knowledge. While we may never know in each instance why mourners constructed a tomb in a certain way or placed some objects within or withheld others from a tomb, we still acknowledge that the materiality of these practices emerged from the sociality of everyday life and death, with people learning, making decisions, and assessing actions according to their moral and spiritual understanding of how to take care of their dead.

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