

1 Introduction

Death and Burial within the Ancient Levant

Death is the great leveller, we all have to die, but the ways in which the living conceptualise and deal with the dead vary significantly across time and space; from hasty burial to elaborate and lengthy funerary rituals. Despite these variations, attempts are often made to identify a ‘normative’ burial practice for any given period. Individual inhumation, in particular, is often viewed as a typical way of dealing with the dead. Part of these assumptions stem from our own cultural (and often western-centric) biases and traditions. Individual inhumation within a cemetery and the integrity of the human corpse, for example, is often at the forefront of burial practices within the major monotheistic religions. Stepping beyond these confines and assumptions, however, we can find a truly breathtaking variety of ways in which the living interact with the dead.

The potential for exploring and trying to understand the intricacies and meanings of these variations is immense, although largely unrealised, particularly for ancient Western Asia. Despite hundreds of years of excavation and survey providing us with an unparalleled wealth of mortuary and funerary material, few scholars have attempted to holistically untangle the complexities of this record (e.g. Porter and Boutin 2014b, 1). Until recently, for example, human remains from both funerary and non-funerary locales were often relegated to short reports or appendices within larger publications. Focus, instead, was dedicated to the study and discussion of burial typologies and grave goods, often without considering the human body and the practices, processes, and beliefs involved in the treatment of the deceased. A simple survey of data from across Western Asia also highlights regional and sub-regional disparities. Whether due to accessibility, lack of publication, or an absence of evidence, we are presented with a highly fragmented dataset, rich and abundant for some areas and some periods, while almost invisible for others (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2015; Bradbury and Philip 2016, 309–11).

With the emergence of big data projects, new excavations, and shifting theoretical frameworks and methodologies, scholars have begun to highlight the sheer variety of burial practices across ancient Western Asia. Such research has been enabled by new ways of manipulating, analysing, and incorporating large datasets, as well as diverse and messy data. Indeed, as different projects have demonstrated, a small proportion of the overall deceased population may be

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visible in the archaeological record (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2015; Faust and Safrai 2022; Wood et al. 1992). Starting from this unique standpoint, and rather than assuming that the fragmentary record is representative of the whole, this volume argues for the necessity of analysing both the existing and non-existing data at multiple scales of analysis. In the pages that follow, therefore, rather than attempting to identify a ‘normative’ or ‘typical’ burial, I explore the multitude of ways in which the living approached and interacted with the dead.

By doing so, I aim to acknowledge and foreground variability. Not only in terms of so-called ‘atypicality’, but also in terms of burials and practices that have been mistakenly lumped together, often in the drive to streamline and produce narratives of similarity and ‘normative’ behaviour. This is not to disregard broader temporal and spatial parallels. Instead, by adopting an approach that attempts to combine ‘big data’, ‘tyrannous case studies’ and everything in between, I seek to explore patterns that can shed light on changes in the ways in which humans perceive(d) of the dead and themselves (the living). By exploring and interrogating these data at multiple scales, the volume focuses on three general themes, woven throughout the chapters of this book; the manipulation and treatment of the human body; the relationships between human bodies within burial contexts, and, finally, the relationships between human bodies and non-human agents within the mortuary sphere. Attempting to chart shifts and changing patterns in these relationships over the course of thousands of years is not without its challenges. Throughout this volume, therefore, it has been necessary, on occasion, to further delimit discussions chronologically. As such the Levantine Bronze Age (fourth to second millennia BCE) remains at the core of this volume, while being brought into broader conversation with materials and archaeological data pre- and post-dating these millennia. Predominantly focused on the Levant, including the modern nation states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria (see Figure 1.1), this book also engages with these broader themes across Western Asia and the Mediterranean, adopting an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach to understanding temporal and spatial variability.

Another Book about Death and Burial?

Having taught on the broad subject of death, dying, and burial in the ancient world at both undergraduate and graduate levels in the United Kingdom, Germany, and, more recently, the United States, I was always struck by the overall lack of comprehensive, temporally extensive, and theoretically engaged volumes on offer. While various projects and publications have explored topics associated with mortuary archaeology, these have often been confined to the exploration of a single site, region, or chronological period. Some of the most useful texts, at least to understand the broader reconstruction of burial trends and traditions (e.g. Bloch-Smith 1992; Gonen 1992; Ilan 2002), are now decades old. Moreover, no single volume comprehensively explores changes over the *longue durée* or aims to bring data from both the northern and southern

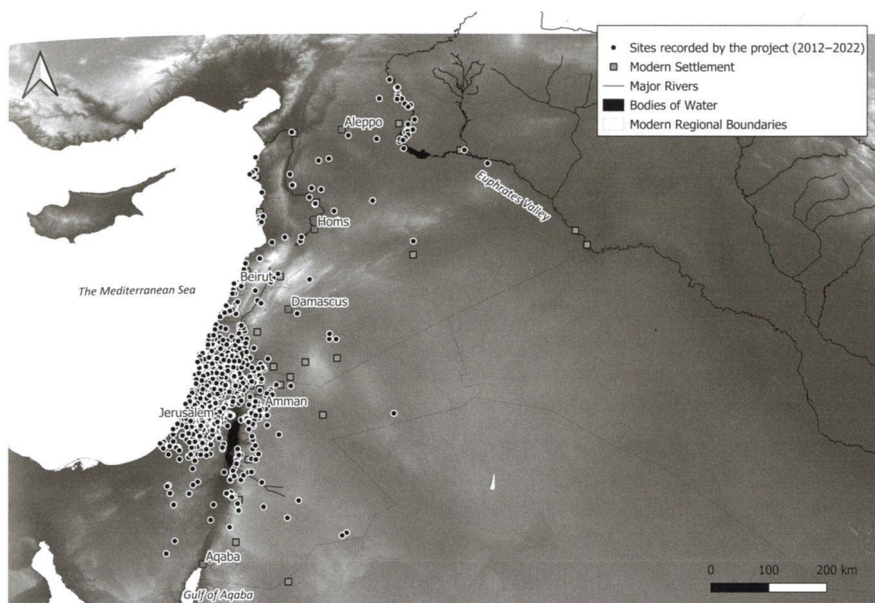


Figure 1.1 The areas and regions covered by this project. This plot shows the total number of sites recorded by the Invisible Dead Project and author (2012–2022). Modern settlements and nation state boundaries are included for reference, along with the major rivers and inland water bodies. These will be included on maps in the following chapters without labelling.

Levant into dialogue. Indeed, despite some excellent edited volumes on this topic (e.g. Campbell and Green 1995; Felli 2016; Laneri 2007; Porter and Boutin 2014a), very few attempt to build a broader and more comprehensive conversation around similarity and difference across this region. At the other end of the scale, it is also relatively rare to see contributions focused on Western Asia in more recently published handbooks. *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Stutz and Tarlow 2013), for example, only includes two contributions (out of 44 chapters): one on Islamic burials and the second on looting in Jordan. Part of the explanation for these trends may be associated with the perceived volume of data we have for this region. On the one hand suggesting that we have learnt all that we need to know and, on the other, posing a serious challenge for any project attempting to bring together and analyse such disparate datasets. The early origins of this book lie with research tackling these very issues.

First initiated in 2012 and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the Invisible Dead Project (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2015; Bradbury and Scarre 2017),¹ based at Durham University and directed by Professor Christopher Scarre and Co-PIs, Professors Graham Philip, Charlotte Roberts, and Douglas

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Davies, aimed to collate burial data for the Levant (and Britain), from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Over a period of two years, data on over 40,000 individuals and nearly 200,000 burial features were documented and recorded within the database. One of the key challenges of the project was how to bring together and make data cross comparable. While we aimed to achieve a high level of coverage, for some sites this was not possible.² When the project came to the end of its preliminary phase in 2014, we estimated that we had managed to achieve detailed coverage or sampling for the majority of known sites (c. 70%) where data regarding human skeletal material was available. Such data were complimented by summary coverage of sites from journals and online databases, where presence of burial features was noted but associated details were unknown.

Funding for this project ended in 2014, however, research on this subject has continued and developed in different directions. Colleagues at Durham University continue their exciting work, exploring shifting patterns in settlement alongside burial data. At the same time, other projects have also started to address similar issues, seeking to better understand the demographic links between the living and the dead (e.g. Faust and Safrai 2022). Over the past decade, I have also continued to add to and work with these original Invisible Dead datasets. While acknowledging the significant gaps in scholarly discourse that have shaped my dedication to this project, my interest also stems from a profound fascination with how I (and those around me) deal with death and, more importantly, the bodies of the people and animals that have died. From my insistence at an early age that pet animals were to be buried at the bottom of the garden, to recent discussions with my husband about what I would like to happen to my own body when the time (eventually) comes, these are all experiences and conversations that have shaped and influenced my perceptions and beliefs around death, the dead, and ideas of ‘proper’ behaviour. Whether people in the past had similar conversations or experiences is difficult to determine. As archaeologists, we have relatively few ways to access practices and beliefs around the process of *dying*. We do, however, have an unparalleled insight into practices involving the dead. These rich and storied behaviours can tell us a huge amount about past peoples, from individual lived experiences to societal structures; religious and eschatological beliefs; to health, well-being, and past environmental conditions. They are also, however, structured by sociocultural norms and constraints. Thus, by attempting to find, although not necessarily trying to fill, gaps in our evidence we also have an opportunity to give voice to individuals and groups who are often overlooked, ignored or simply less visible in the archaeological record.

Why the Levant and Bronze Age?

The geographical scope of this volume, encompassing an area from the Mediterranean Sea to the deserts and the northern Euphrates Valley in the east and from the Gulf of Aqaba to the borders of Syria in the north, is delimited

and shaped by historical, sociopolitical, geographical, and academic boundaries. Characterised as a land bridge, as well as a region of significant diversity, the 'Levant' throughout its history has been both highly interconnected, as well as home to distinctly local and regionally specific trajectories of development (Greenberg 2019, 3–7; Killebrew and Steiner 2013, 2–3). As such, it serves as an ideal playground for exploring both patterns of similarity, as well as aspects of variability and difference at multiple scales of analysis. In comparison to surrounding areas, this region is also unparalleled for its wealth of published mortuary data. Publications from excavations and surveys over the past 150 years and more have created a vast array of legacy data that, while temporally and spatially variable, serve as a vital resource for any project seeking to undertake a study on this scale. In contrast, as we move towards the deserts of modern Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, published data becomes far less plentiful, a situation that is largely an artificial creation.³ Even as we enter the heavily studied river valleys of ancient Iraq/Mesopotamia, accessible and comprehensive mortuary data are relatively limited, although this is again changing (Sołtysiak 2006, 152–53, 2017, 119–20).

'Levant', although in some ways outdated and certainly historically situated in the colonial and post-colonial legacies of the region (Greenberg 2019, 3–7; Killebrew and Steiner 2013, 2–3), is employed here for several reasons. First, as a term that has local, although equally historically situated, equivalents (e.g. *al-Mashriq al-'Arabi*, *Bilad al-Sham*), it provides greater specificity than 'Western Asia'. It acknowledges that while the volume seeks to place its discussions within a wider context, sites east of the northern Euphrates River Valley have largely been excluded. On the other hand, the term also invokes relatively soft geographical boundaries. Thus, where appropriate, materials and discussions from the wider region are brought into conversation. It is certainly hoped that the methodological approaches and questions raised here can also serve as inspiration for future research across Western Asia as a whole. A broad use of the term 'Levant' has the additional benefit of emphasising the north/south and east/west comparisons that lie at the heart of this volume. Writing (and likely reading) a volume with a narrower geographical scope (e.g. northern Levant or southern Levant) would be far easier. My desire to bring the whole Levantine zone into conversation, however, stems not only from a frustration around the lack of volumes that currently do so, but also from the more fundamental question of what would, and would not, be included.

By way of example, Greenberg (2019, 4–5, Figure 1.1), in his excellent overview of the archaeology of the Bronze Age Levant, employs a narrow definition of this term, drawing his northern boundary at the Homs Gap. Yet, research from my PhD, from just north of this region, revealed clear evidence for material culture that was much more southern-, rather than northern-, oriented (e.g. Bradbury 2011; Bradbury and Philip 2011; Philip and Bradbury 2010). This evidence, therefore, could be included in a volume on either the northern or southern Levant and considered or presented as an indication for both variability and similarity. Similar issues are encountered when considering

the region where my current fieldwork is centred, Lebanon, a country which seems to shift association depending on the scholar (e.g. southern Levant (e.g. Greenberg 2019, 4–5, Figure 1.1) versus northern Levant (e.g. Artin 2013)). While these discussions are somewhat pedantic, the reader, I hope, will start to see the larger point. Drawing boundaries is necessary, although for a volume interested in patterns of variability and similarity, taking as broad a definition and spatial extent as possible offers real benefits.

The same can also be said for the chronological parameters of this volume. These have been shaped very broadly, so as to be able to better understand wider patterns of change, as well as continuity. The Bronze Age in the Levant and wider Western Asia has, in recent decades, been viewed as a timeframe worthy of study and dissection in its own right, characterised by diverging trajectories towards urbanism, new patterns of subsistence and economy, and shifting scales of interconnectivity and mobility (Bradbury, Braemer, and Sala 2014; Chesson and Philip 2003; Greenberg 2002, 2019; Lawrence et al. 2016; Lawrence, Palmisano, and Gruchy 2021; Lawrence, Philip, and de Gruchy 2022; Lawrence and Wilkinson 2015; Wilkinson et al. 2014). In other words, a “...significant epoch in human history...” (Greenberg 2019, 2). Yet many of these changes and developments have their origins in earlier centuries and millennia, while other patterns and practices clearly continue long after the so-called end of the Bronze Age. It is as a result of these gradual shifts and transformations that the chronological parameters of this volume have been set as they are. They are also, however, a product and reflection of our current methodological limitations.

Some of the continuity in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I (fifth–fourth millennia BCE) burial sites in the southern Levant (see Chapters 3 and 4), for example, may be restricted to the very end/beginning of these periods. We do not, as yet, however, have this degree of temporal specificity for most of the examples and case studies touched upon in the following chapters. At the other end of my period of interest, practices dating to the first millennium BCE have echoes in the late second (see Chapters 3, 5, and 7). Moreover, debates around resilience and continuity shape much of the current scholarship on the end of the Bronze Age/beginning of the Iron Age (e.g. Greenberg 2019, 354–57; Ilan 2017, 52). Providing justification for an end point c. 550 BCE (although for some chapters I also include reference to Persian materials) are some of the visible changes in burial practices (e.g. significant increases in burials without associated materials (Chapter 8)), as well as the scale at which imperial powers in the region are now operating.

This is not to suggest that continuity cannot be seen in later periods (e.g. Persian, Hellenistic, or beyond) or alternatively that definite connections and through lines can be seen from the Late Chalcolithic to the beginning of the Achaemenid Empire. On the contrary, these periods and the historical circumstances which shaped their associated societies and cultures are very different. One of the ultimate limitations, but perhaps one of the significant benefits, of this volume is that the geographical and chronological breadth of its remit

makes it impossible to spatially contextualise and historicise every observed pattern and variation. Considering burial practices over the long term, however, we can identify behaviours that do change, as well as those that, at least at first glance, do not. Informed by these broader trends we are better equipped to further interrogate, historicise, and disentangle the data, asking questions around why change does or does not appear to occur. Thus, rather than presenting a definitive and streamlined overview of mortuary practices from the Late Chalcolithic through Iron Age, in the following chapters I foreground variability, missing evidence, as well as often ignored issues and aim to raise new questions and avenues for future investigation.

Laying the Foundations

Archaeological data are rarely perfect or incontrovertibly accurate. Instead, even when dealing with recent research excavations, there will always be issues of interpretation or missing details. Working with earlier materials, such as nineteenth-century reports, or with secondary summaries, tends to amplify these issues and thus we are always dealing with fragmentary and partial datasets. In the following chapter (Chapter 2) I will cover some of the most significant theoretical paradigms and frameworks shaping and spurring the research discussed in this book. A brief note, however, regarding the methods and approaches used within the data analyses is worth including here. These have been covered in more detail by other publications (Bradbury et al. 2015; Bradbury and Philip 2016), and, thus, I just want to draw out some of the key elements shaping the types of questions explored within this volume.

Data Collection and Cleaning

Over the past few decades, increasing emphasis and attention has been paid to the validation, publication and re-interpretation of legacy datasets and collections, both mortuary and non-mortuary alike (e.g. Atici et al. 2013; Cooper and Green 2016; Lawrence, Bradbury, and Dunford 2012; Voss 2012). A range of challenges are encountered when dealing with legacy mortuary data, and, based on the strong belief that no data are totally unusable, one of the most difficult tasks is designing methodologies and sampling strategies that can bring together and make data cross-comparable, while also minimising inherent biases (see Bradbury et al. 2015; Bradbury and Philip 2016 for further discussion). Clearly the ideal scenario would be to (re)investigate each data point entered within a big dataset to the fullest, reconsidering everything from the chronological attribution of the burial to the positioning of the dead. As I will touch upon again in later chapters, such work would also require a re-analysis and re-assessment of much of the bioarchaeological age and sex data recorded by this project.

Another obstacle is the sheer diversity of terminologies and methods used in studies. Terms are not consistent across all sources. For example, as I will