

Chapter 7

Protracted burial practices and cremation in the ancient Near East: Two independent phenomena?

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Introduction

In a workshop organised at the University of Florence at the end of 2013, the topic of mourning and funerary practices in the ancient Near East, especially Syria, during the Bronze Age was discussed in light of Robert Hertz's theories on secondary burials in modern societies (Felli ed. 2016). Though acknowledging the importance of mourning in the region, one aspect that emerged from the debate is the impossibility, at present, of identifying a clear pattern which could be interpreted as a common funerary behaviour such as the one described by Hertz in relation to the Borneo communities (Hertz 1960). Moreover, whilst secondary treatment of the dead is attested throughout history, this practice does not represent a norm, the number of documented cases being generally limited in number in comparison with primary burials, and, for most periods, being linked, although not exclusively, to elite contexts (see below; for an ethnographic parallel see Bloch 1971, 146–7). The phenomenon of dislocating or disarticulating bones also appears more varied than expected, not only at an inter-site level, but also within the same site. These variations are particularly apparent in urban contexts, where there is no clear association between such practices and any specific grave type. This is in contrast to dolmens, which are commonly associated with secondary burials, and are typical of the Southern Levant, but also found in Syria, as, for example, in the area of Gebel Bishri (Fujii and Adachi 2010, 66, 73; Nakano and Ishida 2010, 105).

Notwithstanding the complexity of the situation, I would like here to resume attention on the question of protracted funerary rites within a changed perspective. Concentrating in the first part of the paper on some specific cases which show the use of heat in the treatment of the

body from Syrian sites dating to between the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BC and including, in the second part, some observations on the possible interplay with the diffusion of cremation in the same area in the second part of the 2nd millennium BC (Fig. 7.1). My intent is to show that cremation is not an alien custom within Syro-Mesopotamian funerary traditions as often suggested.

General background

I would first like to explore a possible link between inhumation under the form of protracted funerary practices and cremation at a conceptual level. In his study on the collective representation of death, Hertz argues for a similarity between cremation and other forms of temporary burial, acknowledging differences in modes and duration, but stressing that these practices ultimately have the same objective: to change the character of the corpse and give it new life (Hertz 1960, 42–3; although see Rakita and Buikstra 2005, 100–4). Along the same lines, Louis-Vincent Thomas (2005, 3240) argues that cremation can be seen as a peculiar type of double funeral, in which the first phase has a shorter duration and is represented by rituals of handling the corpse in relation to fire, while the second involves the treatment of the recovered charred remains and corresponds to rites of integration/incorporation, both of the dead and the living. Similarly, according to John Barrett (1996, 398), both secondary burial and cremation share a similar separation of rites of incorporation from the earlier rites of liminality so that ‘the symbolism associated with liminality is discarded by the time deposits finally enter the “archaeological record”’; in addition, secondary burial and cremation establish a distance between the site where

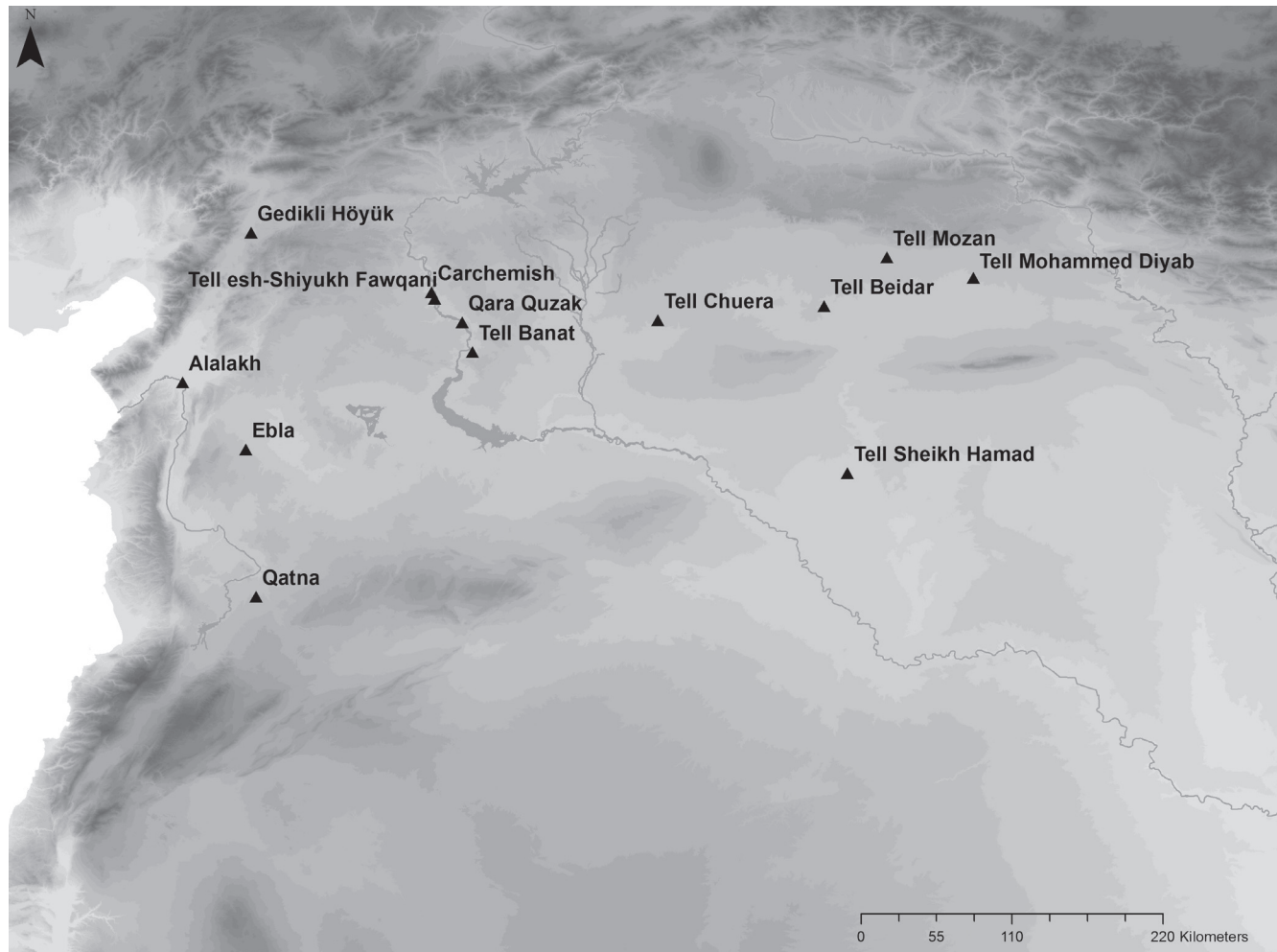


Figure 7.1. Map of Syria showing the location of sites discussed in the texts.

rites of liminality take place and the one for final rites of incorporation.'

In fact, Gilles Grévin (2005, 20; see also Williams 2004, 277–80), conducting ethnoarchaeological researches on cremation in India and Nepal, comes to the conclusion that some of the most visible factors affecting the state of cremated bodies and their degree of preservation were due to manipulation after the burning of the pyre. This recalls closely the importance of manipulation in the context of secondary burials, as discussed in the examples below.

Secondary burials and heat-mediated transformations of corpses

As is apparent from texts dating to as early as the 3rd millennium BC, mourning rites in the ancient Near East were viewed as essential for guaranteeing a dead person's status in the afterlife. They could clearly vary in complexity and elaboration, according to the dead's role and/or status in life, but to mourn and bury the dead appears to have been

the *minimum* ritual requirement for granting the deceased a peaceful rest (*inter alia* Katz 2007, 167; Felli 2016).

As demonstrated by the Royal Hypogeum of Qatna, located in central Syria, protracted funerary rituals were the means through which members of the local ruling family of the Late Bronze Age polity could pass from the state of dead to the state of royal ancestors. Here evidence for the 'heating', movement and eventual re-deposition of human remains, accompanied by food offerings and relocation of grave goods on top of them, are attested (Pfälzner 2012; 2014 and see Pfälzner, this volume). This long term process is perhaps no surprise, considering the status of the deceased. In fact, time appears to have been a crucial factor in mortuary rituals, especially in high status contexts, in which the longer duration of the period elapsing between death and burial is also indicated by textual evidence (*e.g.* Katz 2007, 172, n. 23). Heating could, then, provide a means for temporary preservation of the body during this period. Interestingly, one of the skeletons in the Neo-Assyrian queens' tombs at Nimrud, perhaps that of queen Atalia, the wife of Sargon the

II, also shows traces of alteration of bones due to exposure to high temperatures (Schultz and Kunter 1998, 95, 119). In this case it is possible, as suggested, that the queen died far away from the capital and had to be transported back there for burial (Damerjii 1998, 12, n. 2). Similar evidence has also recently been gathered from the Royal Cemetery of Ur where, in the 3rd millennium BC, not only the main occupants of some of the graves, but also some of the retainers, most likely killed to accompany them, appear to have been exposed to high temperatures (Baadsgaard, Monge and Zettler 2012, 145–7; Molleson and Hodgson 2003). Both instances provide evidence for the use of fire in the context of burial ceremonies, although no relation can be established with the practice of secondary obsequies.

Moving to Early Bronze Age III–IV Syria, instead, we can see further attestation of use of the heat in the context of treatments of the dead including secondary burials. At the site of Tell Banat (Table 7.1), in the Middle Euphrates area, the existence of protracted funerary rites has been postulated by the excavators and, in particular, by Anne Porter (2016) on the basis of the evidence recovered from a variety of both intra- and extra-mural grave structures. According to Porter's reconstruction, which is supported by the paleoanthropological work of Susanne Wilhem (2006), not all corpses underwent the same treatment. Instead, only those individuals chosen to become ancestors underwent protracted funerary rituals. This would explain why not all burials at Banat were similarly disarticulated and displaced. In this view, the multi-stage burial process served a two-fold purpose, to express the idea of community and reproduce its social complexity by means of varying burial practices (Porter 2002a; 2002b).

The clusters of bones from the secondary burials found in the two rock-cut chamber tombs just outside of the settlement, Tombs 1 and 2, could be studied in detail and, notwithstanding the detrimental conditions of bone preservation observed, Wilhelm (2006) has provided evidence to explain the lack of bones, not in terms of an accident, but as the result of a deliberate act of bone collection and removal. The burn marks found on bones of non-adjointing parts in both tombs seem to be the result of exposure to heat at *c.* 300–400 degrees; burn marks are also found on animal bones and artefacts (frit beads) which accompany the bones. No other graves at the site seems to contain bones in a similar state and one wonders whether, here too, exposure to fire has to be seen as a temporary

means for allowing short-term preservation of the corpse or, instead, as a method of accelerating flesh decay, as often suggested in the context of secondary burials (*e.g.* Polcaro 2014, 223–4).¹

What appears relevant here is the strong case made by Porter, both in relation to these two contexts and other secondary burials at this site, for the existence of rituals associated with the displacing of human remains. This would suggest that this wasn't merely a practical activity, *i.e.* to make room for new burials, as is possible in collective tombs. Instead, objects in the examples discussed here (*i.e.* not only Tell Banat, but also Qatna, as seen above) were placed on top of the clusters of bones and, in the case of Tomb 1 at Banat, included small pebbles, bronze objects and a collection of small ceramic vessels, inside which further smaller bones were found (Porter 1995, 5). Differences in the scale and nature of the depositions at Banat and Qatna, for example, can certainly be explained, not only in terms of distance in space and time, but in the context of the different political and social situation which characterizes each of the two sites; a pastoralist-based society in the case of Banat and a fully developed urban centre and capital of a kingdom in the case of Qatna.

Sparse evidence for exposure of corpses to fire can be found at other 3rd millennium BC sites in the region. At Qara Qozak, still along the Euphrates, a two-chamber tomb containing apparently incomplete primary burials of a woman and a child, showed abundant traces of fire next to the bones, along with charcoal remains (Campillo i Valero 2001, 488; Olávarri Goicoechea 1995, 16; Olávarri Goicoechea and Valdés Pereiro 2001, 16–17). These findings suggest that a burning event, at a temperature of *c.* 600°C/700°C, took place in the grave itself, possibly as a means for accelerating soft tissue decay (Montero Fenólos 2004, 46–7; however, see Nassar 2010, 68) or temporary preservation of the body (Porter 2012, 191). It recalls the case of the 'burnt burials' in the Ur cemetery (2% of the total number of graves), where 'a fire was lit in the grave close to the head of the dead man and was allowed to burn itself out before the earth was flung back into the grave-shaft' (Woolley 1934, 31–2, 142–3; see also Polcaro 2014, 226). At Chuera, in the steppic region to the east of the Euphrates, the burnt remains of at least two individuals were found as a secondary interment in a stone cist, Tomb 98.01. The remains were found partly in a vessel and partly scattered on the floor, whilst the tomb, placed on the so-called *via sacra*

Table 7.1. Protracted Funerary Practices at Tell Banat, Syria

Primary single burial	Secondary single burial	Primary multiple burial	Secondary multiple burial	Secondary multiple burial (positive selection)
Tomb 7, Chamber F (intramural) Tomb 4 (intramural)	Tomb 7, Chamber D (intramural)	C135/136, on top of Tomb 7 (intramural)	Tomb 6 (intramural) Tomb 1 (extramural) Tomb 2 (extramural)	White Monument (extramural)

of the town, in an area of temples, also contained fragments of the head of a composite statue or mask, emphasising the importance and ritual nature of this context (Krasnik and Meyer 2001, 386–90; Meyer and Orthmann 2013, 161).

Exposure to fire, whether in association with secondary burials or not, does not seem to always have occurred in obviously high status graves. At Mari, for example, the most important centre on the Euphrates river during the third and first half of the second millennium BC, André Parrot, the first excavator of the site, found eight pit graves under the floors of houses dug in the northern part of the tell at the start of excavations in 1933, which he described as *'inhumations avec dislocations'* and *'incinerations'*. Based on the associated pottery he ascribed these graves to the first half of the 3rd millennium BC (Parrot 1935, 7). Unfortunately, very little is known about these burials in terms of their overall context and contents. Additionally, no anthropological detail is available, apart from the suggestion that three of the graves may have belonged to children, none of which showed traces of burning. Marilou Jean-Marie, who in 1999 published all of the tombs from Mari excavated prior to 1996, is sceptical about Parrot's interpretation of these remains as true secondary burials (Jean-Marie 1999). However, given the burnt condition of the bones and the presence of ashes in two of the burials (T. 2 and 4), as well as the state of disarticulation in the other four graves (T. 3, 6, 7 and 9), the latter also appreciable from the photos published (Jean-Marie 1999, 5, 18, T. 4 and 82; see also Frank 2005, 65, note 21), in my opinion, are likely to be true secondary burials. The presence of materials, mostly ceramics, placed on top of the bones (Fig. 7.2), and not around or next to the body as customary in primary burials, would also seem to exclude the possibility that the dislocation of bones is to be ascribed to post-depositional factors, as suggested by Jean-Marie, and indicates they are instead truly secondary burials. It is interesting to note the proximity of two chamber tombs (21 and 22), found empty apart from some sparse bones and a large quantity of ashes. It would be tempting to see these tombs as the original location of the pristine interments (Jean-Marie 1999, 111, pl. 21; for tombs used as primary burials and others as secondary burials at the same site see now also Jerablus Tahtani, Bolger 2008, 223–4; Parras 2015, 111). The *'incinerations'* remain enigmatic and somehow isolated within the whole burial corpus of Mari tombs. Having said this, only a small proportion of the remains from this site have been osteologically analysed and it is likely that further study will bring to light new findings in terms of exposure to fire (Nassar 2010, 94–7).

If we move to the 2nd millennium BC, at Tell Ahmar, a jar burial found in area S on the acropolis contained fragments of a human skull and a large quantity of charcoal mixed with burnt bones (Roobaert 1998). These remains were partly covered by sherds of two carinated goblets and a bowl, placed upside down, under which there was a toggle-pin and



Figure 7.2. Mari, Tomb T. 6 (from Jean-Marie 1999, pl. 18, top left).

a cylinder seal, uninscribed but belonging to a specific type in use by royal officials in the area of Karkemish in Middle Bronze II (Otto 1998). It remains unclear whether it is here a case of partial cremation, or a combination of remains from an inhumed and a cremated body (Roobaert 1998, 97; on *'mixed'* graves see Seeher 1993; Tenu 2013a, 425).

Tomb P. 8680 in area FF at Ebla is dated to the same period and is composed of a shaft containing multiple primary depositions, subdivided into four levels. According to the investigators, *'the bones were burned inside the pit in different conditions of advanced decomposition'* (Polcaro 2014, 228) and then collected in sacks and placed in the same grave. Only at the bottom level are remains of an individual burned somewhere else, probably on a pyre, included (Polcaro 2014, 229). Polcaro (2014) interprets the use of fire in this context as a purifying agent,² a role attested by a number of Mesopotamian texts, especially in relation to exorcism (for example Bottéro 1984, 177–8; see also Mouton 2006, including Hittite sources; Thomas 2005, 3229, for ethnographic parallels).

Finally, there are also a number of cases where small collections of bones may have been accidentally exposed to fire. For example, the burn marks on the vertebrae of the child in tomb H 109, dug into the fortification wall at Halawa B (Kunter and Wahl 1981, 78; Orthmann 1981, 53, 54). Difficult to evaluate is the case of the MBA (2000–1600 BC) cemetery on the acropolis of Tell Mozan, where firing installations of different sorts (*tannurs*, andirons)

have been found placed on top of, or next to, eight of the 159 graves, thus causing the indirect burning of the human bones contained therein (Kharobi *et al.* 2014, for a later attestation at the nearby site of Tell Barri see Soltysiak 2008, 69, 70).

What seems to emerge from the scattered evidence gathered is first of all an early attestation of the use of fire as a means for treating, preserving and possibly also purifying the corpse before burial. More simply, perhaps we are dealing with the use and presence of fire during body preparation. These practices might be more widespread than thought if we consider that, in the absence of clear burn marks, only analytical methods are able to reveal exposition to heat. For example, in the palace VII Hypogeum at Alalakh, the partial remains of at least four individuals were found in a wooden box, under a deposit of burnt material and alabaster vessels. These remains have not been fully analysed but they may represent another example of these practices (Woolley 1955, 96, fig. 36). The concurrent use of fire in the context of prolonged burial rites, though limited, is certainly worth noticing and adds to the diversity of funerary practices encountered.

I thus suggest that familiarity with the use of fire in the context of funerary rituals may be the key to understanding the recourse, under specific circumstances, to cremation. I quote here Hertz referring to a possible origin for mummification from practices designed to mitigate the risks, faced by the living, caused by the dead body in decay: ‘a fire is kept burning beside the deceased in order to keep malign influences at bay and also to warm the wandering soul and to exercise a soothing action upon the body, which is surrounded by scented smoke and smeared with aromatic ointments. The transition from these customs to the practice of smoking the corpse on a wickerwork frame or to a rudimentary embalment is almost imperceptible’ (Hertz 1960, 42; for critique see Rakita and Buikstra 2005). This scenario would seem to fit well with the situation just described.

Cremation: when and where?

In many ways, the use of fire in funerary rituals could be seen as a forerunner to the practice of cremation. Although examples of cremation burials from the Ancient Near East were already listed in the entry *Grab* written by Eva Strommenger for the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* in the early 1970s, the first overall study on cremation in this area, including also the Levant, was an article by Piotr Bieńkowski published in the journal *Levant* in 1982, which was mainly concerned with first millennium BC evidence, although it also included a list of earlier attestations throughout the Near East (Strommenger 1971, 592; Bieńkowski 1982). Among the earliest mentioned in the literature are the cremation burials found at Old Babylonian Shurgul and al-Hibba

(Koldewey 1887), which are, however, difficult to evaluate properly in the absence of anthropological details. This problem affects more or less all old excavated materials: similarly, it has proved impossible to check whether the information provided by Arndt Haller on the presence of cremated remains in burials 664 and 665 (Akkadian period) at Assur was correct (Hockman 2010, 41). The emerging picture from the 1980s was that very few documented cases of cremation from the Near East could be dated earlier than the Iron Age (last few centuries of the 2nd millennium–1st millennium BC). Moreover, the majority of sites pre-dating this period are located outside Mesopotamia and inner Syria, being geographically limited to the coast and Anatolia, leaving aside the Southern Levant (Carter and Parker 1995, 107; Polcaro 2014).

Therefore, the idea of an external factor being responsible for the inception of cremation in the Near East has dominated our field of studies, and is still far from being fully eradicated. From the 1960s, however, scholars started to realize that a change in funerary customs, such as from inhumation to cremation, could not ‘simply, or necessarily, be equated with the arrival of newcomers or a change in religious beliefs’ (Ucko 1969, 274). In relation to this issue, first of all it must be stressed that cremation is not such a novelty in the Near East, being attested as early as the Neolithic period (see for example the site of Tell el-Kerkh in Syria: Tsuneki *et al.* 2011). In addition, as already underlined by a number of authorities, including Bienkowski himself, there is no clear support for hypotheses which see cremation arriving in Syria under the effect of the influence of, in order, either Sea Peoples, Hittites, Phoenicians or Hurrians (Bienkowski 1982, 87; see also Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015, 49; Mazzoni 2000, 34–5; Novák 2003, 65). On the basis of textual evidence, a common idea found in the literature is that burning of the body is alien to Mesopotamian mentality, due to presumed references to this practice in a negative way (Abrahami 2005, 88–9; Joannés 2005, 81–3; see also Ökse and Eroğlu 2013, 172, n. 72; Polcaro 2014, 227; Soltysiak 2008, 70). The most often wrongly quoted passage, from *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, refers, however, to a man who died in a fire and is listed in a record of ‘bad deaths’ (*GEN*, I. 303; Katz 2003, 213–15). This text does not refer to the practice of cremation and therefore has to be discounted as supporting evidence for this hypothesis.

Recently, the subject of cremation has received renewed attention, thanks to the interest raised by further discoveries of cremation burials at a number of sites, including some significant cases in inner Syria dated to the Middle Assyrian period (13th–12th centuries: Mohammed Diyab, Tell Chuera, Sabi Abyad). These finds have allowed archaeologists to add to our knowledge of 2nd millennium BC cases of cremation and they allow for a reappraisal of this issue (Polcaro 2014; Tenu 2005; see also Ökse and Eroğlu 2013 for the Iron

Age), especially via the application of modern excavation techniques and scientific analyses (see McKinley 2013).

Leaving out the thorny chronological issues, to which I cannot contribute in any decisive way, I would like to stress a number of points which seem to me of interest for a correct evaluation of the interplay between the two practices of inhumation and cremation.

Since its origins and throughout its history, cremation has, at least until recent history never come close to completely superseding inhumation. Rather, it appears as a coexisting mode of burial within the same site (e.g. at the 3rd millennium Anatolian site of Gedikli Höyük, Alkim and Alkim 1966), and often even within the same burial location (on this matter see Seeher 1993, 224–5 in relation to the Middle Bronze Age cemetery at Demircihöyük-Sarıket, still in Anatolia). This aspect is not surprising in itself if we consider the variability of funerary practices encountered at any given site. Variations, for example, can be seen, not only, in terms of grave structures and contextual location, but also in relation to the number of depositions per grave, type of deposition (primary, secondary, tertiary *etc.*) and, as we have already discussed, evidence for the use of heat as a preservation method.

If we consider one of the earliest sites in Syria with substantial numbers of cremations in the period of interest *i.e.* Late Bronze Alalakh (V-II, 15th century), we can see that only 13 cases are attested within a corpus of 122 published graves. Excavated by Leonard Woolley, these graves were ascribed to a foreign influence (Woolley 1955, 202–3, 217). Specific conditions or factors, such as age, gender, death circumstances *etc.*, however, may have influenced the choice to cremate these individuals. Similar factors may have been at play in the construction and use of the roughly contemporary ‘plastered tomb’, a plaster encased cist grave, which is the one of the few collective burials at the site, as well as one of the richest. This example represents another ‘aberration’ from the ‘normal’ practice, in which the at least three plastering events separating the four inhumed individuals may have had the same purifying function as the repeated burning events of the Ebla tomb (Boutin 2010, 116–17, fig. 2.19, 20; Yener 2013).

Moving to inner Syria, and leaving out the controversial attestations of cremation at Mari mentioned above, the earliest example of cremation is from the lower town of Beydar, in the Khabur region, dating to the Mitannian period (14th century, Debruyne 2000, 297), thus roughly contemporary with those from Alalakh. Even in the case of the better known Middle Assyrian attestations, the number of cremations still appear low in comparison to inhumations. In the cemetery in area G at Chuera, for example, only two (one single and one double, three individuals in total) cremations versus 37 inhumations were documented (Wahl 2010, 293, 295). Similarly, at Mohammed Diyab, in the Middle Assyrian phase, a cremation burial of an

adult placed in a jar has been found in a domestic context, which also included five inhumation burials. The variety of contemporary funerary customs at this site, according to the excavator Martin Sauvage (1997a, 162–5, figs 2 and 6; 2005, 49–50, figs 3 and 4), may be due to personal choice. Different funerary behaviours are also attested, roughly contemporaneously, at the site of Sabi Abyad. Here a cremation burial of a female adult has been found placed in the ruins of the Middle Assyrian fortress, along with other inhumation burials, including what is interpreted as a mass grave of five individuals (Akkermans and Rossmeisl 1990, 24–5; Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015, 34). In total, 29 inhumations versus nine cremations have been found at the site, including a very rich double burial (Akkermans and Smits 2008; Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015, 41). In the recent anthropological study of this evidence, the presence of cremations at the site is placed in relation to the local presence of Hurrians known by the texts retrieved at the site, not in terms of ethnic affiliation, but of competing identities in a mixed environment (Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015, 47–8).

Another way to explore this issue is to consider cremation as only one possible variation amongst other heat-mediated transformations of the corpse. If we view these practices, including cremation, against a sliding scale of behaviours starting with very light exposure of the corpse to fire, either intentional or non-intentional (see Oestigaard 2000, 45–8 in relation to human sacrifices), and ending with full incineration of the remains (as it is never the case in the Near East), the proportion of practices might be more balanced.

Despite new findings, it should be acknowledged that Late Bronze cremations are exceptional, and we may be dealing with treatment resulting from specific types of death or, as in 7th century Etruria, exceptional pre-selected individuals (D’Agostino 2003, 21–2). In the Iron Age this practice certainly becomes more widespread. Moreover, whilst in earlier periods cremated remains are usually documented from within settlements, although not necessarily under floor houses (see e.g. Mohammed Diyab), in the 1st millennium BC they are mainly attested from extra-mural cemeteries, possibly reflecting the changing social and cultural role of central settlements and their transformation into monumental citadels as at Carchemish (Woolley 1939), with the majority of the population now living outside, in the countryside (Tenu 2013a, 278–80). Prior to the 1st millennium BC, as a general rule, cremation burials were secondary deposits, with funerary pyres presumably lying some distance away. During the Iron Age, however, as demonstrated at the site of Sheikh Hamad, primary cremations are also found (Kreppner 2008; 2014). Interestingly, cremation would also appear to become more widespread during a period in which the number of sub-adult and adult jar burials also increases, a trend already started at

the end of the 3rd millennium BC in the Middle Euphrates area (Felli 2015, 105). There may be practical reasons for this, and indeed there is a synergy between the placement of both a cremation and inhumation in a jar.

In terms of ritual practice, the data derived from osteological analyses on evidence both from Mohammed Diyab and Iron Age Shiukh Fawqani revealed that burning of bones occurred shortly after death. As recently stated by Howard Williams (2004) in an article on Anglo-Saxon cremation burials, the burning of a corpse on a pyre can be a 'visual' show, lasting for some time and in some way could equate to the lay-in-state or display of the body in the context of inhumation burials, and for which the corpse is prepared in much the same way. It can be noticed, in fact, that there appears no clear distinction in terms of grave inventories between cremation and inhumation burials at the sites described. For example, the adult cremation burial placed in a jar in level 6 at Tell Mohammed Diyab was accompanied by gold earrings, bronze rings and bracelets and black and white beads, similar to assemblages found in association with inhumations at the site (Sauvage 2005, 49, fig. 5). In the pit containing the jar are portions of articulated, un-burnt, animal offerings (caprids), paralleling finds at Tell Sabi Abyad (*ibid.* 50, fig. 6; see also Akkermans and Rossmisl 1990, 25). In the reconstruction of the *chaîne opératoire* of the cremation jars of Shiukh Fawqani, already documented from the site at the end of Late Bronze age, Le Goff (2005; 2007; see also Tenu 2013a for the evidence from the site of Tell al-Nasriyah, near Hama) has been able to distinguish at least eight steps in the formation of the deposits, thus revealing the complexity of the rituals involved in the insertion of the burnt bones into the vessel, alongside items such as beads and knuckle bones, which also appear to have been burnt, in addition to iron weapons, which were apparently not placed on the pyre, followed by the covering of the vessels with a cloth.

Conclusion

I conclude this short review by emphasising the clear analogies, rather than differences, in the funerary ritual between cremations and inhumations and suggest that protracted funerary rites are the common ground in which to accommodate both practices (on this matter as to Britain see Appleby 2013). It is a pity that none of the described sites has provided a continuous sequence of occupation with related burials which could allow us to see the phenomenon from a *longue durée* perspective or the 'big picture', although secondary burials are encountered both at the site of Mohammed Diyab (Bachelot 1992) and at Alalakh in levels predating the appearance of cremation.

Much like the natural mummies of Pre-dynastic Egypt, which are viewed by Hertz (1960) as the result of temporary burials, I tentatively suggest that initial cremation may be seen as coming out of a long tradition of funerary customs

in which recourse to the use of fire in the context of burial ceremonies was less unusual than thought, not only under the form of fumigations, but also to accomplish a temporary state of preservation in elite contexts or to accelerate decomposition of soft tissues in specific cases in which the circumstances of death or of burial required it. The high cost of fuel for burning a corpse on a pyre may have limited this custom, especially during periods in which the space for the living and dead coincided. This is, of course, largely based on speculation and more solid evidence is needed to support this view. However, by looking at the phenomenon within the context of a variegated panorama of different treatments of the dead existing at the same time in the Near East, we can offer a more balanced approach to the question.

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Notes

- 1 Polcaro argues that there is a general association of the use of fire in the Near East and specifically in the EB I southern Levant and the journey of the Sun in the underworld. This is, however, still to be confirmed by circumstantial studies.
- 2 The bottom level case appears however different: according to Polcaro 2014, 229 'it is probable that this man was cremated before deposition in the pit as a particular event occurred before or during his death that ideologically must have created a dangerous situation of a physical or religious nature.'

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