

2 Mortuary and Funerary Archaeology in the Levant and Western Asia

The discovery and documentation of ancient cemeteries and burial monuments have been an integral part of archaeology since its origins. From early antiquarians exploring the dolmens and cairns of the southern Levant (e.g. Conder 1886) to the early-twentieth-century excavations of cemeteries at Jericho (e.g. Garstang 1932, 1934, 1935, 1936; Sellin and Watzinger 1913), Megiddo/Tell el-Mutesellim (e.g. Guy and Engberg 1938) and Tell el-'Ajjul (e.g. Petrie 1931, 1932), archaeological fieldwork and research in this region have provided scholars with an unparalleled wealth of mortuary and funerary material. It is only in recent decades, however, that we have started to see a more holistic approach towards the documentation, analysis, and publication of this evidence. In the following pages, I briefly explore this history, particularly within the Levant and Western Asia. By charting the relationships between this sub-discipline and broader scientific developments and advancements, I explore how the growth of new technologies and wider theoretical trends have impacted studies. With these brief foundations in place, I set the scene for the rest of the chapters in this volume, elaborating on and surveying some of the main paradigms driving this research.

Setting the Scene

Just as the broader discipline of archaeology is beginning to reckon with its problematic and colonialist history, mortuary archaeology in Western Asia is also starting to grapple with the legacies of early work within this region. As Perry (2012, 452–53) has noted, early archaeologists working in the area often failed to even note the presence of skeletal material, focusing instead on surviving grave goods and monumental features or tombs. While some of the earliest reports consulted for this project date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of this early work focused on visible standing remains (e.g. Conder 1886; Renan 1864; Schick 1890). Drawing upon early cultural historical¹ approaches, research on such structures (e.g. dolmens) focused upon the typology of these monuments (e.g. Abel 1928; Stekelis 1935; Turville-Petre 1931), occasionally attributing the construction of these features to mythical beings and giants (Broome 1940, 208–10, 215) or seeking to find connections

between, for example, the dolmen builders of Western Asia and Europe (Conder 1892, 202). Many of the early investigators involved in the mapping and documentation of these monuments also played a role in the colonial machine. A legacy that continues to shape the socio economic and political situations of this region. Acknowledging this problematic history, a topic I shall return to in Chapter 10, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reports can still be of value for indicating the presence of monuments and structures that no longer exist.

Beyond the investigation of stone monuments, within the late nineteenth and first few decades of the twentieth century there was a florescence in the investigation and excavation of cemeteries. From Woolley's work in Anatolia and southern Iraq (e.g. Woolley 1914, 1934, 1939) to Petrie's research at Tell el-'Ajjul (Petrie 1931, 1932), materials from some of these early endeavours continue to shape our discussions today. The accessibility and usability of such data, however, vary. By way of example, in his preface to the volume on the Megiddo Tombs, Guy (1938, xi) notes that much of the exported human skeletal material was significantly damaged during its transport to the United States, making many of the human remains useless for the study prepared by Hrdlička, then curator of the physical anthropology division of the US National Museum. As I will discuss in Chapter 10, as a discipline we have often been very poor caretakers of these once living people. Moreover, as this example demonstrates, and in part due to such poor custodianship, we have very patchy and fragmentary data from these early excavations. Even when skeletal material appears to have been studied, underlying biases are clearly present in many of these early works, with reports focusing on the racial description and determination of the population.² At Gezer, for example, the short human bone report (c. 4 pages) is focused on describing and distinguishing between an earlier pre-Semitic and later Semitic or Amorite population (Macalister 1902, 353–56).

While some of these early cemetery excavations were carried out due to happenstance discoveries (e.g. Gezer (Macalister 1902, 347) and Megiddo (Guy and Engberg 1938, 2)),³ others were the result of targeted excavations, occasionally stemming from specific research questions (e.g. Alalakh/Tell Atchana (Woolley 1955, 1–2)). Even within these early excavation reports, however, there does seem to be a recognition that the documented or excavated tombs/graves do not represent the whole population of a site. Explanations, similar to today, vary from cemeteries existing outside of the excavated area (Macalister 1902, 346) to diverse populations being treated in different ways in death (Woolley 1955, 201).

Moving into the mid-twentieth century, one of the most influential excavations from this region is the work by Kenyon (e.g. 1960, 1965, 1981) at the site of Jericho. As I will discuss in later chapters, this site continues to dominate our studies, particularly for the Bronze Age, in part due to the careful recording of Kenyon, as well as the wealth of preserved materials from this site. Moving away from heavily descriptive narratives of the early to mid-twentieth century, in publications from this point onwards we see the growing use of

statistical analyses, as well as specialist reports. These contributions cover materials such as preserved organics, human skeletal remains, animal remains, and dating methods, although the material culture found within tombs still remains a dominant part of the literature.

From the 1960s and into the 1970s–1980s, in particular, the growing influence of Processual or New Archaeology can be seen within mortuary research and at some of the cemetery excavations undertaken in the region (e.g. Levy and Alon 1982; Schaub and Rast 1989; Shay 1983). Research questions begin to shift beyond issues of chronology and typology to also consider aspects of health, diet, economy, and status (e.g. Frohlich 1987; Molleson 1994; Ortner 1979). The potential use of the mortuary record as a model for social organisation, explored by researchers such as Saxe (1970) and Binford (1971), also shaped methods and approaches used at sites such as the Late Chalcolithic cemetery of Meẓad Aluf (e.g. Levy and Alon 1982; Levy 1985). Alongside such hypothesis-driven modelling and analyses, the application and use of radiocarbon dating, alongside existing pottery typologies, allowed for increasing chronological resolution of excavated burial contexts.

Although slower to impact mortuary archaeology in Western Asia, at least outside of the realm of prehistory, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a rise in archaeological research, excavations and publications focusing on the role of gender, age, identity, and the human body (e.g. Bolger 2008; Croucher 2005, 2008). Alongside such theoretical turns, generally falling under the heading of Interpretative or Post-Processual (plus) archaeology, was the publication of some of the earliest aDNA studies, as well as dedicated bioarchaeological reports exploring invisible or missing groups (e.g. Faerman et al. 1998; Nagar and Eshed 2000). While discussions of status and social organisation still played (and continue to play) an integral role within discussions, there was a recognition of different modes of organisation, as well as realisation that the mortuary record does not offer a single unproblematic snapshot of lived experiences (e.g. Chesson 1999, 2003; Porter 2002). Material culture studies shifted away from a focus on typology to also explore aspects of aesthetics, meaning, and identity (e.g. Baker 2006; Gansell 2007). Studies of monumental architecture, meanwhile, began to consider phenomenological approaches, seeking to better understand how groups in the past experienced space and place (e.g. Abu-Azizeh et al. 2014; Aveni and Mizrahi 1998; Bradbury 2010, 2011; Steimer-Herbet 2004; Prag 1995).

Mortuary Archaeology Today

The past two decades have witnessed a reinvigoration in death studies from a wide variety of disciplines, from anthropology to classics, philosophy, and theology (e.g. Azevedo and Bitencourt Othero 2020; Edmonds 2015; Kaul and Skinner 2018; Kellehear 2007; Scheffler 2013; Tarlow 2023). Alongside these academic shifts, there has also been considerable attention paid to the ethical dimensions of death and dying, a topic I shall return to in Chapter 10. Such

discussions have prompted a recognition of the important role the study of ancient death and dying can play in contemporary societies (e.g. Croucher et al. 2021). In addition, we have begun to see some initial progress around the repatriation of and/or reparations for unethically obtained and curated skeletal collections held in institutions across the globe (e.g. Agarwal et al. 2024; de la Cova 2020; Montgomery and Supernant 2022; Stantis et al. 2023).

After c. 150 years of cemetery and burial excavations we now have a reasonable quantity of data, with most periods and regions represented. Besides field reports, the majority of published research, however, tends to fall within several broad categories. Research that extensively draws upon (bio)archaeological evidence, studies that rely more heavily on philological materials, syntheses that offer generalised reviews or identify ‘type’ sites, and small-scale analyses that focus on the life histories of specific individuals. These areas do not have to be mutually exclusive, however. Here, therefore, I want to briefly discuss the importance of bioarchaeological approaches and the integration of textual sources for mortuary archaeology in general, as well as this specific project, before touching upon my search for variability and commitment to multi-scalar archaeology.

Bioarchaeology

Despite its relatively recent genesis, bioarchaeology as a field of study in Western Asia has seen a fluorescence over the past decade or more. A plethora of volumes and articles now exist on this topic, its methods and results (e.g. Agarwal 2017; Gregoricka 2019; Kharobi et al. 2021; Porter and Boutin 2014; Stantis, Schutkowski, and Sołtysiak 2020; Sołtysiak and Fernandes 2021; Wheeler, Williams, and Dupras 2018). Even a journal, the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*, is dedicated to this subject. First arising as a distinctive field of research in the 1970s and linked to developments in New Archaeology, the study of bioarchaeology⁴ in the Levant and wider Western Asia is, in general, a relatively recent phenomenon, although developing and emerging at different rates across the modern nation states of this region (e.g. Abu Dalou et al. 2014; Hershkovitz 2012; Perry 2012; Rose 2017).

For any study of ancient mortuary practices, bioarchaeology, or the use of bioarchaeological studies, has to be an integral part of the conversation and analysis. Indeed, at a macro scale, one of the most important elements in deconstructing ancient burial patterns is an overall understanding of ancient population dynamics. Attempts to reconstruct the demography of ancient *living* populations have often focused on household size, occupation areas, and probable sustaining areas and subsistence yields (e.g. Widell et al. 2013; Wilkinson 1994). In contrast, analyses of mortuary populations focus on information extracted directly from skeletal remains, including individual health, nutrition, and age at death profiles (e.g. Chamberlain 2006; Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990; Ortner and Frohlich 2008). Combining the two approaches, as well as historical demographic data, can enable significant divergences from expected patterns, in terms of overall population, as well as within specific

demographic groups, to emerge ((e.g. Bradbury and Philip 2020; Murphy and Chamberlain 2017) and see Chapters 4 and 6).

The differential (or lack of differential) treatment of differently abled populations (e.g. Boutin 2016; Gregoricka, Ullinger, and Schrenk 2021), as well as different socio economic groups in death (e.g. Gregoricka and Sheridan 2013; Perry et al. 2009), have also become topics of recent interest, pointing towards exciting avenues for future research. Much of the work on the latter has been facilitated by recent development in aDNA and isotopic studies. Emerging from work in the 1980s–1990s, a growing number of aDNA studies have been carried out across the region. Still limited in number, published works have attempted to explore topics ranging from genetic histories (e.g. Almarri et al. 2021; Haber et al. 2020) to kinship structures (Matney et al. 2012), as well as molecular sexing of infant remains (Faerman et al. 1998). Debate still exists, however, regarding the accuracy and reliability of some of the results (e.g. Baca and Molak 2008, 45), as well as around ethical and interpretative issues (e.g. Alpaslan-Roodenberg et al. 2021; Crellin and Harris 2020). Isotopic studies have, in contrast, had a more significant uptake across the region (e.g. Al-Shorman 2004; Perry et al. 2009; Pearson et al. 2015; Stantis, Schutkowski, and Sołtysiak 2020) and have proved to be particularly effective when combined with problem-oriented research questions or wider interpretative frameworks ((e.g. Gregoricka, Ullinger, and Sheridan 2020; Kharobi et al. 2021; Perry et al. 2011; Pearson and Meskell 2015; Stantis et al. 2020; Sołtysiak and Fernandes 2021) and see Chapter 6).

Last, but definitely not least, perhaps one of the most fundamental challenges, requiring both expertise in human osteology and a deep understanding of archaeological excavation techniques and stratigraphy, is distinguishing between human manipulations versus taphonomic processes (Mickelburgh 2018, 105–6). Archaeothanatology⁵ and funerary taphonomy⁶ are tools and approaches that can be used to better understand the decomposition and preservation of human remains. The careful recording of all elements of the burial context via descriptions, accurate plans and detailed photography, use of appropriate terminology, etc. are essential for such a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the funerary record. Moreover, integrating specialists who have training in both human osteology and general archaeological methods is a priority (Duday 2009, 154–55). For Knüsel (2014, 27), this work must begin in the field, with vital information being lost once the remains have been removed from their place of burial. Given the aims and objectives of this volume, the issue is how we can draw upon such approaches when using legacy data. It is here that the big picture, as opposed to or in addition to the individual biography, may come into play (see Chapters 4 and 7).

Texts and Archaeology

In a volume on death and burial in the ancient Levant, it would be remiss not to mention anything about textual data associated with mortuary and funerary

practices, a record that goes back to the third millennium BCE for Western Asia. Textual sources range significantly, from epics that refer to the plight of those in the netherworld (e.g. the *Gilgamesh Epic* (George 1999)) to lamentations (e.g. Löhnert 2011), poetic elegies (e.g. K890/*The Assyrian Elegy* (George 2010; Reiner 1985)), literary texts that describe the death and funerals of (mythical) kings (e.g. the death of Ur Nammu (Kramer 1967)), and references to *kispu(m)* rituals (e.g. Tsukimoto 1985, 2010). The latter are perhaps one of the most oft described and discussed textual forms within archaeological literature, particularly in relation to the existence of ancient mortuary cults and food and drink offerings found within burials contexts (e.g. Cradic 2021b; Creamer 2020; Lange 2012, 2014; Tsukimoto 2010).

The ways in which the living interact with the dead vary throughout these textual sources. Katz (2005, 85–86, 88) also suggests a chronological shift, with increasing fear and concern with the netherworld emerging in the second millennium BCE. Some of the ways in which to mediate the undesirable conditions of the netherworld were through a ‘proper’ burial (e.g. Katz 2005, 49; Lundström 2013, 169), gifts for deities (e.g. Bonogofsky 1994; Kramer 1967), as well as provisioning the deceased (e.g. Barrett 2007; Katz 2005, 2007; Lundström 2013). The Akkadian term *kispu(m)* is used widely within both philological and archaeological publications and refers not only to funerary offerings but also to regular care and upkeep of the deceased (Tsukimoto 2010). Third-millennium Mesopotamian texts, written in Sumerian, refer to the delivery of offerings to dead kings, although as with conceptions of the netherworld, the occasions and regularity with which these occur vary (e.g. Sallaberger 1993, 63–65; Tsukimoto 2010, 102). Closer to my study area, *kispu(m)* texts from Mari/Tell Hariri, dated to the second millennium, refer to a range of resources that are required for such rituals (Lange 2014, 106–7; Tsukimoto 2010, 104). Offerings here appear to have been made to two groups (the *LUGAL.MEŠ* and *malikū*), interpreted by Lange (2014, 106–9) as representing several generations of known and individually remembered kings (*LUGAL.MEŠ*), as well as a group of ancestral rulers (*malikū*) who were no longer individually remembered or nameable.

The concept of individualised versus collective memorialisation will be touched upon in later chapters. It is worth highlighting, however, that the vast majority of the texts under discussion here are focused on rulers, although some do refer to non-royal individuals (e.g. see the examples in (Tsukimoto 2010, 104–5)). Beyond Mari, ritual texts dating to the end of the second millennium (LBA) from Ugarit/Ras Shamra (e.g. Bordreuil and Pardee 1982) also seem to hint at different phases and occasions for feasting or provisioning activities. Archaeological evidence for *kispu(m)* rituals, or at least care of the dead, is usually reconstructed on the basis of food offerings from tombs or paraphernalia associated with libations (e.g. Lange 2012, 2014). Even when food offerings are absent, however, based on the varied locations in which such offerings could have been made, we cannot necessarily assume that such rituals were not carried out ((Lange 2017, 183–86) and see Chapter 8).

Beyond questions of why and how such texts were authored and conveyed, perhaps one of the most significant issues is the substantial temporal and spatial distances involved. The texts discussed above range from the third until the first millennium BCE. Thus, just as there is not a single idea of the Netherworld (Lundström 2013, 169), the concept of what enabled a ‘good’ afterlife or represented a ‘proper’ burial may have significantly differed across time and space. We are also dealing with textual sources from hundreds of miles apart, which are often brought together, like the archaeological evidence, to present a ‘normative’ or ‘static’ concept of the past. Thus, the extent to which these textual sources can, and should, be used as a direct explanation or interpretative tool for daily life, or rather daily death, is less clear. This is not to suggest that we should ignore this wealth of material, but rather that we have to bring it into conversation with a range of other data. Given the very broad temporal and spatial ranges covered by this volume, and the desire to explore changing patterns across time and space, I will be predominantly focused on the archaeological materials from the region. Textual sources where relevant, however, will be brought into the discussions, as yet another source to inspire and shed light on ancient practices.

Normativity versus Variability

The concept and importance of a ‘proper’ burial (e.g. Katz 2005, 49; Lundström 2013, 169) discussed above is perhaps one of the most enduring legacies to have emerged from philological work on mortuary practices. By way of example, references to the Amorites (a group I shall return to in the next chapter) from an infamous text now known as *The Marriage of Mardul Martu* convey the idea that this group failed to bury their dead. A closer examination, however, reveals that there are multiple ways in which to translate and interpret this text. We can, for example, see this as an indicator that the Amorites left their dead unburied (e.g. Buccellati 1966, 331), as suggesting that this group did not bury the dead on the day of their death (Porter 2012, 293) or alternatively as a judgement on improper behaviour and lack of appropriate ritual (Van de Mieroop 2016, 94). Moreover, as Porter (2012, 293–95) has elegantly demonstrated, the composition and/or conveyance of this text undoubtedly served some sort of political function, although exactly what is debated, just as its interpretation in these different ways fulfils a particular academic agenda. Despite this multiplicity of interpretations, the Amorites serve as an excellent example of archaeologists attempting to identify clear material culture signatures, including burial or lack of burial practices (e.g. Burke 2020; Lönnqvist et al. 2010; Wygnańska 2019), which can be neatly linked to a particular ethno-linguistic group, whether or not that group actually existed as a coherent social or material entity or not. I will return to the Amorites in Chapter 3, but it is worth considering the implications that this example raises a little further.

Beyond bioarchaeological data and philological material, approaches to death and burial in the ancient world have been significantly informed by both

broadscale and individual ethnographies. The utilisation of such research became particularly popular in the 1960s–1980s, alongside the emergence of Processual or New Archaeology, but continues to be employed in studies today (e.g. Chesson 2023; Cradic 2021a; Ilan and Rowan 2019). While some ethnography has been critiqued for presenting a static snapshot, failing to fully take into account temporal and spatial variations (see Parker Pearson 1999, 34–36, for a very brief overview of the use of ethnography within mortuary studies), what such work does highlight is the sheer diversity of human mortuary treatments that can fall within so-called formalised practices (e.g. Bryant and Peck 2023; Davies and Mates 2005). Why then, given such hints towards diversity, has mortuary research in the Levant, and broader Western Asia, been plagued by a continued emphasis on locating ‘normativity’ within the burial record?

The answer to this is multifaceted. Philological emphasis on a ‘proper’ burial is undoubtedly part of it, but this issue also relates to the ways in which archaeologists continue to use burial data, and the questions and scales at which we work. In spite of the broader shifts in research trends and methods discussed at the beginning of this chapter, one of the most lingering assumptions, as with the Amorites discussed above, is the continued belief that sociocultural or ethno-religious identities can be accessed through the burial record. Ironically, at the same time as the pots-equals-people paradigm has been challenged, there seems to be a resistance to move beyond a burials-equals-people approach. Part of this lingering tradition stems from a continued use of the old adage that burial practices are slow to change, remaining “...the same over generations, centuries, sometimes even millennia” (Hallote 2001, 11). Rapid shifts in burial technologies and practices are instead associated with industrialised contemporary society (e.g. Dawdy 2021, 7–8), especially in the wake of pandemics and some of the heartbreaking conflicts and genocides going on across the globe.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, however, especially from the viewpoint of several millennia, the paucity of burial evidence for the early- to mid-third-millennium-BCE southern Levant (EB II–III) can be seen as a relatively rapid shift in burial practices. Especially as this phase is followed, after 500 years or so, by a period (EB IV) during which the dead, as opposed to the living, dominate the archaeological record. While these shifts were originally explained by the movement and incursion of a new population (e.g. Kenyon 1966), scholarship has since shifted away from such explanatory frameworks and, as such, we have no simplistic and straightforward way of explaining these patterns. Five hundred years is undoubtedly a long time, and I do not want to overemphasise the rapidity of change or downplay aspects of continuity here. What some of these generalised assumptions fail to recognise, however, is the fact that different elements of the burial record might shift and change at different rates to others. We might see long-term continuity, for example, in the use of particular structures and tomb forms (e.g. shaft tombs) but very different practices being undertaken within these tombs in relation to the human body (see Chapter 4).

A sustained focus on trying to identify a definable ‘normative’ burial can be critiqued for several other reasons, not least due to the lack of consistency that can be seen within sites and regions apparently associated with a single socio-cultural group. To take just one example of this, in their recent publication on the Iron Age II cemetery at Ashkelon/Askalon/Ascalon, a site traditionally associated with so-called Philistine populations (see Chapter 3), Master and Aja (2017, 135) argue that for the first time a “... typical burial practice for Philistine adults...” can be identified, holding up the cemetery at Ashkelon as a ‘type-site’ against which other Levantine cemeteries can be compared. On the face of it, this argument seems compelling; the documentation of over 200 individuals offers real potential for the identification of ‘normativity’. Yet when the figures are explored in more detail, this idea of typicality unravels somewhat. The most common burial type at Iron Age II Ashkelon is a simple pit grave, comprising just over half of the total graves (Master and Aja 2017, 138). This is a sizeable percentage, but on the other hand, we could also rephrase this as just under half of the burials are not simple pit graves, should these other practices therefore be seen as ‘atypical’? Even within the simple pit graves, variations are present, with different pottery assemblages being documented, as well as multiple burials in some cases (Master and Aja 2017, 138–40).

My critique here is not against the overall findings of this article; these clearly move us far beyond earlier reliance on the use of ‘Philistine Pottery’ or tenuous links to Aegean style burials. Instead, it is on the continued emphasis on and desire to identify a ‘normative’ or ‘typical’ burial practice, one against which all other discoveries can be compared and tested. If our main aim is to find and identify a ‘type site’ or ‘type burial’, then we will do so without fail, whether those burials or sites make up 20% or 90% of the archaeological evidence. Indeed, despite the drawbacks and challenges discussed in Chapter 1, perhaps one of the most significant benefits of working cross temporally, with such a vast array of messy legacy data, is that you are forced to focus on the variability, as well as to some extent, to de-historicise and de-contextualise the data. This is not to suggest that (re)historisation and (re)contextualisation are not vital. By stepping outside of the confines of tightly bounded boxes, however, and pausing to look at the bigger picture, we can return to the confines and limits of specific temporal and sociocultural regions with new questions and ideas to test against our existing theories of normativity.

Multi-scalar Archaeology

Innovations in open-source geospatial and database technologies and software mean that archaeologists are now able to collect, store, and analyse data at unprecedented scales. While many projects continue to employ these technologies for the documentation, mapping, and analysis of settlement, population, and heritage data (e.g. Lawrence et al. 2016; Casana and Laugier 2017; Franklin and Hammer 2018; Menze and Ur 2012; Rayne et al. 2017), relatively few projects in Western Asia have started to explore their use for the analysis of burial

data (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2015; Faust and Safrai 2022). There has also been a recognition of the need to return to the particular, to focus on the minutiae or small-scale and to integrate methods and approaches which may simply not be possible at the macro level. Croucher (2012, 2–3), for example, in her volume on Neolithic death and dying, adopts a small-scale, case-study approach, allowing for a problematisation of the grand narrative, as well rejection of a linear developmental trajectory. Work exploring individual biographies of buried individuals can also serve to better humanise and individualise the past (e.g. Boutin 2016). Similarly, detailed archaeothantological work, such as that discussed above, allows us to better understand the intricacies and complexities of burial taphonomy and make more meaningful and concrete interpretations (e.g. Richter et al. 2010). Alongside this, work focused on detailed assessments of larger, single burial contexts, or single site assemblages also vastly adds to our overall understanding of burial practices, processes, and beliefs (e.g. Chesson 1999; Cradic 2021b; James 2008; Pfälzner 2011). As I hinted towards above, however, the challenge lies in what to do with sites or legacy data where such an approach is not possible.

Starting with the latter, not every archaeological site can, or should, be studied to the same level of detail. Accessibility, funding, time constraints, not to mention site condition, all influence the different methods and techniques that can be used to study an individual burial context or site. In terms of legacy data, while this could easily be dismissed as too difficult, fragmentary, or challenging to handle, without its inclusion we would be ignoring a substantial dataset, especially given the time depth of archaeological excavation in the region. The ethical implications of such an approach clearly also need to be considered, especially given recent debates around best practices within collections and museums (e.g. Gregoricka 2023; Stantis et al. 2023; Voss 2012). It is worth noting that the material discussed in this volume all represents published or in press legacy data from sanctioned excavations, although here we have to be careful not to draw too strict a line between sanctioned and unsanctioned. Given the colonial history that has shaped and continues to shape Western Asia, as well as current conflicts, some of the earliest, as well as more recent, excavations in this region could be seen as unilaterally sanctioned at best (see Chapter 10).

Spatial scale is not the only issue at play here. As discussed in Chapter 1 (and will be taken up again in the next chapter), there also exists considerable uncertainty and debate when it comes to the archaeological chronologies framing such discussions. While different methods can be used to mitigate for, or at least better understand, the impact of such variations (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2015; Lawrence, Bradbury, and Dunford 2012; and see Chapter 1 for further discussion), we also have to acknowledge that we are dealing with very specific scales, measures, and approaches towards time (e.g. Croucher and Campbell 2009; Lucas 2005). Archaeological chronologies, while forming the backbone of this research, are only one way of measuring time. Instead, we also need to think about the passage of moments, days, weeks, months, and years and how

these impacted interaction with and conceptualisation of the dead. How were occasions such as burials, funerals, and memorials woven into the daily, seasonal, and yearly taskscape of the living?

With these different perspectives in mind, how can we bring macro, and micro, linear and cyclical together? Crellin and Harris (2020, 49), in their recent critical review of DNA studies, suggest that there is no correct scale to work at, that “... we have to combine both the local story and the grand narrative, alongside other scales of analysis”. While specifically speaking to the future of aDNA research, this idea is equally applicable to the topics covered in this volume, as is the title of this work, *Beyond Binaries*. Thus, while we may avoid the grant narrative at our own peril (Robb and Pauketat 2013, 33), it is equally perilous to ignore the individual case study. In many respects, mortuary archaeology, by its very nature, offers an unparalleled opportunity for such an undertaking. It is scalable and partible, a composite of multiple forms of evidence and relations. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that more and more scholarship in both Western Asia and beyond is adopting a multi-scalar approach (e.g. Torres-Rouff and Knudson 2017; Wheeler, Williams, and Dupras 2018; Zakrzewski 2015). In the following chapters, I therefore aim to bring these different scales and temporalities together, exploring large-scale patterns as well as individual nuances or peculiarities, wider temporal trends alongside punctuated events and experiences, site scale variations against regional assemblages.

Laying the Theoretical Foundations

With these broad paradigms in place (i.e. that there are significant benefits from combining different forms of data (e.g. (bio)archaeology, textual, and more), that variability is as important as normativity and that multi-scalar analysis is an important way of exploring these patterns), I want to end this chapter by touching upon some of the most recent scholarly debates and theoretical frameworks that inform the following discussions. All of these come back to the question of how we can interpret and understand the different ways in which the human corpse was treated across time and space.

Ideas of Transformation

Perhaps one of the most fundamental questions we can ask of the archaeological record is when and how society affects the transformation of a corpse from being part of a living group to being part of a deceased community. Tangled up with this question are debates around temporality and differences between so-called primary (i.e. where the body is placed, and then no further manipulation takes place) and secondary burial practices (i.e. where there is removal and manipulation of the dead between a temporary and final resting place (e.g. Pfälzner 2016, 245 and see further references therein)).

One of the most cited scholars in works focused on this topic is Hertz (1907, 1960). Seen as a pioneer for the understanding of secondary burial

practices and despite never using this precise term, Hertz's (1907, 1960 and see, Davies 2000 for a useful overview of his life and work) research remained largely unacknowledged within the Anglophone world, until the publication of an English version of his research in 1960 (e.g. Davies 2000). Since then his approaches and theories have seen a renaissance in archaeological literature, particularly from scholars working within the Levant and wider Western Asia (e.g. Felli 2017; Pfälzner 2012, 2016). Hertz was a proponent of a 'Comparative Methodology', proposing that despite outward differences, funerary rituals and burial practices were all trying to achieve the same basic social goals: the transformation of the deceased from one status to another and, through this, the reorientation or renegotiation of the relationships between the living and the dead (e.g. Davies 2000). Published around the same time, the work of Arnold Van Gennep (1909, 1960) has been equally influential for scholars working in the region. Again, focusing on concepts of transformation, Van Gennep (1960, 2–3) argued that every "...series of passages..." within life and death incorporate three phases, separation, liminality, and incorporation. It is these stages that scholars have attempted to map onto the archaeological record, and particularly, as I will further explore in Chapter 4, secondary burial practices (e.g. Cradic 2021a; Pfälzner 2016; Lange 2014).

While acknowledging and certainly finding inspiration from this work, in the chapters that follow I seek to move beyond Hertz and Van Gennep, particularly in terms of their reliance of universalisms. In other words, while accepting that a transformation (from living to dead) is part of the story, in the pages that follow, I am more interested in understanding why such alterations required different temporalities and types of practices and behaviours, both across time and within the same region, cemetery, or even burial context.

Personhood

To move us beyond these conversations, a useful concept to think with is personhood (i.e. conceptions of the self and the human body, both deceased and living (e.g. Boutin 2016; Barba 2021; Bradbury and Philip 2017; Cradic 2021a; Chesson 2007; Fowler 2004, 2016; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018)). One of the first archaeological texts to fully explore these ideas was Fowler's (2004) *The Archaeology of Personhood*, which problematised individuality and indivisibility as natural phenomena, suggesting, instead, that the ways in which people are configured and conceptualised are historically contingent. Drawing upon anthropological thought and studies (e.g. Busby 1997; LiPuma 1998; Strathern 1988), this volume introduced the concept of dividual or relational personhood, providing various examples from Melanesia to India. In doing so it sought to introduce key ideas, such as partibility (i.e. persons are seen as multi-authored or a composite of relations, substances and the actions of others) and permeability (i.e. personhood is created and affected by the flow of different substances) (e.g. Fowler 2004, 23–42).

One of the biggest critiques against such approaches was the uncritical use of ethnographic models, which failed to take into account the use of metaphors, as well as the diverse beliefs, concepts, and desires which may be held by different groups or individuals within a single society (e.g. Gillison 2013; Roscoe 2015) and acknowledged by Fowler (2016, 399–400). Of equal importance for my discussions here, however, are the binary tensions created in these models between individual and dividual. In more recent discussions on this topic there has been a movement away from this, with an acknowledgement that all persons are shaped by relationships between people and objects (e.g. Crellin et al. 2020; Fowler 2016; Hamilakis 2014; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018). In other words, individual and dividual, divisible or indivisible are not opposed but are different ways of representing, bringing together or assembling the different relations that form a person (Fowler 2016, 403).

Given the different ideas outlined here, for the purposes of this research, personhood is conceived of as something that is actively (or passively) shaped and that has the ability to be contextually and temporally specific, not only in terms of chronological and spatial variations on the macro scale, but also throughout the life (and death) course of the person. Returning to the original publication that spurred discussions here, however, it is clear that in order to understand changing conceptualisations and (re-)negotiations of personhood, we also have to consider how such concepts intersect and entangle with other identity features such as sex, gender, and age (Fowler 2004, 42).

Beyond Binaries

As many scholars now recognise, biological sex and gender are socially and culturally mediated (e.g. Asher-Greve 2002; Bahrani 2001; Bolger 2008; Butler 1993, 2004, 2006; Geller 2017). Bahrani (2001, 25), in her volume on gender in the ancient Near East, for example, suggests that while sexual difference may be present and a concern in most societies, the way such differences are articulated, understood, and created vary historically and culturally. Despite this, and while the existence of a biological binary, female versus male, is both historically and culturally contingent, it is the starting point for many bioarchaeological investigations and analyses. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges for archaeologists is how to untangle these concepts and constructs. When carrying out research on gendered practices and societal differences (status, health, etc.), for example, this process almost always starts with the division of skeletal samples into distinct (and most often binary) sex groups (e.g. Agarwal 2017, 166). As a result, as scholars such as Joyce (2017, 1) have suggested, there can be a tension or an uneasy relationship between anthropological research on sex and gender, and the discipline of bioarchaeology. This being said, even a cursory review of human bone reports can reveal even further issues.

The binary division of skeletal remains into female and male is not always straightforward, and we are often left with a non-diagnostic or indeterminate group of adults who cannot be easily sexed. As touched upon in the previous

chapter, this issue is even more apparent in non-adult groups, where it is generally agreed that sexing is very difficult if not impossible⁷ (Bradbury et al. 2015, 572; Cunningham, Scheuer, and Black 2016). Even within adult groups, the assessment and measurement of different body parts can lead to different results. The ratios between females and males at the Late Chalcolithic site of Peqi'in/Buqei'a, for example, differed based on femoral (excess of males) versus humeral (equal representation) measurements (Nagar 2013). Scholars have also drawn attention to a wider, systematic bias in favour of males which may be affecting some of our data, while others have highlighted the necessity of considering the age of an individual before recording an overall sex estimation (Nagar and Eshed 2018, 640). To a lesser or greater extent, scholars in Western Asia have started to tackle these issues, considering the different ways in which gender and sexuality may have been differentially represented and conceptualised in the ancient world (e.g. Cifarelli 2016; Croucher 2008; Helle 2018; N'Shea 2016, 2022; Winter 2009).

The same can also be said of research on age and identity. It is only very recently that scholars of the ancient Levant and Western Asia have started to seriously consider infants and children within their work and explore how age, as well as concepts of ageing and the passage of time, is culturally mediated and, indeed, differentially experienced (e.g. Artin 2008; Faerman and Smith 2008; Garroway 2014, 2020; Pearson and Meskell 2015; Wheeler, Williams, and Dupras 2018). Here we can think not only about different age groups (chronological and social) but also about class, gender, differential life histories, as well as circumstances of death and even birth. Exceptions do, of course, exist, and more scholars are now beginning to think through how non-adults were treated in both life and death in the ancient world (e.g. Barba 2021; Beaumont, Dillon, and Harrington 2021; Biehl 2015; Garroway 2014, 2020; Harrington 2018). Furthermore, there is also beginning to be a realisation of the integral role that infants and children may have played within broader society (see Chapter 6).

In the pages that follow, I do not suggest either completely disregarding binary bioarchaeological data, the existence of different biological sexes or ages, or taking these ideas as simplistic fact. Instead, drawing inspiration from many of the scholars mentioned above (and below), I would argue that we need a more nuanced approach. Such scholarship moves beyond a simple dichotomy and considers a multiplicity of masculine and feminine identities in the ancient world. It also considers groups and individuals for whom such broad groupings may be problematic or irrelevant. In particular, thinking back to the discussions on personhood above, we need to find appropriate vocabulary and methodologies to consider the intersections between different features of human identity, of which biological sex and gender are just a small part.

Intersectional and Life History Approaches

Coined by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), the term 'intersectionality' emerged out of Black feminist scholarship seeking to foreground and understand the unique

experience of Black women in the United States. It has since been engaged with and explored in a range of different ways and disciplines (e.g. Cho, Williams Crenshaw, and McCall 2013), including by bioarchaeological studies of skeletal collections from North America as well as, to some extent, Western Asia (e.g. Agarwal 2017; Boutin 2016; de la Cova 2020; DeWitte and Yaussy 2020; Geller 2017; Torres-Rouff and Knudson 2017). Within bioarchaeology, its applications have focused on the multitude of biological and social identities that can overlap (including race, age, gender, sex, status) to create and perpetuate different lived individual experiences (e.g. Agarwal 2016, 2017). It has also been used to explore how these intersecting identities might be represented within the mortuary sphere and, as such, is a useful heuristic approach for the studies undertaken here.

Boutin (2016) and Boutin and Porter (2014), for example, in their work on burials from Early Dilmun, adopt a fictive osteobiographical and personhood approach to better understand how differently abled bodies were commemorated, celebrated, or discriminated against in death (and life) and, in particular, the experiences of a *probable*⁸ female individual (skeleton 12-10146) with reduced mobility and visible physical differences, stored in the Hearst Museum's Paleopathology collection from Bahrain. While Boutin's (2016) fictive reconstruction can be critiqued for introducing and projecting contemporary values (e.g. concepts of mental well-being and motherhood amongst other things) onto the ancient past, it serves as an engaging and innovative approach to considering the multifaceted nature of identity and personhood. Drawing upon and taking inspiration from the scholarship briefly discussed here, in the chapters that follow (and particularly Chapter 6) I attempt to explore some of the intersectional identities and processes shaping the treatment and conceptualisation of the dead, at both societal and individual levels.

Concluding Remarks

This brief overview has demonstrated just how far we have come in terms of being able to reconsider and re-evaluate patterns and processes, as well as the role and importance of burial practices in the past. It has also shown, however, how far we have to go. Rather than shifting our theoretical perspectives, something that archaeologists have and continue to do, perhaps one of the biggest challenges is critically dismantling, undoing, or re-evaluating the data we have already constructed and created. Such work, although an integral step for any skeletal analysis utilising an intersectional approach (e.g. de la Cova 2020, 155; Mant, de la Cova, and Brickley 2021, 586, Table 1), goes well beyond the research being presented here. While not fulfilling or negating this very real need, in the meantime, the development and use of different technologies and scales of evidence perhaps give us the chance to creatively deal with or evaluate existing data and interpretations. It is with these caveats in mind, therefore, that I want to move forward to consider the evidence we do have, laying the foundations for Chapters 4–9 and surveying current understandings of mortuary behaviour in the ancient Levant.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent overview of some of the most significant theoretical trends in archaeology including Culture History, Processual or New and Post-Processual archaeology see e.g. Harris and Cipolla (2017); (Johnson 2020).
- 2 And see Perry (2012, 451) for an excellent overview of the 'cranial fixation' within this region during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.
- 3 The Megiddo tombs were discovered during preparations for the future dumping of spoil.
- 4 The term 'bioarchaeology' in North America is predominantly used in reference to the study of human remains. In Europe and Western Asia (including for the journal *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*) this term includes research on human, animal, and plant remains. While the study of animal and plant remains is an integral part of understanding the wider mortuary recorded, here I focus the discussions on human remains.
- 5 Whose objective is to explore the social and biological components of death, focusing on the study of the human skeleton and analysing the acts linked to the management and treatment of the corpse (Duday 2009, 6; Duday, Le Mort, and Tillier 2014, 236).
- 6 The study of the ways in which taphonomic principles can be used to reconstruct the sequences of events surrounding death and burial and to identify patterns result from anthropogenic practices (Knüsel and Robb 2016; Mickelburgh 2018, 107).
- 7 Although see section on *Bioarchaeology* for examples and references to studies using aDNA analyses to sex non-adults.
- 8 This probability is, interestingly, not engaged with or mentioned again after its first mention in either the chapter by Boutin and Porter or the fictive reconstruction. Skeleton 12-10146 is referred to as a female throughout both works.

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