

Burial Rituals

Neolithic Cairns & Tumuli

by Thomas Kummert www.ancient-cultures.info

This is a highly interesting subject, because ancient civilizations buried their dead in many different ways. From simple dug graves without any stone markers to highly sophisticated Nabataean monumental tombs, every funerary practice can be found in the Middle East.

This includes Neolithic tumuli and cairns in Saudi Arabia, Dilmun burial mounds in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Hili and Hatif burial towers and domes in UAE and Qatna royal tombs in Syria, all of which are older than 3,000 years.

Slightly younger are the burial structures found in Tayma, Dedan, Madain Saleh and Thaj, the lost capital of the old kingdom of Gerrha in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Palmyra in Syria is a special case, as it offers three very different types of burial techniques, eight storey high towers with up to 500 burials, large underground hypogaeums and Greco-Roman temple tombs.

Simple Neolithic Burials

But lets start at the beginning around 15,000 years ago. The Neolithic homo-sapien population buried their dead in shallow circular graves, laid to rest in the fetus position and covered with sand or clay. The Neanderthals

were the second cultural group living in this area and they buried their dead lying on their backs and stretched out in a sleeping position. Neolithic burials were single graves without any gifts being added.

Skull Removal

A new custom evolved in the Late Natuf Period, when it became a very common practice to remove the deceased skulls and prepare them for ancestral cult purposes. This included preservation and decoration of human skulls with reconstructed facial features of the deceased formed out of clay.

The skulls were either kept at the family homes, or in special buildings, which possibly were erected for religious rituals, or were used as an ancestral assembly place in which skull caches were excavated. At a later stage skulls were re-buried after ritual use over an extended period, or once their successors in the family hierarchy died and replaced them.

Important Natuf Culture

The Natuf civilization erected the first permanent settlements in Jordan at Wadi an-Natuf, which gave this early civilization its name. Possibly they were the first Neolithic settlements built worldwide. Today we know

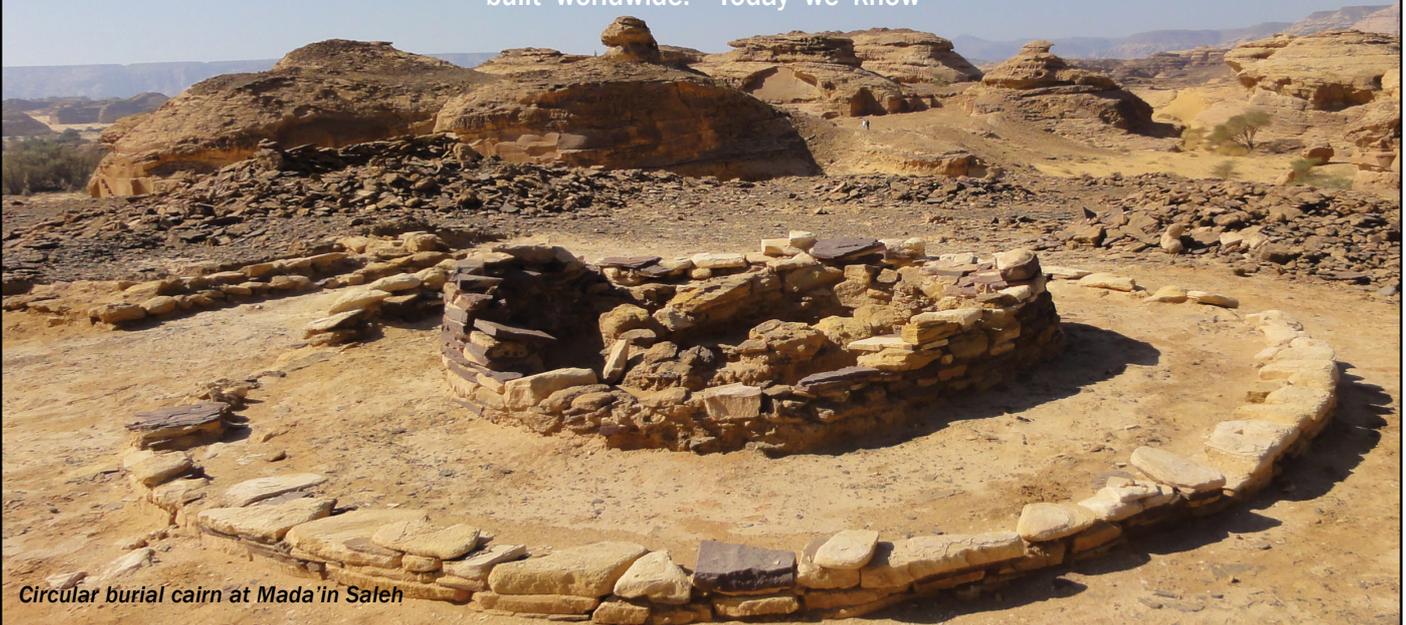
that these Natufians really started organized agricultural domestication and cultivations of grains, a step which was called the Neolithic Revolution.

When it comes to their burials, this sophisticated culture also developed the first cemetery in Palestine, with a large organized burial ground with over 500 burials which was used by various clans. Collective burials were more common in the Early Natuf Period until 13,000 years ago.

The dead were buried stretched out, or in a crouched position on their side with stones used as head rests. There was no social differentiation yet in burial practices.

Archaeologists noticed a high child mortality rate of 30% and the first burial ritual with broken mortars buried with the adult deceased. We know that dogs were the first domesticated animals trained and used for hunting purposes. So it should not surprise us, to find

and the first burials with dogs buried side by side with humans some 12,000 years ago. Standing stone slabs were used as grave markers as well as huge mortars. The reason to use mortars in burials has not been established



Circular burial cairn at Mada'in Saleh



yet.

Neolithic Funerary Rituals

Researchers found proof for various rituals. For example small cup size holes were pecked into stones next to graves, which were used to prepare either food or drinks for sacrifice. In addition large fire places were found surrounded by lime stone slabs and clusters of burials.

Part of the rituals and beliefs of a life after death included grave gifts. During excavations many decorative items and jewelry were found including head decorations, personal ornaments, shell beads, red deer teeth, bone and stone tools, pendants made from marine shells, bone, teeth and beads, as well bracelets, necklaces, earrings, belt ornaments, bone daggers, gazelle figurines and even a small lime stone model of a human head.

Saudi Cairns

The first cairns in Saudi Arabia were erected around 9,000 years ago and were still used as burial monuments 7,000 years later. Cairns were used for ceremonial and burial purposes with different regional developments.

But it is important to note that cairns were also used as trail markers and others for commemorating special events and for regular offerings. For

this purpose idols were positioned on top of cairns and for their circumvention 60% of cairns have circular low stone walls with an internal cleared area pathway.

Many cairns did not contain any burials and were possibly used for symbolic burials of persons, who disappeared in the desert, or died far away. Excavations have revealed pieces of goat meat and it is assumed that for ceremonial purposes this animal flesh was buried instead the deceased body.

70% of cairns were erected on summits, plateaus and on hill slopes and the rest was built at the foot of mountains and on higher ground terraces. One third of cairns have so-called tails, a straight line, which can be up to 1km long, either being a continuous stone wall, or a line of numerous small stone piles. The purpose of these tails is not known, but assumed to show either the number of family members, or the number of annual commemorations held for the deceased.

Some cairns also have rectangular, circular or semi circular annex structures of unknown use and purpose. Cairns erected for funerary purposes normally have a circular chamber with a diameter of 2-4m, which can be cobbled or sealed with a big cap stone. Larger cairns may be surrounded by a perimeter wall with a diameter of up to fifteen meters.

Cairn Evolution

The evolution of cairns started with a simple and crude pile of stones. At a later stage a circular structure with tail evolved, but with further developments the use of tails reduced. Thereafter circular cairns with rectangular annexes were erected, which later had internal divisions.

Of these basic forms regional variances developed. More developed forms were used in the western and central parts of the peninsula, with domes and rectangular flat tops similar to the Egyptian mastaba style.

In the northern region of Saudi Arabia the most simple cairns are found. Eastern region cairns could have square foundations with circular, semi circular or rectangular annexes plus inward leaning walls forming a dome. In the central region, at first circular cairns were built, later rectangular and thereafter square cairns.

Tumuli Developments

With the domestication of animals and the start of permanent settlements and farming, burial methods and funerary structures changed around 6,000 years ago.

Now tumuli were erected on high ridges, plateaus and on prominent mountains with far reaching visibility. Tumuli could be up to 10m wide and 4m high. A common feature is the ring wall



around them found throughout Arabian Peninsula.

They offer one to three burial chambers some with corbelled roofs. Tumuli were built either in circular form with stone rubble and slabs on top, or in circular form again with plain foundations and a tail, or with a surrounding ring wall.

As special features, in coastal areas tumuli might have stone slab covers and sand on top. Large tumuli were built on a platform and were possibly a later model. A unique form with two to three levels of superimposed chambers was discovered at Wadi Tharaj, east of al-Nimas.

A second different form was also found here with underground rock-cut cist graves covered by single large slabs and some being subdivided into compartments. The Abqaiq tumuli in the eastern region are also unique with their circular conical form, normally with two burial chambers inside.

Some tumuli sites we came across are situated at the archeological site of al-Faw, in the greater Najran region, at Tathlith and Zarhran Djanub, as well as in the Bir Hima area famous for its numerous rock art panels and petroglyphs. Bir Hima for example has about 75 tumuli, which are all around 3,000 years old.

Role of Animals

Arab tribes still today associate camels with after life and resurrection beliefs. They left one of the owner's camels on the grave of the deceased with its head turned to the rear, to die of starvation, believing that he would mount his camel on the day of resurrection.

Animals played an important part in religious beliefs and therefore Nabataeans mass produced a variety of ceramic animal figurines for worshipping. Next to horses which were symbolizing solar deities and camels symbolizing the demons and jinn or spirits, horned animals such as ibex, goat, gazelle and ram were symbolizing power and strength.

Goats were worshiped as a symbol of fertility, monkeys to ward off evil spirits, doves were considered sacred and representing Isis - nevertheless they were sacrificed. Eagles alone had a special position, as they were regarded as the only animal

not bound to earth by gods. Eagles could fly high up to reach the Nabataean god Dhu'shara.

They were seen as connecting people or deceased with the principle deity in heaven.



Burial mounds - possibly Dilmun

Therefore many monumental tombs in Petra and Mada'in Saleh have eagle statues above their entrance. Together with eagles, snakes were depicted on tomb facades as guardians of the death to ward of any intruder.

Egyptian Mummification

The whole Egyptian life was focused on a strong belief in life after death. Therefore a body had to be conserved to be able to enter the important after life phase. The pre-dynastic burials were done in a crouched fetus position wrapped in animal skin or papyrus mat placed simply in a desert sand hole. The heat and dry conditions quickly extracted all body fluids and with this dehydration natural mummies evolved.

Later burials were placed in baskets and wooden or stone sarcophagi. Certainly the greatest



Burial mound

burial structures worldwide are the famous Gizeh pyramids reaching up to 150m in height with changing burial chamber constructions and sophisticated security mechanisms against tomb robbers.

Due to the enormous efforts and time needed to build a pyramid,

Egyptians switched to build underground tombs and conceal their entrances. Unfortunately it was organized crime of later rulers and priests who robbed them to finance their wars and lavish life styles during economic down turns created by long draughts and super floods.

During the Old Kingdom the art of mummification was not yet perfect, as only bones and some tissue survived in otherwise well preserved linen embalment, because body organs were not removed at that stage. In the Middle Kingdom, the next step was taken with the brain removal and in the New Kingdom the embalming process was perfected with the removal

of all organs resulting in perfectly conserved bodies with complete skin and muscle tissue with mummies surviving for thousands of years.

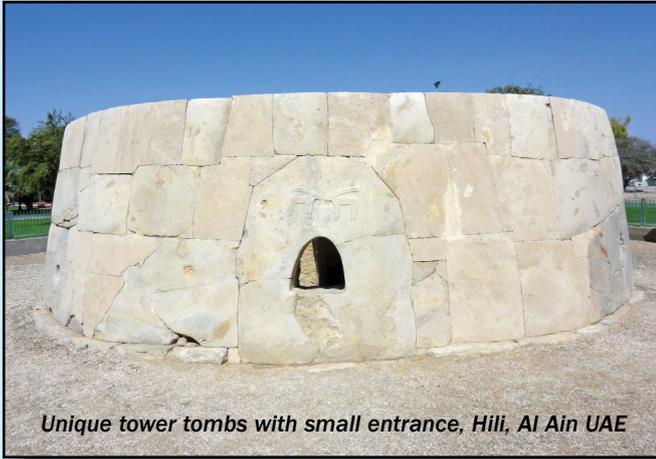
Dilmun Burial Mounds

The Dilmun Culture is one of the oldest in the Middle East and is said even to be the birth place of the Sumer people who settled in ancient Mesopotamia. In Bahrain alone, there are over 170,000 burial mounds, most still visible today. The biggest mound concentration in Saudi Arabia is situated rather close to the Dhahran airport.

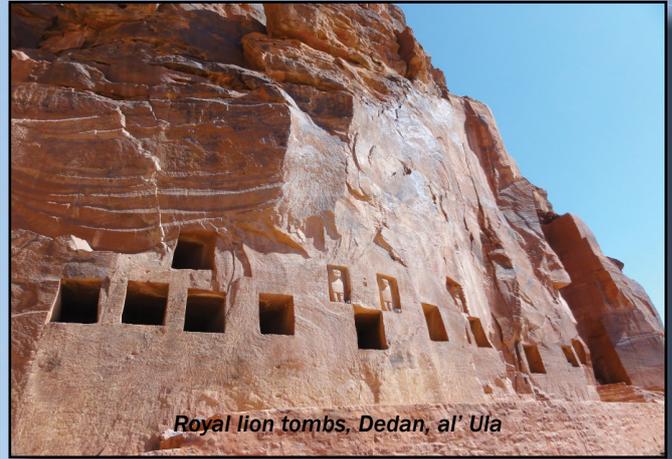
A further 3,000 ancient burial mounds are found around the Yabrin oasis on the northern border of the Rub al Khali desert about 100km south of the village of Haradh. All these mounds were built about 5,000 to 3,000 years ago. They are either collective or individual tombs with some mounds having multiple burial chambers, plus subsidiary chambers being erected later using a different architecture. What has been established is that often mounds and tombs were re-used over time.

Archeologists have found out that burial mounds, rather like the Egyptian pyramids, were built in advance before the death of the owners and were erected by a team of expert builders. The mounds exist of a central stone crypt or tumuli with a long ring wall around it measuring between 4-9m in diameter.

The biggest mounds are found close to the Bahraini village of Ali reaching about three storeys



Unique tower tombs with small entrance, Hili, Al Ain UAE



Royal lion tombs, Dedan, al' Ula

in height and some of these have a double-decked burial chamber.

Burial mounds in Kuwait area all from the Dilmun Culture, but Qatari tumuli are not Dilmun and therefore vary in chamber shapes and mound construction and no grave gifts were found.

Umm an-Nar Burials

The burial mound-looking structures at Umm an-Nar are actually not mounds, but collapsed round funerary buildings and are between 4,500 to 4,000 years old. In total about 50 above ground tombs of different size with a diameter between 6-12m have been found in UAE.

They are large sized and low height burial towers with various alcoves or a single chamber with an average of 200 burials. These burial structures were used over time for regular burials and previous burials were simply pushed aside when space became a problem. One of these structures therefore has housed over 600 burials. The outside was decorated with few carved depictions over the entrance including oryx, ox, snakes, camel and human figures. Similar burial towers are found in Abu Dhabi at Al Ain, in Dubai at Hatta and at Al Sufouh, in Ajman at Moweihat, in Umm al Quwain and Sharjah at Tell Abraç and in Ras Al Khaimah at Shimal and Wadi Munay'il.

Hili Culture

Hili burial structures are similar to those at Umm an-Nar. The Hili Culture existed in the Al Ain oasis in Abu Dhabi and is dated between 2,500BC and 2,000BC. There are very little remains left, but these include various simple mud brick houses plus some stone built collective circular tombs.

Hili's grand tomb is a round structure 12m in diameter and 4m in height. It shows tomb wall carvings above the entrance hole depicting a man riding an animal with a second man walking behind and two embracing

human figures. Below the entrance hole, the tomb features two Arabian leopards facing each other possibly devouring a gazelle.

The rear entrance carvings are showing two oryx with two standing human figures between them. The common Hili population was buried in simple pit tombs, which were discovered with an assortment of bones belonging to over 800 individuals including males, females and children, and which were buried over a period of 100 to 200 years.

Close by at Buraimi, a different cultural group must have resided around the same time using true burial mounds for their burials. These structures are different to the Dilmun and Umm an-Nar burial mounds. Various burial structures were excavated on the northeastern slopes of Jabal Hafit in the Buraimi area and these were found to have been erected with beehive dome shaped chambers, a burial form not found anywhere else. Unfortunately all were already robbed of their contents in antiquity.

Dedan Rock Tombs

A first settlement at the vast Al'Ula oasis was erected about 4,000 years ago and developed into one of the most important trading posts on the incense route. It is no wonder that later with the rise of Nabataean power, Madain Saleh was erected just 20 kilometers north of it.

Dedan was one of the few ancient cities, which allowed various tribes living next to each other in peace and erecting their own temples to worship different gods. The Minean colony from Yemen must have been significant and was a guarantor to the regular flow of incense from Arabia Felix via Dedan to the Mediterranean on which Dedan levied a tax of 10%.

Most of the over 100 tombs are found straight at the foot of the red colored rock cliff right next to the sprawling city. It's square tombs were cut 2m deep and horizontally into the rock



Unique tower tombs with up to 200 loculi, Palmyra, Syria

face, or into the rock bed floors at the mountain base. The tombs we can see today were created during 5th century BC and are either single or collective tombs with funerary inscriptions. A few are decorated with lion carvings to indicate a royal status and we know that one lion tomb belonged to a Minaean leader.

These are the only rock face cut tombs in Saudi Arabia and possibly a simple predecessor of the sophisticated Nabataean temple facade tombs.

Royal Thaj Gold Burial

Thaj was the capital of the old Gerrha or Hagar kingdom in Saudi Arabia's eastern region. It was an important trading post in the Gulf area about 3,000 years ago during Assyrian and Babylonian times. A frankincense caravan took about 40 days from Hadramaut to Thaj.

But Thaj became famous some years ago when archeologists discovered an untouched female royal tomb full of gold jewelry. These treasures are exposed at the National Museum in Riyadh and presently they are shown in various overseas capitals such as Paris, Barcelona, St. Petersburg and Berlin as part of the Saudi Antiquities touring exhibition "Roads of Arabia".

The astonishing gold collection consists of a beautiful funeral mask, an intriguing glove, shiny gold strips worn as head band or crown, necklaces, rings and bracelets. In addition the clothing was sewn with gold foil squares showing Greek gods and goddesses, proof of the strong trade ties and admiration for the Greek culture already known from the Nabataeans. The wooden funeral bed on to which the deceased body was placed had elaborate stylized bronze feet in dolphin form.

Non-royals were laid to rest in burial mounds arranged in various units forming a group. These mounds had various chambers with multiple burials, each covered by cap stones. At Thaj we find a different method of burial with the deceased positioned lying in a squatting position with their hands joined together covering their faces. Some were also found with their hands joined together behind the neck, or under their face, or even covering their ears on the side of the face.

Tayma Burial Sites

Tayma was a large ancient oasis on the frankincense route with a long settlement history going back 6,000 years and it is estimated that the population must have been around 3,000 to

5,000 in number. But unfortunately little is known about the burial customs of this ancient culture, despite the fact that Tayma is surrounded by at least five extensive burial grounds spanning over all different occupational periods.

One such site consists of a group of various burial mounds 2km outside the Tayma city wall, and which is over 12km long. All mounds are similar in construction with either circular, square or rectangular shapes built with local chiseled stones and were dated around the 3rd millennium BC.

Some mounds form groups and are part of a clan cemetery. In the so-called Saidi Gardens area various cist tombs cut into shallow bedrock covered by cap stones were found. Unfortunately they all were disturbed and only one featured an Aramaic inscribed tomb marker or grave stone.

More recent in date between 1,000BC to 500BC during the Iron Age are the tombs southeast of Tayma on sand stone plateau along the Madinah road. These tombs are badly preserved due to previous looting and some earthworks for modern roads. Again these stone built tombs have either circular, rectangular or square shapes.

At both sites round tombs can be seen with a row of square or rectangular annexes for later burials possibly form the same family. The main tombs were closed by large door stones, which could be removed for later burials to be added to the same clan structure. Therefore up to five burials per grave were established and rectangular graves normally housed even more burials. An interesting discovery was a small face betyle style stele as we got to know them later from the Nabataean Culture.

There are two distinctive groups in this site, each with six large stone chamber graves, plus some rectangular adjacent chambers for lower rank family members and even small cists attached at end for child burials. A fire place in front of a tomb was even discovered with traces of burning of grape vines, which tells us something about the rituals performed at the burial or later annual commemorating dinners.

The last burial site at Tayma is a collective burial site with more than one burial in each grave dated between 1,500-750BC. The burial mounds here have rectangular chambers with straight walls. Some features include buttresses and central pillars to carry roof slabs and cap stones. Some found again to be family or clan burial sites, which were reused for later burials as based on the different artifacts found.



Thaj tomb gold jewelry find

With regards to burial rituals it was established that incense burners were used for burial ceremonies and were left with the deceased inside. It was also a common practice that women were buried with their jewelry and, differently to that observed at other Tayma cemeteries, children were always buried together with adults (possibly their parents) and not separately in small cist tombs.

It is interesting that one group of mounds, which represent the oldest mounds in this area, have only circular tombs, and not all structures were actually tombs and are assumed to have been used for religious purposes and ceremonies. Another option is that they were built in advance like the Dilmun burial mounds but never came to use. It also might be that the owner died far away or on sea, without this body being returned home. In this case the structures were not used as actual tomb but as commemoration site.

Madain Saleh

This is not the oldest, but is certainly the most impressive burial site in Saudi Arabia and possibly, after Petra, on the whole Arabian Peninsula. Here burial structures are assumed to have been created in two phases. At first Nabataeans carved simple chambers without any facade out of the surrounding rock faces some meters above ground like in the neighboring Dedan.

At a later stage in the first century AD the famous monumental tomb facades were only developed. In the greater Madain Saleh area over 2,500 tombs were discovered including 325 tumuli and over 2,000 open pit tombs, but only 139 tombs with highly decorated temple like facades. These were family or clan tombs with multiple niches and caissons inside with between five to over 50 burials added over time in the very spacious internal burial chambers, which even had sealed doors.

Only 36 of these tombs have detailed inscriptions dated from 1BC to 75AD. The best decorated tombs were built in a very short time space during the reign of King Malichus II between 40-70AD.

In addition Madain Saleh has various so-called

tricliniae or rock carved out dining rooms with benches, as Nabataeans similar to Greek and Romans dined lying down. Again these were used for annual commemorative feasts to honor the deceased. Unfortunately all these tombs attracted grave robbers long time ago, who left little to no remains at all, making any archeological research rather difficult.

But at Madain Saleh we also find a number of unfinished tombs, because during the carving process alterations in the rock quality were discovered, which were not visible at the beginning when choosing the site. These problems included major cracks, decomposition of rock, coarse grained sandstone and salinity rising from the sandy soil. This can be best seen at the famous Qasr al-Farid tomb.

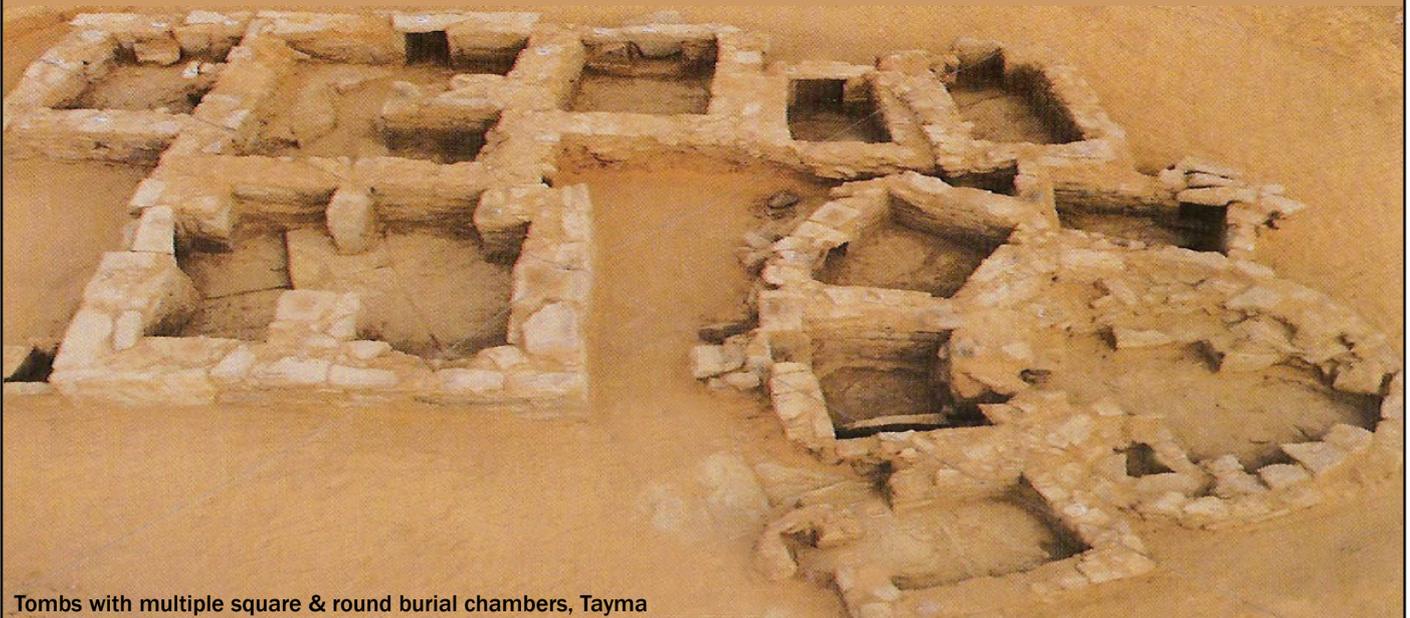
The Qatna Burial Rituals

From the small but important kingdom of Qatna just north of Hama in Syria experts can report good news. An archeologist dream came true twice in the last 10 years with the discovery of two untouched and fully equipped royal tombs under the burnt down central palace. Therefore we know today that in this part of the Levant a simple embalming process was used with oil and resin

paste rubs. Thereafter the corps were exposed to heat for a minimum of one hour at 200-250° Celsius.

This drying process was done outside of the palace to get rid of all body fluids and also to minimize the bad smell and to be able to perform the prescribed rituals in the royal burial chambers.

The deceased were then prepared for the lying in state ceremony accompanied with crying rituals and praying. Then he or she was placed in a wooden coffin or on a wooden bed and covered in valuable textiles and jewelry with a floral branch put on top. Thereafter food sacrifices or kispum with regular monthly family meals took place at new moon in the burial chamber of the deceased.



Tombs with multiple square & round burial chambers, Tayma

In Qatna, differently to Egypt, it was not necessary to conserve the body, as it was the ghost of the deceased or etemmu that were important in the ancestor cult and not the body.

As no skulls were found in the burial chambers we have to assume that the earlier mentioned Neolithic ritual survived, which included that the deceased were beheaded after death. Their skulls were kept in the family home and for this all day presence they were covered with clay and decorated with paint. It is assumed that the deceased lost with death their identity and became part of the ancestral family still living as ghosts in the house.

Qatna burials were done in different ways, either in spacious underground burial chambers or in simple shaft tombs. Both were used for multiple burials with over 40 burials in some cases. When space became a problem, older burials were simply removed to make space for new burials with old bones stacked up in the corner. The deceased were buried on their back with their head in western direction and face south looking. Above their head, a flat bowl and small bottle was placed filled with food.

Scientists found that live expectancy was low with 35-45 years. They also established a high child mortality rate in the first three years after birth, with babies being buried in ceramic pots. Nevertheless there was no proof of epidemics and they also did not find any traces of hard labor, but traces of repetitive artisan work. Deceased were well feed with sufficient proteins and carbon hydrates, but they found differences between royals and common people.

Palmyra Tower Tombs

Palmyra in modern day Syria, is a very interesting site when we look at the different burial structures used there. During different times in history, distinctive burial techniques were used. The most intriguing are the tower tombs, which were possibly invented in Palmyra, as they are only here found in such number and variance.

A total of 180 tower tombs were found with many still fully intact today. They were an indicator of the importance of Palmyra and demonstrated the town's social standing and were a self-portrayal of their builders and families. Some early towers had no

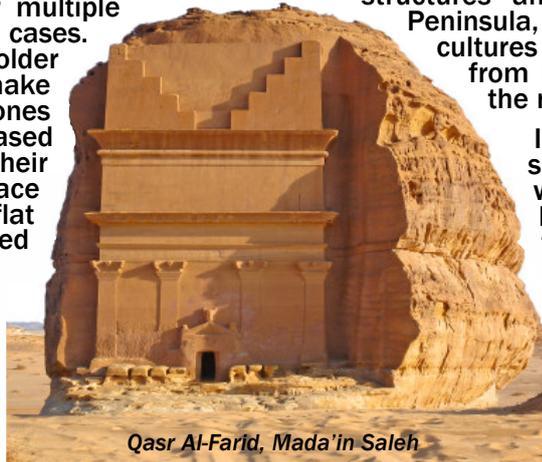
internal burial niches or loculi, but nevertheless they had various floors with a staircase leading to the roof. This suggests that the roof served as an important cult platform.

Similar tomb towers are also found along the Euphrates close to the archeological sites of Dura Europos, Halabiye, Qalaat Djaber and Baghuz and in the Hauran area in Qanawat and Suweida. Often underground burial chambers, so-called Hypogaeums, were combined with tower tombs and later the Greek or Roman example was followed with the erection of small temple tombs.

Summary

There are certain interesting similarities in burial structures and rituals on the Arabian Peninsula, when looking at the different cultures and such a long time span from Neolithic up to the time of the rise of Islam.

In Pre-history there were only simple shallow graves dug, which were more disposals of bodies than burials. During the Early Neolithic Period the first ancestral cult developed with deceased family members being interred under floor in residential quarters. Very early this included in certain regions the skull removal with skulls being decorated and kept in the

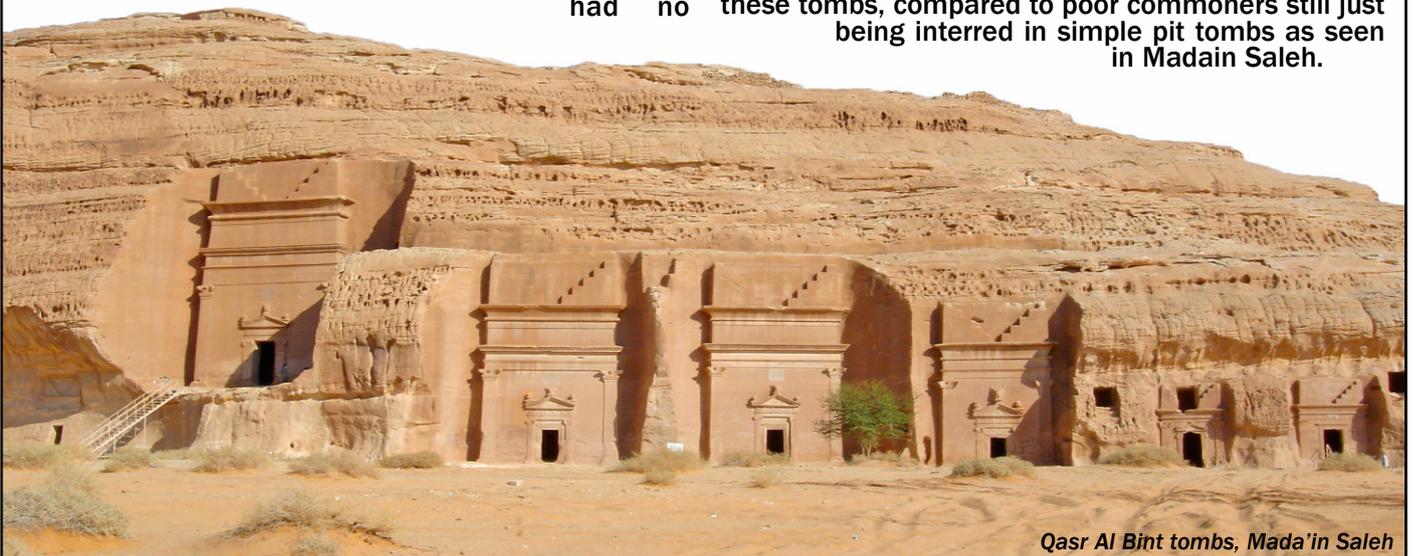


Qasr Al-Farid, Mada'in Saleh

family home.

About 15,000 years ago the first organized burials took place creating burial grounds or cemeteries. This was followed by covering bodies with a simple pile of stones, which developed into more sophisticated cairns and tumuli with added features like a surrounding wall for ceremonial circumventions. For the effort taken to erect these burial structures they were not used for single burials but became family or clan tombs reused over time with older skeletons just pushed aside to make space for new burials.

This was also the time when grave goods such as personal jewelry and pottery with food were added depending on the varying beliefs of live after death. Only 4,000 years ago tombs became more refined and sophisticated structures such as the Nabataean temple facades, or high tower tombs with over 500 burials placed in loculi. During these times rules were being defined who was allowed to be buried in these tombs, compared to poor commoners still just being interred in simple pit tombs as seen in Madain Saleh.



Qasr Al Bint tombs, Mada'in Saleh