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Burying the Dead in Late Neolithic Syria

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La artesanía y el arte en el Oriente Antiguo
- 4. *Reports on the Results from the Latest Archaeological Seasons***
Informes sobre los resultados de las recientes campañas de excavación

Index - Índice

VOL. I

Á. Gabilondo Pujol, <i>Prólogo</i>	17
P. Matthiae, <i>Opening Speech</i>	21
J. M ^a Córdoba, M. Molist, M ^a C. Pérez, I. Rubio, S. Martínez, <i>Bienvenida</i>	25

Opening Lectures to Main Themes - Apertura de las sesiones temáticas

N. Chevalier, <i>Considérations sur l'histoire de l'archéologie, ses origines et son développement actuel</i>	31
S. Mazzoni, <i>Arts, crafts and the state: A dialectic process</i>	37

Papers and posters - Comunicaciones y pósters

M. Abdulkarim, O. Olesti-Vila, <i>Territoire et paysage dans la province romaine de la Syrie. La centuriatio d'Emesa (Homs)</i>	55
G. Affani, <i>Astragalus bone in Ancient Near East: Ritual depositions in Iron Age in Tell Afis</i>	77
A. Ahrens, <i>Egyptian and Egyptianizing stone vessels from the royal tomb and palace at Tell Mišrife/Qatna (Syria): Imports and local imitations</i>	93
B. Ajorloo, <i>The neolithization process in Azerbaijan: An introduction to review</i>	107
C. Alvaro, C. Lemorini, G. Palumbi, P. Piccione, <i>From the analysis of the archaeological context to the life of a community. «Ethnographic» remarks on the Arslantepe VIB2 village</i>	127
Sh. N. Amirov, <i>Towards understanding religious character of Tell Hazna 1 oval</i>	137
Á. Armendáriz, L. Teira, M. Al-Maqdissi, M. Haïdar-Boustani, J. J. Ibáñez, J. González Urquijo, <i>The megalithic necropolises in the Homs Gap (Syria). A preliminary approach</i>	151
A. Arroyo, <i>Akpınar</i>	163

L. Astruc, O. Daune-Le Brun, A. L. Brun, F. Hourani, <i>Un atelier de fabrication de récipients en pierre à Khirokitia (Néolithique pré-céramique récent, VIIe millénaire av. JC, Chypre)</i>	175
G. Baccelli, F. Manuelli, <i>Middle Bronze Khabur Ware from Tell Barri/ Kabat</i>	187
B. Bader, <i>Avaris and Memphis in the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt (ca. 1770-1770-1550/40 BC)</i>	207
F. Baffi, <i>Who locked the door? Fortification walls and city gates in Middle Bronze Age inner Syria: Ebla and Tell Tuqan</i>	225
L. Barda, <i>El aporte de los mapas y descripciones antiguas en el ensayo de reconstrucción de sitios arqueológicos, periferias y rutas (con uso del SIG)</i>	245
C. D. Bardschi, <i>A propos des installations dans la cour du Temple Oval de Khafajah</i>	253
C. Bellino, A. Vallorani, <i>The Stele of Tell Ashara. The Neo-Syrian perspective</i>	273
D. Ben-Shlomo, <i>Iconographic representations from Early Iron Age Philistia and their ethnic implications</i>	285
A. I. Beneyto Lozano, <i>Manifestaciones artísticas desde Oriente Próximo a Al-Andalus</i>	305
L. Bombardieri, C. Forasassi, <i>The pottery from LA II-III levels of Late-Assyrian to Post-Assyrian period in Tell Barri/ Kabat</i>	323
B. Brown, <i>The Kilamuwa Relief: Ethnicity, class and power in Iron Age North Syria</i>	339
A. Brustolon, E. Rova, <i>The Late Chalcolithic settlement in the Leilan region of Northeastern Syria: A preliminary assessment</i>	357
S. M. Cecchini, G. Affanni, A. Di Michele, <i>Tell Afis. The walled acropolis (Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age I). A work in progress</i>	383
B. Cerasetti, V. A. Girelli, G. Luglio, B. Rondelli, M. Zanfini, <i>From monument to town and country: Integrated techniques of surveying at Tilmen Höyük in South-East Turkey</i>	393
N. Chevalier, <i>Fouiller un palais assyrien au XIXe siècle: Victor Place à Khorsabad</i>	403
L. Chiocchetti, <i>Post-Assyrian pottery from the Italian excavations at Fort Shalmaneser, 1987-1990</i>	417
X. Clop García, <i>Estrategias de gestión de las materias primas de origen mineral en Tell Halula: primera aproximación</i>	441
A. Colantoni, A. Gottarelli, <i>A formalized approach to pottery typology: The case of some typical shapes from the Late Bronze Age in Northern Syria</i>	455
A. M. Conti, C. Persiani, <i>Arslantepe. The building sequence of the EB3 settlement</i>	465
C. Coppini, <i>Mitannian pottery from Tell Barri</i>	477
J. Mª Córdoba, <i>Informe preliminar sobre las últimas campañas en al Madam (2003-2006)</i>	493
F. Cruciani, <i>The attributes of Ishtar in Old Syrian glyptic and the Mesopotamian literary tradition</i>	509
A. Daems, <i>Alternative ways for reading some female figurines from Late Prehistoric Mesopotamia and Iran</i>	519

A. D'Agostino, <i>Between Mitannians and Middle-Assyrians: Changes and links in ceramic culture at Tell Barri and in Syrian Jazīrah during the end of the 2nd millennium BC</i>	525
A. D'Agostino, S. Valenti, N. Laneri, <i>Archaeological works at Hirbemerdon Tepe (Turkey). A preliminary report on the first three seasons</i>	549
M. B. D'Anna, R. Laurito, A. Ricci, <i>Walking on the Malatya Plain (Turkey): Preliminary remarks on Chalcolithic pottery and occupation. 2003-2005 Archaeological Survey Project</i>	567
I. de Aloe, <i>A preliminary report on the 1995 Tell Leilan survey: The pottery from the Hellenistic to the Sasanian Period</i>	575
F. Dedeoglu, <i>Cultural transformation and settlement system of Southwestern Anatolia from Neolithic to LBA: A case study from Denizili/Çivril Plain</i>	587
K. De Langhe, <i>Early Christianity in Iraq and the Gulf: A view from the architectural remains</i>	603
T. De Schacht, W. Gheyle, R. Gossens, A. De Wulf, <i>Archaeological research and CORONA: On the use, misuse and full potential of historical remote sensing data</i>	611
C. del Cerro, <i>Life and society of the inhabitants of al Madam (UAE). Interdisciplinary study of an Iron Age village and its environment</i>	619
G. M. Di Nocera, <i>Settlements, population and landscape on the Upper Euphrates between V and II millennium BC. Results of the Archaeological Survey Project 2003-2005 in the Malatya Plain</i>	633
S. Di Paolo, <i>Dalle straordinarie avventure di Lady Hester Stanhope alla «Crocata» archeologica di Butler: la politica «religiosa» dei viaggi delle esplorazioni scientifiche nella regione di Damasco tra XIX e XX secolo</i>	647
R. Dolce, <i>Considerations on the archaeological evidence from the Early Dynastic Temple of Inanna at Nippur</i>	661
R. H. Dornemann, <i>Status report on the Early Bronze Age IV Temple in Area E at Tell Qarqur in the Orontes Valley, Syria</i>	679
A. Egea Vivancos, <i>Artesanos de lo rupestre en el alto Éufrates sirio durante la época romana</i> ..	711
A. Egea Vivancos, <i>Viajeros y primeras expediciones arqueológicas en Siria. Su contribución al redescubrimiento de Hierapolis y su entorno</i>	731
B. Einwag, <i>Fortified citadels in the Early Bronze Age? New evidence from Tall Ba'zi (Syria)</i>	741
M. Erdalkiran, <i>The Halaf Ceramics in Şirnak area, Turkey</i>	755
F. Escribano Martín, <i>Babilonia y los españoles en el siglo XIX</i>	767
M. Feizkhah, <i>Pottery of Garrangu style in Azerbaijan (Iran)</i>	775
E. Felluca, <i>Ceramic evidences from Bampur: A key site to reconstruct the cultural development in the Bampur Valley (Iran) during the third millennium BC</i>	797
E. Felluca, S. Moghazza, <i>Under-floor burials in a Middle Bronze Age domestic quarter at Tell Mardikh – Ebla, Syria</i>	809

VOL. II

S. Festuccia, M. Rossi, <i>Recent excavations on the Ebla Acropolis (Syria)</i>	17
S. Festuccia, M. Rossi <i>Latest phases of Tell Mardikh - Ebla: Area PSouth Lower Town</i>	31
J.-D. Forest and R. Vallet, <i>Uruk architecture from abroad: Some thoughts about Hassek Höyük</i>	39
M. Fortin, L.-M. Loïsier, J. Pouliot, <i>La géomatique au service des fouilles archéologiques: l'exemple de Tell 'Acharneh, en Syrie</i>	55
G. Gernez, <i>A new study of metal weapons from Byblos: Preliminary work</i>	73
K. T. Gibbs, <i>Pierced clay disks and Late Neolithic textile production</i>	89
J. Gil Fuensanta, P. Charvát, E. A. Crivelli, <i>The dawn of a city. Surtepe Höyük excavations Birecik Dam area, Eastern Turkey</i>	97
A. Gómez Bach, <i>Las producciones cerámicas del Halaf Final en Siria: Tell Halula (valle del Éufrates) y Tell Chagar Bazar (valle del Khabur)</i>	113
E. Grootveld, <i>What weeds can tell us Archaeobotanical research in the Jordan Valley</i> ...	123
E. Guralnick, <i>Khorsabad sculptured fragments</i>	127
H. Hameeuw, K. Vansteenhuyse, G. Jans, J. Bretschneider, K. Van Lerberghe, <i>Living with the dead. Tell Tweini: Middle Bronze Age tombs in an urban context</i> ...	143
R. Hempelmann, <i>Kharab Sayyar: The foundation of the Early Bronze Age settlement</i>	153
F. Hole, <i>Ritual and the collapse of Susa, ca 4000 BC</i>	165
D. Homès-Fredericq <i>The Belgian excavations at al-Lahun (biblical Moab region), Jordan. Past and future</i>	179
J. J. Ibáñez et al., <i>Archaeological survey in the Homs Gap (Syria): Campaigns of 2004 and 2005</i>	187
A. Invernizzi, <i>El testimonio de Ambrogio Bembo y Joseph Guillaume Grelot sobre los restos arqueológicos iraníes</i>	205
K. Jakubiak, <i>Pelusium, still Egyptian or maybe Oriental town in the Western Sinai. Results of the last excavations on the Roman city</i>	221
S. A. Jasim, E. Abbas, <i>The excavations of a Post-Hellenistic tomb at Dibba, UAE</i>	237
Z. A. Kafafi, <i>A Late Bronze Age jewelry mound from Tell Dayr 'Alla, Jordan</i>	255
E. Kaptijn, <i>Settling the steppe. Iron Age irrigation around Tell Deir 'Alla, Jordan Valley</i>	265
C. Kepinski, <i>New data from Grai Resh and Tell Khoshi (South-Sinjar, Iraq) collected in 2001 and 2002</i>	285
A. Klein-Franke, <i>The site in Jabal Qarn Wu'l near Hiziaz in the region of Sanhan (Yemen)</i>	297
G. Kozbe, <i>A new archaeological survey project in the South Eastern Anatolia: Report of the Cizre and Silopi region</i>	323
P. Kurzawski, <i>Assyrian outpost at Tell Sabi Abyad: Architecture, organisation of space and social structure of the Late Bronze settlement</i>	341

R. Laurito, C. Lemorini, E. Cristiani, <i>Seal impressions on cretulae at Arslantepe: Improving the methodological and interpretative references</i>	351
A. R. Lisella, <i>Clay figurines from Tell Ta'aneke</i>	361
M. Lönngqvist, Kathleen M. Kenyon 1906-1978. <i>A hundred years after her birth. The formative years of a female archaeologist: From socio-politics to the stratigraphical method and the radiocarbon revolution in archaeology</i>	379
K. O. Lorentz, <i>Crafting the Head: The human body as art?</i>	415
C. Lorre, <i>Jacques de Morgan et la question de l'origine de la métallurgie dans le Caucase</i>	433
S. Lundström, <i>From six to seven Royal Tombs. The documentation of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft excavation at Assur (1903-1914) – Possibilities and limits of its reexamination</i>	445
N. Marchetti, <i>A preliminary report on the 2005 and 2006 excavations at Tilmen Höyük</i>	465
O. Marder, I. Milevski, R. Rabinovich, O. Ackermann, R. Shahack-Gross, P. Fine, <i>The Lower Paleolithic site of Revadin Quarry, Israel</i>	481
R. Martín Galán, <i>An example of the survival of ancient Mesopotamian architectonical traditions in Northern Jazireh during the Hellenistic period</i>	491
A. C. Martins, <i>Oriental antiquities and international conflicts. A Portuguese episode during the 1st World War</i>	515
K. Matsumura, <i>Hellenistic human and animal sacrifices in Central Anatolia: Examples from Kaman-Kalehöyük</i>	523
P. Matthiae, <i>The Temple of the Rock of Early Bronze IV A-B at Ebla: Structure, chronology, continuity</i>	547
M. G. Micale, <i>The course of the images. Remarks on the architectural reconstructions in the 19th and 20th centuries: The case of the Ziqqurrat</i>	571
L. Milano, Elena Rova, <i>New discoveries of the Ca'Foscari University – Venice Team at Tell Beydar (Syria)</i>	587
I. Milevski, Y. Baumgarten, <i>Between Lachish and Tel Erani: Horvat Ptora, a new Late Prehistoric site in the Southern Levant</i>	609
O. Muñoz, S. Cleuziou, <i>La tombe 1 de Ra's al-Jinz RJ-1: une approche de la complexité des pratiques funéraires dans la péninsule d'Oman à l'Âge du Bronze ancien</i>	627
L. Nigro, <i>Tell es-Sultan/Jericho from village to town: A reassessment of the Early Bronze Age I settlement and necropolis</i>	645
L. Nigro, <i>Preliminary report of the first season of excavation of Rome «La Sapienza» University at Khirbet al-Batrany (Upper Wadi az-Zarqa, Jordan)</i>	663
A. T. Ökse, <i>Preliminary results of the salvage excavations at Salat Tepe in the Upper Tigris region</i>	683
V. Orsi, <i>Between continuity and transformation: The late 3rd Millennium BC ceramic sequence from Tell Barri (Syria)</i>	699
A. Otto, <i>Organization of Late Bronze Age cities in the Upper Syrian Euphrates Valley</i>	715
M. Özbaşaran, <i>Musular: The special activity site in Central Anatolia, Turkey</i>	733
F. Pedde, <i>The Assur-Project. An old excavation newly analysed</i>	743

C. Persiani, <i>Chemical analysis and time/space distribution of EB2-3 pottery at Arslantepe (Malatya, Turkey)</i>	753
L. P. Petit, <i>Late Iron Age levels at Tell Damieh: New excavations results from the Jordan Valley</i>	777
L. Peyronel, <i>Making images of humans and animals. The clay figurines from the Royal Palace G at Tell Mardikh-Ebla, Syria (EB IVA, c. 2400-2300 BC)</i>	787
P. Piccione, <i>Walking in the Malatya Plain (Turkey): The first Half of the III millennium BC (EBA I and II). Some preliminary remarks on the results of the 2003-2005 Archaeological Survey Project</i>	807

VOL. III

F. Pinnock, <i>Artistic genres in Early Syrian Syria. Image and ideology of power in a great pre-classical urban civilisation in its formative phases</i>	17
A. Polcaro, <i>EB I settlements and environment in the Wadi az-ẓarqa Dolmens and ideology of death</i>	31
M. Pucci, <i>The Neoassyrian residences of Tell Shekh Hamad, Syria</i>	49
P. Puppo, <i>La Tabula «Chigi»: un riflesso delle conquiste romane in Oriente</i>	65
S. Riehl, <i>Agricultural decision-making in the Bronze Age Near East: The development of archaeobotanical crop plant assemblages in relation to climate change</i>	71
A. Rochman-Halperin, <i>Technical aspects of carving Iron Age decorative cosmetic palettes in the Southern Levant</i>	93
M. Rossi, <i>Tell Deinit-Syria MEDA Project n. 15 (2002-2004). Restoration training programs</i>	103
M. Sala, <i>Khirbet Kerak Ware from Tell es-Sultan/ancient Jericho: A reassessment in the light of the finds of the Italian-Palestinian Expedition (1997-2000)</i>	111
S. G. Schmid, A. Amour, A. Barmasse, S. Duchesne, C. Huguenot, L. Wadeson, <i>New insights into Nabataean funerary practices</i>	135
S. Silvonen, P. Kouki, M. Lavento, A. Mikkala, H. Ynnilä, <i>Distribution of Nabataean-Roman sites around Jabal Harûn: Analysis of factors causing site patterning</i>	161
G. Spreafico, <i>The Southern Temple of Tell el-Husi/Beth-Shean: The sacred architecture of Iron Age Palestine reconsidered</i>	181
M. T. Starzmann, <i>Use of space in Shuruppak: Households on display</i>	203
T. Steimer-Herbet, H. Criaud, <i>Funerary monuments of agro-pastoral populations on the Leja (Southern Syria)</i>	221
G. Stiehler-Alegría, <i>Kassitische Siegel aus stratifizierten Grabungen</i>	235
I. M. Swinnen, <i>The Early Bronze I pottery from al-Labun in Central Jordan: Seal impressions and potter's marks</i>	245
H. Tekin, <i>The Late Neolithic pottery tradition of Southeastern Anatolia and its vicinity</i>	257
H. Tekin, <i>Hakemi Use: A newly established site dating to the Hassuna / Samarra period in Southeastern Anatolia</i>	271

D. Thomas, <i>The ebb and flow of empires – Afghanistan and neighbouring lands in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries</i>	285
Y. Tonoike, <i>Beyond style: Petrographic analysis of Dalma ceramics in two regions of Iran</i>	301
B. Uysal, <i>The technical features of the Ninevite 5 Ware in Southeastern Anatolia</i>	313
C. Valdés Pererio, <i>Qara Qūzāq and Tell Hamīs (Syrian Euphrates valley): Up-dating and comparing Bronze Age ceramic and archaeological data</i>	323
S. Valentini, <i>Ritual activities in the «rural shirines» at Tell Barri, in the Khabur region, during the Ninevite 5 period</i>	345
K. Vansteenhuyse, M. al-Maqdissi, P. Degryse, K. Van Lerberghe, <i>Late Helladic ceramics at Tell Tweini and in the kingdom of Ugarit</i>	359
F. Venturi, <i>The Sea People in the Levant: A North Syrian perspective</i>	365
V. Verardi, <i>The different stages of the Acropolis from the Amorite period at Tell Mohammed Diyab</i>	383
V. Vezzoli, <i>Islamic Period settlement in Tell Leilan Region (Northern Jazīra): The material evidence from the 1995 Survey</i>	393
O. Vicente i Campos, <i>La aplicación de las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en el yacimiento arqueológico de Tell Halula</i>	405
N. Vismara, <i>Lo sviluppo delle metodologie della scienza numismatica e la scoperta di una nuova area di produzione monetale: il caso dell'identificazione della emissioni della Lycia in epoca arcaica</i>	417
T. Watkins, <i>Natural environment versus cultural environment: The implications of creating a built environment</i>	427
N. Yalman, <i>An alternative interpretation on the relationship between the settlement layout and social organization in Çatalhöyük Neolithic site: A ethnological research in Central Anatolia</i>	439
E. Yanai, <i>Ein Assavir, Tel Magal and the peripheral settlement in the Northern Sharon from the Neolithic period until the end of the Early Bronze Age III</i>	449
E. Yanai, <i>Cemetery of the Intermediate Bronze Age at Bet Dagan</i>	459
E. Yanai, <i>The trade with Cypriot Grey Lustrous Wheel Made Ware between Cyprus, North Syrian Lebanese coast and Israel</i>	483

Workshops - Talleres de debate

Workshop I

Houses for the Living and a Place for the Dead

N. Balkan, M. Molist and D. Stordeur
(eds.)

<i>Introduction: House for the living and place for the dead. In memory of Jacques Cauvin</i>	505
P. C. Edwards, <i>The symbolic dimensions of material culture at Wadi Hammeh 27</i>	507

F. R. Valla, F. Bocquentin, <i>Les maisons, les vivants, les morts: le cas de Mallaba (Eynan), Israël</i>	521
E. Guerrero, M. Molist, J. Anfruns, <i>Houses for the living and for the dead? The case of Tell Halula (Syria)</i>	547
D. Stordeur, R. Khawam, <i>Une place pour les morts dans les maisons de Tell Aswad (Syrie). (Horizon PPNB ancien et PPNB moyen)</i>	561
I. Kuijt, <i>What mean these bones? Considering scale and Neolithic mortuary variability</i>	591
B. S. Düring, <i>Sub-floor burials at Çatalhöyük: Exploring relations between the dead, houses, and the living</i>	603
P. M. M. G. Akkermans, <i>Burying the dead in Late Neolithic Syria</i>	621
T. Watkins, <i>Ordering time and space: Creating a cultural world</i>	647

Workshop III

The Origins of the Halaf and the Rise of Styles

O Nieuwenhuysse, P. Akkermans, W. Cruells and M. Molist
(eds.)

<i>Introduction: A workshop on the origins of the Halaf and the rise of styles</i>	663
W. Cruells, <i>The Proto-Halaf: Origins, definition, regional framework and chronology</i>	671
O. Nieuwenhuysse, <i>Feasting in the Steppe – Late Neolithic ceramic change and the rise of the Halaf</i>	691
R. Bernbeck, <i>Taming time and timing the tamed</i>	709
M. Le Mièvre, M. Picon, <i>A contribution to the discussion on the origins of the Halaf culture from chemical analyses of pottery</i>	729
B. Robert, A. Lasalle, R. Chapoulie, <i>New insights into the ceramic technology of the Proto-Halaf («Transitional») period by using physico-chemical methods</i>	735
H. Tekin, <i>Late Neolithic ceramic traditions in Southeastern Anatolia: New insights from Hakemi Use</i>	753
M. Verhoeven, <i>Neolithic ritual in transition</i>	769

Programme - Programa

Burying the dead in Late Neolithic Syria

Peter M.M.G. Akkermans, Leiden

Abstract

Mortuary customs in Syria in the seventh and sixth millennia BC were highly varied. This paper discusses the several dozen child and adult burials found during excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, c. 6400-5900 BC. The burial evidence principally consists of primary inhumations in different forms, although there were also indications of secondary mortuary rituals, associated with the removal of the skull or the intentional burning of buildings. There is proof for the existence of formal, extramural cemeteries, with the dead differentiated according to age: both adults and children had graveyards of their own in different parts of the site.

Keywords: burial, mortuary practices, cemeteries, burnt buildings, Syria, Tell Sabi Abyad, Late Neolithic.

Introduction

We are still rather poorly informed about the treatment of the dead in Syria in the Late Neolithic (ca. 6900/6800-5300 BC),¹ because of the paucity of excavations dealing with this particular period and because of the even greater scarcity of burials found in those excavations. The current evidence includes only a few dozen graves from a handful of sites in widely different locations, and any conclusions valid in one area may not hold for another region. Temporal limitations have to be taken into account as well, as not all burials are contemporaneous: some of the investigated sites and their burials cover the earlier stages, others belong to the later parts of the Late Neolithic period, which lasted for one and a half thousand years altogether.

In the course of these 1500 years, mortuary customs in Syria and adjacent regions were subjected to substantial change. The treatment of the dead was neither static nor uniform, but varied considerably through time, ranging from single and double pit inhumations to single and multiple skull sepultures and cremations in different forms, with each category of burial often displaying important further differentiation (in terms of grave construction, orientation of the body, number and kind of funerary gifts, etc.). It is beyond doubt that the handling of the dead in Syria in the seventh and sixth millennia BC was complex and highly diverse in time and place.²

In the following I wish to elucidate this often locally and temporally bound complexity of mortuary behaviour in the Late Neolithic, by presenting the burials uncovered in recent years at the site of Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria (fig. 1). The excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad up to 2005 have produced 36 graves, in layers dated to the

¹ All dates in this article are calibrated dates BC.

² See e.g. Akkermans 1989; Campbell 1992; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003.

end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth millennium BC. Characteristic were the primary inhumations of children in simple pits, with a single individual lying in a crouching position on its side, sometimes endowed with grave goods. For a long time, burials of adults were conspicuously rare, but this picture has recently changed with the discovery of a graveyard which seems to have been specifically intended for the interment of adults. Although the burials of adults resemble those of children in many ways, several of them appear to have been treated differently, in combination with either the removal of the skull or the burning of buildings.

It is emphasized that the following is no more than an interim evaluation, because many of the human skeletal remains are still under study – the physical-anthropological data in particular is not yet fully available.

Tell Sabi Abyad

Tell Sabi Abyad is situated in the upper Balikh basin in the province of Raqqa in north-central Syria, about 30 km south of the Syro-Turkish border as the crow flies. The site consists of four prehistoric mounds (Tells Sabi Abyad I to IV), each located at a distance of only a few dozen metres away from one of the other mounds. They were used from the late eighth to the early sixth millennium BC, although not always contemporaneously: in the course of time settlement shifted back and forward from one mound to the other.

Tell Sabi Abyad I (henceforth simply Tell Sabi Abyad) is the largest of the four mounds, comprising about 5 ha and rising up to six metres above the surrounding plain. Part of the mound as we see it today is deeply buried, and its earliest deposits occur at a depth of four metres below modern field level. Contrary to the impression created at first sight, Tell Sabi Abyad is not a single, coherent site but comprises another four low, contiguous mounds, each with its own history of settlement, which have merged in the course of time. Two of these settlement mounds came into being in the early half of the seventh millennium and another two mounds to the east of the original ones after 6200 BC. Significantly, settlement on the two western mounds ended at the time when occupation on the eastern mounds began.

The investigation of the prehistoric layers of settlement at Tell Sabi Abyad took place in five areas in different parts of the site, termed operations I to V (fig. 2). An extensive programme of excavation in the relatively low southeastern part of the site between 1986 and 1999 (operation I) has yielded stratified deposits dating from the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth millennium, c. 6200-5800 BC. The work in operations II to V since 2001 has considerably expanded not only the horizontal exposure but also the stratigraphic sequence. Deposits of the late seventh to early sixth millennium, roughly contemporaneous with those of operation I, have been unearthed in the northeastern and southern parts of the site (operation II and upper portion of operation V), whereas occupations of the earlier seventh millennium, c. 6900-6200 BC, have been exposed in the western areas (operations III, IV and lower portion of V).³

³ Akkermans, ed., 1996; Akkermans et al. 2006.

To date, only a handful of graves have been found in the early strata of settlement at Tell Sabi Abyad. The majority of the burials presented in this report belong to the end of the sequence of habitation at the site, and are dated between 6100 and 5900 BC. Although they were found in different parts of the mound, almost all of them are associated with the settlements newly founded to the east of the original site at the end of the seventh millennium.

The child inhumations

In analogy with the burial evidence at other sites of this period, the majority of the graves uncovered at Tell Sabi Abyad contained the skeletal remains of children. Altogether, 24 child burials have been found at the site so far, in different levels of occupation.

The earliest of these graves were found in operation III in the northwestern part of the site, dated at about 6400 BC. Sunk into the ruins of an abandoned building were the remains of an infant, laid in a contracted position on its right side and oriented north-south, with the head pointing to the north. On or slightly above the floor in one room of another building were the skeletons of three children of different ages (fig. 3).⁴ The oldest child was about 12 years old at the time of death; the second 6 to 7 years old; and the third about 2 to 3. Two of the children were lying next to each other (partly on top of each other) roughly parallel to the southern wall of the room, one in a crouching position lying on its left side, with the head to the west, the other lying on its belly in a severely twisted position, with the head towards the east. The youngest child seems to have been placed in a squatting position against the wall, thereby resting on the outstretched left hand of the oldest of the other two individuals. On the floor below the skeletons as well as on and amidst the bones themselves were fibrous material and silicate imprints of matting, suggesting that the corpses were originally wrapped in mats. It is tempting to conclude that the dead children were not buried in a grave pit, but that they were deliberately placed on the floor in the room, the more so because the entrance to the long room appears to have been blocked by a short pisé wall, presumably at about the time of interment.⁵ Perhaps the building served as a repository for the dead.

The other child inhumations are all of a later date, c. 6100-5900 BC. Moreover, they were found in operation I in the southeast of Tell Sabi Abyad and, to a much lesser extent, operation II in the northeast.⁶ The graves almost all consisted of simple, unlined and often shallow pits, the sizes of which were in accordance with the corpses that had to be interred. One pit had a thin mud plaster, applied prior to the deposition of the child. Surprisingly, one child (about 18 months $\pm$ 6

⁴ Cf. Akkermans et al. 2006.

⁵ Despite an intensive search we were not able to detect any evidence of a burial trench in the long room filled with collapsed wall debris. One reason may be that the pit was back-filled with material identical to (and difficult to distinguish from) the deposit in the remainder of the room, another that there simply was no such burial pit.

⁶ Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996: 52, 71, 114-8; Otte et al., in press.

months at the time of death) was lying on its back in a rounded, beehive-shaped oven, about 75-80 cm in diameter, in the corner of a room.⁷ The child was lying upon an approximately 10 cm thick layer of brown loam; a similar deposit was found on top of the skeletal remains. Once out of use, the oven was apparently considered to be a suitable burial container, keeping the dead child in the immediate vicinity of the living.

Each grave contained a single individual lying on its side in a crouching or, rarely, supine position in perfect anatomical order, indicating primary inhumation (figs. 4 and 5). The orientation of the body ranged from northeast-southwest to southeast-northwest, with the head almost always to the east (facing either north or south); only one child was oriented with the head to the west.

The sex of the children could not be established because of their young age and the skeletal fragmentation. The age at death ranged from foetus and newly born to about 14 years old, although most of the children (over two-thirds) seem to have died before the age of one year, often even in the first months of their life. No pathologies were recognized, except for the occasional occurrence of dental aberrations.

One third of the children ($n = 8$), all below an age of 3 to 4 years at the time of death, was accompanied by grave goods, in the form of one to three pottery vessels always placed upright near the head,⁸ and/or in the shape of personal ornaments such as pierced shells and stone and bone beads and pendants, worn as necklaces, bracelets or, in one case, anklets. One child had been provided with a small necklace of three beads, as well as with a stone vessel placed near the head. Another child held a pierced shell pendant in the left hand folded on the belly, whereas a third child had a small piece of red ochre, a small cylindrical piece of black pigment (unidentified) and a triangular pottery sherd near the right arm.

The spatial and temporal distributions of the child graves in operation I display some significant patterns. First, the burials have been found exclusively in building levels 7, 6 and 5, representing the earliest part of what we have termed the Transitional period, intermediate between the so-called Pre-Halaf and the Early Halaf phases.⁹ No graves have been recovered as yet in the other strata of occupation in this part of the site. Second, although some of the graves ($n = 6$, out of a total of 24) seem to have been sunk into the floor of buildings, indicative of intramural burial, the majority of the children appear to have been buried in previously deserted parts of the site. Most graves ($n = 10$) were found high in the fill of the earlier abandoned level 7 settlement, the ruins of which must still have stood to some height and were used as a burial ground for children. The burials were related neither to the level 7 architecture, which was already out of use at the time of the construction of the graves, nor to the subsequent level 6

⁷ Cf. Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996: 48.

⁸ Usually small jars, rarely bowls. Some of them were painted or otherwise decorated, others were not. The vessels stood either in front of or behind the head. In one case, a low, painted bowl was situated by the head, whereas two painted jars stood near the lower spine.

⁹ Cf. Akkermans, ed., 1996: ix-xii.

settlement, founded upon the remains of the earlier settlement and the graves. The people who had carried out those child inhumations must have lived elsewhere at the site (probably in the northeastern area, where the excavations in operation II revealed occupations roughly contemporaneous to those of operation I). The same holds for the handful of child burials at first sight associated with levels 6 and 5; with one or two exceptions, they do not properly belong to these levels either, but were sunk into them, at a time when the area was no longer inhabited.

The adult inhumations

Until very recently, the burial record at Tell Sabi Abyad was highly biased, in the sense that it consisted almost exclusively of children, not adults. However, this picture has changed during the 2005 season of excavation, when, within a relatively small area of excavation, eight adult burials were uncovered within a close distance of each other (each grave was only a few metres away from an other grave). Although the sample is admittedly still small, I believe that these graves are just the tip of the iceberg: they are part of what may have been a cemetery specifically intended for the burial of adults. The newly found adult skeletal remains are currently under study and, with two exceptions, no data on sex, age, etc., is as yet available.

Although the graves were found in what is termed operation III in the northwest of Tell Sabi Abyad, at the highest part of the site (cf. fig. 2), they bear no relation with the Neolithic occupation in this area but they do with the settlements newly founded at the eastern foot of the mound after 6200 BC.¹⁰ The burials appear to have been sunk into the abandoned but partly still standing remains of the architecture (filled with collapsed wall fragments and other debris) of the final level of Neolithic occupation in operation III, which probably came to its end around 6200 BC or shortly afterwards.¹¹ The ruins must have been still visible to those who constructed the graves, as they clearly affected the position and orientation of at least some of the interments. Thus the building of the graves must have begun shortly after the termination of settlement in operation III. When also taking into account their stratigraphic order and narrow spatial distribution (with none of the burials disturbing another), their similarities in terms of lay-out, orientation, etc., it seems reasonable to assert that the inhumations were roughly contemporaneous, the dead having been interred over the course of perhaps one or two generations between 6200 and 6100 BC.¹² In this respect I suggest that the burial of adults in operation III took place more or less concomitantly with the earliest interment of children in operation I. Phrasing it more explicitly: people at Tell Sabi Abyad had two cemeteries at their disposal, one for the adults and one

¹⁰ Cf. Akkermans et al. 2006. The remains of these newly founded settlements have been exposed in operations I and II.

¹¹ Two radiocarbon samples (grain) suggest a date between 6400-6260 BC (95.4% probability) for the penultimate building phase in operation III (GrN-29719: 7485±15 BP; GrN-29720: 7450±15 BP). In view of the dates from the lower strata of occupation, a date around 6300-6260 BC is more likely than a date around 6400 BC; cf. Akkermans et al. 2006.

¹² A series of radiocarbon dates, based on the skeletal remains, is planned to test this assumption.

for the children, which were used roughly simultaneously, yet were spatially clearly divided from each other.

The graves all consisted of simple, unlined pits, sunk to a depth of about one metre at the most. In each of them was a single individual on its side in a crouching position, with the legs sometimes severely contracted, suggesting that the corpses had been bound before interment (fig. 6). Only one female individual, between 23-44 years old at the time of death, was positioned on her back, with both arms extended along the body (fig. 7). The legs were spread with the knees raised and the feet in a crossed position. Large pottery sherds covered the legs. A sheep's horn as well as a small pestle were found lying underneath the legs.

The orientation of the bodies was in most cases northwest-southeast, with the heads either to the west ($n=5$) or to the east ($n=4$; an interesting difference with the children, who were nearly always oriented with the head to the east).

One grave was exceptional, in the sense that it contained two individuals, an adult and a child, laid tightly flexed next to each other, with the child in front of the adult. They were both oriented with the heads to the southeast, facing east. The pelvis and legs of the adult were lying upon a number of large pottery sherds, deliberately placed there for the occasion. A large sherd, too, lay below the right arm of the child.

Exceptional is also the twice-attested evidence for the intentional removal of the cranium. One grave, situated at the edge of the burial field, contained the primary remains of an adult laid in the usual crouching position on its side but without the head. Most likely, the skull was removed some time after interment of the corpse in view of the considerable disarrangement of the bones of the upper body. The body was oriented northwest-southeast, with the head originally to the north.

The other adult burial with evidence for cranium removal is enigmatic in several ways. We are dealing with a male person, aged between 26 and 35 at the time of his death, laid on his right side in the grave, oriented east-west, with the head to the east and the legs very tightly contracted (suggestive of bondage). Although in a more or less proper anatomical position, the skull was lying at an odd angle to the spinal column, with the face downwards. The vertebral column was complete, except for the cervical and the upper two thoracic vertebrae which were missing. Clearly, the skull had been separated from the remainder of the body but was subsequently replaced in the grave (fig. 8). The head may have been cut off prior to interment by means of a rather blunt tool crushing the neck vertebrae, which could explain their absence in a practical sense but which fails to explain the complete lack of cutting traces on the remains that were left. Alternatively, the grave may have been reopened at a time when decomposition of the soft tissue was complete, after which the skull and the topmost vertebrae were taken out, leaving the rest of the skeleton untouched. Subsequently the head was replaced in the grave. In either scenario there is evidence for a secondary mortuary ritual.¹³ Remarkably, the grave was not found in the cemetery of the adults high on the top of Tell Sabi Abyad (in operation III) but it occurred in

¹³ A third option is that this man met his death in a violent way, either in warfare or by execution. In the latter case, however, proper burial would probably not have taken place.

the graveyard of the children low on the southeastern slope of the mound (in the fill of level 7 in operation I).

The adult burials were sometimes endowed with grave goods. A sheep's horn as well as a small pestle were lying underneath the legs of the deceased in one grave. A small undecorated pottery bowl stood upright behind the head of the corpse in another grave. The child in the double inhumation carried a necklace made of colourful stone beads.

Burials and burnt buildings

In addition to the burials mentioned above, the skeletal remains of three more adults were found at Tell Sabi Abyad. I will treat them separately because of the specific contexts in which they appeared: they were associated with the deliberate burning of buildings.

The best evidence in this respect comes from the well-known level 6 «Burnt Village» in operation I in the southeast of Tell Sabi Abyad. The settlement about one hectare in extent was built of large and closely spaced rectangular buildings, interpreted as granaries and storehouses, and many small circular structures, which were primarily used for living. Most of the buildings ended in a conflagration around 6000-5900 BC. The fire has been explained as being ritual and intentional, not accidental, related to a concentration of skeletal material in one storage structure.¹⁴ In the burnt fill high above the floor of a small room in building V there were, next to each other, the skeletal remains of two adults, one male, the other female, both over 30 years old at the time of death.¹⁵ Both skeletons were oriented roughly north-south and were lying on their side, turned towards each other, with the legs severely contracted. The poorly preserved female individual was lying on her left side, with the head to the north, facing south, whereas the male individual was lying on his right side, with the head to the north, facing west.

Although it is at first sight tempting to regard the man and woman either as casualties of the burning of building V or as simple interments in the ruins thereof, there is good reason to assert that this was not the case.¹⁶ In view of their recovery above the floor and the absence of burial pits, the original location of both persons must have been on the roof, from which they fell into the lower room when the building was set alight. Rather than being trapped on the roof and caught by the flames, it seems that both individuals were already dead at the time of destruction; they were lying on the housetop in the proper funeral position of the period with their legs tightly flexed (probably due to bondage), in preparation for final burial. Although severely crushed and partly separated during the collapse of the roof, the skeletal elements were for the larger part in the proper anatomical order, indicating that they were still held together by ligaments. Thus decay of the corpses must have progressed to a limited extent only when the fire began. Most of the bones appear to have been exposed to a heat between 500-800 °C, although

¹⁴ See Akkermans and Verhoeven 1995:16; Verhoeven 1999:224-229, 2000.

¹⁵ Aten 1996.

¹⁶ Cf. Akkermans and Verhoeven 1995; Aten 1996; Verhoeven 1999, 2000.

to differing extents. In the case of the female, the extremely regular colouring of all bones indicates a constant heating over a prolonged period of time but with no direct contact with the flames. The much more irregularly burnt remains of the male person suggest that the chest and parts of the arms were fully exposed to the fire, whereas the skull and, very likely, most other parts of the body were protected from direct exposure to the flames (probably by the debris of the building during collapse).¹⁷

In association with the skeletons, ten large clay 'torsos' up to 62 cm in length and provided with parts of the skulls and horn cores of wild sheep and the limbs and ribs of cattle were unearthed in building V, features not found in any of the other structures in the Burnt Village (or elsewhere, for that matter). Oval with a flat base, they all had one or two shallow holes along each of the long sides, and there was usually another hole on the top.¹⁸ A ritual purpose is implied by the animal skeletal material embedded within the «torsos», reminiscent of the horns and skulls of wild animals frequently found in houses of the earlier Neolithic, such as at Mureybet, Jerf al-Ahmar and Çatalhöyük. In view of their position often high above the floor, amidst and above charred roof materials, these enigmatic objects must originally have stood on the roof of the building, where they had surrounded the dead and from which they had fallen together into the rooms below when the roof collapsed.

In the light of the above, it seems that we are dealing with a distinct and complex mortuary practice, combining the death of two people with the abandonment and final destruction of the building containing the deceased. Ritually prepared on the roof for their final journey, the dead were laid to rest by intentionally setting the storehouse (and the village as a whole) alight and deserting the former area of habitation.

These finds at Tell Sabi Abyad in the early 1990s have remained unique and without parallels at the site for a long time. However, more recently another burnt storage building in association with human skeletal remains has been excavated in operation II in the northeastern part of Tell Sabi Abyad, in a layer slightly older than level 6 and its Burnt Village in operation I and radiocarbon-dated to around 6200-6100 BC.¹⁹ Like the storehouses of the Burnt Village, the newly found building in operation II ended in what must have been an intentional conflagration. Not only was the structure wholly filled with ashes, burnt wall fragments, charred wood, etc., but its walls were burnt throughout, which must have been achieved by filling the building entirely with fuel and deliberately setting fire to it.²⁰ The burn-

¹⁷ Aten 1996. Obviously the burnt skeletons remains do not represent a cremation in the proper sense of the term.

¹⁸ See both Spoor and Collet 1996 and Verhoeven 2000 for a detailed description of these 'torsos'.

¹⁹ A detailed report is underway.

²⁰ Experimental archaeology and colonial military accounts have shown that it is extremely difficult to burn down and cause full-scale destruction of mud-brick or wattle-and-daub buildings. Buildings need to be substantially packed with combustibles to achieve a sufficient level of ferocity of fire. Merrett and Meiklejohn point out: «Setting a mud brick house on fire requires preparation in addition to application of a fire source. The building must be filled with supplementary fuel source since the only combustibles in the houses are the wood roof supports that are covered in layers of mud. Action is necessary to increase air

ing appears to have been strictly controlled and confined to this building only; it did not effect the surrounding structures which remained in use, nor were there ashes or burnt debris beyond the exterior walls of the building.

Although different in lay-out, the newly found building closely recalls the structures of the Burnt Village, not only because of its destruction by fire but also because of its internal organization and contents. It was T-shaped in plan and consisted of three parallel rows of small rooms with a long but narrow room at a right angle in front of them. The walls were partly still standing to a height of 1.8 m but they showed no evidence of entrances at floor level; the building and the rooms in it must have been accessible either through openings high in the walls or through passages in the roof.²¹ As in some of the storehouses of the Burnt Village, hundreds of finds were recovered from the burnt fill in the building, including lithics and, in particular, very large numbers of (complete) basalt grinding slabs, mortars and pestles. In addition, there were many clay sealings with stamp-seal impressions and tokens (calculi) in different shapes and dimensions, which were simple but efficient devices functioning together in an early administrative system, transcending the keeping of records by memory.²²

In the smallest room at the back of the building were the skeletal remains of an adult (details about sex, age, etc., are awaited), who, contrary to the two adults originally on the roof of storehouse V in the Burnt Village, had been purposefully interred, prior to the onset of the fire (fig. 9). The skeleton was oriented east-west, with the head to the east, facing south. In accordance with the general burial practice of the period, the individual was lying on its left side in a crouching position, parallel to the back wall of the building, with the arms folded in front of the body. The right hand rested upon half a stone macehead, apparently deliberately placed there as a grave good. Remarkably, the deceased was not buried underneath the floor of the room but had been placed on it, after which the room was partly filled with soil, covering the corpse.²³ In this respect, it seems that the small room, undoubtedly used for storage at one time, had been turned into a burial chamber or tomb at a later time. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that the other rooms of the building retained their original use, it is, I believe, more likely that the storehouse met its end shortly after the construction of the grave. Or, phrased differently, the building was filled with combustibles and set alight, precisely *because* of the burial in it.

As with the Burnt Village, the destruction was probably intentional and ritual, related to death, fire and abandonment. It may have been connected with the

circulation and oxygen supply since the houses often have no windows and only one door. We would thus summarize that accidental burning is an uncommon and unlikely event and definitely not a common hazard. Purposeful action is suggested.» See Merrett and Meiklejohn, in press. See also Gordon 1953; Bankoff and Winter 1979; Shaffer 1993; Dennis 2005.

²¹ The same holds for at least some of the structures of the Burnt Village; see e.g. Akkermans and Verhoeven 1995.

²² Tokens in their role of counting devices expressed specific goods and quantities, whereas the sealings helped to define individual property and to secure sealed products against unauthorized opening, which was very useful in the organization of controlled storage. See Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997.

²³ Because of the burial in it, the room contained neither ashes nor traces of burning on the walls.

‘ritual cleansing’ or ‘closing-off’ of specific buildings, as has been proposed in the case of a number of deliberately burnt structures at Çatalhöyük in Anatolia and Arpachiyah in Iraq.²⁴ However, the occurrence of graves in the structures at Tell Sabi Abyad suggests that the conflagrations were part of an extraordinary form of mortuary behaviour or an ‘extended death ritual’²⁵, which was practiced only now and then in what must have been exceptional circumstances. Despite the relatively large areas of excavation and their long sequences of occupation, the coinciding occurrence of burnt buildings and graves has been attested only twice at the site, both in layers of the late seventh millennium BC. It has been tried to explain the combined act of burning and burying as a materialized concept of transformation from life to death and from abandonment to settling or resettling,²⁶ but this approach fails to account for the rareness of the practice.

The current burial record indicates that a range of choices for the treatment of the dead was available to the Late Neolithic people but the options were apparently not all appropriate in each specific case. Perhaps the ritual relating the death of humans to the burning and desertion of buildings was reserved to people of specific status or to the particular circumstances of their deaths. The two skeletons in building V were not associated with tangible grave goods indicative of special position or ranking, unless the enigmatic clay ‘torsos’ surrounding the dead fulfilled such a role. However, the burial in the storehouse in operation II had been provided with a large fragment of a stone macehead – an item rarely found at the site. Only four maceheads or parts thereof have been recovered in the past twenty years of extensive excavation in different phases of settlement, suggesting that these tools were luxury or status products owned by a handful of people only. The occurrence of one half instead of the complete tool in the grave may have been intentional; there are many archaeological and ethnographic examples of the breakage or ‘killing’ of artefacts in funerals, often related to the removal of the impurity and ill effects of death.²⁷

Although evidence of rituals associated with fire and death has been demonstrated at a number of Neolithic sites in the Near East, the excavation at Bouqras on the Euphrates in eastern Syria has produced a particularly striking parallel to the finds at Tell Sabi Abyad. House 12 at Bouqras, belonging to building phase III in the southwest part of the site and dated to the second half of the seventh millennium BC, appears not only to have been destroyed by fire but it also contained the skeletal remains of six individuals – the only human remains recovered from the Neolithic levels at the site. Although initially both the fire and the skeletons were said to derive from a catastrophe,²⁸ it has recently been suggested that house 12 was intentionally set on flame, in association with the dead in it.²⁹ One step further, reanalysis of the skeletons vis-à-vis their find circumstances has suggested that house 12 had been con-

²⁴ Matthews 1996; Campbell 1992.

²⁵ Verhoeven 2000.

²⁶ Verhoeven 2000.

²⁷ See for example Hodder 1980: 164; Parker Pearson 1999: 26; Akkermans and Schwarz 2003: 148.

²⁸ P.A. Akkermans et al. 1983: 369.

²⁹ Verhoeven 2000: 61-62.

verted from a structure used for ordinary domestic purposes into an explicit charnel house at the end of its lifetime, with the dead in different stages of decay on the roof.³⁰

This idea of the metamorphosis of an ordinary building at Bouqras into a ritual space through its designation for the preparation of the dead for burial can be extended to the burnt structures at Tell Sabi Abyad as well. Buildings that were the storehouses of the living at one time were the purposeful receptacles of the dead at a later time. It is, however, not excluded that buildings repeatedly underwent such metamorphoses, although for short periods only: each time when one of their owners or users passed away, the structures may have served in the preparation of the final journey, in their ascribed role of liminal spaces where the dead reside between the time of their death and their burial.³¹ Merely by the act of burning such an alteration of the use and meaning of architecture became definite and irreversible.³²

In this respect, it is probably not without significance that the deliberate destruction, both at Bouqras and Tell Sabi Abyad, took place at a time when the buildings were already in a state of disrepair or even desertion.³³ The burnings were the ultimate closing of processes of abandonment that had been set into motion earlier. The decline and destruction of specific buildings paralleled the death of the people they contained, yet it must have been the latter who sealed the fate of the former, simply because people, in contrast to buildings, usually meet their death at unpredictable moments. Thus it is conceivable that villages (or parts of them) on the brink of anticipated disintegration and dispersal were, literally, awaiting the death of prominent community members, after which the habitations were formally ended through what seem to have been extended funerary rites combining the death of people and the destruction of buildings. In regard of its sheer magnitude and obvious visibility, the practice of burning and burial was not an individual act but involved the entire community. Rather than being unique singularities or *ad hoc* responses to the fate of an individual, the fires were communally planned and prepared, and constituted decisive moments in the history of the community, associated with considerable symbolic behaviour. Although the circumstances underpinning the intentional destructions remain unknown (and perhaps unknowable), their momentous, ceremonial frame is a crucial, structuring principle, wholly set apart of the usual developmental cycle of waxing and waning of settlements through time, comprising continuous movement and localized abandonment of occupation.³⁴

Summary and conclusions

The current burial record at Tell Sabi Abyad comprises several dozen graves of both adults and children. Obviously this relatively small number of burials can-

³⁰ Merrett and Meiklejohn, in press.

³¹ Cf. Moore and Molleson 2000; Merrett and Meiklejohn, in press.

³² If so, we may recognize the practice in the archaeological record only in its most extreme form, not in its usual temporary, transient form.

³³ Cf. Merrett and Meiklejohn, in press; Verhoeven 1999.

³⁴ Cf. Vickers 1989; Akkermans et al. 2006.

not represent the entire population at the site, the more so because of the differences in date. Although there must have been many more graves, we should, however, not expect the number of burials to run into the hundreds for each phase of occupation. Both the segmented nature of the community and the constant shift in the area of occupation, leaving large parts of the site unused, suggest that the individual occupations were usually small, within a range of 0.5 to 1 ha, and with the number of inhabitants restricted to a few dozen rather than a few hundred.

Nearly all the graves were primary inhumations in simple, often shallow, pits and contained a single individual, rarely more. Occasionally the dead were lying on their backs, but usually they were resting in a crouching arrangement on their sides, in what seems to have been an attitude of repose or a foetal position; «Both sleeping and foetal positions may be the prelude to rebirth or arrival in the land of the ancestors.»³⁵

Orientation of the graves and their occupants as well as the position of grave goods was not at random but held significance to the Late Neolithic population at Tell Sabi Abyad. The orientation varied from northeast-southwest to southeast-northwest, occasionally north-south, with the head usually to the east, suggestive of an association between the direction of sunset and sunrise and thoughts of death and rebirth. Orientation of the head seems to have been related to age: whereas 5 out of 10 adults had their heads to the west, this was true for only 2 out of 24 children.³⁶

Both the children and the adults were sometimes provided with grave goods that mainly consisted of pottery but sometimes also included stone vessels, necklaces and other ornaments. In the case of the ornaments, we may wonder whether these objects were grave gifts *per se*, as they might have been worn by the deceased during their lives and subsequently accompanied them in their graves. If so, it is suggested that some, if not all, of the dead were clothed at the time of interment. In contrast, the pottery vessels may have had one or more symbolical meanings, as they represent the mourners' gifts to the deceased and were deliberately placed in specific parts of the graves.³⁷ The vessels may have contained food and drink, either real or symbolic, for use on the journey to the hereafter. Their presence in some burials and their absence in others may indicate a degree of social ranking but the evidence is weak and difficult to reconcile with the otherwise virtually identical lay-out, orientation, etc., of the graves, suggesting that everybody was considered to be equal in death.³⁸ Rather, it seems that the practice was one of several mortuary customs existing side by side and varying from case to case, perhaps in relation to a mosaic of thoughts on the journey to the world of the afterlife, on the causes and consequences of death, and on the obligations of the mourners. In this respect some

³⁵ Parker Pearson 1999: 54.

³⁶ In addition, the two adults found in the burnt building V had their heads oriented to the north.

³⁷ See e.g. Parker Pearson 1999:7ff.

³⁸ Within the settlements at Tell Sabi Abyad no evidence of any form of institutionalized social hierarchy or status difference has been found either. See Verhoeven 1999: 210-11; Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997. See also Akkermans 1993: 288ff.

of the burials may have compulsorily required the placement of grave goods, others may not. The pots themselves were not specially made for the occasion but were ordinary objects indistinguishable from those found in the houses of the living; they received a new meaning only by their use in the grave.

Although the graves of the adults and children closely resembled each other in terms of construction, lay-out, orientation, etc., they were, with one or two exceptions, strictly separated spatially. I have suggested that there were at least two formal burial grounds concomitantly in use at Tell Sabi Abyad at the end of the seventh millennium, one for the adults on the northwestern summit of the mound, overlooking, as it were, the community of the living below, the other for the children in an abandoned portion of the settlement low on the southeastern slope of the site. Apparently age was an important determinant for the treatment of the dead and the place of burial.

There is proof for many, often short, local breaks in the sequence at Tell Sabi Abyad, with occupation episodically contracting and expanding over the site. People did not always remain in the same place but constantly shifted from one area to another within their villages in the course of generations.³⁹ The distribution of the graves has to be considered in relation with this continuous pattern of intra-site shift and localized abandonment of occupation. The Late Neolithic people took their dead outside the spaces of the living, by burying them preferably not in or around the houses that were in use but in the ruins of nearby but earlier, deserted, occupations at the site.⁴⁰ The ruins were turned into burial fields, although they were usually exploited intermittently for one or two generations at most, until the areas with the graves were deemed to be suitable or necessary for reoccupation and rebuilding; subsequently, the dead had to be brought elsewhere and the pattern repeated itself on and on. In short, there must have been many short-term, *ad hoc* graveyards in different places, rather than one single cemetery specifically chosen and used for the purpose through the ages.

For a long time there has been much speculation on the presence of formal burial grounds in Syria in the Late Neolithic, the existence of which was assumed in view of the often (very) restricted number of graves in the excavated areas of occupation and its strong bias in favour of infants and children. The finds at Tell Sabi Abyad confirm the reality of such cemeteries. They also contradict the commonly held view that children –because they were assumed not to have obtained all the facets of the *social persona* yet– were predominantly buried intramural or, at the least, in the immediate vicinity of what may have been the parental properties. Rather, it appears that in most cases even the youngest children were formally interred together with others in a specific graveyard of their own, situated outside the proper areas of habitation and testifying to these children's individual social role and identity. In this respect, the many similarities between adult and child graves may not be without relevance.

Not all graves at Tell Sabi Abyad adhere to what seems to have been the ordinary, normative way of burying the dead. There was a small number of burials

³⁹ See Akkermans et al. 2006.

⁴⁰ A view earlier expressed by Akkermans 1989: 83.

which underwent special treatment for reasons that remain puzzling to us. For example, there was a concern with the human cranium, attested also at Bouqras and several other sites in Syria and Iraq in the seventh and sixth millennia BC.⁴¹ Removal of the head, probably some time after burial, and decapitation, perhaps at the time of interment, was practised on a small scale at the site, and seems to have been connected to adults only. Detachment of the cranium from the buried body suggests that at least some of the skulls remained in the houses or shrines of the living, perhaps as memories of those once alive but now passed on into the community of the dead ancestors, but no skull deposits have been found at the site so far.⁴² Such forms of a secondary mortuary custom may have been restricted to people of special importance to the community, although the graves are indistinguishable from the common burials in every other aspect. That the practice of secondary burial and the considerable symbolic behaviour associated with it served the needs of a group larger than a single household or family is clear in the case of the intentional destruction of some buildings in association with dead people in them. Performed in a most explicitly public manner, the conflagrations may be interpreted as deliberate ritual acts of burial and abandonment, connecting the closure of specific (storage) buildings to the death of specific individuals of the community.

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⁴¹ Cf. Merrett and Meiklejohn, in press; Akkermans 1989; Akkermans and Schwarz 2003.

⁴² Part of a human skull (the crown with the join of the eye sockets) was found on the floor of a large pit in operation III, dated around the middle of the seventh millennium BC, but it remains unknown whether this skull fragment was placed in the pit on purpose.

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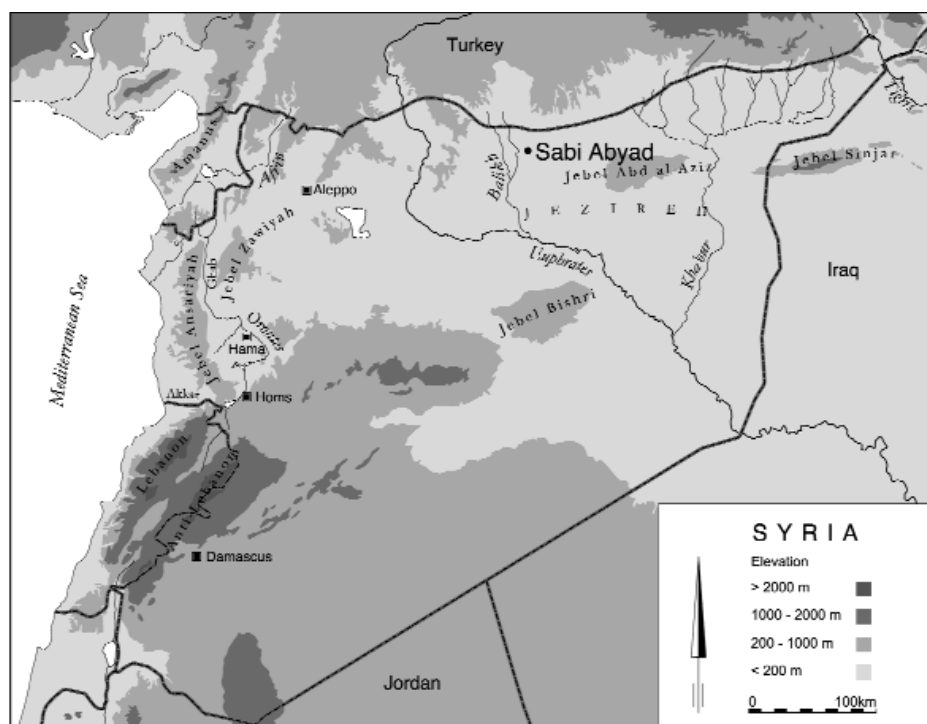


Fig. 1: Map of Syria with the location of Tell Sabi Abyad.



Fig. 2: Plan of Tell Sabi Abyad with the location of the various operations and the prehistoric graves. A: cemetery of the adults; B: cemetery of the children; C: burnt storehouse V with graves (operation I); D: burnt storehouse with grave (operation II).



Fig. 3: The multiple child burial BN03-6 in operation III and a reconstruction of the position of the bodies at the time of interment.

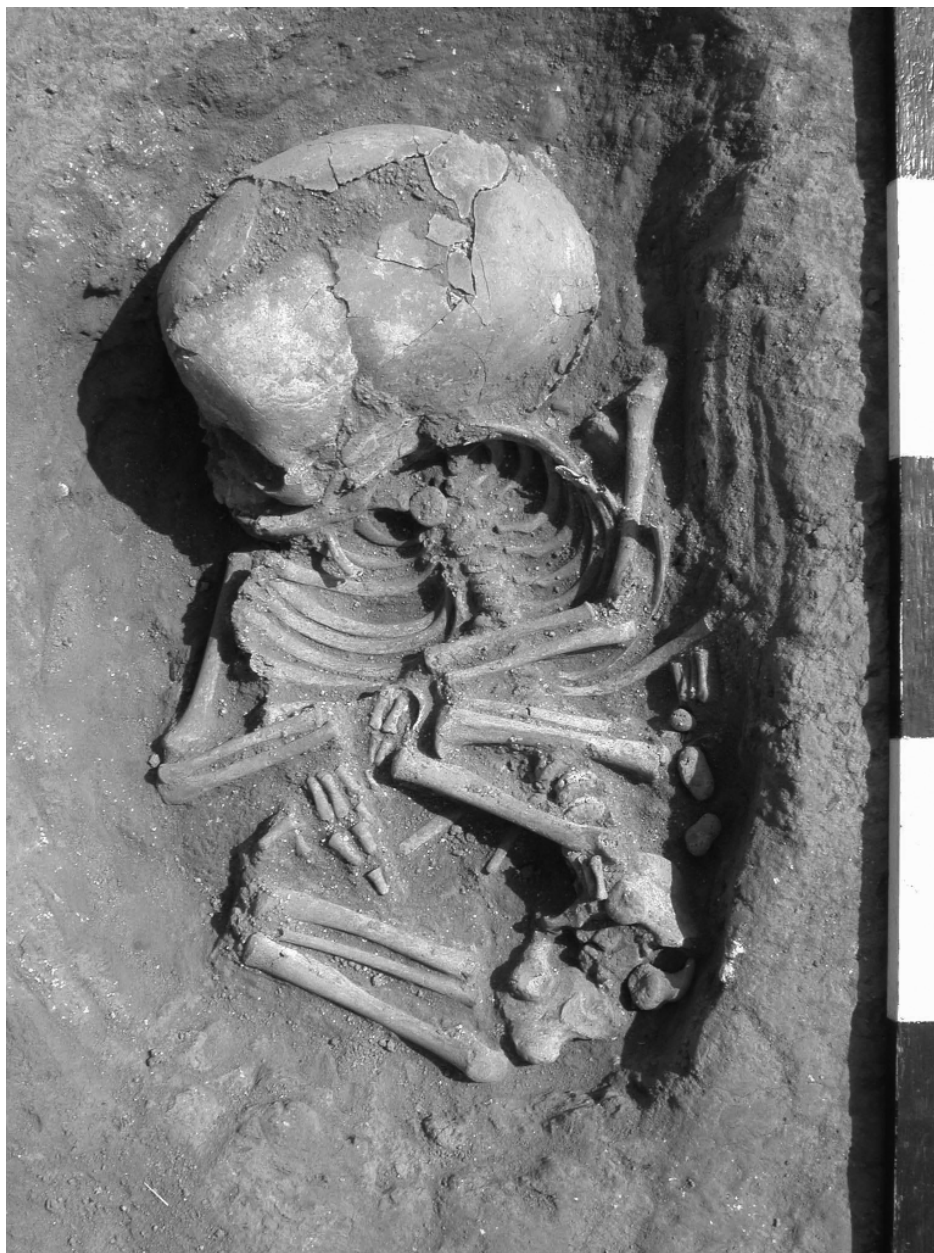


Fig. 4: Child burial BN03-4 in operation II. The child is lying in a crouching position and held a pierced shell pendant in the left hand folded on the belly.



Fig. 5: Child burial B99-13 in operation I. The child, about three years old at the time of death, had been provided with a small necklace of five stone beads and one stone pendant.



Fig. 6: Adult burial BN05-9 in operation III. This individual was lying on the side in a crouching position, with the legs severely contracted, suggestive of bondage.



Fig. 7: Adult burial BN02-2 in operation III. Burials in a supine position are rare at Tell Sabi Abyad.



Fig. 8: Adult burial B99-11 in operation I. The skull of this male person, between 26 and 35 years old at the time of his death, had been separated from the remainder of the body but was subsequently replaced in the grave.

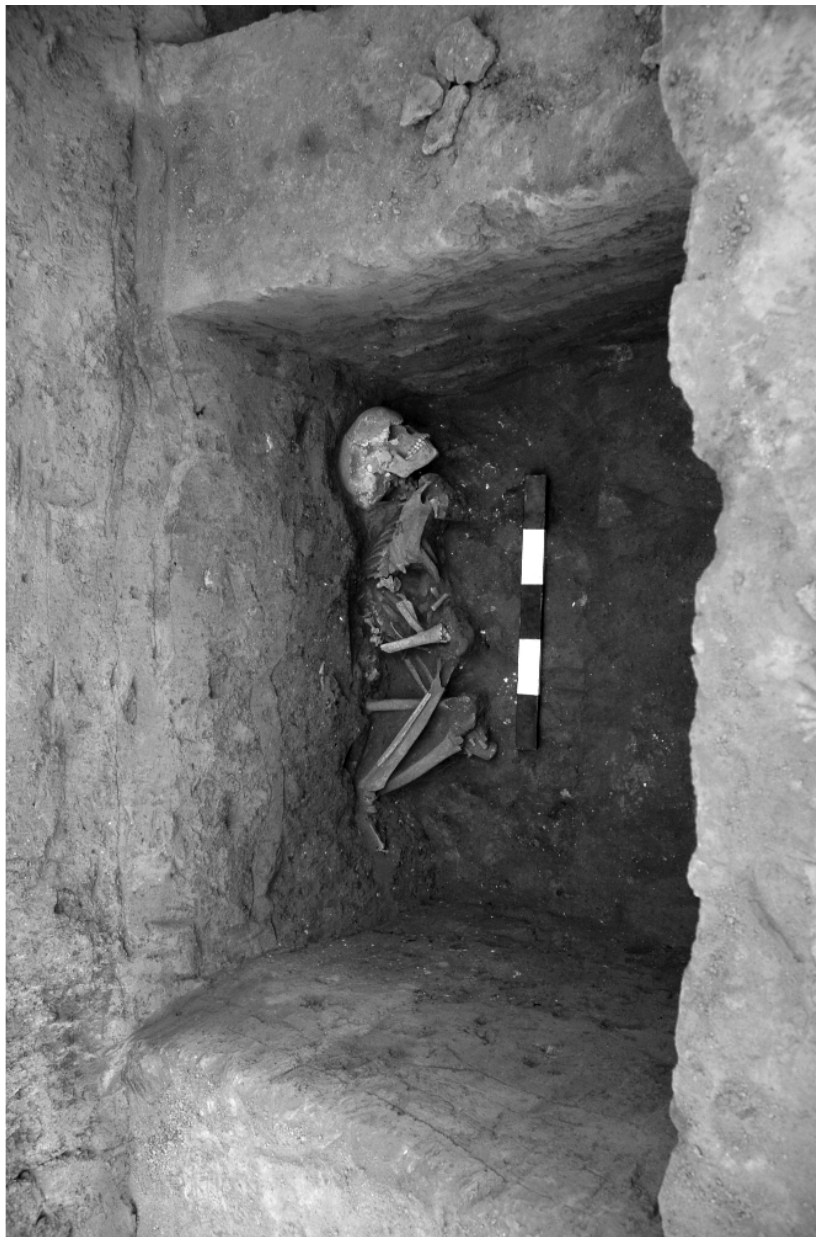


Fig. 9: Adult burial BN04-5 in operation II. The individual was lying in a crouching position in a small room in the burnt storehouse in operation II. Remarkably, the deceased was not buried underneath the floor of the room but had been placed on it, after which the room was partly filled with soil, covering the corpse.

