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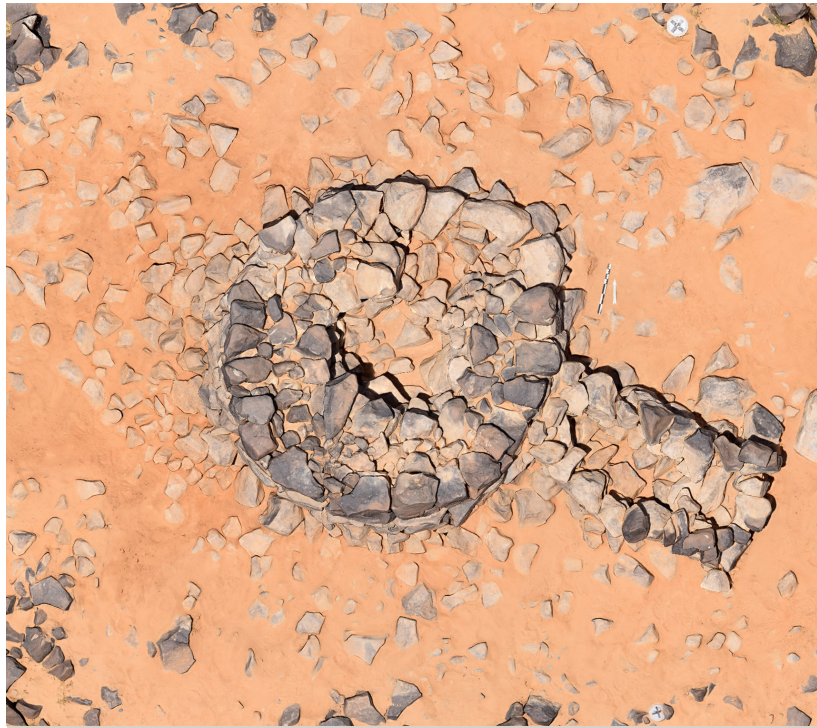


Fig. 1. Aerial view of the tower tomb and associated cist grave at the site of QUR-47. The central burial chamber in the tower had been looted in antiquity. (Photo by P. Akkermans.)

In 2022–2023, the Jebel Qurma Archaeological Landscape Project continued its excavations of burial cairns in the rugged, basalt-strewn Jebel Qurma region, located east of Azraq in Jordan's northeastern "Black Desert." Although pre-Islamic tombs occur in the basaltic uplands in large numbers, these graves of different shape, size, type, and construction have rarely been investigated comprehensively. Our project explicitly focuses on the exploration of the many tombs and their development through time.

Prehistoric tombs, ranging from the Chalcolithic to the Early Bronze Age IV, occur sparsely in the Jebel Qurma region. The vast majority of the burial mounds date from the first millennium BC to the early first millennium AD (on the basis of ^{14}C and OSL dates) and were repeatedly reused for interment. A variety of (contemporary) burial cairns is also found, although it is often difficult to distinguish between these types through survey data alone due to issues of preservation, reuse, reconstruction, and looting. Hence, typological order depends in many cases wholly on excavation.





Fig. 2. The long tail of small, rounded cairns associated with the tomb at the site of QUR-62 (the tomb is visible at the tail's end). This tail was about 53 m long and consisted of 21 rounded stone heaps. (Photo by P. Akkermans.)

A most common type is the so-called ring cairn, a tumulus characterized by an oval, corbelled burial chamber encircled by an outer ring of large rocks, with the area between the burial chamber and the outer ring entirely filled in with stones. They are usually around 7 m across and up to 1.2 m high. Also very common are tower tombs, which differ from ring cairns by their distinct tower-like shape and their clear, straight façade made of large basalt slabs. They are either round or apsidal in shape, 3–5 m in diameter and 1–1.4 m in height, and have an oval or square, corbelled burial chamber in their center.

Interestingly, the round tower tombs regularly had one or two rectangular cist graves attached to their outer facades (Fig. 1). Some of these cists were covered with capstones, while others had a layer of basalt rocks covering the skeletal remains of one or two individuals in a crouched position. The cist graves appear to be relatively late installations, dating between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD. Another late type of cairn consists of reused tower tombs that, at the time of renewal, had been wholly concealed underneath a stone cover, converting the tower tombs into conical tumuli. Other, less common, types of cairns have a square rather than circular layout or occur in the form of large but low platforms with stacked façades, up to 10 m in diameter.

Significantly, all types of tombs, except the cists, may have a tail of small cairns attached to them, which range in number from about five to fifty and can extend up to 135 m from



the cairn (Fig. 2). While at first sight these small cairns resemble tombs, our excavations yielded no evidence whatsoever of human remains or other finds in or underneath them. The meaning of these tails remains unclear.

The tombs contained some grave goods, mostly beads and pendants made of glass, stone, shell, and mother-of-pearl. Metal objects also occur, comprising bracelets, pins, and (ear) rings made of iron or bronze. Some tombs had weaponry, including pieces of bronze armor scales and iron arrowheads and javelins. Remarkably, pottery is entirely absent. A unique find in the debris of a small tower tomb was the socketed and trilobate “Scythian” arrowhead made of bronze, securely dated to the beginning of the 6th century BC (Fig. 3). Also unique were the claws of vultures in two cairns, which probably had an amuletic meaning.

Project website: jebel-qurma.com