

Contextualising Grave Inventories in the Ancient Near East

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Part II

Mortuary Rituals

The New Primary Cremation Custom of Iron Age Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dūr-Katlimmu (North-Eastern Syria)

Florian Janoscha Kreppner



Figure 1: Map showing northern Mesopotamia with sites mentioned in the text.

1 Introduction

Rituals for the dead serve to overcome the event of death. They contribute to re-establish the order disturbed by death. They help overcome the mourning of the bereaved. Rituals successfully separate the dead from the living and transfer them to the community of the dead. Moreover, rituals also solve the problem to remove the dead bodies and set norms for behavioural patterns that make the world easier to manage for the bereaved and console the mourners. Furthermore, they contain elements which strengthen identity formation and allow insights into a society's religious imaginations.¹ For archaeologists, therefore, graves are a source for exploring social structure and cultural identity of ancient societies. However, numerous examples from the area of social- and cultural anthropology indicate the huge variety in how societies were dealing with their dead. All societies display dissimilar burial rituals at the same time. According to Robb, these differences are not caused by random simultaneity but

1 Assmann 2005.

rather by a coherent general burial programme structured by the specific meaning patterns of the single rituals. Three aspects meet in Robb's hypothesis:² (1) The individual's biography is shaped both by the society's cultural tradition and by the individual's own decisions. Norms prescribe the individual life course, which aims should be properly reached by certain groups of persons at certain phases of life. These norms organize individuals' action patterns during the life course, and they structure a person's social network; they also provide measurable standards according to which actions are initiated and evaluated. Thus, death is not just seen as a pure fact, but reveals certain properties or imponderables (death came too early or after long suffering or with capital punishment etc.). (2) A person's biography is at the same time the history of his or her body. The individual consists of the clear cut material unity of the body which is inhabited by the mind. However, it also represents a social construction. (3) The way how humans treat material things, how they alter their functions or how they get rid of them is not

2 Robb 2007: 287–289.

easy to grasp and is mainly guided by the semantic connotations of these things. The treatment and burial of a dead human body represent a very particular example of disposal management. The different treatments of how to get rid of a human body is strictly prescribed and strongly dissimilar from the waste treatment of things or dead animals. In contrast to other things, remains of a human body may generate strong emotions and lead to specific actions.

Burials and burial customs in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria during the first half of the first millennium BC are of salient topical interest in current archaeological research. This is evident from a number of new studies focusing on the totally dissimilar treatments of the deceased as, for example, in Ashur on the Tigris by Hauser³ on the one hand, and in Tell Shiukh Fawqani on the Euphrates in Syria by Tenu⁴ on the other (figure 1). It was the aim of these studies not only to analyze burials according to the typical shapes of graves including their respective finds, but also to reconstruct possible ritual practices and imaginations associated to these burials. During the Neo-Assyrian period, the burial of dead bodies is the major treatment of the deceased in Ashur. As the study of Hauser⁵ shows, graves were usually laid out inside the houses under the floors. So far, graveyards could not be identified.⁶ Normally, the dead were buried in varying types of graves. Out of 686 Neo-Assyrian graves only eight were assigned to the group of cremations in urns.⁷ As anthropological data are missing, the interpretation of these cremational finds in urns as graves appears somewhat problematic. According to Hauser's critical classification, only graves Ass. 12279 and 12299 can be accepted as urn-graves and therefore must be seen as exceptions.⁸ In contrast, in Tell Shiukh Fawqani, during Iron Age I and II, the dead were cremated.⁹ The burial of the remains in urns was carried out on a graveyard outside the settlement. With some plausibility, Tenu has linked this burial ritual to that of the Aramaeans.¹⁰ The examples for cremations I just referred to are of the type 'cremation in an urn'. Such cremations were executed at unknown places. The incinerated bones were collected from the fire-place, filled into vessels and buried at another place (secondary cremation).¹¹

In Tell Sheikh Hamad a new primary cremation custom could be identified for the first time for Iron Age northern Mesopotamia:¹² cremations in pits without transfer of the remains in vessels to other places. The burial space was located inside the settlement in rooms, courtyards, or outdoor areas of dwelling houses. The excavation site Tell Sheikh Hamad is situated in northern Mesopotamia on the eastern bank of the Khabur-river, today's north-eastern Syria, close to the Iraqi border (figure 1). During Late Bronze and Iron Ages it was an Assyrian provincial centre with the name Dūr-Katlimmu.¹³ The distance to the Neo-Assyrian capitals Ashur, Nimrud and Nineveh at the Tigris-river is about 200 km. The new cremation type has been detected in the context of an extensive research programme that focussed on the Neo-Assyrian Lower Town II.¹⁴ In the centre of the lower town the so called Neo-Assyrian Residences have been excavated¹⁵ and a sequence of uncovered buildings can be dated to the period from the ninth to the sixth century BC.¹⁶ Several graves were detected which were divided into two groups. The first were grave types well known from Neo-Assyrian sites like Ashur (figure 2), the second group was the new grave type which we called 'primary cremation pit' (figure 3).

2 Grave types well known from Neo-Assyrian sites like Ashur

An inhumation in a chamber tomb has been excavated in the Lower Town II (grave 03/28). The stratigraphy proves an early Neo-Assyrian date (late tenth/ninth century BC).¹⁷ Numerous burnt bricks in fallen position (figure 4) indicate that the chamber once was vaulted as recorded from other Neo-Assyrian sites like Ashur¹⁸, Nimrud¹⁹, Tell Ahmar²⁰, Humaidat²¹, and Arbil²². The tomb had been robbed and destroyed. Only the lower part of the staircase and single bricks of the floor remained *in situ* (figure 5). The bones including the skull, all belonging to one individual, were found in a fragmented condition. The bones were not assembled in their anatomical

3 Hauser 2012; 2008.

4 Tenu 2009; 2005; Al-Bahloul *et al.* 2005; Tenu – Bachelot 2005; Le Goff 2005.

5 Hauser 2012; Mofidi-Nasrabadi 1999.

6 Hauser 2012: 319–325.

7 *Ibid.*: 170, 249–255.

8 *Ibid.*: 254–255.

9 Additionally 14 inhumation graves have been found at the foot of the tell in Area G. They are younger in date (sixth – fifth century BC), cf. Luciani 2005: 719–996.

10 Tenu 2009.

11 Sprague 2005: 137–138.

12 Kreppner 2008.

13 Kühne 2013.

14 Kühne 2008; 2013.

15 Pucci 2008.

16 Absolute dates of occupation periods of the Lower Town II in Tell Sheikh Hamad used in this article accord to Kühne (2008: 550): foundation: ca. 935–824 BC, phase 1 of full occupation: ca. 823–722 BC, phase 2 of full occupation: ca. 721–612 BC, phase 3 of full occupation: ca. 611–539 BC.

17 Kreppner – Hornig 2010: 107–114.

18 Haller 1954; Hauser 2008; 2013.

19 Damerji 1999.

20 Bunnens 1997.

21 Ibrahim – Amin Agha 1983.

22 Van Ess *et al.* 2012.



Figure 2: The Neo-Assyrian Residences with the location of the common grave types known from the Neo-Assyrian period.



Figure 3: The Neo-Assyrian Residences with the location of the cremation pits.

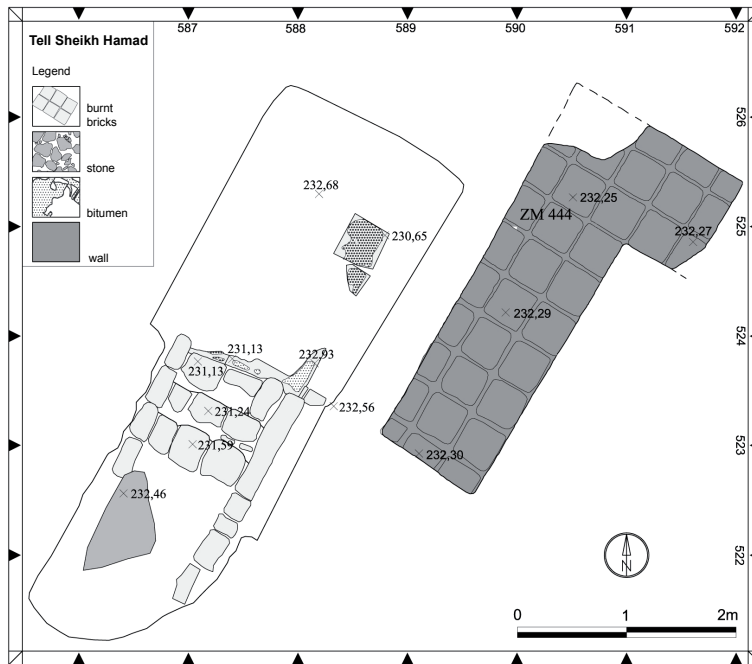


Figure 4: Chamber tomb, grave-no 03/28, plan.



Figure 5: Grave-no 03/28, burnt bricks in fallen position.

order, they were dispersed all over the chamber, most likely due to the work of tomb raiders. All the skeletal elements permitted the diagnosis that the bones

are from a very gracile female person who died at the age of 20–22 years. A silver-ring, a fragment of a glazed tripod bowl and two beakers were found in the fill and must be assigned to the burial objects.

In room K, a grave of the type ‘inhumation in a vessel’ (grave 03/15, figure 6) has been uncovered under a floor which had been in use during the second phase of full occupation of the Lower Town II.²³ The mortal remains were identified as a one-year-old child²⁴ lying on its right side, orientated along the western wall of the room. The burial type ‘inhumation in a vessel’ is well known from Neo-Assyrian Ashur.²⁵

Under the floor of room GG a grave has been found which could be typified as ‘inhumation in a pit’ (grave 06/02, figure 7).²⁶ The pit had been dug from a floor in use during the second phase of full occupation in the Lower Town II. The grave was orientated along the southern wall of the room. The buried individual was a three – six-months-old child.

²³ Further graves of this type were excavated in operation North-Eastern Corner (grave 90/01) and operation Red House (grave 09/06, cf. Kreppner – Schmid 2013: 142).

²⁴ Dr. Heide Hornig (Freie Universität Berlin) processed the human bones of the Iron Age inhumation graves in the Neo-Assyrian Residences of the Lower Town II of Tell Sheikh Hamad and provided the anthropological data for this article.

²⁵ Haller 1954: 40–41; Hauser 2012: 215–218.

²⁶ Further graves of this type were excavated in operation Red House: room TV: grave-no. 99/05, 99/07, PV: 97/115, YV: 98/62, 98/63, 98/52, 97/116, 97/117, 97/112, 99/004, 97/125, 97/113, 97/114, UV: 08/003 (two individuals), QV: 97/61, cf. Rohde 2013: 129–133; Kreppner – Schmid 2013: 86, 93, Beilage 32–34.



Figure 6: Inhumation in a vessel, grave 03/15.



Figure 7: Inhumation in a pit, grave 06/02.



Figure 8: Cremation in an urn, grave 04/23.

This burial type is known from Neo-Assyrian Ashur as well.²⁷

In room MM, a grave of the type ‘secondary cremation in an urn’ (grave 04/23, figure 8) had been buried under the floor which was used during the second and third phases of the full occupation of the Lower Town II. The buried individual was

a 17–20 years old woman. Graves of this type are known from Neo-Assyrian Ashur.²⁸

The locations of the Tell Sheikh Hamad burials are documented on figure 2. The chamber tomb was older than the walls shown on the plan. It dates to the tenth/ninth century BC. The other graves are orientated parallel to the walls and can be ascribed to the occupation period of the eighth, seventh and sixth century BC. It is important to notice that an inhumation burial existed in room GG, the room in which also three graves of the newly detected type ‘primary cremation pit’ have been found.

3 The new type of grave: primary cremation pit

Along with the common types of burial modes just described, a quite new type of grave was detected: the primary cremation pit. These are pits which show heavy traces of fire. 15 pits of this type have been found on the excavation site, they are marked in the plan (figure 3). In order to elaborate this type of grave in more detail, grave 04/20 in the western area of courtyard Z is chosen to explain the stratigraphy (figure 9). The youngest features visible on the picture are cuts caused by pits of the Parthian-Roman graves which were dug from a higher level. In the centre of the picture, a rounded black line caused by fire is visible at the bottom of the excavated Parthian-Roman pit. This line represents the boundary of the cremation pit. A mud brick platform was built on top of it. Remains of small walls indicate that this platform once served as the substructure for a small architectural unit visible in the courtyard. Two floors of courtyard Z are visible on the picture. The upper floor ended at the mud bricks. Therefore, the floor was in use when the mud brick platform was already erected and the lower context was sealed and inaccessible at that time. This floor of courtyard Z was in use during the third phase of full occupation of the Lower Town II.²⁹ As the lower floor continued under the mud brick platform, one can conclude that the mud brick structure has been set on top of it and therefore is younger. The lower floor is the original floor of the courtyard Z in House 1. It was in use during the phase 2 of full occupation of the Lower Town II.³⁰

After the removal of the mud brick platform it became visible that the pit was dug from the original floor of courtyard Z and was filled with a loose yellowish to reddish earth before the mud brick platform was erected (figure 10). Thus, it is evident that the procedure of burning was executed from the

28 Haller 1954: 52–53; Hauser 2012: 249–255.

29 Pucci 2008: 62, fig. 4.

30 Ibid.: 61, fig. 3.

27 Haller 1954: 12–15; Hauser 2012: 204–206.

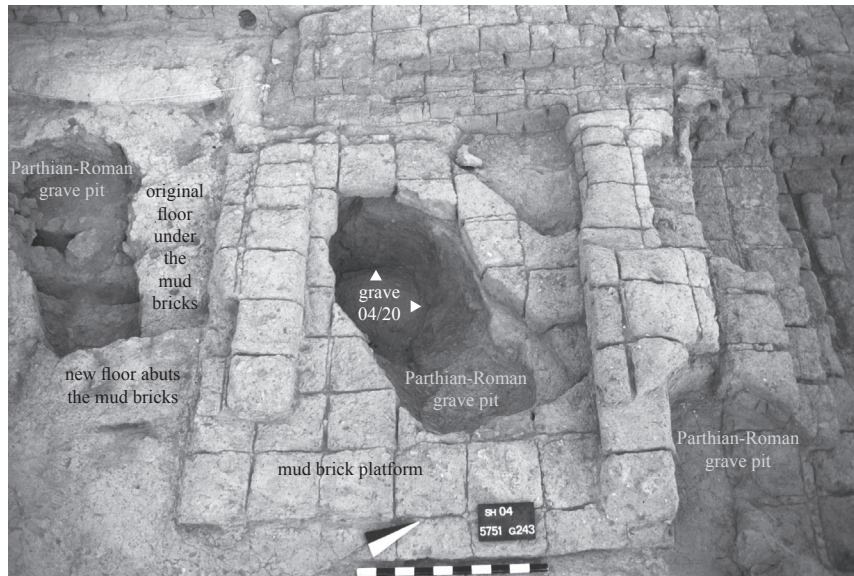


Figure 9: Stratigraphical context of grave 04/20 in House 1, courtyard Z.



Figure 10: Grave 04/20.

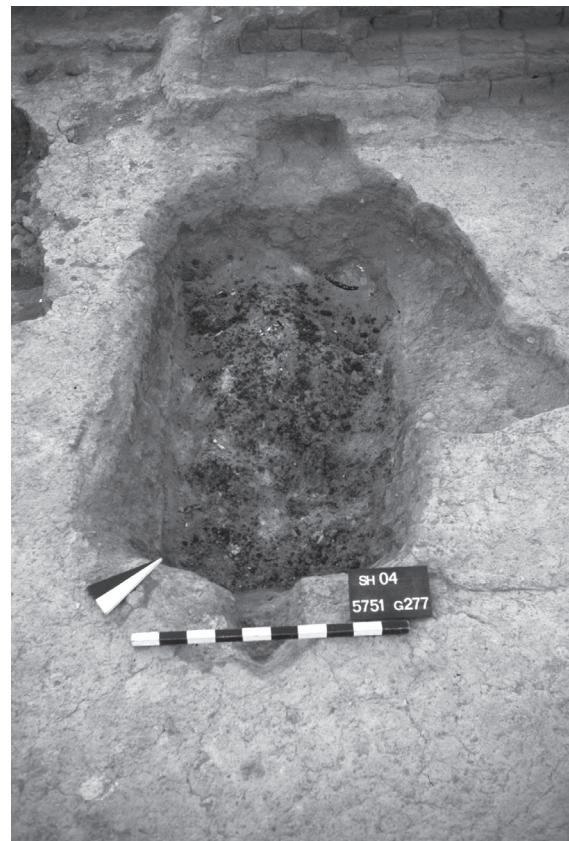


Figure 11: Grave 04/20, ashy layer.

original floor of courtyard Z. A loose greyish earth with lots of charcoal, small bronze fragments and small fragments of bones underlies the upper fill (figure 11, plate 5 a). Within the lower layer, large bronze objects were found which were fragmented into numerous small pieces. They were documented in their original positions. The same documentation

was accomplished for the smaller finds like textile, iron objects, small bronze objects, charred wooden objects, shells, fragments of ivory discs and plaques, as well as silver objects. It was obvious that the finds had been seriously impaired by the blaze and were found in disarrangement. This clearly indicates that the objects were not found in their original positions



Figure 12: Graves 03/03, 03/04 and 03/26.

but rather at places where they had fallen after the cremation. The ashy layer contained charred wooden beams and charred twigs. Small fragments of bones were found all over this layer in different areas of the pit, completely out of anatomical order. Both human and animal bones were found.

In general, cremation can be seen as a rather destructive event: it results either in the entire disappearance of the corpse or in distinctive morphological alterations of the disarticulated bones. For example, the colour of the bones found indicates that they were burnt with a temperature ranging between 500°C and more than 750°C. Nonetheless, all parts of the skeleton are present with only the exception of hands and shoulder girdle. Moreover, there are no indications pointing to cremations of multiple individuals at grave 04/20, because no single component of a skeleton was found twice. In the selected grave a woman older than 40 years has been buried.³¹ One turtle, three cowries and the tasty parts of one juvenile sheep were also burnt with the dead.³²

At which locations did we find cremation pits? A group of three cremation pits was found in courtyard Z (figure 12, plate 5 b). The picture shows the characteristic features: black debris with charred beams at the bottom of the pit and a reddish colour caused by the heat of the fire on the upper part of the pit's boundary. It should be noticed as a rather strange fact that this kind of pit was also found in 'rooms', that is, most likely in closed environments with ceilings like grave 92/89 in House 1 room CZ, or in House 3 in room GG (figure 3), and not in open

spaces. The three pits in room GG form a sequence dating from the eighth to the sixth century BC. The grave 06/012 south of House 4 belongs to the first occupation period of the Lower Town II, as can be seen from a wall of House 1 that covered it.³³ In sum, the cremation pits found are attested from the ninth until the sixth century BC. After having shown the stratigraphical situation and details of the cremation pit 04/20, which were relevant for identifying the pit as a grave, I would like to give an overview of the characteristic finds with regard to the entire group of cremation pits on our site.

3.1 Finds from the cremation pits

Many small finds are associated with the cremation pits (table 1). The pits contained vessels made of various materials. Neo-Assyrian style pottery vessels have been found as well as a remarkable group of glazed pottery and stone vessels. One grave (04/20) contained a wooden carinated bowl. A bronze bowl (figure 13) has been found in grave 03/26. The bowl can be interpreted as a container for gifts like food and drink.³⁴ Comparable bronze bowls are known in large numbers from graves of Neo-Assyrian Ashur³⁵ and have been found in Nimrud in the Royal Tombs as well as in the Layard and Mallowan excavations.³⁶

31 Dr. Heide Hornig (Freie Universität Berlin) analysed the human bones of the primary cremation pits (table 1).

32 Dr. Cornelia Becker (Freie Universität Berlin) analysed the animal bones (table 1).

33 The first phase of full occupation of Lower Town II dates ca. 823–722 BC (Kühne 2008: 550).

34 In the frame of her diploma thesis in the field of restoration the bowl and the drinking straws have been restored by P. Kotsiari under supervision of M. Knauth and C. Gütschow at FHTW-Berlin in 2008.

35 Haller 1954; Luschey 1939: figs. 13, 16–17, Ashurno Ass.12325k, l, m².

36 Curtis 2008: 244–245.

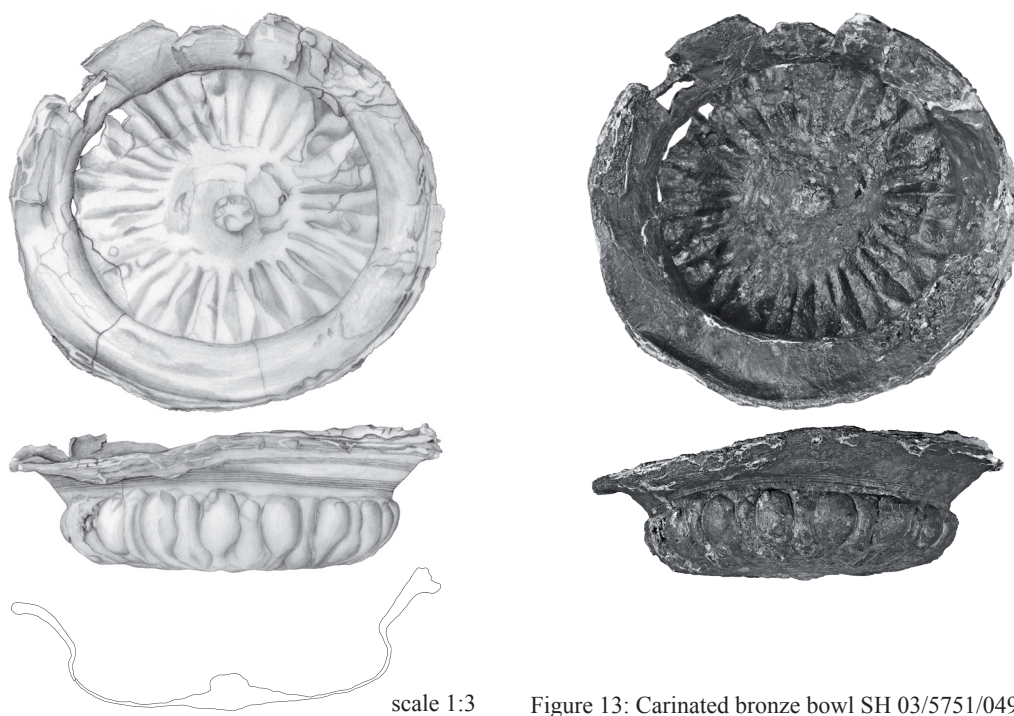


Figure 13: Carinated bronze bowl SH 03/5751/0496.

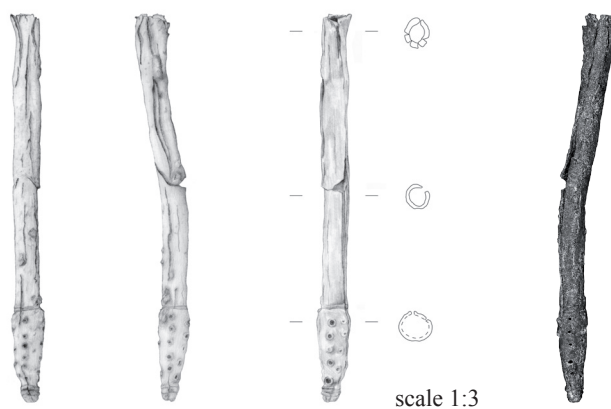


Figure 14: Drinking straw SH 03/5751/0231.

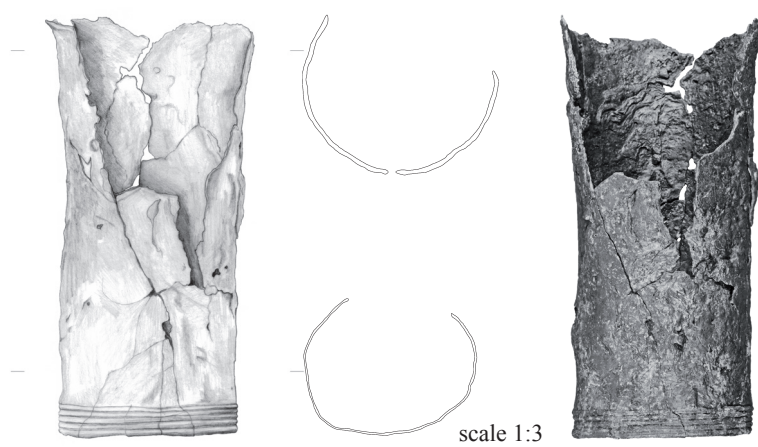


Figure 15: Cylindrical terminal made of bronze SH 03/5751/0233.

The carinated bowl is well acknowledged as a typical Assyrian form.³⁷

Drinking straws (figure 14) were found in grave 03/26 still lying in the bowl. Small holes allowed absorption of the fluid. Its tip is perforated, with holes of 1–2 mm in diameter serving as a sieve to filter the solid remainders of the brewing process out of the beer. Comparable drinking straws have been published from Deve Hüyük.³⁸ They are believed to have been in use during feasts for the dead.³⁹

Moreover, cylindrical terminals made of bronze (figure 15) were found in graves 03/26, 04/20 and 92/87. Comparable pieces are attested in the Nimrud Royal Tombs, grave II,⁴⁰ where it seems very likely that they belonged to furniture such as a table or a stand. The Nimrud pieces are interpreted as furniture sheathings.⁴¹ The furniture sheathing in the cremation pits could also have been affixed to a cline or chair on which the dead could have been positioned and cremated.

Ivory discs and plaques as well as ivory hinge-joints indicate that small decorated boxes had been given to the dead. Cloths and jewellery of the dead are attested by textile and fibulae, earrings of bronze and gold, beads made of all kinds of material, pieces of gold and lapis lazuli. An ivory comb and a scarab are examples of special gifts for the dead. Furthermore, the tasty parts of sheep were also given to the dead. In some graves different kinds of animals were added and may be interpreted as offerings. Table 1 shows the location and the number of each grave of the type 'primary cremation pit', followed by the anthropological and archaeozoological results and finally, in the last column, the finds. Usually the cremation pits contained one individual.⁴² Juvenile, adult, mature and senile females are attested. One male infant and one male senile were cremated as well. Only grave 03/26 contained two individuals: a senile male and an infant. Taking together, the burial custom was not restricted to a specific age range or sex. However, it should be noticed that male adults have not been identified in a cremation pit so far. Generally, the cremation pits found on our site can be divided into groups by location and finds. The graves in courtyard Z (03/03, 03/04, 03/26, 04/20) are richly equipped as well as those in the south of House 1 (92/89, 92/086, 92/87, 92/88, 04/24, 06/12). The graves located in House 3 (87/70, 87/71, 06/06) and the two in the north of House 4 (03/19, 06/15)

did not contain precious objects. From this follows that variations in burial custom details may have occurred.

3.2 Reconstruction of the primary cremation custom in Iron Age Tell Sheikh Hamad

How were the dead cremated? Common features of the pits presented are: an oval form, a fill of charcoal, bones, finds on the bottom, and, last but not least, the red coloured earth at the rim of the pit, most likely caused by the heat. In order to reconstruct the process of cremation by which the just mentioned features might have been created, I would like to refer to an experiment called *bustum*. This experiment, published by Gaitzsch and Werner,⁴³ has been conducted in order to reconstruct the formation processes of the so called *busta* – a common funerary type in Roman Europe. The procedure led to a result which points to a certain sequence during the cremation rite which may well be compared to the finds in Iron Age Tell Sheikh Hamad: A pit was dug, a pyre was erected on top of it, the dead and the gifts were placed on top of the pyre, the pyre was lit, and, finally, the burnt remains fell into the pit and were buried *in situ* by filling the pit with homogeneous earth. The archaeological record of the cremation pits in Tell Sheikh Hamad clearly suggests such a procedure.

However, lighting a pyre in and around the houses seems abnormal, and presumably it would cause heavy damage. In order to reconstruct a manageable type of pyre, I would like to refer to an ethnoarchaeological study conducted by Grévin.⁴⁴ Several types of pyres were documented, for example the funeral pile of the Katmandu-type.⁴⁵ The dead is positioned on his back on the pyre. He is cremated in an open fire. In the Lower Town II of Tell Sheikh Hamad, however, it seems indeed inappropriate to apply such a pyre on top of the pit to cremate the dead. But there is a different mode to conduct cremations, a mode to cremate without open fire as this could be observed in the cremation custom of Puducherry/India.⁴⁶ The individual is laid on a pyre and covered with straw and moist mud. Then the pyre is ignited. The funeral pile burns slowly. It takes 15–19 hours with a temperature up to 750°C to cremate the individual without open fire. Our finds suppose that this method of cremation or a very similar one might have been used in Iron Age Dür-Katlimmu. Such a cremation procedure would allow that the buildings could be kept in use even after a cremation ceremony.

37 Luschev 1939; Curtis 2008: 245.

38 Rehm 2006: 199.

39 Brunke 2011.

40 Damerji 1999: fig. 20; Hussein – Suleiman 2000: 384.

41 Curtis 2008: 249–250.

42 The phases have been labelled according to the current state of analysis of the stratigraphy and architecture of the operation Neo-Assyrian Residences by Marina Pucci.

43 Gaitzsch – Werner 1993.

44 Grévin 2005.

45 Ibid.: fig. 3.

46 Ibid.: fig. 1.

Location	Phase of full occupation of Lower Town II	Grave No	Anthropology (H. Hornig)		Archaeozoology, numbers refer to MNI (C. Becker)	Finds
			Age	Sex		
House 1, Courtyard Z	phase 3	03/03	adult	undetermined	2 sheep, 1 equid	pottery: 1 lamp, 4 bowls, 1 alabaster vessel, 1 iron knife, 27 beads, 1 ivory disk, 4 fragments of ivory panels, 1 ivory pin, 1 broken bronze vessel (?)
House 1, Courtyard Z	phase 3	03/04	adult	undetermined	3 sheep, 1 cattle, 1 camel, 1 equid	pottery: 3 bowls, 3 ivory disks, small ivory fragments, many small bronze fragments, 7 beads
House 1, Courtyard Z	phase 3	03/026	50–70,	indifferent	1 sheep	1 stone tripod bowl, 1 stone bowl, 40 beads, small ivory fragments (disks, pierced panels), 1 bronze bowl with drinking straws, small bronze fragments, bronze cylindrical terminal
			8–14	undetermined		
House 1, Courtyard Z	phase 2	04/20	>40	female (?)	3 sheep, 1 turtle, 3 cowries	2 bronze earrings, 1 fibula, small ivory fragments (disks, pierced panels), bronze cylindrical terminal, textile, small wooden box, 1 wooden bowl
House 1, Room CZ	phase 3	92/89	22–30	female	?	1 silver earring, 1 fibula, some small bronze fragments
South of House 1, IZ	phase 2	92/86	11–13	female (?)	2 sheep, 1 pig, 1 cattle, 1 fish	pottery: 3 bowls, 5 glazed vessels, 16 beads, 3 fibulae, 2 scarabs, 3 ivory disks, 60 pierced flat ivory fragments, 1 iron fragment, 3 bronze fragments
South of House 1, IZ	phase 2	92/87	16–20	female (?)	3 sheep, 1 pig	pottery: 2 bowls, 1 glazed vessel, 1 alabaster vessel, 6 beads, 2 bronze cylindrical terminals and many small bronze fragments, 4 bronze earrings, fragments of ivory panels
South of House 1, IZ	phase 2	92/88	6–8	undetermined	1 sheep	pottery: 1 glazed vessel, 1 bronze bangle, 2 bronze earrings, 11 beads
South of House 1, IZ	phase 2	04/24	?	undetermined	3 sheep	6 fragments of ivory panels
Open Space KS	phase 1	06/12	24–30	female	3 sheep, 1 equid, 1 pig, 1 bird	1 pottery table, 768 beads, gold earring, seal, ivory
North of House 4, FZ	phase 3	03/19	50–70	female (?)	?	—
North of House 4, JS	phase 3	06/15	>50	male	1 sheep, 1 gazelle	1 bronze fibula, 1 tripod bowl
House 3, Room GG	phase 3	87/70	8–9	male	?	1 glazed vessel
House 3, Room GG	phase 2	87/71	25–40	female	?	—
House 3, Room GG	phase 2	06/06	5–7	undetermined	2 sheep, 1 cattle, 1 pig	18 bronze earrings

Table 1: Content of the cremation pits.

3.3 Parallels

Although I tried to find parallels to the Dūr-Katlimmu cremation pits in neighbouring regions like Iran, Urartu⁴⁷ and Anatolia dating to the first half of the first millennium BC, I was only successful in a few, isolated cases. In the Assyrian heartland east of Tell Sheikh Hamad at the Tigris-river, where the Neo-Assyrian capitals have been excavated, cremation pits are not (yet) attested. One can, however, argue that the fact that cremation pits have not been identified in the old excavation activities does not necessarily mean that they did not exist. It could be the case that they were just not detected because at these excavation campaigns anthropologists did not participate and also modern excavation techniques were not known at these times.⁴⁸

In western Syria, the burial type 'secondary cremation in an urn' interred at extramural cemeteries is widely attested in sites like Yunus Tepe at Karkemish,⁴⁹ Deve Hüyük I,⁵⁰ and Hama.⁵¹ A characteristic feature for this particular cremation procedure, developed in a Syro-Hittite milieu under the domination of Aramaeans and Assyrians,⁵² is the choice of a specific area outside the city, a necropolis. However, the burial custom of western Syria using urns differs typologically from the 'primary cremation pit'-type of Tell Sheikh Hamad as well as in the choice of the burial space.⁵³

At the cemetery at Tell Atlit at the Philistine coast, 17 'in situ'-cremation burials have been excavated and, in addition, one cremation burial in an urn.⁵⁴ These graves are dated to the seventh century BC. In Atlit, the burnt bodies had been covered with sand and arranged in a burial ground situated outside the settlement. Thus, these graves may show some parallels to the cremation procedure suggested by our finds. However, the location is totally different from Tell Sheikh Hamad. It seems that in Atlit an extended graveyard existed. Therefore, these forms of burial do not fit to what has been found in Dūr-Katlimmu. A pit containing cremated human bones has also been excavated at Tell Arqa.⁵⁵ But this pit

did not show the coloured earth caused by the heat. Thus, one can conclude that the bones were cremated at another place and filled into the pit later. Therefore, this burial type also differs markedly from the Sheikh Hamad-type.

Up to now only in Ziyaret Tepe five features seem to be comparable to the cremation pits in Tell Sheikh Hamad. Ziyaret Tepe is located in south-eastern Turkey at the Tigris River. Three of the features⁵⁶ comparable to the primary cremation pits of Tell Sheikh Hamad were excavated in Area A in the years 2000 and 2001.⁵⁷ These features are located under a floor of the courtyard of a huge Neo-Assyrian building which is supposed to be the Neo-Assyrian palace of Tushan ('Bronze-Palace'). The floor was paved with burnt bricks. The three features were initially interpreted as pyrotechnical installations such as kilns for metal production. The outlines of the features look like the cremation pits of Dūr-Katlimmu. The preliminary interpretation shows that the identification of such features as graves is difficult because the preservation of the human bones is in a bad condition due to the fire. Recent fieldwork in Ziyaret Tepe Area A/N conducted in 2007 and 2008⁵⁸ as well as 2009 and 2010⁵⁹ brought to light two additional features⁶⁰ which point to similarities with the cremation pits of the Dūr-Katlimmu-type. The graves contained, as one feature, a mixture of large quantities of bronze artefacts and various elite items like ivories.⁶¹ They also contained, as a second feature, both human and animal bones in the same pit. This may perhaps lead to the reasonable assumption that the pits in Ziyaret Tepe can be compared to the cremation pits of the Dūr-Katlimmu-type.

4 Conclusions

How can we interpret the burial ritual which we have identified in Tell Sheikh Hamad and, afterwards, at other places? Inhumation burials below the floors inside the houses in Ashur can be described as being exemplary for Assyria. For the few cremated individuals Hauser offers three possible interpretations:⁶² (1) witches, (2) Assyrians with a very specific position or fate, (3) foreigners. Hauser apparently prefers the third interpretation. In contrast, in the West urn graveyards outside the settlements are believed to represent the ordinary form of a burial ritual. Tenu tries to associate this with the cultural unity with the Aramaeans.

47 Herles 2011.

48 Hauser considers an assignation of Ashur Grave 7900 to the 'primary cremation pit'-type, cf. Hauser 2012: 254–255.

49 Woolley 1939/1940: 11–37.

50 Moorey 1980.

51 Riis 1948.

52 Tenu 2009: 83.

53 More exceptional are the cremation graves at Tell Halaf. Two seated stone statues encased in a mud brick construction on the citadel overlay shaft graves containing cremations in urns (Langenegger 1950: 159–163, 366). The new excavations in Tell Halaf brought to light two tombs in the north-western part of the citadel each containing an inhumation burial (Martin – Novák 2010: 12).

54 Johns 1936/1937: 121–152.

55 Thalmann 1978: 73–77.

56 Features A-242, A-252, A-805.

57 Matney *et al.* 2002: 53–56; Matney – Rainville 2005: 44.

58 Wicke 2009a; 2009b.

59 Wicke 2011.

60 Features N-070, N-212.

61 Wicke 2008.

62 Hauser 2012: 253–254.

In a study dealing with the primary cremation pit-graves of Ziyaret Tepe, Wicke⁶³ interprets these graves as result of the fact, that Assyrian and local cultural groups may have met and mixed up at the upper part of the Tigris.⁶⁴ Following this idea, the cremation pit-graves found in Tell Sheikh Hamad could be taken as the result of cultural exchange between Assyrians and Aramaeans. It can be assumed that at this place an intensive exchange of the two cultures took place concerning writing systems, visual art, and architecture. This initiated an independent and genuine cultural development.⁶⁵ In this vein, the graves detected in Tell Sheikh Hamad could be seen as the result of an innovation in the area of burial rituals, generated by the commingling of Aramaeans and Assyrians. However, in my view, the number of graves is far too small in comparison to the expected number of inhabitants during the entire period of about 300 years, when the buildings in the excavation area 'Neo-Assyrian residences' were in use. The argument that the archaeological record represents only a sample is not conclusive in this specific case, as the houses 1, 3, and 4 were completely excavated to the ground plan and the features below the floors have also been analysed down to the bedrock. Accordingly, we do have only a rather incomplete picture of the burial rituals. Where and how was the large majority of the inhabitants buried? If we do not deal with the majority of the inhabitants, the burials found are not the norm, they are exceptions!

The Neo-Assyrian residences are characterized by the juxtaposition of dissimilar types of burial rituals. In House 1 we found inhumation burials, a secondary cremation in an urn, and primary cremation pits. In House 3 we even found cremation pits and an inhumation burial together in one room. If one assumes that these houses were inhabited by family clans, it appears rather problematic to explain the differences of burial rituals by the affiliation to dissimilar cultural groups.⁶⁶ We have to find out for what reasons the inhabitants of Dūr-Katlimmu accepted strong stench and possible damages of their buildings only to cremate certain dead in the middle of the town, directly adjacent to the buildings, in the inner courtyards or even inside rooms. The choice of the place where cremations and even burials took place obviously should not only stimulate emotions and actions immediately during the cremation procedure, but also later, as marks of the graves in yard Z and room GG guaranteed their visibility during further use of the buildings.

There must have been serious reasons – perhaps reasons difficult to comprehend for us as members of a modern, Western society – why the bodies of very few individuals were buried at selected places inside the town area with this highly performative cremation ritual, whereas other deceased – obviously the majority of the inhabitants – were buried with a different body treatment and at places which so far could not yet be identified. Unfortunately, ancient oriental text sources so far do not reveal information which could shed some light on the motives leading to these cremation rituals.⁶⁷

From my point of view these motives for the selection of those individuals and the choice of the burial space should be sought – following the aspects of Robb, that the differences are not caused by random simultaneity but rather by a coherent general burial programme structured by the specific meaning patterns of the single rituals – in specific biographical events of the deceased. Moreover, the performative character of the ritual and the permanent visibility of the graves point to an intended long lasting effect for the community of the living.

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63 Wicke 2013.

64 See also Forza 2013.

65 Kühne 2009.

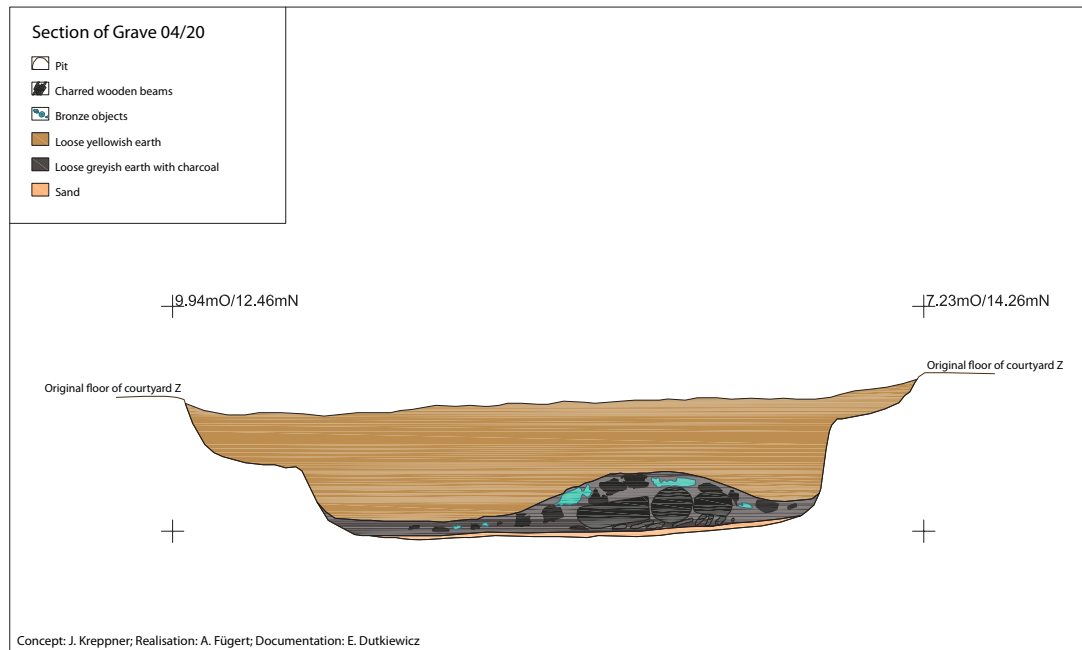
66 Cf. Bienkowski 1982; Seeher 1993; Novák 2003; Sauvage 2005.

67 Lundström 2013: 123–124, Groneberg 1990; Mofidi-Nasrabadi 1999.

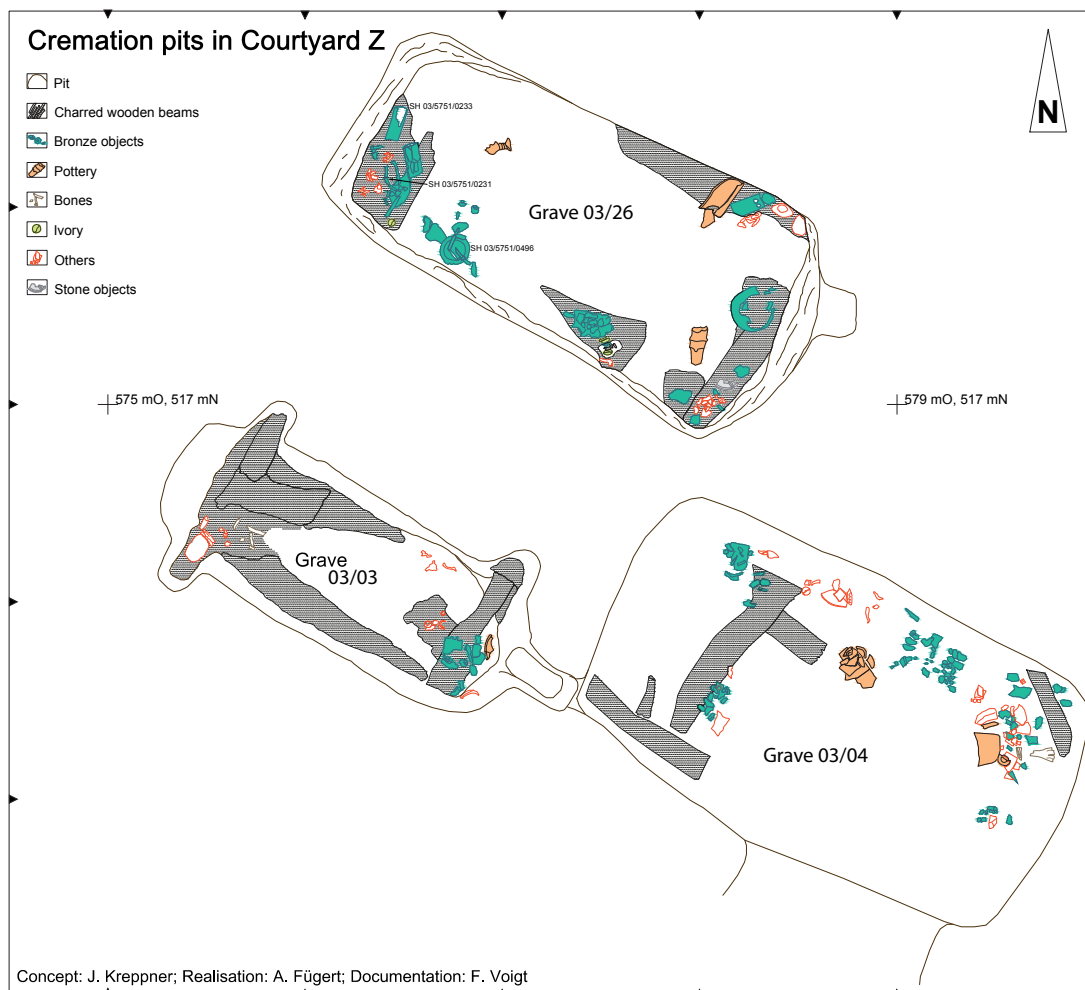
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a: Tell Sheikh Hamad, section of grave 04/20.



b: Tell Sheikh Hamad, plan showing graves 03/03, 03/04 and 03/26.