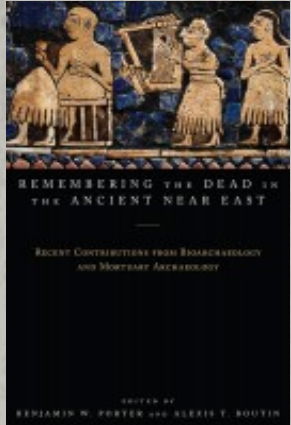


Re-evaluating the State of Mortuary Studies in the Near East

Review by [Michael Brass](#)



Remembering the Dead: Recent Contributions from Epigraphy and Mortuary Archaeology
by [Benjamin Porter & Alexis Boutin \(eds\)](#)
Published 2014
University Press of Colorado

As stated in the introduction, there is a dearth of holistic and “comprehensive treatments of mortuary culture in the Near East, which includes Egypt and Nubia. The point is made that usually only one or occasionally two datasets are used, either the graves and/or skeletal remains. There is a move underway in the Sudan to buck this trend and to include more datasets (see, for example, 2015, Brass and Schwenniger 2013; Dann 2009; Salvatori 2012; Salvatori and Usai 2008; Usai et al. 2008; Usai et al. 2015). Outside of the Near East (see, for example, Rakita et al. 2005, McHugh 1999, Sullivan and Mainfort 2005), the Society for American Archaeology conference from which these publications arose.

The book is organised into seven chapters. Each chapter is co-authored by different scholars and each chapter, by the editors, is an introduction to how mortuary archaeology is conducted more thematically. The chapters are grave goods, tomb construction, architecture, ceramics and chronology treated together. While using specialists, holistic attempts to integrate and cross-correlate the disparate data remain in the minority. The chapters cover: dental and skeletal data; visual and, where appropriate, written sources; and the inscription of elites. Four of the remaining 6 chapters concern the third and second millennia BC which suggests possible solutions to the challenge.

Chapter 2 looks at Domuztepe in south-eastern Turkey. It dates from the first half to the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. The Death Pit, a Red Terrace and a ditch in the Red Terrace with burials which the piece focuses upon. Burials were rebuilt in relatively short bursts, which is in contrast to the three discussed features containing burials. The site was renewed and expanded; a shaft was dug down to the water table towards the end of the life of the Red Terrace. In the burial contexts, dogs and humans received similar treatment, while artefacts were also deliberately buried. In association with fragments such as teeth. Food was also buried: in the Death Pit, animal food remained in association with human bones. The author suggests that food associated with feasting was given special attention and connected between eating, dying and memory. They also suggest that there are traces of artefacts being accessed. Burial has been a means to connect past and present, and that it could have been a mechanism whereby anything buried was remembered. The authors point out that burial is not simply a disposal of individuals but rather part of a culturally constructed meaning is gained and ascribed in multiple contexts, including the use of actions and artefacts.

Chapter 3 looks at how Akkadian identity was constructed at Kish (Iraq) during the late 3rd millennium BC. The palace, which was destroyed and replaced by buildings which were the scene of multiple activities, including building activity are ascribed to the ruler Sargon, who defeated the previous (Sumerian) ruler. The authors look at the nature of the burial assemblages, and combined it with the results of their biodistance analysis. They look at the buried individuals in determining the degree of biological affinity of those interned within “A” cemetery and use that biodistance studies to calculate “the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between a priori groups (here defined by the frequency of expression of the various nonmetric traits observed in each group) is uncommon in Mesopotamia. The effects of biological diversity at a local rather than regional level. The results showed that the males in the population history or descent), while its females and males and females from elsewhere were similar. The results were similar. The authors interpret the data as showing that some Akkadian males settled in the city at

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genetic stock but not necessarily with undue distinct cultural traditions. Alternatively, the authors also p
not strong enough to warrant being represented in death by non-perishable artefacts, although there n
rites. The decision to have (semi-)homogenized mortuary treatments may thus have been a coping me

Chapter 4 moves to Bahrain, in particular to the Bronze and Iron Age polity of Dilmun. The authors re-
Peter B. Cornwall, especially the skeleton of a disabled young woman who lived circa 2050-1800 BC.
individuals managed their conditions in life and to juxtapose them in death in order to see how their res
chapter is a bioarchaeology of livelihood or personhood where physical attributes are embodied social
The Western assumption that disability may have been less tolerated in general in the distant past is n
unusually rich array of goods compared with her contemporaries but it may not have been on account
unrelated to her physical condition.

Chapter 5 looks at biological group identity during the Early Bronze Age (EBA I-IV) at Bab edh-Dhra’, c
patterns and incorporate the results of dental morphology with the wider social archaeology denoting r
latter period, the occupation became more permanent. A large wall was constructed, orchads were exp
constructed above ground outside of the settlement. Previously, the dead were buried in shaft tombs. I
former likely held extended kin. The numbers of interned individuals are argued to be more accurately
(MLNI) rather than the older “minimum number of individuals” (MNI) technique through better addressi
the study “looked at changes in [social and biological structuring forces] as a means of determining wh
remembered” (p. 176).

Chapter 6 moves into Africa, notably into Nubia. Specifically, Tombos which was founded circa 1400 B
entangled identity emerge which incorporated both Egyptian and Nubian mortuary ideals. These ideals
commemorations that emphasised different cultural memories reinterpreted in the present. The author
experiences versus longer-term interpreted cultural memories. Furthermore, the authors state (page 1

a consideration of inscribed versus incorporated memorialization can help distinguish between con
the archaeological record. We suggest that like the distinction between inscribed and incorporated
memory at Tombos do not represent contrasting forms. Instead they indicate intersecting social fiel
reflecting choices conditioned by individual predispositions as well as larger social and political con

δ18O data supported the proposition of intermarriage between locals and colonists, while the bioarcha
trauma wounds, particularly to the cranio-facial area. The presence and reuse of pyramids, after they l
how cultural symbols were used in long-term cultural memory to the advantage of local political elites.

Chapter 7, the last, looks at the newly discovered South Tomb Cemetery at Tell el-Armana, which the i
was a portion of the cemetery for more elite elements of the population, the nature of the grave goods,
wider social archaeological knowledge of the town Armana itself show how the diverse population was
home regions over the course of two decades. The authors conclude that the living robbed the cemete
robbery per se but rather as commemoration through the removal of objects or parts of individuals to r

Overall, the editors achieve their stated aim with the articles. More Near Eastern archaeologists shoul
enough to have separate chapters on mortuary and settlement patterns, grave structures, grave goods
extensive cross-referencing and integration in order to answer specific questions to determine how the
their social interactions were with the living.

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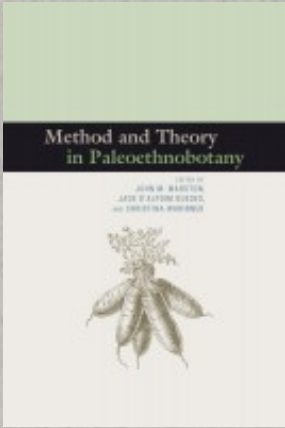


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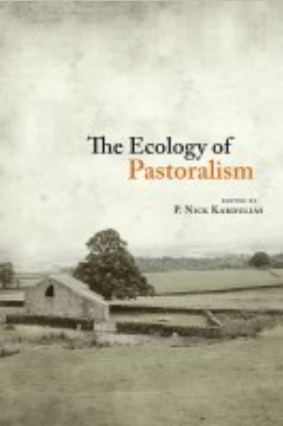
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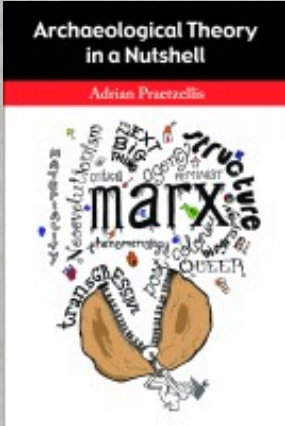
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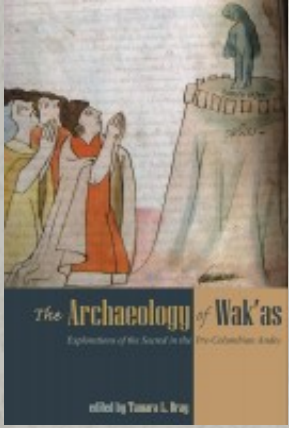
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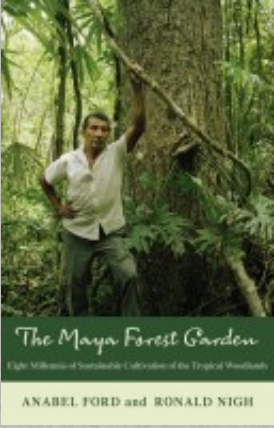
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