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DESERT FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE AND AFTERLIFE BELIEFS IN THE ARID SOUTHERN LEVANT FROM A *LONGUE DURÉE* PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
Use and intermittent visits to funerary and afterlife-related cultic structures played a significant role in the afterlife-world of the nomadic, semi-pastoral population that lived in the southern Levantine and Syro-Arabian arid margins for several millennia. This paper intends to analyze the archaeological evidences of mortuary structures and afterlife-related cultic architecture in the Negev and southern Jordan from the Neolithic to the Early Islamic Period. The study will actively adopt a *longue durée* and trans-regional perspective by exploring several case studies in the long tradition of desert funerary landscapes.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of desert mortuary and cultic architecture in the arid southern Levant was part of the long tradition of extra-mural structures present in the Syro-Arabian arid lands harking back to the Neolithic and extending at least to the Early Islamic period. The most important feature was the preponderance of open-air spaces with few if any roofed spaces, appropriate to the clear skies of the desert and adapted to the mobile nature of the nomadic peoples and trade caravans. There was a consistent conservatism and longevity of the desert architecture, although as we will see, the material culture was not static and changed over time mostly owing to external influences.

The topic is vast, so I would like to concentrate on some individual issues, particularly what archaeology can tell us about the funerary landscape of the desert people of the Negev desert and southern Jordan in terms of mortuary architecture and mobiliary, spatial location, re-use of ancient funerary monuments and shrines, offerings to the dead, and the afterlife world. It is obvious that modern boundaries meant nothing in ancient times and similar funerary landscapes can be seen in neighbouring regions such as the Sinai Peninsula, the southern Badia and the northern Hejaz. For this reason observations on relevant material remains in these regions will be made when neccesary, highlithing similarities and differences in their socio-historical backgrounds.

DESERT FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE

In general, variability characterized the desert funerary architecture in the arid southern Levant. For analytical purposes, in this article I classify the funerary-related material remains into four categories: pit and cist burials, cairn/tumulus burials, cave or stone-cut burials, and standing stones. These categories are not impermeable and consider the funerary sites purposively as ritual spaces. Funerary locations are by definition inviolable and deliberately present a sacred character, including cultic mobiliary.

PIT AND CIST BURIALS

This was the most widespread burial type, first attested in southern Jordan in the early/middle Neolithic (intra-mural burials) (Makarewicz and Finlayson, 2018) and in the Negev since the late Neolithic/Chalcolithic periods (Eshed and Avner, 2018). Depending on the terrain conditions, burials could be dug into the ground and built into circular or rectangular cists. They were normally lined with stones and covered with boulders. In some cases, stone piles were placed upon the burial chamber, forming a cairn or tumulus burial, which constituted another burial type with likely different social connotations and afterlife rituals.

CAIRNS/TUMULI

Cairn or tumulus burials are basically piles of stones built in layers, covering burial cists or niches. Their preferred location is outside settlements, preferably standing on hilltops over viewing ancient roads. They can form large tumulus fields with dozens or hundreds of tumuli. Cairns/tumuli can also be located within or around habitation sites, sometimes abutting or sitting astride walls; settlements and tumuli were not always contemporary, making dating them difficult. During some periods, stone platforms were associated with tumuli, closely located but not necessarily in their immediate vicinity (Haiman, 1992, pp. 38-41; 1996, pp. 7-10; Abu-Azizeh *et al.*, 2014, pp. 170-176).

An important problem for the identification of cairns/tumuli is that they can also stand on their own, without burials below or with the cist empty of human remains or grave goods, and there is no clear geographical or chronological pattern within which one should expect one or the other, making interpretation hard for archaeologists. However, since burials were normally associated with funerary ritual practices, most tumuli can be considered as marking ritual installations or commemorating visitations. Although in the Negev and southern Jordan tumuli started being erected in the late Neolithic/early Chalcolithic periods (Abu-Azizeh *et al.*, 2014; Eshed and Avner, 2018) and became very popular in the Early Bronze and Intermediate Bronze Ages, there is evidence of their use and re-visiting millennia later, during the Iron Age and the Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Haiman, 1992).

CAVE BURIALS

Intra-mural and extra-mural burials in caves, both natural and man-made, were restricted by geology to certain areas and were popular in certain periods – particularly in the loess soil of the northern Negev during the Chalcolithic (Rowan and Ilan, 2013) and the sandstones of the Petra area in southern Jordan during the Nabataean period (Perry, 2002). The Negev, with minor or inaccessible karstic formations, showed relatively few cave or carved tombs (Rowan and Ilan, 2013, p. 102).

STANDING STONES

Standing stones were, by all standards, the most important component of the mortuary and cultic assemblage of the desert peoples. Their use, which extended back to the eleventh millennium BCE, was very popular in the Syro-Arabian desert regions, especially between the sixth and third millennia BCE (Avner, 1984; 2002; 2018). The number of standing stones in these areas is larger than those found in the rest of the Near East, enjoying a higher status in the desert ritual practices. Desert standing stones were usually crude and left unhewn, contrasting with the well-

known practice of dressing standing stones in the Levant and Mesopotamia (Tebes, 2016).

Owing to the lack of local written sources for most of history (at least until the Nabataean period), it is difficult to get to get a sense of their meaning. Their interpretation is usually based on their location, associated architecture and parallels from the Levant, Syria and Mesopotamia. Judging from these data, standing stones could represent deities or ancestors in cultic or mortuary sites, but they were also used for marking of tombs, commemoration of events and peoples, witnessing of treaties, and demarcation of borders.

DATABASE: SURVEYS AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE NEGEV AND SOUTHERN JORDAN

Decades of surveys and excavations in the Negev and southern Jordan have revealed, and are still revealing, thousands of sites, most of them semi-nomadic campsites. There is a great variability in the number of sites recorded in each archaeological period, reflecting different socio-economic systems, settlement patterns, and material cultures.

As part of a larger research project, I am building a database with associated map listing all mortuary and cultic sites in the Negev and southern Jordan dating from the Neolithic to the Early Islamic period (for a similar database, but with a far larger geographical coverage, see Bradbury *et al.*, 2015). For data collecting, I am using all the published literature of archaeological surveys and excavations done in this area, hoping in the future to include the Sinai, south-eastern Jordan and north-western Arabia. In the database I include the most important data, including site names, geographical coordinates, main features, periods of occupation and use, and bibliography. The majority of these sites are small with little occupation debris, and therefore surface artifacts such as pottery are usually representative of the occupation history of a site.

So far I have found more than 4000 mortuary and cultic sites, but this number is very conservative because surveys are still going on in this area and large tracts of land are as yet unexplored. Data from unpublished surveys has yet to be included, such as that from the important areas of ‘Uvda Valley and Nahal ‘Amram in the southern Negev.

A preliminary review of the database and associated map present several patterns. The most recurrent types are the cairns/tumuli, and secondly general or un-classified burials, most of which comprise pit and cist burials. Cave and stone-cut burials only amount to a very few sites. In many cases mortuary sites overlap with shrines, sanctuaries and temples of diverse kinds, including churches and mosques, while standing stones are ubiquitous in the area (Fig. 1).

Taking into account that this is a preliminary review, and that overlapping exists between the different type-sites, some trends in the geographical distribution of the site types can be distinguished. Cairns/tumuli and standing stones are ubiquitous in the Negev and southern Arabah, probably because of the importance of nomadic pastoralism in these areas. In southern Jordan, pit and cist burials are more important, a distribution due to the preponderance of a more sedentary agricultural economy throughout the different periods, the abundance of sandstones ready for carving in the Petra area, and historical-cultural patterns (the last two factors especially operating in the Nabataean period).

It is time now to begin the analysis of each period and the main features in the mortuary architecture and associated ritual practices as they can be seen through the main study cases.

EARLY/MIDDLE NEOLITHIC PERIOD

The earliest evidence in the arid southern Levant for mortuary and cultic remains can be dated to the early/middle Neolithic, the millennia-long period that represented the transition from hunting and gathering to food production and the appearance of the first settled villages. However, the emergence of such funerary and cultic practices was not geographically homogeneous nor was it completely analogous to what was going on in the rest of the southern Levant. During the several millennia that encompassed these early periods, mortuary and afterlife-related material remains were placed within settlements, with no evidence yet of extra-mural burials.

During the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA), around the tenth millennium BCE, there is already evidence of the practice of intra-mural burials in the small villages established in the southern Levant, with the interring of individuals under house floors or in outdoor spaces within accumulating debris (Rollefson, 2008; Makarewicz and Finlayson, 2018). In the southern arid regions the earliest evidence comes from the areas around Petra, Wadi Hasa and Wadi Faynan in southern Jordan, which probably enjoyed a better environment during the early/middle Neolithic and "cannot be considered part of the desert periphery in this period" (Rosen, 2017, p. 109). Sites in these areas can be considered southern extensions of the early/middle Neolithic cultures in vogue in the rest of the southern Levant, although presenting regional characteristics.

In the site of Wadi Faynan 16, located in the lowlands of the Faynan district, more than 40 burials of adults, juveniles and infants in tightly flexed position were excavated within sub-circular semi-subterranean buildings (Mithen *et al.*, 2016). Some of the body parts, such as the skull and the upper torso, were deliberately removed, while there is evidence that some skulls and other bones were "decorated" with some paste or paint. In some instances the skulls were visibly displayed either at the floor level, suspended from the roofs or the walls, or totally hidden inside the walls of the structures. The burial of individuals within domestic structures suggests that the deceased were completely integrated into the life of the community, and probably formed part of the rituals for the establishment and re-generation of each household.

In the succeeding Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB), dated between the ninth and eighth millennia BCE, burials of entire individuals were placed within unusually large circular structures interpreted as "communal buildings" or "mortuary houses". This is the case with the burials found in two sites located in the mountainous region north of Petra: Beidha (building 41), where burials were placed on the floor, and Shkarat Msaied (building F), where over 67 burials built of flat sandstone slabs were placed below the floor (Makarewicz and Finlayson, 2018; Kinzel, 2018; 2019). The elaborate mortuary practices such as the burial of individuals, skull removal (at Shkarat Msaied), skull and bone decoration and plastering (the latter, present in Ayn Ghazal in central Jordan but not in southern Jordan) have been understood as evidence for the cult of ancestors, connecting the living to the dead within the household, and in turn binding households together through the active participation in the post-mortem rituals and ceremonies.

From the PPNB we have what can be interpreted as the earliest material remains pointing to religious practices, although the interpretation of the evidence is hotly debated (Rollefson, 2005). Kirkbride's early excavations at Beidha uncovered three semi-subterranean curvilinear structures close to the Middle PPNB village, with features very different from the domestic buildings – including clean surfaces and a vertical sandstone slab, which she interpreted as a "sanctuary" (Kirkbride, 1968). Similar stone slabs were found standing on end in the walls and at the entrances of houses at Shkarat Msaied, including one with graphic incisions found in building F (Kinzel, 2019). Although it is tempting to see in these slabs a ritual significance and the antecedents of the later standing stones, precaution should be taken because they also were used in domestic contexts.

Changes in mortuary practices during the Late PPNB (second half of eighth millennium BCE) coincided with changes in the social structures of villages. The construction of semi-circular structures, and particularly large communal buildings, ceased in southern Jordan and was replaced by the use of multi-familiar rectilinear compartments in densely packed agglutinative villages, likely reflecting the consolidation of larger consumption units. This is best exemplified in the site of Basta, south-east of Petra, where single and collective burials were found below floors, in sub-structure channels and intrusive in walls, with some skulls missing from burial. Analyses of teeth and skulls demonstrated a local origin of the individuals, with features consistent with the practice of endogamy (Gebel, Nissen and Zaydoon, 2006, p. 215; Alt *et al.*, 2013). Although the intra-mural household-related burials continued, collective burials containing all age classes became much more common, such as those excavated in Ba'ja in the Petra region (Gebel *et al.*, 2016).

LATE NEOLITHIC/CHALCOLITIC PERIODS

The adoption of goats and sheep into the subsistence systems of the southern Levantine desert societies can be dated to the late Neolithic, around the early-mid seventh millennium BCE (Rosen, 2017, pp. 110-130). At about the same time we witness the emergence of the earliest mortuary and cultic sites in the Negev. There is some debate whether this predates (Avner, 2018) or postdates (Rosen, 2017, pp. 103, 107, 143-147; Saidel, 2017, p. 134) the appearance of such sites in the southern Levant, where they appear in the Pre- Pottery Neolithic A and B (see above).

The earliest funerary sites in the Negev are located in the Eilat burial ground in the southern Negev, radiocarbon dated from the mid-sixth to the mid-fourth millennia BCE. Surveys and excavations have found 11 simple graves, 20 tumuli tombs, two open-air sanctuaries and additional cult installations (Eshed and Avner, 2018) (Figs. 2; 3). The presence of animal bones in the tombs and of hearths in the close vicinity (Avner and Horwitz, 2017, pp. 38-39) suggests that ritual meals took place alongside the presentation of offerings to the dead.

According to Avner (2018, pp. 41-47), the Eilat burials are the first in many aspects: one of the earliest cemeteries in the Near East to be a totally extra-mural independent institution; the first to show heavy investment in tomb construction, which are built above ground, on hilltops, thereby declaring ancestral territory; the first necropolis to integrate standing stones in tombs; and the first with numerous hearths around the tombs, remains of sacred meals shared by the living and their ancestors.

Interpretation of the Eilat burials' plan and architectural elements – and in fact, of most pre-Iron Age funerary landscapes – is difficult due to the lack of contemporary written sources and because cultic literature appeared only millennia later. In this respect, Avner (2018, pp. 45-46) has seen in the Eilat burials two different but related symbolisms: female fertility and belief in the netherworld. Female fertility is present in features such as a hill-shaped tumulus tomb; tomb doorways and standing stones on their perimeter facing the east (the direction of the rising sun, radiating life and fertility), and standing stones representing goddesses. A belief in the afterworld can be seen in the presence of broad standing stones facing the west, the orientation of the netherworld. However, Rosen (2017, p. 203 n. 5) is more cautious and considers that the Mesopotamian mythology cannot be easily attached to the prehistoric beliefs of the desert.

Probably contemporary (mid-sixth to late fifth millennia BCE) is the recently-excavated tumuli field in Al-Thulaythuwat/Jabal Kabd, in the south-eastern Badia of Jordan (Abu-Azizeh *et al.*, 2014). Here, below the cairns were peripheral stone rings marking the tombs, generally oriented north-south and with the deceased's head to the south. Some of the tombs contained

significant amounts of animal bones, evidence of mortuary offerings to the dead. Associated rectangular and trapezoidal stone platforms with standing stones were located near the burials. These structures could have been used as locations for mortuary feasts or banquets at the time of the interment, as ceremonial places of gathering and contemplation, or used for temporary deposition of the bodies during the defleshing of the skeleton.

A possible parallel to these platforms in association with tumuli, although in a greater scale, can be found in the shrine complex of Ramat Saharonim in the central Negev, radiocarbon dated to *ca.* 5000 BCE. Here, archaeologists found four rectangular shrines and 30 large round burial tumuli (Rosen *et al.*, 2007; Porat *et al.*, 2006). Three of the cairns were excavated, including one reused in the Nabataean period. The cairns were occasionally re-accessed, with evidences of primary and secondary interments and deliberate reorganization and manipulation of bones.

The excavators interpreted the shrines' massive walls facing the west as a probable alignment with the summer solstice setting sun, an element they attributed to mortuary cults. The same orientation has also been attributed to three elongated open-air shrines excavated in Nahal Tsafit in the north-eastern Negev, whose long axis was aligned approximately north-east to south-west (Knabb *et al.*, 2018, p. 51). Owing to the lack of local contemporary written sources, this orientation was considered a symbolism connected with later Near Eastern mythologies, such as the dying Tammuz or Osiris (Rosen and Yaniv, 2003; Rosen *et al.*, 2007). This interpretation is not without criticism, however. According to Avner (2018, p. 36 n. 13), the orientation of the Saharonim open sanctuaries should be determined as perpendicular to their long axis, i.e., towards the winter sunrise, thus expressing a symbolism related to life and fertility.

But what social realities were expressed in the rise of desert cults in the Negev? Rosen (2015) has pointed out that the new cults represented significant social changes occurring in the local groups. The construction of large structures communicated power and hierarchy and therefore suggests the presence of corporate structures of larger scale than the nuclear family or band; that is to say, a tribal society. The linkage between mortuary behavior and megaliths would indicate the presence of corporate territorial signing and territorial anchors. More particularly, monumental burials connect ancestors with burial grounds: since tumuli can be seen from greater distances, they acted as territorial indicators.

Similar burial practices are noted in the *nawamis* burials in southern and central Sinai, dated somewhat later, in the late fifth-fourth millennia BCE. *Nawamis* are double-walled cylindrical, corbel-vaulted tombs made of undressed stones and housing multiple burials. Contrary to the Negev tumuli, access to the interior was directly through the doorway into the burial chamber (Bar-Yosef *et al.*, 1977; 1986). The westward orientation of the *nawamis* entrances has been related to a belief that the deceased were going to the land of the setting sun, akin to the plans and architectural details of the Egyptian tombs (Bar-Yosef *et al.*, 1983; cf. also Hershkovitz *et al.*, 1985).

Recent fieldwork in the northern Hejaz in north-western Arabia has discovered similar ritual and mortuary structures (Fujii, 2016). Probably the earliest constructions (Chalcolithic period to the Early Bronze Age) are the large, round or oval open-air sanctuaries, consisting of a circular sandstone wall and generally incorporating a rectangular room roofed in its eastern corner. The entrance is always oriented to the east, which according to the excavators suggests the worship of the sun. Two other types are tentatively dated to the Early Bronze Age: cylindrical tower tombs with a corbelled roof; and elongated platforms with a major axis running roughly north-south, with a rectangular niche in their middle part. This burial and ritual practices show that north-western Arabia formed part of a larger cultural area together with the Negev, Sinai and southern Jordan.

A completely different tradition of mortuary landscapes emerged in the northern Negev, an area whose burial practices generally followed those predominant in the settled areas to the north. The key site is Shiqmim (*ca.* 4700-3500 BCE), where a large extra-mural Chalcolithic cemetery with approximately 100 mortuary structures was excavated on a ridge above the settlement. The cemetery contained rock-hewn cists and aboveground, circular stone structures containing secondary remains, elongated tumuli and standing stones. Since the cists did not contain human remains, they probably served as defleshing pits for later reburial (Levy, 1987; Levy *et al.*, 1991; 1994).

The loess sediments characteristic of the northern Negev wadi terraces also allowed the possibility of using or carving caves for burials, such as those found in the underground complexes of Abu Matar and Bir es-Safadi and in the subterranean chambers of Shiqmim (Rowan and Golden, 2009, pp. 31-33; Rowan and Ilan, 2013, pp. 100-101). The exceptions are two burial caves, Qina and Ashalim, recently excavated in the northern Negev Highlands, considered to be the product of the decision of people living north in the Beersheba Valley to "banish" their dead to remote desert caves, probably because they were considered "unfit" for burial among their ancestors for unknown reasons (Davidovich *et al.*, 2018). The popularity of the subterranean burials has been interpreted as an afterlife belief in which the cave acted as a symbolic womb and locus of contact with the chthonic forces of death, where the dead would be reborn (Rowan and Ilan, 2013, p. 103).

A unique Chalcolithic underground burial site, much smaller in scale, was excavated in Kissufim (Goren and Fabian, 2002). A rectangular, below-ground burial structure was found, made of mudbrick walls with niches, containing clay ossuaries, grave offerings and skeletal remains in ossuaries. Adjacent to the structure were pit funerary chambers and standing stones.

EARLY BRONZE-INTERMEDIATE BRONZE AGE

The conventional theory for the Bronze Age in the Negev described two waves of settlement, the first one in the Early Bronze II and the second one in the Intermediate Bronze Age – also known as Early Bronze IV and Middle Bronze I. However, old and new radiocarbon dates indicate a long period of activity in the south throughout the Early Bronze and the first half of the Intermediate Bronze Age (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2018). Activity in the Negev Highlands was probably related to the copper industry around the Wadi Faynan mines and to the transportation of copper to the settled lands through the gateway site of Tel ʻArad.

It is within this context that the contemporary burst of settlement in the central Negev Highlands should be understood, where dozens of elliptic-shaped sites have been excavated. Contrasting with the preponderance of rock-cut tombs in Early Bronze Canaan (Ilan, 2002), tumulus burials dominated the mortuary landscape of the Negev (Figs. 4; 5). Haiman (1992) noted that the tumuli in the Early Bronze-Intermediate Bronze Negev can be separated into two groups, according to their location and different function: tumuli within habitation sites and tumuli in cairn fields.

Tumuli located within or around dwellings can be found standing on their own, but sometimes abutted or sat astride structural walls; they frequently contained human remains. Tumuli of this kind were, for example, excavated in Har Saggi II near an habitation site, where abutting circular cairns containing parts of skeletons are built of rings of large stones, which in turn retain a fill of unhewn stones that comprise the core of each cairn (Saidel and Haiman, 2014, p. 46).

Tumulus fields, generally situated on top of ridges, were devoid of material remains and thus were probably not used exclusively for burials, but as the location of some sort of mortuary cult,

phenomenon also recorded in the Chalcolithic tumulus burials at Shiqmim and Mezad Aluf. In some cases, stone platforms were located in their vicinity. A typical tumulus field is located at Nahal Mitnan, containing eleven cairn clusters with 250 tumuli. Their perimeter was demarcated by a ring of large standing stones; the burial cist in the center of the cairn was framed by undressed fieldstones, filling the space between the cist and the stone ring. Access to the burial chamber in the center of a tumulus was indirect, as one would have had to climb on top of the cairn, walk across a loose stone fill, remove the cap stones, and descend into the burial chamber (Saidel and Haiman, 2014, pp. 19-25; Saidel, 2017).

There is some debate on the dating of these tumuli remains. Haiman (1992, p. 37) assigned most of the tumuli recorded in the Negev Highlands to the Early Bronze II-Middle Bronze I (Intermediate Bronze), based on their proximity to, or directly abutting, habitation sites of the same period. However, this interpretation has been rejected by Saidel (2014, pp. 182-183) on the grounds that there are no stratigraphic connections between tumulus fields and Early Bronze II habitation sites and that we should not assume a correlation between distance and chronology.

Furthermore, if tumuli and habitation sites were contemporary, "it would create an irreconcilable clash between the sacred and the profane". Therefore Saidel (2017), based on the similarity in layout with the tumulus fields of Ramat Saharonim and Al-Thulaythuwat/Jabal Kabd, argued that the Early Bronze Age architecture and material culture are intrusive and unrelated to the original construction and function, therefore re-dating the tumuli to the late Neolithic/Chalcolithic periods.

There are more excavated tumuli in the central Negev dated to the Intermediate Bronze Age. One of the best preserved are the ones from Be'er Resisim, a one-period site that ended in abandonment rather than destruction, so remains are very well conserved (Dever, 2014). More than 20 cairns were surveyed in the surrounding region, most of which are rectangular or square chamber structures with a smaller inner chamber, built of large stones. Some contained human remains. A few monumental rectangular stone structures (elite burial places, cultic installations?), similar to the ones recorded in the Early Bronze II, were located close to the tumuli (Dever, 2014, pp. 213-220). Excavations in large, permanent sites like Be'er Resisim, 'En Ziq and Mashabei Sade also found flat stone figurines or stelae that have parallels in the Arabian Desert oases (Haiman, 2018, p. 273, Fig. 18.2). The large Intermediate Bronze sites in the Negev were not the norm, being overshadowed in number by hundreds of small, short-term habitation sites, the product of the local population practicing animal husbandry. Typical of these small sites were the tumuli found in their close vicinity, together with rectangular and round platforms made of large stones and filled with earth and small stones (Haiman, 1996, pp. 7-10; 2018)

LATE BRONZE-IRON AGES

In the last part of the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, nomadic groups started to settle down, particularly around the copper-mining areas of Wadi Timna and Wadi Faynan, where they resumed the exploitation of the local mines after a hiatus in activity during the Middle Bronze and most of the Late Bronze Age (Tebes, 2008, pp. 16-33). During the Iron Age, the local population continued burying their dead in cist tombs and pit burials, a practice that had become exceedingly rare in the rest of the southern Levant (Ilan, 2017, p. 61).

In Timna the copper mining was carried out under the supervision of the Ramesside Egyptians, but so far no unequivocally Egyptian burials have been found in this area, and the little is known about the local population's funerary practices shows no influence from Egypt's mortuary architecture. A corbel-vaulted tomb was excavated close to a metallurgical site in

Timna Site 2, beneath a fill of metallurgical waste, rocks and standing stones. Although two individuals of “Afro-Egyptian” origin were found, no definitive conclusions can be reached (Rothenberg, 1972, p. 103, Figs. 27-28, Pl. 26). Scattered human remains found within rock crevices over the cliffs known as “King Solomon’s Pillars” (Timna Site 198), along with pottery and a nearby standing stone and table-like rock, could point to a burial place or shrine (Rothenberg, 1972, pp. 118-119, Pls. 111-112). One small tumulus tomb was excavated in Timna Site 15, but no human bones or burial-related artifacts were found (Ben-Yosef, 2018, p. 44).

Much more is known from southern Jordan, where a series of local polities developed out of the nomadic population, including chiefdoms in Faynan and later Edom (Tebes, 2013, pp. 39-51). One of the most impressive remains left by the local nomads is the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery in the Faynan district, a large necropolis dated to the tenth century BCE. The excavators linked the buried individuals with the *Shasu*-nomads of the New Kingdom Egyptian sources (Beherec, Najjar and Levy, 2014). WF40 had a total of 245 cist graves, the most common type consisting of stone cist graves for primary and secondary burials, dug to one meter and with walls lined with slabs (Fig. 6). Stone slabs were placed on top to serve as capstones, in turn covered with a coating of mud plaster. Cists were usually oriented north-south, with the head towards the south and facing the west. Beherec/Najjar/Levy (2014, p. 685) suggest a possible connection with Egypt or Cisjordan, but concede “this is merely speculative”.

The most frequent surface architecture consisted of double or three concentric circles of cobbles, set upright on the soil. Aniconic (unworked or smoothed) and anthropomorphic (shaped and smoothed) standing stones were placed in the grave circles, preferably in their centre (Fig. 7). Unlike earlier and later cemeteries in the Wadi Arabah, WF 40 is notable for their simple grave goods – mostly personal adornments such as stone and shell beads and pendants, and few metals – and the almost complete lack of pottery.

Similar but smaller Iron Age tumulus burials were excavated at the sites of Wadi Fidan 4, 45, and 61. A scarab seal found in WF4 and dating to the LBIIA (Beherec, Najjar and Levy 2014, Fig. 9.6,7) could be an heirloom or may indicate re-use of a Late Bronze burial (Ilan, 2017, p. 58).

The picture is less clear for the Iron Age II in southern Jordan. In a recent reassessment of the evidence, Bienkowski (2014) noted that while surveys recorded many “possible” Iron II tombs, in most cases the dates are uncertain.

Similarly, archaeological surveys in the Negev and the north-eastern Sinai have recorded tumuli in small Iron Age sites, such as in Wadi el ‘Asli and Wadi el Huar (Haiman, 1992, pp. 27, 42, Fig. 22:5,6), or re-using ancient Early Bronze cairns, such as in the Nahal Mitnan and probably the Har Horesha tumulus fields (Saidel and Haiman, 2014, p. 21; Fig. 2.36; 2.37; p. 34). Since these tumuli heavily contrasted with the types of burials popular in Iron Age Judah and in Judaean sites in the Negev – rock-carved bench and niche tombs, they are most likely remains of burial tumuli made by the local nomads, who probably buried their dead re-using Early or Intermediate Bronze Age cairns (Ilan, 2017, p. 60).

NABATAEAN-ROMAN PERIODS

Little is known of the local mortuary practices during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, when few if any nomadic sites have been found. It is during the Hellenistic and the later Nabataean period when surveys start to trace nomadic encampments identified by the finds of Nabataean pottery. During the Nabataean and Early Roman periods, the landscape of southern Jordan, and particularly the Petra area, was covered by the dozens of rock-cut tombs that are

justly famous today. Judging from the continuation of similar mortuary and ritual practices in the archaeological record in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, it is likely that the Nabataean identity persisted well after the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom by the Romans in 106 CE (Politis, 2007). Not all of these sites should be attributed to the Nabataeans, however, as diverse ethnic groups were living under the umbrella of the Nabataean polity and likely shared many features of their material culture.

Nabataean tombs generally comprise three types: burials in monumental tombs (Petra and Medain Saleh), burials in communal shaft tombs, and single burials in cist tombs or coffins (Perry, 2002, p. 266). While the first two have been the focus of most scholarly research, the majority of the rural population outside the settled area of Petra continued burying their dead in pit/cist tombs and burial tumuli. Nabataean-period extra-mural burials normally presented few grave goods, finds consistent with their association with individuals of low economic status and/or belonging to nomadic groups.

The study of the distribution patterns of the mortuary and cultic architecture in this period reveals that there is a marked contrast between the distribution patterns in southern Jordan versus the Negev. The prevalence of cist and rock-cut burials in southern Jordan may be related to cultural patterns, the area's agricultural economy and the factor of geology. Nomadic burials are to be noted, however, in the arid regions south and east of the central highlands, such as the five graves excavated in the remote rugged area of Wadi Mudayfa'at east of Petra (Perry, Al-Shiyab and Falahat, 2007; Al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009). Here, the individuals were buried in simple pit burials covered by fieldstones and wrapped in stitched and decorated leather, while corpses had naturally mummified tissues. The east-west orientation of the burials was interpreted by the excavators as reflecting a belief associated with the sun, which was widely worshipped among the Nabataeans (Al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009). Similar cist burials have been excavated at Bir Madhkur (Perry, 2007), Wadi Musa (Sites 25 – an-Naqla; 27, 29), Umm Sayhun (Sites 4, 5, 6) ('Amr and Al-Momani, 2001) and Wadi Ramm, very close to the Nabataean temple of 'Allat (Perry and Jones, 2008). Some of the simple pit burials only contained the remains of children, and it has been suggested this reflects the low status of small children among the Nabataeans ('Amr and Al-Momani, 2001, p. 268). Some Nabataean burials re-used old cemeteries, such as the early Neolithic cemetery of Wadi Faynan 16 (Mithen *et al.*, 2016, p. 91) and the late Neolithic tumulus field of Ramat Saharonim (Rosen *et al.*, 2007, pp. 17-18).

Tumulus burials and standing stones are proportionally a larger part of the desert sites in the Negev and the southern Arabah, probably because of the importance of nomadic semi-pastoralism in these regions. In the central Negev Highlands sites concentrated south of the main Nabataean road stations such as Haluza, Rehovot, Mampis, Avdat and Nizzana. Roman-period tumuli have been recorded, for example, in the Nahal Ramon (Haiman, 1992, p. 27; Fig. 2:7). It is likely that this distribution pattern reflects a system of complementary socioeconomic zones, pastoral in the south and more agricultural-oriented in the north (Rosen, 2007).

Based on a comparative analysis of the Nabataean standing-stone sites in the Negev with those from previous periods, Avner (1999-2000) has suggested that these sites' arrangement and physical features can be associated with specific types of aniconic worship of Nabataean deities, a conclusion also shared by other scholars (Murray, 2011, p. 223; McKenzie and Reyes, 2013, p. 265). Although Rosen (2017, p. 226) has alerted us to the methodology of attributing standing-stone sites to the Nabataean period based solely on the preponderance of Nabataean pottery, this is a standard methodology in desert field surveying (Rosen, 2017, p. 347). The occurrence of Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine pottery in these sites simply mirrors the continuation of similar religious practices over different periods.

LATE ROMAN-BYZANTINE PERIODS

Written and epigraphic sources alongside archaeological evidence shows that during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, Christianity was by and large restricted to the urban centers, with few if any inroads into the desert fringes (Avni, 2014, p. 283). Although most Christian burials have been primarily excavated in the floors of Byzantine urban churches – such as Rehovot, Oboda and Nessana (and the same phenomenon occurs in southern Jordan, such as in Udhruh: Al-Salameen *et al.*, 2011), most burials are located in still-unexcavated extra-mural necropoleis and identified only by their tombstones (*e.g.* Klein and Mamalya, 2014). Nagar and Sonntag (2008) have summarized the information on Christian cemeteries in Byzantine sites in the Negev (Rehovot, Horvat Ma'aravim, Horvat Lassan, Horvat Liqit and Beersheba): they contained burials that did not differ much from those in the countryside, with stone-walled cists oriented east-west or north-west to south-east, covered by stone slabs.

Dozens of pit, cist and tumulus tombs from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods have been surveyed in the Negev and southern Jordan countryside. Typical, for example, is the Byzantine-Early Islamic tumuli at Nahal Sirpad site 112 (Haiman, 1992, p. 27; Fig. 2:8). They are barely discernible from previous Nabataean-period burials in terms of architecture and grave goods (Perry, Al-Shiyab and Falahat, 2007, p. 310), showing few changes in the burial practices and probably reflecting the continuation of the afterlife beliefs of the Nabataean period. However, the persistence of the Nabataean beliefs was not restricted to the countryside, as can be seen in the existence of grave stones with engraved *baetyl* and *nefesh* signs in the later cemetery of Khirbet Qazone on the south-eastern shore of the Dead Sea and in a Christian tombstone found at Mampshit in the Negev (Politis, 2007, pp. 190-194).

Of particular importance were the Roman and Byzantine mining ventures in the Faynan district, where labourers had to endure unhealthy working conditions under the most extreme of circumstances. Several burial grounds have been documented from this period, the most prominent ones being located around Khirbet Faynan: WF1 (Late Roman-Byzantine), WF2 (Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine) and WF3 (Roman-Byzantine). WF3, called the "Southern Cemetery", was excavated and found to contain over 1700 burials consisting mostly of vertical grave cuts. The majority are aligned west-east with skeletons with head facing the west. Around 1200 are marked by headstones, of which 180 had crosses engraved (Findlater *et al.*, 1998). Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis of 31 burials indicates the deceased belonged to a locally-born population (Perry *et al.*, 2009).

EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

Contrary to early scholarship that stressed the violence caused by the Islamic conquest in the Negev, the transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic period did not represent, at first, a big break in the archaeological record. In the Negev, there is no hint of violent destruction of the Byzantine towns, while there seems to have been an uninterrupted pattern of settlement between the two periods. Christian communities continued living in some towns side by side with the newly-arrived Muslim elites, such as in Shivta and Nessana in the Negev and Udhruh and Wadi Musa in southern Jordan (Avni, 1996; 2014; Magness, 2003).

This pattern can be seen in the funerary repertoire. The few excavated Early Islamic intra-mural burials are simple pit tombs with the deceased oriented east-west and the head facing the south (Avni, 1996, pp. 25-26), such as a double burial found in a village in Eilat (Rapuano,

2013, pp. 137-140). This is generally interpreted as representing the direction to Mecca, akin to the *mihrab* present in the Muslim mosques indicating the *qibla*.

In the Negev countryside, most common were the pit graves with different layouts – mostly round and elliptical, some square or rectangular. Despite the fact that most of these burials are not dated, it is evident they are Muslim graves. Typical of this burial type is the small cemetery excavated in the Nahal ‘Oded in the central Negev Highlands, close to a semi-nomadic encampment. It contained eleven simple rectangular shaft graves dug in the ground, marked by an outline of fieldstones. Three standing stones were found on top of a low ridge near the cemetery (Avni, 1996, pp. 39-40; 2014, p. 271).

Isolated burial tumuli located at the edge of the settlements were another less common type, a burial practice different to the tumulus fields characteristic of previous periods (Avni, 1996, p. 26), such as those around a semi-nomadic encampment near ‘Ein Qadeis in the Sinai-Negev border (Haiman, 1995, p. 33, Fig. 6.2).

DISCUSSION: VISITING AND RE-USE OF FUNERARY MONUMENTS AND SHRINES

One of the most important features of the funerary and cultic landscape of the arid southern Levant is the visiting and re-use of ancient burial monuments and shrines. This phenomenon is not restricted to this area but is widely known in the Arabian Peninsula. In southern Arabia there are evidences of visiting and re-use of third millennia BCE tombs by people one or two millennia later (McCorriston, 2011; 2013), but such phenomena have not been extensively noted in the arid southern Levant.

The current southern Arabian landscape is dotted with shrines of many sorts, from formal buildings with cupolas associated with mosques to solitary open-air tombs (Newton, 2010; McCorriston, 2011; Daum, 2015). These shrines commemorate the lives of admired and respected individuals, such as Islamic teachers, pre-Islamic prophets or descendants of the Prophet Mohammad. Because most of the shrines have been modernized, the original character and traditional architecture have been lost. They were all originally open-air tombs, graves without any formal roofing and were known by local inhabitants through oral tradition to be the graves of important people.

In the southern Levant exist dozens of Islamic shrines, many of them in the Negev, but unfortunately they have seldom been studied. Frantzman and Bar (2013) have recently counted a total of 786 sheikh's tombs in Mandate Period Palestine, while 26 of them were located in the Negev, that is to say 3% of the total. However, the Mandate Period maps did not cover the Negev south of Beersheba, and therefore their number may be considerably higher. In many cases the burial is represented by a mound, heap of stones or a large tombstone. Bailey (1982, pp. 75-76) has noted that sometimes local Bedouins had only a vague idea of who the commemorated person was.

Some southern Levantine shrines have been excavated and pre-Islamic remains have been found. An important case is the Tomb of Aaron (Jabal Haroun) in the Petra area, a Muslim shrine and focus of pilgrimage that recent archaeological work has shown it has roots in a nearby Byzantine monastery and a structure below it dating to the Nabataean period, probably a temple (Fiema, Frösén and Holappa, 2016). A Byzantine religious structure probably lies beneath the less-known Islamic shrine of Wali Yosha, located north of Shawbak in southern Jordan, to judge from the Roman/Byzantine wall bases and pottery and one Greek inscription found in the site (Shqairat, Abudanah and Bdour, 2018, pp. 28-29).

We know that Bedouins interred some of their dead within or close to ancient burial grounds, such as two tumulus burials close to the Intermediate Bronze settlement of Be’er Resisim, with

adult human remains extended east-west and skull facing the south (*contra* Dever, 2014, pp. 213-214, who consider them of Intermediate Bronze or Byzantine date), and one Ottoman- or British Mandate-period Bedouin adult burial in a tumulus attaching an Early Bronze structural wall at Har Saggi site 5 (Saidel and Haiman, 2014, p. 53).

However, we should not transpose too easily what we know on modern funeral rites to the archaeological evidence of pre-modern mortuary remains. In a recent important study, Mustafa and Abu Tayeh (2014) have argued that the Bedouin funeral rites have been influenced and transformed by the processes of sedentarization of the mid-20th century. They distinguish between funerary rites of pure nomadic tribes and rites of those who have gone through sedentarization. Funerary practices among pure nomadic peoples include the burying of individuals where they died; the stacking up of stone piles over the grave (*rijm*); the presence of tribal symbols (*wasm*) engraved on a large stone nearby; the absence of graveside ceremonies (particularly for women); and the placing of the deceased's clothes on top of their grave. Mortuary rites of people who have sedentarized are fairly different, including the moving of dead bodies for several days to a tribal cemetery; the existence of cemeteries close to camping grounds; the visiting of tombs of ancestors and saints; and the sacrifice of animals and offerings during frequent visits by tribe members. Since we find several material correlates of these features in the pre-modern archaeological evidence, a careful study should be made to discriminate between ancient tombs of nomadic peoples from those of sedentarized ones.

Judging from the large amount of archaeological evidence pointing to regular movements of people to sacred places in the Arabia Peninsula, McCorriston (2011) pointed out that the practice of pilgrimage was central to the religions of pre-Islamic Arabia at least since Neolithic times. The time is ripe for the same phenomenon to be studied in the arid southern Levant.

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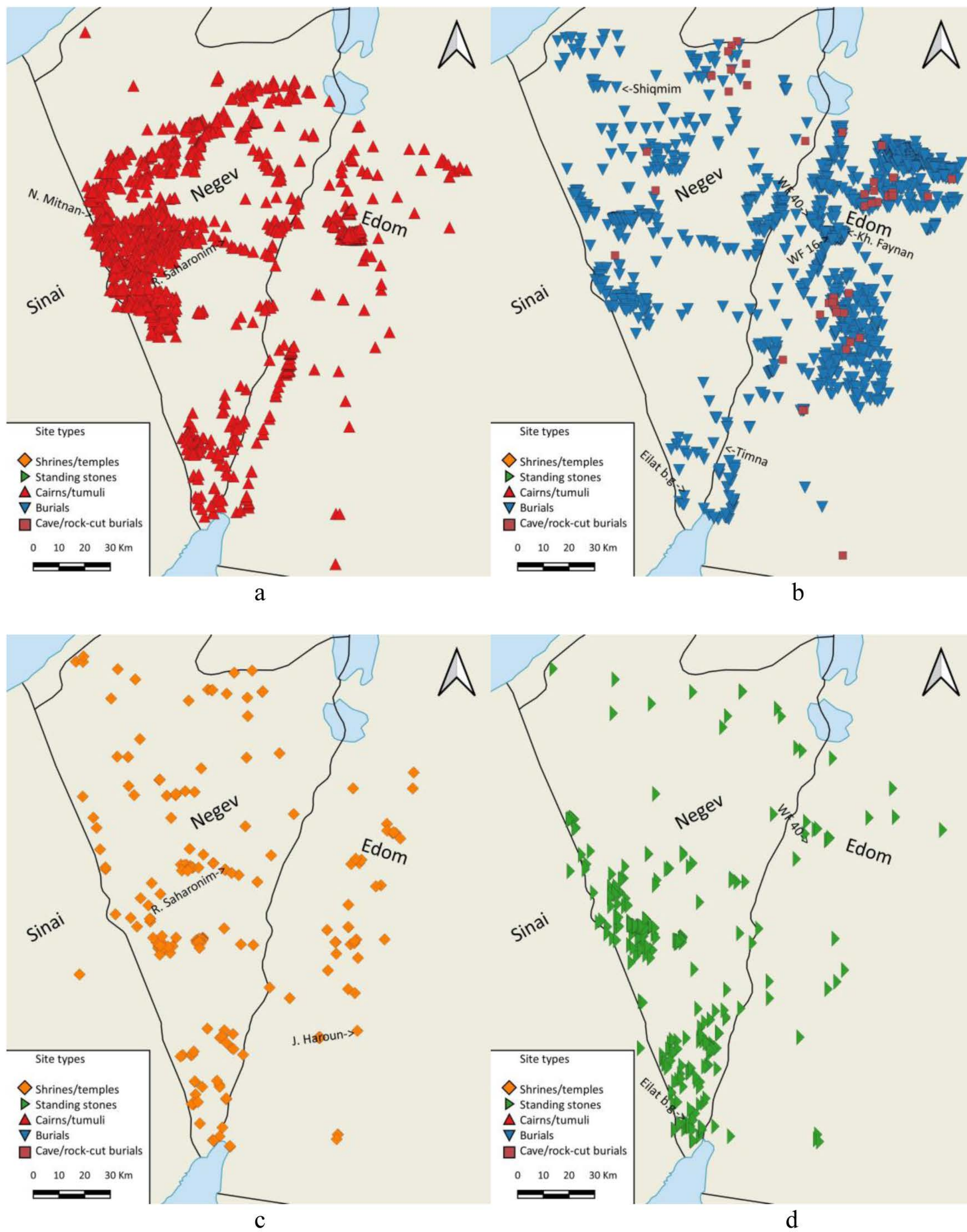

Fig. 1. Distribution of mortuary and cultic sites and architecture in the Negev and southern Jordan according to the preliminary results of the database: a. Cairns/tumuli, b. Burials and cave/rock-cut burials, c. Shrines/temples, d. Standing stones.

Fig. 2. Eilat burial ground, Tumuli IV and V, with 66 hearths around them. (Photo courtesy of Uzi Avner)

Fig. 3. Eilat burial ground, Tumulus XV, with flexed articulated bones of a woman and a child.
(Photo courtesy of Uzi Avner).

Fig. 4. Sheluhat Qadesh Barne‘a, burial cell in Cairn 102 (Early Bronze Age). Photo courtesy of Tali Erickson-Gini, Naomi Porat and Israel Antiquities Authority.

Fig. 5. Sheluhat Qadesh Barne‘a, Cairn 103 (Early Bronze Age). Photo courtesy of Tali Erickson-Gini, Naomi Porat and Israel Antiquities Authority.

Fig. 6. Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery, overview of excavations. Photo courtesy of Thomas E. Levy and Levantine Archaeology Laboratory University California San Diego.

Fig. 7. Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery, Grave 712: stone circle burial monument with standing stone. Photo courtesy of Thomas E. Levy and Levantine Archaeology Laboratory University California San Diego.