

THE PLACE OF CHILDREN  
IN THE ANCIENT SOCIETY OF URKESH  
(TELL MOZAN, NORTHEASTERN SYRIA)  
IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE (2000-1600 BC):  
AN ARCHEOTHANATOLOGICAL  
APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

*The specificity of burials allows for gaining information concerning the culture of ancient populations, in particular their relation to death, and their perception of the biological status of living populations. Our focus is to bring to light children's burials coming from the Khabur Ware period levels in Mozan, ancient Urkesh, which are dated between 2000-1600 BC. The analysis of burial practices through osteological observations has provided evidence of age-related characteristics. Indeed, the funerary treatment of the children has proven to have been different from that of the adults.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the first excavations at Tell Mozan in 1984, 150 burials from both the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age have been recovered from the site. All of these graves were found in an urban context; in most cases in a well-defined relation with the domestic structures, such as floors and foundations of walls. They are a reflection of the Ancient Near Eastern tradition that led the people to bury their dead close to or beneath their proper estate. The majority of the burials, namely eighty of them, can be dated to the Old Babylonian period. 57 tombs containing 63 individuals (aged between 0 to 18) have been analyzed and have given insight on the burial customs.

Tell Mozan is located in the northeast of Syria, within the Khabur plains. It was identified as ancient Urkesh, an important urban and religious center during the mid-third millennium BC, linguistically connected to the Hurrians. The topography of Mozan is differentiated into a high mound and an outer city (Fig. 1). Excavations conducted by Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati have revealed the remains of a small town which is considered to have been a small kingdom, with a monumental temple terrace at the center of the mound and a royal palace dated to c. 2350-2200 BC, corresponding to the Akkadian period (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2001).

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## LOCATION AND TYPOLOGY OF THE TOMBS

Around 2100 BC, the royal palace was abandoned, and overlaid by a wide open area that served as the outskirts of a settlement to the north. This area eventually developed by the period regionally referred to as Khabur into a burial ground consisting of several funerary structures, each one containing from 2 to 10 tombs. These burials were extramural and belonged to two different levels, the Early Khabur – corresponding to phase IV material for burial deposition (dated between 2000-1900 BC), and the Late Khabur level – retaining the same purpose (dated between 1900-1600 BC). The two phases are separated by the intrusion of a large pit that covered and cut into the whole funerary zone. With regard to burial types referring to children, 16 jar burials, 15 earth pits, and only two built tombs have been identified.

### II. 1. JAR BURIALS

Jar burials are the most ubiquitous type of interment for children in the Khabur levels in Mozan, as they are well-known throughout the Levant. They are frequently placed next to and aligned with the walls. The jars' necks and shoulders were usually broken and removed to enable the insertion of the corpse. This opening was sometimes covered by a large fragment from another jar (Fig. 2). Where the human remains are sufficiently well-preserved, osteological observations allow for identifying primary<sup>2</sup> and individual<sup>3</sup> burials. The cadaver was deposited in a flexed or contracted position (to varying degrees, at both knees and hips) either on its side or on its back. The immature individuals were buried with archaeological deposits such as bronze jewels (ear rings, rings, and bracelets), while pottery objects were less frequent in these burials than in the adult ones. No jar burials were found in the Late Khabur levels.

At Ras Shamra and Tell Arqa, jar burials have been found in similar contexts dating to the Middle Bronze Age II (Salles 1995; Thalmann 2006). However, they contained only children less than 7 years old at their death.

At Tell Mozan, the burial labeled A16.47 was a unique deposit in the site, containing two probable neonates, and this burial was dated to the Late Khabur. It consisted of one cracked jar in which a large body sherd was laid flat on the ground with its inside facing up. The first neonate (aged 38-40 weeks)<sup>4</sup> was laid over this sherd. The body was oriented north to south with the skull to the north. The second neonate (aged

2 In the case of primary burials, the dead body usually decomposed in the same tomb where it was ultimately buried (Duday 2005, 2009).

3 Three categories of burials are defined based on the number of individuals buried inside the tomb: (1) individual: only one person; (2) double: containing the remains of two individuals; (3) multiple: more than two individuals buried in the same grave. In the case of the last two categories, it is important to understand whether bodies have been deposited simultaneously or separately over a long period (Duday 2005, 2009).

4 Age estimated through the length of the femur bone based on the tables of Fazekas and Kosa (1978).

39-48 weeks)<sup>5</sup> was likely oriented in the same position but with the skull to the south. This position 'head to tail' was observed only in this grave. The two bodies were covered by another large body sherd with the inside facing up. No objects could be related to this burial (Fig. 3).

## II. 2. EARTH PITS

The second category of children burials in Mozan consists of earth pits. These pits were dug beside the foundations of a wall and just below the earth floor of the royal palace (AP). Two categories were recognized: simple and complex pits. In both cases, a pit was first excavated, later – in the complex type – this first step was followed by the construction of a roofed mud-brick tomb. A10.39B is a well-preserved example of a complex earth pit, containing an infant who died around birth. It was built of several mud-bricks in the form of a square placed on both sides (east and west). Covered with the same type of mud-bricks positioned vertically, the grave had a pyramidal shape (Fig. 4). The infant (34-40 weeks old)<sup>6</sup> was buried on his back next to a young adult buried on his side (18-22 years old).<sup>7</sup> Both deceased were oriented in the same way, with flexed limbs.

Earth inhumations are mostly single and primary, except for one (A15.51, cf. below). The skeletonized bodies were always lying on their sides (right or left) at the bottom of the pit in a flexed or contracted position. Beside the pottery objects placed either next to the head or the feet of the cadaver, the same type of bronze jewels as the ones found in the jar burials were discovered as part of the inventory. Infants and children under 10 years old were interred in this type of burials, which indicates that no age-related change in mortuary gestures can be noticed. On the other hand, these burials were used in both Early and Late Khabur levels. In contrast with the jar burials, the earth burials were used for both children and adults.

Burial A15.51 is a complex earth pit, recovered twenty centimeters below the floor surface of a mud-brick structure. The skeletonized body was lying inside a rectangular pit, oriented north to south. The funerary structure was delimited with elongated and compacted mud-bricks. The skull was disarticulated and placed at opposite ends of the grave. The trunk and the pelvis bone have kept their anatomical connection. The absence of a significant amount of bones, the distribution of bones within the appropriate region of the original body space, and finally the displacement of the skull, all these osteological observations suggest anthropic post mortem intervention with displacement of dry bones. Thus, A15.51 was a primary deposition with reintervention that occurred later. Evidence for such burial practice is well documented in several sites from different periods, but appears to be unusual in Mozan.

5 Age estimated through the length of the femur bone based on the tables of Fazekas and Kosa (1978).

6 Age estimated through the length of the femur bone based on the tables of Fazekas and Kosa (1978).

7 Age estimated through the pelvis bone, using the method proposed by Schmitt (2005).

### II. 3. BUILT CHAMBER TOMBS

More elaborated tombs built usually of stone or mud-brick were discovered in several Middle Bronze Age sites.<sup>8</sup> This type has appeared since the sixth millennium BCE in several sites in the ancient Near East (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003). In Mozan, two built chamber tombs were discovered: A16.54/60 and A7.525/530 (Fig. 5). Both were constructed of mud-brick, following a rectangular plan (2x3 meters) with an entry passage located in one of the walls at its mid-point. Six individuals were buried in each one. Skeletons in grave A16.54/60 were found disarticulated and badly preserved. Human bones were found scattered throughout the western end of the chamber (three adults aged more than 20, two children – respectively 1-2 and 6-7 years old, and one very young individual less than 36 weeks old. Some fauna was discovered mixed with the skeletons. It is a multi-burial believed to be a re-use since the bones have been found in a pile (not laid out), concentrated towards one side.

In grave A7.525/530, five adults and one child were buried inside the funerary structure. The adult skeletonized bodies (all aged more than 20) were laying north to south on their sides (three on their right sides, and one on his left side). The upper and lower limbs were flexed towards the side. The child (2.5-3.5 years old at death) was placed between two adults, following the same orientation as the adults' bodies, but lying on his/her back; with upper limbs extended along the side, knees flexed and legs folded to the exterior of the body. So even when children were buried together with adults in the same grave, their body position differed from that of the adults; this observation confirms that there were special mortuary gestures. No funerary objects were found in these two graves.

### CONCLUSION

Mortuary practices reflect a society's social organization and cultural values. The analysis of Middle Bronze Age mortuary practices regarding children at Tell Mozan has shown specific characteristics linked to age. Children received proper funerary treatment that distinguished them from adult individuals. These mortuary patterns were probably socially selected and do not represent random acts.

Jar burials were reserved only for children less than 7 years old and only during the Early Khabur levels (2000-1900 BC). This type seems to have been replaced within the Late Khabur period (1900-1600 BC) by the simple/complex earth pits. In both cases (jar burials and earth pits), burials were mostly primary and single, with the exception of two graves containing two perinatal individuals in the same jar burial and a double burial where the infant was buried with an adult in the same pit. Secondary inhumation was less used (only one example with reference to children). Infants and children were not excluded from the multiple 'familial' burials. In these examples, when the

<sup>8</sup> Such as Tell Tweini in Syria (Hameeuw *et al.* 2008).

original position of inhumation was reconstructed, we have observed that children were buried in a body position not similar to that of adults. These observations lead us to propose that age was an important factor in the choice of mortuary practices. Children had a special social status in the ancient society of Mozan. This pattern occurs in other sites dating to the Middle Bronze Age in both Mesopotamia and Levant. Indeed, the skeleton was a part of a person that interacted within the social environment in a dynamic way.

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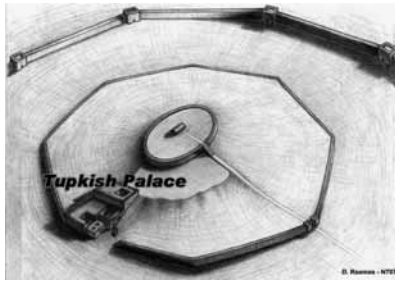


Fig. 1: Localization of Tell Mozan in red; to the left – a reconstruction of the site in the Bronze Age.



Fig. 2: A child *in situ* buried inside a jar; to the right – one of the jar burials found in Mozan with a child inside.

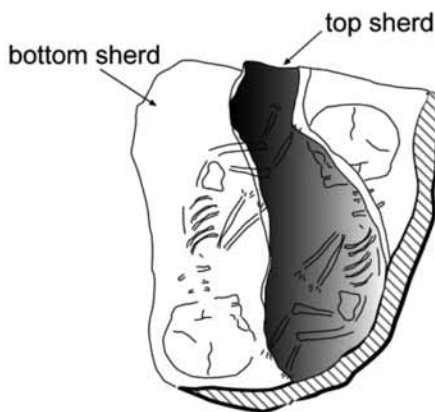


Fig. 3: Two probable neonates buried in a jar and covered with another, note the 'head to tail' position, drawn by L. Ramos.

■ covered portion



Fig. 4: A10.39B – a mock pitched roof tomb with two individuals inside: a young adult and a neonate.





Fig. 5: A7.525/530 – a built chamber tomb where 5 adults and one child were buried inside, following the same orientation but not the same position.