The Archaeological Heritage of Oman

LANDSCAPES OF DEATH

Early Bronze Age Tombs and Mortuary Rituals on the Oman Peninsula

KIMBERLY D. WILLIAMS

Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
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Cover: Umm an-Nar type tomb at Shir, Sultanate of Oman (photograph by Oriol Alamany)

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* All photographs by Kimberly D. Williams unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

Death is a universal experience for all people, in all periods of human existence. Perhaps because witnessing the death of friends and family is one of a few life experiences that all people can relate to, or perhaps because the question of what becomes of a person when they die has been asked by every generation, people have long been fascinated with death practices. Travelers and antiquarians who observed the cultures of far-away places and ancient ruins of tombs, settlements, and other residues of the ancient past both close to home and abroad, provided the earliest accounts about variation in death practices. Throughout the world, these observations intrigued those who read or heard about how other cultures, contemporaneous and ancient, lived and died. Surely, over the course of history, many accounts have been lost, but some of the earliest recorded demonstrate the power of death practice narratives. These accounts range from the works of history's earliest recorded historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides to medieval travelers (e.g. Ibn Battuta, Abu Zayd Al-Sirafi) to Western travelers/explorer to Arabia (e.g., Philby, Thesiger, etc.) and elsewhere.

As an archaeologist observing just these physical remains, the material culture that may be associated with the remains, and the vessel (e.g., urn, grave, tomb, etc.) where these remains are interred, it is not possible to gain a full picture of the rituals surrounding the death and interment of these people. Thus, we must remember that there are aspects of death practices that can never be fully preserved in the archaeological record. Nonetheless, these are vital aspects of the ritual(s) performed by the living. This awareness should temper our interpretations past practices by heightening awareness of the events the archaeological record bears witness to and openly acknowledging the aspects of these practices that are lost. It should also inspire us to responsibly consider ethnographic analogy to generate insight into aspects of the human past that we often cannot know: intention, emotions, and memory.

Early Bronze Age Landscapes of Death on the Oman Peninsula

This volume considers death practices of the ancient inhabitants of the Oman Peninsula during the Early Bronze Age (3200-2000 BC). It was this time that the earliest widespread construction of monuments to inter the dead occurred. The death practices of the preceding Neolithic period are known from comparatively fewer sites (see Munoz 2019 for a review), most of which were coastal sites such as Ras Al-Hamra (RH-5; e.g., Biagi *et al*. 1984; Maggi 1984; Coppa *et al*. 1985; Maggi *et al*. 1985; Macchiarelli 1989; Coppa *et al*. 1990; Biagi 1994; Santini 2002; Biagi and Nisbet 2006; Salvatori 2007; Charpentier and Mery 2010; Marcucci *et al*. 2011; Zazzo *et al*. 2014). The dead were interred in oval graves or occasionally in middens (Durante and Tosi 1977; Maggi *et al*. 1985).

There were exceptions during the Neolithic period, such as the inland site of Al-Buhais 18 (BHS18; Kiesewetter *et al*. 2000; Uerpmann *et al*. 2000, 2013; de Beauclair *et al*. 2006; de Beauclair 2008; Kutterer and De Beauclair 2008; Kutterer *et al*. 2012). Here, there is strong evidence for a seasonally used cemetery, and the mortuary practices of primary versus secondary interments varied significantly. The repatriation of those who died away from Jebel Buhais strongly suggests the importance of place for these Neolithic people.

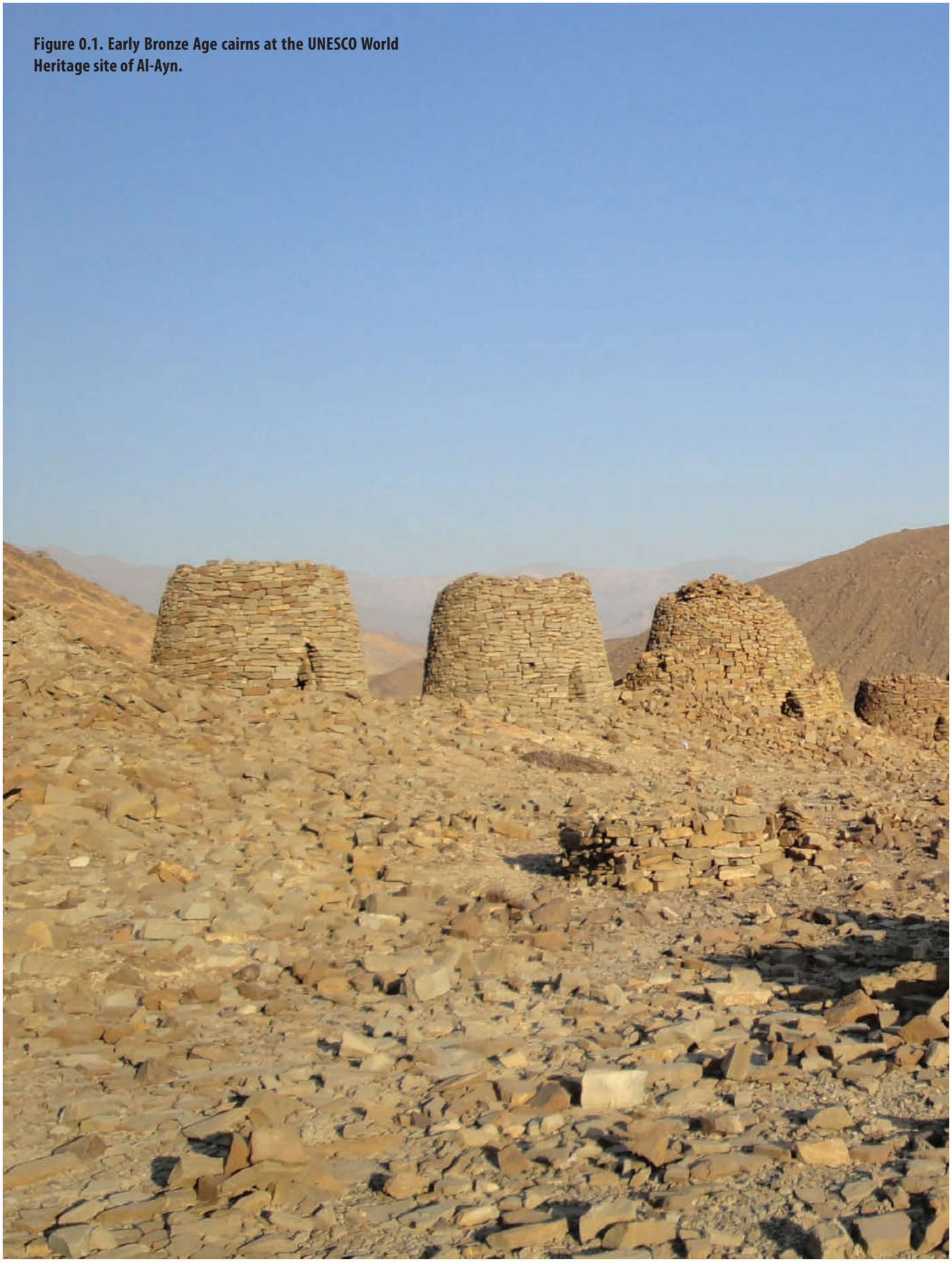

Figure 0.1. Early Bronze Age cairns at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Al-Ayn.

Other evidence from both inland (Dhank, Williams and Gregoricka 2021) and the Ja'alan (Jarama, Sevin-Allouet, this volume) provides important evidence of more isolated Neolithic era mortuary monuments rather than pit graves. Still, despite these data suggesting ties to places and seemingly occasional mortuary monument construction, the Early Bronze Age was the first time that the use of monuments to the dead became a widespread practice across the expanse of Arabia.

This volume presents the evidence for how the dead were treated during the Early Bronze Age and explores hypotheses for why these ritual practices emerged, became universally practiced, and how they changed over time. Central to this inquiry is a consideration of the previously mentioned unknowable aspects of the past, which permeate all human experience of death and death practices: intention, emotion, and memory. This volume considers individual treatments of the dead (e.g., construction of individual tombs, placement of individual bodies), as well as the communal act of engaging in common funerary rituals. It seeks to present what we know about events in the past, and how we can understand what they meant for those who witnessed and practiced them, as well as for those who lived afterwards with the monuments that remained.