

Book review

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A. Tsuneki, N. Hironaga, and S. Jammo. Eds. 2022. *The Neolithic Cemetery at Tell el-Kerkh*. Al-Shark – University of Tsukuba: Studies for West Asian Archaeology 5. Excavations Reports of Tell el-Kerkh Northwestern Syria 2. Oxford: Archaeopress. ISBN: Paperback: 9781803270265 | Digital: 9781803270272, pp. 422, figs. 322, tables 75.

The edited volume *The Neolithic Cemetery at Tell el-Kerkh* by Tsuneki, Hironaga, and Jammo, along with contributions from six additional scholars, represents an important contribution to Near Eastern archaeology, offering a systematically detailed examination of the Neolithic mortuary practices in the site. This volume was selected for review due to its comprehensive scope and the unique insights into Neolithic burial practices and the social and cultural transformations of the early agricultural societies. More specifically, this volume processes and presents data from the 1997–2002 and 2005–2010 excavation seasons (see also Tsuneki et al. 2007), focusing on the discovered cemetery located in Northwest Syria. This extensive report synthesizes published data (e.g., Jammo 2014, 2018, Jammo and Tsuneki 2020; Tsuneki 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; Tsuneki and Hydar 2011) as well as new evidence, and constitutes the second volume in a series, following Volume I by Arimura (2020), which was dedicated to the site's lithic tools and implements. Prior to this final report, the works of Tsuneki and Hydar (2011) and Jammo (2018) provided crucial preliminary insights into the burial practices at Tell el-Kerkh.

The volume includes eleven chapters, a conclusion, an appendix, and references. A. Tsuneki's Chapter 1 serves as the volume's introduction, providing essential background information on the Tell el-Kerkh site. The first archaeological investigation of the Tsukuba University in the Rouj Basin, conducted from 1990 to 1992, sought to understand the transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer-herder societies and the development of social complexity. Tsuneki offers a comprehensive overview of the site, encompassing its chronological and geographical context, enhanced by detailed topographic and geological maps. He also outlines the periods, durations, operational procedures, and personnel involved in each excavation season. Finally, the chapter includes an analysis of the Rouj Basin's chronology, supported by detailed chronological tables.

In Chapter 2, K. Hisada examines the geological context of the site, detailing the available geological sources within the Rouj Basin. Subsequently, in Chapter 3, A. Tsuneki presents the site's stratigraphy using a variety of topographic maps, square sections graphs, and photographs of key artifacts recovered from different layers across the excavation squares. The stratigraphy of each square is analyzed in a consistent methodological approach. Furthermore, the structures identified within each layer are briefly discussed, accompanied by supporting photographs and plans.

Chapter 4, authored by S. Jammo, provides a concise overview of the burial types discovered at the Tell el-Kerkh cemetery. Jammo categorizes the burials of the 244 individuals into four primary types: a) primary burials, the most prevalent type observed; b) secondary burials/pits; c) cremation burials/pits; and d) urn

burials. Additionally, an unclassified category is noted. The chapter includes photographs and drawings of the cemetery's overall layout, as well as detailed plans of each area occupied at different stratigraphic layers. Furthermore, several tables detailing the sex and age distribution of the deceased, alongside charts illustrating the distribution of burial types within each layer, are presented.

Chapter 5, authored by A. Tsuneki, N. Hironaga, S. Jammo, Y. Miyauchi, and Y. Tatsumi, forms the core of this volume, presenting a comprehensive catalogue of the cemetery's burials. The chapter begins with a tabular burial list, followed by detailed descriptions of each individual burial, accompanied by high-quality photographs and illustrations. These descriptions systematically document burial number, excavation square and layer, burial type, sex and age of the deceased, body position, orientation, and side, head and face placement, and the presence or absence of grave goods. Supporting photographs and illustrations of the burials, skeletal remains, and associated artifacts are included. The information is presented with exceptional clarity, and the visual aids effectively complement the textual descriptions. The exemplary presentation of the burial data serves as a model for similar archaeological reports.

In Chapter 6, S.P. Dougherty provides an in-depth examination of the human remains from Tell el-Kerkh, focusing on those excavated between 2002 and 2010 and examined from 2008 to 2010. The author acknowledges that this analysis is incomplete due to the inability to continue research in Syria. The chapter details the state of bone preservation, accompanied by charts illustrating regional variations in skeletal preservation. A detailed mortuary profile of the deceased is provided, along with numerous tables outlining preservation and fragmentation scores for each bone category (i.e., skull, vertebrae, sacrum, ribs, sternum, clavicle, scapula, humerus, radius, ulna, hands' long bones, os coxa, femur, tibia, fibula, feet long bones, and tarsals). Further tables present age and sex distribution by burial type, postcranial measurements, and estimations of stature and body mass. Moreover, the chapter extensively discusses infectious diseases, dental pathologies, traumas, osteoarthritis, and other degenerative joint changes. The chapter concludes with appendices containing an analytical catalogue of the human remains, sex and age determination data, adult and non-adult postcranial osteometric data, and odontometrics of permanent teeth.

Chapter 7, authored by Y. Itahashi and M. Yineda, presents a radiocarbon dating of both human bones and previously unpublished charcoal samples. The chapter outlines the materials and methods used, and the results are presented in tabular form. In Chapter 8, S. Jammo explores the theme of body transformation. The chapter begins with a general overview of Pottery Neolithic funerary practices, followed by a discussion of burial disturbances, detached heads, headless individuals, and skull removal (see also Jammo 2014) during the Pottery Neolithic at the Tell el-Kerkh cemetery. Jammo endeavors to establish criteria for the selection of individuals subjected to postmortem treatment by outlining the profile of those whose skulls were removed. Notably, this chapter provides a detailed illustration of the retrieval, manipulation, and circulation of human remains, offering significant insights into the diverse practices at the Tell el-Kerkh cemetery.

Chapter 9, authored by N. Hironaga, explores the significance of cremation. The chapter discusses the terminology associated with cremation and presents relevant examples from Pre-Pottery Neolithic and Late Neolithic periods. The focus, however, is on the Tell el-Kerkh cremation burials, analyzed through tables categorising cremation types, and age and sex distribution, supplemented by photographs and plans of crematorium pits and associated offerings. In Chapter 10, Y. Itahashi and M. Yoneda present the stable isotope analyses of human and animal bones. The materials and methods employed are briefly outlined, while the results are presented through a series of tables and isotopic value charts.

The concluding Chapter 11, authored by A. Tsuneki, synthesizes the previously presented data. As earlier indicated by Jammo and Tsuneki (2020), and further emphasized in this chapter, the 2007–2010 seasons revealed a “large-scale outdoor Pottery Neolithic cemetery” spanning approximately 200 m², contrasting with the individual burials found during earlier excavation seasons. Tsuneki provides also a concise summary of burial practices in western Asia from the Epipalaeolithic to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods. Finally, he outlines the formation process of this “outdoor communal cemetery” in Squares E252, E270, and E271, Layers 7 to 4. While

acknowledging that questions regarding Pottery Neolithic burial practices remain, he posits that Tell el-Kerkh transitioned from a site with “traditional house burials”, where the graves were separated from dwellings, to a communal cemetery. Tsuneki further argues that this communal cemetery was organized into family and clan burial units, each dedicated to family burials for decades. The book concludes with an appendix by N. Hironaga detailing Neolithic burials excavated outside the main cemetery, followed by a list of references and an extensive Arabic abstract.

The exceptional scale of the Tell el-Kerkh cemetery, encompassing over 240 individuals, presents an unparalleled opportunity for advancing scholarly comprehension of Neolithic mortuary practices. This volume offers a unique and invaluable perspective, not only on the specific context of the site, but also on the broader trajectory of burial archaeology within the ancient Near East. The work’s strength resides in its capacity to synthesize complex excavation data into a coherent and compelling narrative, thereby bridging the divide between detailed excavation findings and broader socio-cultural interpretations.

This meticulously detailed volume is an indispensable resource for understanding Neolithic burial practices at Tell el-Kerkh. Through its systematic analysis and thorough documentation –including detailed presentation of data, and detailed photographs, illustrations, and plans– this edited volume significantly advances our knowledge of Neolithic mortuary traditions in the region and for Near Eastern archaeology. Serving as a foundational text for future research on burial practices, this publication will significantly influence scholarly discourse on the subject. It is a valuable resource for scholars and researchers alike, and its inclusion in academic library collections is strongly recommended.

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