Burial practices of the Final Neolithic pastoralists at Gebel Ramlah, Western Desert of Egypt

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During the 2000, 2001 and 2003 seasons of research by the Combined Prehistoric Expedition, three Final Neolithic cemeteries were discovered in the southern part of the Egyptian Western Desert (Fig. 1). All were located along the shores of a fossil playa adjacent to a prominent hill named Gebel Ramlah (Sandy Mountain) (Fig. 2), some 25 km northwest of Gebel Nabta. Excavation of these burial grounds was conducted in 2001 and continued in 2003 (Schild, et al. 2002; Kobusiewicz, et al. 2004). Radiocarbon dates indicate that these burials were made in the fifth millennium B.C., during the last phase of Neolithic settlement in this region, which is called Bunat El Ansam (Megalith Builder) by Wendorf and Schild (2001).

Radiocarbon dating provides the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cemetery E-01-2</th>
<th>Burial 5: Charcoal</th>
<th>5740 ± 50 BP</th>
<th>4690 (16.3%)</th>
<th>4630 cal. BC (Poz – 459)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burial 10: Charcoal</td>
<td>5610 ± 45 BP</td>
<td>4490 (68.2%)</td>
<td>4360 cal. BC (Poz – 460)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burial 3: Human bone</td>
<td>5555 ± 60 BP</td>
<td>4460 (68.2%)</td>
<td>4340 cal. BC (Poz – 466)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Cemetery E-03-1 | Burial 4: Charcoal | 5535 ± 35 BP | 4390 (68.2%) | 4310 cal. BC (Poz – 4402) |

The undisturbed nature of the skeletal remains, grave goods, and the graves themselves facilitated the collection of important new data concerning these ancient people. The burial grounds, designated as E-01-2, E-03-1 and E-03-2, were separated from one another by just a few dozen meters and consisted of densely clustered graves; these concentrations do not exceed ten meters in diameter (Figs. 3–5). Because all three cemeteries revealed striking similarities to one another, they will be discussed as a single entity.

In total, 32 graves were discovered containing the skeletal remains of 69 individuals plus one symbolic burial. In addition to individual interments, multiple burials are also present, including one with eight individuals. In all cases it was possible to determine age at death with varying degrees of certainty, and in 50 cases the sex of the individual could also be determined. The number of females outnumbers males by more than 2:1. Children comprise 22% of the sample. Ages range from neonates to adults over 40 years old. From a physical anthropological viewpoint, the population sample exhibits evidence of North African and sub-Saharan admixture. They mostly enjoyed good health, with only a few individuals having suffered from mild, hard-tissue-affecting illnesses. Moreover, there were no traces of violence on the skeletons.

In the case of individual interments (Fig. 6), skeletons in all primary inhumations were found in anatomical order. All had been laid out in the same manner, i.e., on their right side, body flexed, head to the west and facing south, with their hands positioned in front of the
face. Bodies were deposited in oval pits about 60 to 80 cm below the present surface. Pits were lined with a basket-like plait-work, the outline of which was still visible in the form of a dark strip surrounding the body. The multiple burials contained more or less complete skeletons, but often revealed a combination of disarticulated bones and, on occasion, a variety of skeletal elements was missing (Fig. 7). In addition, a cenotaph—a symbolic grave containing only grave goods with no associated human remains—was discovered in cemetery E.01-2.

All individuals had received numerous grave goods. A total of 896 artifacts of various types were recovered. Of these, 568 qualified as single gifts, considering that some necklaces were composed of many beads. In 331 cases, the goods can be connected with particular individuals. In 286 of these instances, it was also possible to state exactly their location in relation to different parts of the body.

The most common grave goods were artifacts made of flint and agate; next, in order of magnitude, were items of personal adornment, stone objects and bracelets. The following categories of grave goods were identified:

1. Objects of flint and agate: These include mainly microlithic armatures—segments and, more rarely, triangles, most probably meant as arrow heads (Fig. 8). Scrapers, truncations, denticulated tools, Helwan-type points (Fig. 9), retouched flakes and blades, as well as cores (Fig. 10), flakes and blades without retouch (Fig. 11) were also recovered.
2. Stone objects: This category includes numerous small polished pebbles of chert, agate and quartz (Fig. 12), granite axes (Fig. 13), small pestles of sand stone, celts of chert and grano-diorite, retouchers of quartz, quartzitic sandstone and basalt, and granite grinders.
3. Personal adornments: There were abundant beads and pendants of carnelian (Fig. 14), agate, chalcedony (Fig. 15), diorite, gneiss, limestone, hematite, ostrich egg shells (Fig. 16), petrified wood, burnt clay, shells of Nerita species (Fig. 17), Nile bivalves, animal teeth and bird bones, as well as lip or nose plugs of turquoise, carnelian, bone (Fig. 18) and shell.
4. Palettes made of granite (Fig. 19), limestone and sandstone.
5. Bracelets made from Red Sea shells (Fig. 20) and ivory (Fig. 21).
6. Mica in irregular sheets up to 20 cm in diameter and almost 1 cm thick (Fig. 22).
7. Needles made of mammal, bird and fish bone (Fig. 23).
8. Shells of Nile bivalves (Sphatopsis rubens) and cowry.
9. Colorants: Chunks up to several centimeters in diameter and sometimes small pieces of pigment were composed of red ochre and yellow ochre of hematite and limonite respectively, and powdered green malachite.
10. Bone tools: So-called bone “daggers” were made of Dama gazelle bone and the proximal radius of cattle (Fig. 24). A kind of chisel-like tool and pointed bones were also found.
11. Containers for colorants made of cattle horns (Fig. 25), ivory (Fig. 26), concave potsherds decorated along the edge with incisions (Fig. 27), bivalve shells and small containers made from fragments of yellowish brown sandstone covered by lids of the same material (Fig. 28).
12. Pottery included ornamented caliciform beakers (Figs. 29 and 30), bowls (Fig. 31) and pots of different sizes and shape (Fig. 32), small cups (Fig. 33) and jars. A few sherds of black-topped pottery were also recovered (Fig. 34).
13. Animal bones included a goat incisor, the long bone of a Dama gazelle, and unidentified fragments.

14. Various other objects: These include: a flat stone vessel of diorite (Fig. 35); an ornamented object made of animal bone, similar to the so-called tusks of the Predynastic period (cf. Petrie 1920, 34, pls. 32–33), or the “magical knives” of the Middle Kingdom (Fig. 36); a sculpture of a tilapia fish made from a sheet of mica (Fig. 37); and a small wooden object with two holes. In addition, some of the bodies were practically covered by powdered red ochre based on the shape of large red tinted stains.

The number of grave goods per individual in the burials of females was more than twice that found in the graves of males or children. With some exceptions, the categories of goods for both sexes and children are more or less the same. In the burials of children there are more palettes, bracelets and shells. In the graves of males, and similarly in the graves of children, colorants were more abundant. Female burials contained relatively more jewelry and needles, and included the decorated “magical knife” and mica fish sculpture, as well as bone tools. Males received more pottery vessels than females, while pottery in the burials of children is almost completely absent. Similarly, mica—so popular in the graves of adults—was never found with children.

Most grave goods, in more than 50% of male and female graves, were deposited near the head. This location was the rule for children. The second most common, but apparently less preferable location, especially with regard to females, was around the knees. About 6% of goods, mainly bracelets, occur next to the hands, elbows and forearms. Some goods (11%) were placed near the chest and stomach, and less than 4% by the neck. In the last case, they were mainly bead necklaces given to men. Quite exceptionally, gifts were found by the pelvis, shoulders or feet.

In general, about 80% of the grave goods were deposited around the upper half of the body. In the lower half, they were positioned almost exclusively by the knees. It is impossible to discern any specially designated locations for a particular type of object. In the case of adults, the arrangement of objects in relation to the body parts was similar. Only in the graves of children was the position of goods restricted to the vicinity of the head.

All three cemeteries should be interpreted as extended family burial grounds. Most likely they were located near settlements. Numerous traces of settlements are visible along the edge of the ancient lake. The upper levels of some of them have the same Final Neolithic date. They represent the Bunat El Ansam phase of the Neolithic of the southeastern Western Desert (Wendorf and Schild 2001).

Within the burial grounds, distinct and dense clusters of graves can be observed. They may represent particular families. It seems that interment of the dead in the family burial ground was very much desired. This is especially suggested by the damage caused when burying successive family members. The apparent lack of room in all three graveyards is hard to explain, considering the vast space available for the contemporary playa inhabitants. The family concentrations must have been marked in some way; however, no traces of such markers were observed.

As mentioned above, most of the multiple burials contain disarticulated skeletons mainly as a result of the addition of successive bodies, which caused damage to prior interments.
There is one unusual case, Burial 2 in cemetery E-01-2, in which the semi-articulated skeletons of five adults were deposited; perhaps they died elsewhere before retrieval and burial. Perhaps they were herdsmen who were guarding their animals far from the village when they met their death. A double burial, deposited in the same way with the lower half of one skeleton missing, was discovered in the Final Neolithic layer of site E-75-8 near Nabta Playa (Wendorf and Schild 1980). We can assume that some form of ritual was also practiced on the occasion of symbolic interments, when a body was missing. As noted, such a cenotaph, containing only artifacts, was discovered in cemetery E-01-2. Perhaps the strikingly small number of male burials in all cemeteries can be explained by the death of men while active in remote areas.

Certainly, the richly ornamented caliciform beakers had some kind of ritual meaning. Pottery of this type is known from cemeteries dated to different phases of the Neolithic, spreading over a vast area from Middle Egypt in the north to Khartoum in the south, along the Nile Valley as well as in the modern desert, both west and east (Geus 1979; Krzyżaniak 1991; Reinold 2001; Darnell 2002; Friedman et al. 2002; Salvatori and Usai 2002). That such an exceptionally shaped vessel was of special importance is supported by the discovery of a miniature caliciform beaker with two holes for hanging, found near the chest of one individual in the Final Neolithic burial from Nabta Playa mentioned above. Also, the so-called “magical knife” found in the female grave could have played some role in rituals of the Gebel Ramlah inhabitants.

Of special interest are finds that may testify to the beliefs of the population discussed here. Namely, in two cases from cemetery E-01-2, skulls were found that indicated tooth replacement in antiquity. In both cases, the teeth were apparently collected and repositioned by Neolithic people after being disturbed by later burials. In the first case, a young female’s maxillary anterior alveoli contained a combination of mandibular and misplaced maxillary teeth (Irish et al. 2005). In the second case, another young female’s maxilla and mandible contained two incorrectly placed teeth. Also in the same cemetery, four bracelets were found encircling a right humerus (Fig. 38), which had been moved from its original anatomical position during the deposition of a later burial. However, the bracelets were maintained in place by the insertion of the individual’s own right ulna and radius that had been fractured post-mortem.

Such manipulation suggests that the intention was to repair the damage caused during the insertion of later interments. These intentions are supported by the discoveries, from cemetery E-03-2, of two other skulls with mis-positioned teeth. In one case, the right orbit contained eighteen of the individual’s teeth (Fig. 39); in the other, the nasal aperture contained one tooth. All of these examples suggest a deep conviction about the importance of body preservation, i.e., keeping it together, ideally in an undisturbed state. Perhaps this was necessary to secure eternal life—similar to the belief that is so popular throughout all of ancient Egyptian civilization.

In general, in all of the investigated cemeteries, there were no indications of social differentiation. Such differences are clearly present in the Final Neolithic sites studied for many years near Nabta Playa, including a megalithic grave in which a four-year old child was buried; other megaliths and fields of stone stelae were also constructed there (Wendorf and Schild 2001). Such constructions prove the presence of a developed social system, in which a leader was able to organize difficult enterprises. In one Gebel Ramlah cemetery, the
identification of an individual exhibiting chronic stress from flexing and bending when lifting and carrying objects makes us wonder. These types of activities are not typical for cattle-keepers. Perhaps this person took part, willingly or not, in the erection of the megaliths in the Ceremonial Center not far from his village.

The communities using the cemeteries described above were almost the last dwellers of the dying savanna, which is today’s desert. The worsening drought soon forced them to migrate toward the Nile Valley, where they undoubtedly brought their culture, organizational system and beliefs contributing to the birth of ancient Egyptian civilization.

Bibliography


http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_13/kobusiewicz.aspx
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