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A SEALED DOUBLE CREMATION
AT MIDDLE ASSYRIAN TELL SABI ABYAD, SYRIA

Recent excavation at Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria has exposed a very substantial part of a Middle Assyrian fortified farmstead or *dunnu*, dated ca. 1225-1120 BCE. From its foundation early in the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, the *dunnu* was maintained by a number of high-ranking officials affiliated with the Assyrian royal house and each bearing the titles of “grand vizier” and “king of Ḫanigalbat”: successively, Aššur-iddin, Šulmānu-mušabši and Ilī-padā. The death of Ilī-padā around 1180 BCE seems to have ushered first into important changes in the layout and organization of the fortress, then into its devastation by a violent conflagration. Shortly afterwards, there were attempts to partially renovate and reconstruct the rural estate, and the occurrence of cuneiform texts reveals the continuing presence of both Assyrian functionaries and a centralized system of administration and control, albeit at a much lower level and on a much smaller scale than before. The renovation primarily concerned the north and northwestern parts of the fortress, whereas the heart of the *dunnu* remained an extensive field of ruins, left to its fate for good and serving for the disposal of ashes and other household waste, and the interment of both adults and children (Akkermans 2006; Akkermans/Wiggermann, in print).

This article in honour of our friend and colleague Hartmut Kühne concerns one of these burials: An extraordinarily rich cremation which dates somewhere between 1180-1140 BCE (building level 4) and which must be associated with the local administration at the site. So far, 38 graves have been uncovered in the *dunnu* at Tell Sabi Abyad, of which 29 were inhumations and nine were cremations. The inhumations consisted of either simple pits or mud-brick tombs, with the deceased lying either in a crouching posture on their side or in an extended position on their back. Children were often buried in large jars. Some of the graves contained funerary gifts in the form of pottery or personal ornaments, others not. The cremations usually consisted of relatively small jars containing the burnt skeletal remains, which were placed in narrow pits. The cremation vessels occasionally contained gifts in the form of beads, whereas pottery and a ram’s skull and other animal bone sometimes laid in the pit, next to the urn.

The cremation of our concern (inventory no. SAB BN98-1) differs from the other cremations to a considerable extent, because of the rich and varied finds in it. The grave consisted of a roughly circular pit about 45 cm in diameter and 115 cm deep, sunk in the corner of a room (thereby damaging the walls) in the northwestern part of the level 4 *dunnu*. Although it stood due next to another series of buildings each inhabited for certainty, the room with the grave was in a dilapidated state at the time of burial. The grave was sunk from what seems to have been a faint walking surface, not a clear-cut floor, into a debris layer, suggesting that the area was open to the elements. No doorway is associated with this surface (an earlier doorway was deeply buried below the refuse accumulation). More debris built up after construction of the burial, consisting of a layer of whitish silica imprints of straw or reeds, covered in its turn by mud-brick fragments, ashes, animal bone and weathered, broken pottery, indicating that the room remained primarily in use for the disposal of waste. It was not until the beginning of building level 3 in the late 12th century BCE that the room was reused for habitation, in association with the construction of a mud-brick floor in it and a passage in one of its walls.

At the base of the burial pit stood a small complete jar with a lightly burnished buff surface, a squarish, inward sloping rim and a ring base, about 40 cm high and 12 cm in rim diameter – a rather rare type of vessel in the later building levels at Tell Sabi Abyad but regularly used for burial purposes at the site (fig. 2, no. 1; cf. Duistermaat, in print). Significantly, the urn appears to have been sealed before being placed in the grave, and the clay sealing carrying a cylinder-seal impression was still at its original position on the neck of the vessel at the time of discovery. The reverse of the sealing shows that the opening of the vessel had originally been covered by a piece of cloth, tightly knot together by a rope around the neck of the jar and subsequently sealed. Although cremation vessels at Tell Sabi Abyad were probably all originally covered prior to interment (another cremation jar was equipped with a small pottery bowl, which was used as a lid), the question why in this case the urn had to be sealed as well remains intriguing but unanswered. The cylinder-seal impression on the obverse of the sealing shows a galloping, winged horse followed by a foal (fig. 1), produced in the typical Middle Assyrian iconographic style of the 12th century BCE (see e.g. Matthews 1990, 1992).

The physical-anthropological investigation of the burnt skeletal remains inside the burial vessel revealed two individuals, because of the presence of several identical anatomical parts.¹ In addition, these parts show a clear distinction in robustness, indicating that some of them belonged to a female person and others to a male person (tables 1-2). Most of the bone fragments belong to the female individual (whose post-cranial skeleton was very frail). Both persons must have been at an age between 20 and 40 years at the time of death, since the epiphyses are closed and the sutures are open; actually, an age between 20 and 30 years is not unlikely, as not even a beginning of suture obliteration was observed.

The cremated material collected for burial in the vessel comprises about 60-70% of the original skeletons (table 1). The skeletal inventory with its diverse anatomical parts shows that no specific selection was made for the gathering and burial of the bone fragments. The bones appear to have been exposed to a heat varying from 450 to over 800° C (table 1). Several green discolorations were observed on parts of the knee joint, which may have been caused by the presence of metal (bronze) objects on the pyre. One Wormian bone was found (a non-metric trait), although its precise location on the skull remains unclear. No pathological aberrations were recognized, so the cause of death remains unknown.

Interestingly, amidst the human cremated remains were those of several animals (table 3).² There were the incinerated fragments of the head and the legs of a ram over three years old, which must have been on the pyre together with the human corpses. The occurrence of a ram's skull and other animal bone has been repeatedly recognized in cremations (and occasionally in inhumations as well) at Tell Sabi Abyad, although the remains were never burnt

1 Physical-anthropological research evidently depends on the quality of the skeletal remains, which in its turn is inhibited by the burning process and the way in which the remains were collected and buried afterwards. The following features are described: skeletal part, weight, fragmentation and burning degree (tables 1-3; see also Wahl 1982). The inventory of the bones in the several anatomical parts of the skeleton is indicative of the completeness of the remains (McKinley 1989). The skeletal parts are the neurocranium, viscerocranium, axial skeleton, diaphyseal parts of the extremities, and the epiphyses (cf. Smits 2006). Sex and age diagnosis are based on diagnostic morphological traits on the cranial and pelvic bones, which are described according to the methods of the Workshop of European Anthropologists (WEA 1980).

2 The animal remains were determined by R. Maliepaard, Amsterdam Archaeological Centre.

so far; rather, they were always interred in the flesh (according to their anatomical traits) in the burial pit, next to the urn (see e.g. Akkermans/Rossmesl 1990: 25). They may have been part of the mourners' gifts to the deceased or, perhaps more likely (in view of the selective skeletal parts), they were the remains of a funeral meal by the mourners.

Special attention is drawn to the presence of the (burnt) third phalange of a lion, which points to the inclusion of a lion-skin cloak on the funeral pyre. The dead may either have rested upon the skin or it may have covered them as a shroud. This find recalls the occurrence of bear claws in Neolithic cremation graves in northwestern Europe (see e.g. Parker Pearson 1999: 7; Smits 2000).

In addition to the above, the burial vessel contained an unusually large amount of jewellery in the form of beads, pendants, gem settings, rings and bracelets, made of a wide variety of materials: stone, bone, faience, wood, gold, bronze and iron. Many of these objects appeared to have been blackened by fire or even melted and deformed by the heat of the funerary pyre. They most likely should not be considered as funerary gifts but as the personal belongings of the deceased, accompanying them on the pyre and their journey to the hereafter. Evidently, we cannot tell whether the ornaments were originally divided either equally or selectively over both persons represented by this cremation.

The majority of the finds were stone beads ($n=455$), predominantly made of a light-grayish, sometimes whitish or black, veined stone or, rarely, rock crystal, which were undoubtedly originally part of a number of necklaces (see fig. 2, nos. 2-5 for the reconstructed necklaces). They ranged in size from less than 0.3 cm to over 3.4 cm in length or diameter and occurred in many different shapes: cylindrical, conical, biconical, spherical, ribbed, octagonal, triangular, rectangular, circular but flattened, and lozenge. One pinkish limestone bead was in the form of a frog (fig. 3, no. 6) and another black bead (steatite?) occurred in the shape of a "duck weight". There were also seven pomegranate-like beads made of faience and one rounded bead made of wood. A single oval faience bead, about 1.9 cm long and 1.1 cm wide, had one convex and one flat side (fig. 3, no. 7). The convex side is smoothed but its edges carry an incised rib pattern. The flat side is also symmetrically decorated, although the motif is difficult to understand (birds with spread wings?). Possibly this bead served as a seal or amulet.

Amidst the beads was also one whitish faience scarab, about 1.9 cm long and longitudinally pierced (fig. 3, no. 8). The representation on its base shows the Horus falcon in the middle, flanked by the uraeus and another object. Scarabs have been found as part of necklaces in two other Late Bronze Age cremations at Tell Sabi Abyad (cf. Akkermans/Rossmesl 1990; Akkermans/Wiggermann, in print). In view of their find circumstances, it is likely that they had an ornamental meaning or were used as amulets. However, their role as seals cannot be excluded when taking into account that the scarab became one of the most popular shapes for seals in the Near East in the Iron Age (see e.g. Moorey 1980; Buchanan/Moorey 1988; Herboldt 1992).

Metal objects occurred in the form of ornaments made of gold ($n=14$), bronze ($n=6$) and iron ($n=4$). The golden objects consisted of two rings, one earring, three pendants, one bead, five gem settings and two ear (?) ornaments, all intricately worked (fig. 3, nos. 9-13; fig. 3, nos. 14-15). The rings about 2.1 cm in diameter were made of worked, flat sheets of gold, bow-shaped in section, ca. 0.5 cm wide and 0.1 cm thick (fig. 3, nos. 14-15). The single crescent-shaped earring about 1.4 cm long carried three pairs of gold wire (fig. 3, no. 10).

Two pendants each showed granulated triangles made of gold grains, and a granulated star at the tubular base (fig. 3, no. 11). Another pendant consisted of a golden “ball” about 1.6 cm in diameter, embraced by a flattened iron ring ca. 2.5 cm in diameter and 1 cm wide; the ball was secured to the ring by means of two bent protrusions (fig. 3, no. 12). The five gem settings occurred in the form of long-drawn but narrow, oval golden “boxes”, which had a small circular perforation on one side and which were open on the other side, undoubtedly to hold a precious stone or other ornament (fig. 3, no. 13; however, none of the objects found in the urn fitted these settings). One of the long sides carried a row of large gold grains or knobs bounded by gold wire; apparently these objects were meant to be seen from one side only. Finally, there were two crescent-shaped objects, hemispherical in section, which may have served to partly cover the auricles (fig. 3, no. 9). They were about 4 cm long and 0.6 cm wide, with one of the long sides covered with a row of golden knobs bounded on both sides by a gold wire (identical to the gem settings).

The bronze objects consisted of four simple rings between 2.3 and 2.9 cm in diameter and 0.3-0.6 cm thick (fig. 3, nos. 16, 18, 20-21). In addition, there was one bronze cylindrical and longitudinally pierced bead with a crosshatched surface (fig. 3, no. 22), about 1.7 cm long and 0.8 cm in diameter, as well as one square, dice-shaped “weight” with flat, smoothed surfaces, 1.5 x 1.3 x 1.3 cm (fig. 3, no. 24).

The iron finds included one ring about 2.4 cm in diameter and 0.4 cm thick (fig. 3, nos. 17, 19), and two bracelets or anklets up to 11.2 cm in diameter and 0.6 cm thick, each with a narrow opening with thickened tips. In addition, there was one iron ring associated with a golden ornament (see above). The iron was in all cases heavily corroded and in a poor state of preservation, sometimes with stone beads stuck to the corrosion. Iron, usually in the form of small rings, is rather scarce at Tell Sabi Abyad but it occurs from about 1200 BCE onwards.

There were also 23 small, flat squares or rectangles (fig. 3, no. 25) made of bone, up to 2.7 cm long, 1.1 cm wide and 0.1 cm thick, which may have served as hair ornaments (cf. Akkermans/Rossmesl 1990). The rectangles each had two perforations. Three broken pieces of bone, thin and flat but originally spherical or semispherical in shape, showed a dotted guilloche decoration (fig. 3, no. 24).

Finally, there were two fossilized (limestone) marine shells in the burial vessel (one of which partly blackened due to the fire), as well as 14 small, colourful stones, at least three of which showed traces of polishing or attempts of drilling. Perhaps these were semi-manufactured items intended for bead production, although it is difficult to evaluate their meaning in the context of death and burial.

The richness of finds in this grave is remarkable, when taking into account that almost all other cremations at Tell Sabi Abyad contained either simply a small number of beads or no goods at all (there is only one other cremation with a comparable inventory; cf. Akkermans/Wiggermann, in print). Before it was stated that this cremation contained the burnt remains of two young adults – a man and a woman. Both persons must have died at more or less the same time and both were subsequently cremated and buried together. In view of their sex and age, it is tempting to consider them as spouses, tied to each other both in the terrestrial world and in the hereafter. Although the dead remain unknown to us, they undeniably must have been people of status and wealth. Moreover, the clay sealing with its typical Middle Assyrian representation suggests that they (or their mourners who carried out the burial) were affiliated with the Assyrian administration at Tell Sabi Abyad. Further proof in this respect is provided

by the location of the grave in the immediate vicinity of the buildings of the living – it is unlikely that any outsiders to the local community were allowed to bury their dead here. The burial vessel, too, is entirely of Middle Assyrian style and origin in terms of shape and finish, as is the jewellery found in it (see e.g. Ohuma/Numoto 2001). In short, there can be no doubt that both the dead and their mourners were part of the local community at Tell Sabi Abyad, the more so if we take into account the sheer magnitude and obvious visibility of the practice of cremation: The burning and burial were not individual acts but involved the entire community. Somewhere on the site there must have been a large funeral pyre, on which the deceased were placed together, fully dressed and equipped with adornments and covered by a lion-skin cloak. A ram was slaughtered for the occasion and its meat was consumed by the mourners either shortly before or during the fire; the remains were thrown into the flames. After the corpses had been burnt, the remains selected for burial from the surface of the extinguished pyre were stored in an urn which was subsequently covered and sealed and finally buried in a specific area very close to the houses of the living.

In view of its stratigraphical position, the grave must belong to the penultimate stage of Middle Assyrian occupation at Tell Sabi Abyad, i.e. the upper building level 4 of the early to mid-12th century BCE. It is recalled that a large part of the *dunnu* was a deserted ruin at this time, thus facilitating its use as a burial site. Interestingly, a small number of cuneiform texts, all in good Middle Assyrian language and script, found in and around the level 4 (and subsequent level 3) architecture shows the continuing presence of local and regional functionaries and of the centralized administration of food products such as sesame. Thus, despite the decrease of its size and the decay of its earlier prestige buildings, the *dunnu* still functioned in an imperial Assyrian system of administration and control, albeit at a much lower level and on a much smaller scale than before (cf. Akkermans/Wiggermann, in press). The duration of use of the level 4 outpost at Tell Sabi Abyad, and hence the date of the grave, remains difficult to establish, but on the basis of the stratigraphy and the textual evidence it probably began around 1180 BCE and it may have lasted for one or two generations, say 20-40 years, till about 1140 BCE at the latest.

Actually, there is good evidence that the practice of cremation began at a modest scale at Tell Sabi Abyad already at about 1220-1200 BCE, shortly after the foundation of the Middle Assyrian administrative seat at the mound, but it increases in importance in the (later) 12th century, comprising roughly one quarter of the burials at the site. Although Middle Assyrian funerary customs in general emphasize inhumation, rather than cremation, the latter apparently became rapidly an accepted form not only of corpse disposal but also of associated ritual and symbolic discourse. The local, Assyrian-dominated community at Tell Sabi Abyad seems to have easily integrated funeral trends of Levantine or Northwest-Syrian origin in its burial repertoire (as is also shown by the repeated occurrence of scarabs in the graves). Once included, the practice of cremation was to stay and rapidly became a predominant treatment of the dead, as is shown by the extensive Iron Age cremation cemeteries at, for example, Hama on the Orontes and Shiukh Fawqani on the Euphrates. Significantly, graves recently uncovered at the latter site revealed several double cremations, as at Tell Sabi Abyad, but also jars containing the burnt skeletal remains of three or even four individuals (adults and children; L. Bachelot, pers. comm. January 2006).

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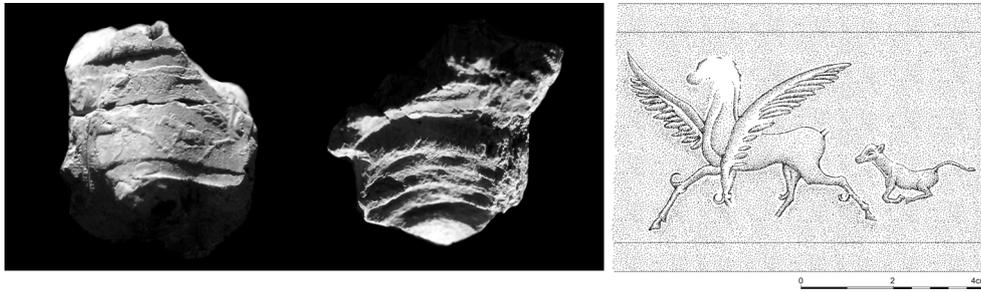


Fig. 1: Clay sealing with cylinder-seal impression.
Left: obverse; middle: reverse; right: reconstruction of the seal impression

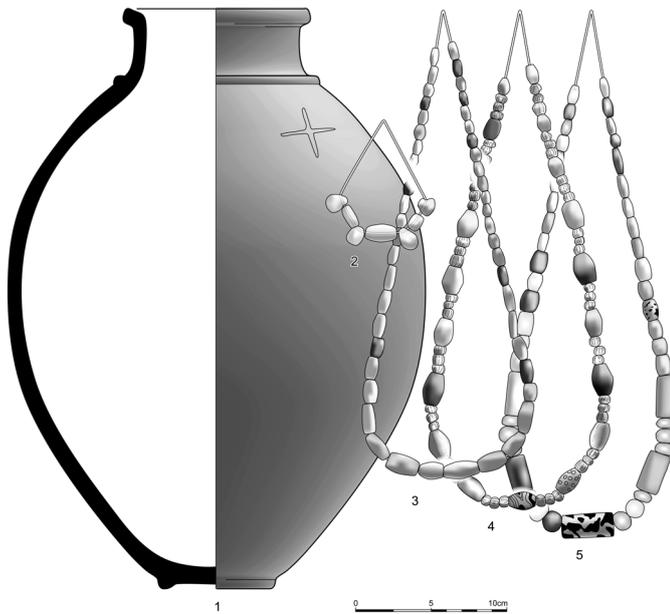


Fig. 2: The cremation vessel and a selection of the small finds in it

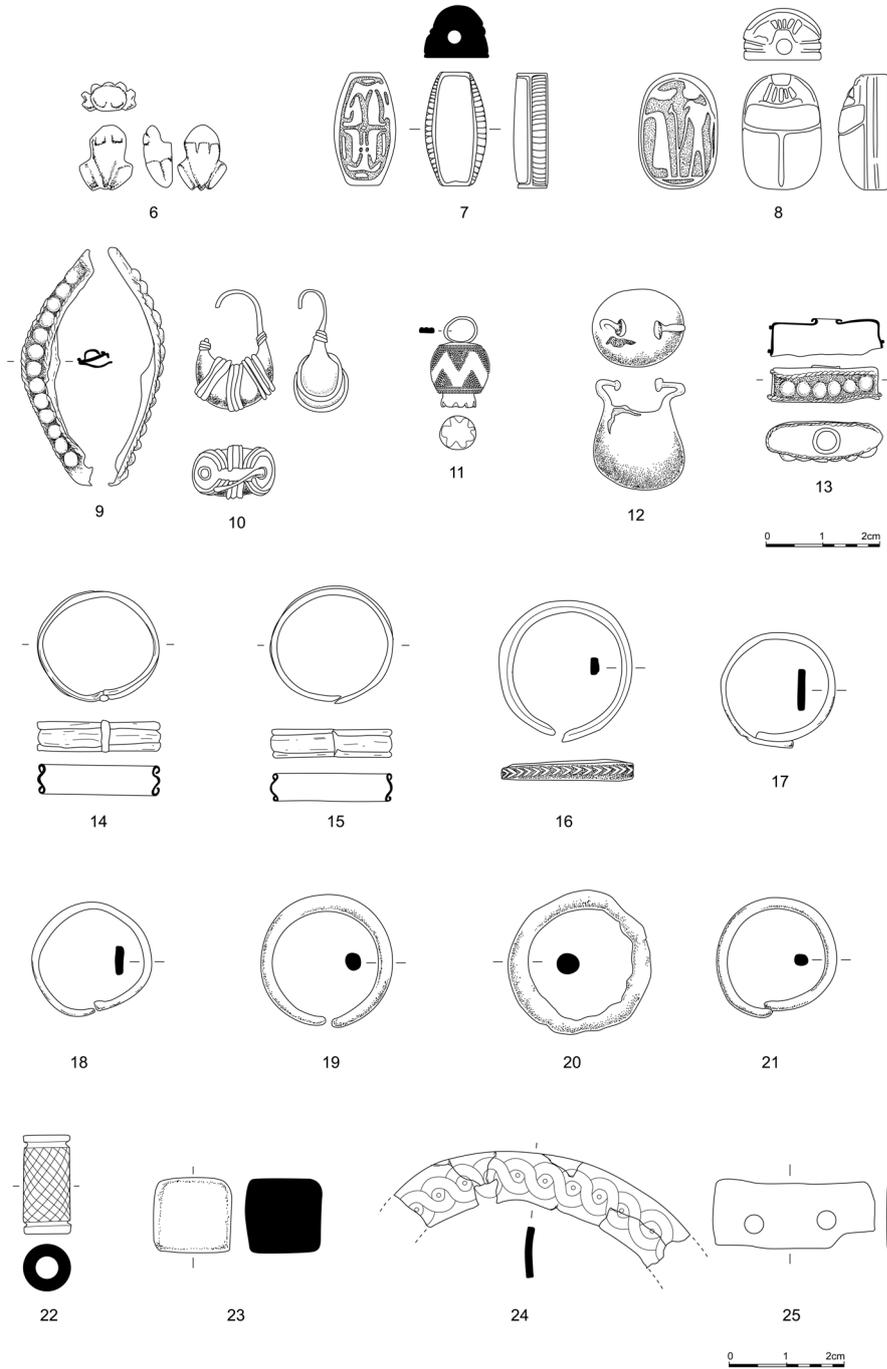


Fig. 3: Selection of small finds in the cremation vessel

Skeletal part	Weight (gram)	Fragmentation (cm)	Burning degree (phase, °C)	Contents (fragments of specific bone present)
Neurocranium	288	7	5 (>800 °C)	frontal bone temporal bone parietal bone occipital bone skull base
Viscerocranium	49	4	4 (650-800 °C)	orbit lacrimal bone zygomatic bone maxilla roots from teeth
Axial	142	9	3 (450-650 °C)	vertebrae costae scapula pelvis
Diaphysis	265	7	3-4 (450-800 °C)	humerus radius ulna femur fibula phalanges (hand and foot)
Epiphysis	65	6	3-4 (450-800 °C)	joints of hand/arm and foot/leg
Residue	650	<1		
Total human remains	1459			

Table 1: Inventory and description of fragmentation and burning degree of the human bones

Cranium	<i>Score female</i>	<i>Score male</i>	<i>Weight</i>
Glabella	-1		3
Nuchal plane	-2		3
Nuchal plane		+1	3
External occipital protuberance	-1		2
External occipital protuberance		+1	2
Temporo-zygomatic process	-1		3
Supramastoid crest	-2		2
Orbit (form & margin) - left		+2	1
Orbit (form & margin) - left + right	-2		1
Pelvis			
Greater sciatic notch	-2		3

Table 2: Sex diagnosis of the human bones

Animal bones	Weight (gram)	Fragmentation (cm)	Burning degree (phase)	Contents (fragments of specific bone present)
Sheep (ram), older than three years	119	7	3 (450-650 °C)	frontal bone temporal bone parietal bone occipital bone skull base frontal bone hyoid bone horn pit humerus (left) radius (left) ulna (left) 4 x phalange III (four hoofs of front and hind legs) metatarsal bone
Lion	3	2	4 (650-800 °C)	phalange III (of the fifth toe of hind leg)
Small rodent	2	1	0 (not burnt)	2 thoracic vertebrae
Total weight animal remains	124			

Table 3: Inventory and description of fragmentation and burning degree of the animal bones