

Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin

Jagiellonian University
Cracow

MULTIPLE AND DISORDERED BURIALS AS SPECIAL
FUNERARY PRACTICES IN EARLY EGYPT – EXAMPLES
FROM TELL EL-FARKHA

The number of burials recorded at Tell el-Farkha after 10 seasons of extensive fieldwork has exceeded a hundred. These numerous and diverse structures comprise for, in fact, three distinct cemeteries that were in use from Dynasty 0 to the Old Kingdom times having belonged to people directly unrelated, though, of the same cultural origin (for more details see: Dębowska-Ludwin in press A). Since the first and second phase of the cemetery represent following evolutionary stages of funeral practices and significant changes took place in the time between the second and third phase of the cemetery it seems we deal with separate chapters in the history of Egyptian burial customs. Below, only graves dated from Dynasty 0 to 2 will be the subject of discussion. Graves nos. 1-53 were published in a general catalogue (Dębowska-Ludwin 2009), the remaining ones selectively in particular articles.

Human skeletal remains dated at the Proto- and Early dynastic periods that were found on the site, unfortunately, are usually very badly preserved. The adverse influence of specific local soil conditions (see: Pawlikowski, Dębowska-Ludwin 2010) made bone material fragile and useful actually only for basic analyses (physical anthropology was held by M. Kaczmarek), however, it has still retained numerous elements of early Egyptian burial rituals. Basing on the data, an attempt to reconstruct the rules according to which early burials were founded becomes possible. The material enables to discuss how strictly the rules were followed and which practices were considered as normal or special and atypical. If phenomenon frequency is taken into consideration, in Tell el-Farkha such abnormal cases appear to be multiple and – generally speaking – disordered burials.

Multiple burials

The most typical form of early Egyptian burial was single body inhumation predominant in all cultural contexts. This is probably why researchers as early as W.M.F. Petrie and J.E. Quibell (1896) devoted so much interest to those unusual cases when more than one individual had occupied a single burial chamber. Also at Tell el-Farkha for over 100 burials only 6 contained more than one body and further 2 were single main burials accompanied by subsidiary ones. The ratio clearly points that multiple burials belong to rather marginal practices, though quite well attested.

Grave no. 1 belongs to the oldest graves registered on the site and it also fits best the widely-held opinion that majority of double burials belonged to mothers and their offspring died in around childbirth. A female aged about 20 had been lying in the most popular position – contracted, left side, head to N, while the skeleton of an infant 0-1 year old was so badly preserved that at the first glance it was nearly invisible. The exact body position of the infant remains indeterminable except the fact that the tiny bones were recorded in the female pelvis area. Without DNA samples we will probably never be able to decide whether we deal with a “mother-and-a-child” case but this very example really points to such a conclusion especially if we would interpret the facts as the eventuality that the infant was unborn yet (the pelvis position) and the female died while giving its birth. The human remains were preserved too badly to determine the answer, but – on the other hand – the whole burial structure and offerings do not indicate unusual situation and with high mortality rate typical for early populations the case would probably be regarded as.

Three other examples (graves nos. 7, 23 and 75) are more disputable. All three are dated at the end of Dynasty 0 or the beginning of Dynasty 1, have similar mud bricked construction and contained 2 bodies. In grave no. 7 these were a female aged 25-35 and an infant 8-9 years old, in grave no. 23 – a female aged 20-30 and a juvenile 15-18 years old, while in grave no. 75 bones preservation state was so weak that only one individual was determined as an adult solely. In grave no. 7 both deceased were lying in the contracted left side position with their heads to N, in grave no. 23 the female had been placed in the contracted left side position with her head to S and the state of the second individual’s skeleton enabled to determine only that his/her head was turned towards S. In grave no. 75 both deceased were lying in the more or less typical contracted position on their right side, their heads to S. Condition of these funerary structures was diversified: only grave no. 75 was discovered undisturbed, grave no. 23 was disturbed probably by younger building activity on the site, whereas grave no. 7 was evidently looted early in antiquity presumably in search for metal objects as tiny gold fragments were registered in the burial chamber. Beside these differences the three burials illustrate the same situation: and adult and a minor

buried together in a single chamber. It seems that in each case both deceased had been positioned in the same way, very close to each other, the younger individual turned his/her back towards the older one. It is not difficult to fall into impression that the older deceased had been trying to protect the younger one even in the afterlife. And even though it is nothing but a speculation harmony noticeable in the graves, their typical structural composition and offerings point that we deal here with a situation ones again considered as typical. If it is the “mother-and-a-child” case (see Stevenson 2006: 14, 17-18), it remains unproved, we cannot even state whether the deceased were related or not but some family relations are a rather tempting explanation of the case.

Graves nos. 52 and 66 are another examples of multiple burials recorded at Tell el-Farkha. They belong to the period around early Dynasty 2, both contained adults who had been buried in a simple pit and devoid of offerings. What is more, in both cases bodies positioning was highly unusual. As far as the weak bones condition allowed it has been stated that grave no. 52 contained remains of probably two adult females and one adult male. The first skeleton was poorly preserved. It had been placed in the contracted position with head to S on a large pottery bowl fragment. Some pelvis bones and one lower limb is presumably connected to the deceased. Beneath, the second skeleton was found. It was the best preserved, lying in the quite typical contracted left side position with head to S, however, her left upper limb was slightly moved from its natural place. Then, by the pit bottom the third deceased was discovered. This skeleton was the worst preserved, reduced to the skull and some very grated teeth. Quite surprising is the arrangement of bodies in the grave – they were lying one above the another and in a sort of a circle. The whole structure was disturbed, it is sure that by some younger human activity on the spot, but it remains undefined whether it was intact then, looted shortly after closing the grave or it was undisturbed but incomplete bodies had been intentionally deposited inside. Also any relations of the deceased are presently impossible to define as no hints of any kind were recorded.

Grave no. 66 is an atypical example, too, since two deceased had been placed one over another in the contracted position – left side, head to NW and right side, head to N. Unfortunately, this grave, too, was discovered in a disturbed condition, most probably unintentionally by younger human activity on the site.

Both structures (52 and 66) represent the cemetery phase when burials were much diversified, both are poor and insignificant in their form. Their interpretation is difficult – they might have been simple and hurriedly made graves of regular but insignificant community members or the structures represent some burial connected ritual activity. Regardless which hypothesis is closer to the facts, five individuals buried in these graves had been treated in an abnormal way. Was it carelessness, award or punishment, it remains unknown.

And finally, when discussing multiple graves, two exceptional cases of subsidiary burials should be at least mentioned here as rare and specific variants of the phenomenon. The first of them is grave no. 100 (Dębowska-Ludwin et al. 2010) with four minor burials found in between layers of bricks the main structure was built of. What is even more surprising, the burials belonged to infants and a juvenile, and one of the infants was interred burnt. Except for the context the sub-burials represent typical poor burials of their times – contracted side position, general orientation along the NS axis. Grave no. 100 is dated to Dynasty 0 and it represents an early stage of the subsidiary burial practice, while the second example, grave no. 55 (Dębowska-Ludwin in press B), dated at the beginning of Dynasty 2 illustrates the twilight of the practice. There, two little mud bricked structures (graves nos. 62 and 64) were parts of a larger funerary enclosure. They were located adjacent to the enclosure wall, by its SW corner but on its outer side. The sub-burials were typical for their time in the group of middle class graves – innumerable though valuable offerings, contracted side position, head to N. Both deceased were infants, what is not surprising in general but in the context it becomes puzzling, since young individuals usually were not buried in such subsidiary structures. Usually, but at Tell el-Farkha the practice appears to have been different. And ones again, it is impossible to answer the question who the children were, why they were chosen or destined and what the relation between the children and the main deceased was.

Disordered burials

The issue of so-called “disordered burials” is much wider. In general, all cases when bones were found in a kind of disorder are taken into consideration but the reason of such a condition was much far diversified. Still, however, they represent marginal and therefore special funerary practices. Some of them are rather easily explainable as damaged or secondary burials, another part of them the author prefers to call “postponed burials” as they refer to larger graves with richer offerings and usually limb bones dislocated only. The most common of these cases are represented by burials where bodies were not fully anatomically arranged. There were also found a few examples with some body parts missing and in two graves only a solitary skull was registered. A puzzling and already mentioned above discovery is an infant subsidiary burial from grave no. 100 with clearly burnt bones, too. No traces of mutilation practices were registered, although unsatisfying preservation state could cover their traces up and presently it is impossible to state that they were absolutely absent.

Grave no. 12 is the most obvious example among “disordered burials”. The skeleton of a 20-25 years old male was found dismembered, disordered and incomplete. The grave mud bricked construction and categories of goods suggest a typical middle class burial, the condition of human remains and distribution



Fig. 1 – burial chamber in grave no. 91

of much damaged objects in the chamber prove serious and uncompromising robbery which turned a quite modest (at least in its size) burial into a sort of cemetery dump. It is clear that the condition of the grave covered any eventual traces of special practices up, but – on the other hand – looting really seems the most convenient explanation for the “disorder”.

Another quite easily explainable example forms grave no. 69. There, in a two chamber brick construction, equipped in 23 objects (mostly pottery vessels) a 30-40 years old female had been buried. The skeleton position – a pile of bones with the skull on its top – is a copybook solution applied in secondary burial cases. That is why also the reason for which the human remains had been organized in the way seems rather little disputable – the woman had passed away far from the settlement and/or her remains were transferred from one place to the final one, which was from a point we do not know regarded as better than the previous and/or temporary one.

Far more intriguing are examples set by graves nos. 2, 4, 24, 27, 91 (fig. 1) and 114 (fig. 2). Half of the group was found disturbed, while the rest was doubtlessly unearthed intact, still secured with perfectly shaped superstructures – with no robbery or any other after-burial interference signs inside burial chambers. Deceased in graves nos. 4, 24, 27 and 114 were lying in the contracted left side position with their heads mostly to N (in grave no. 27 to S) whereas

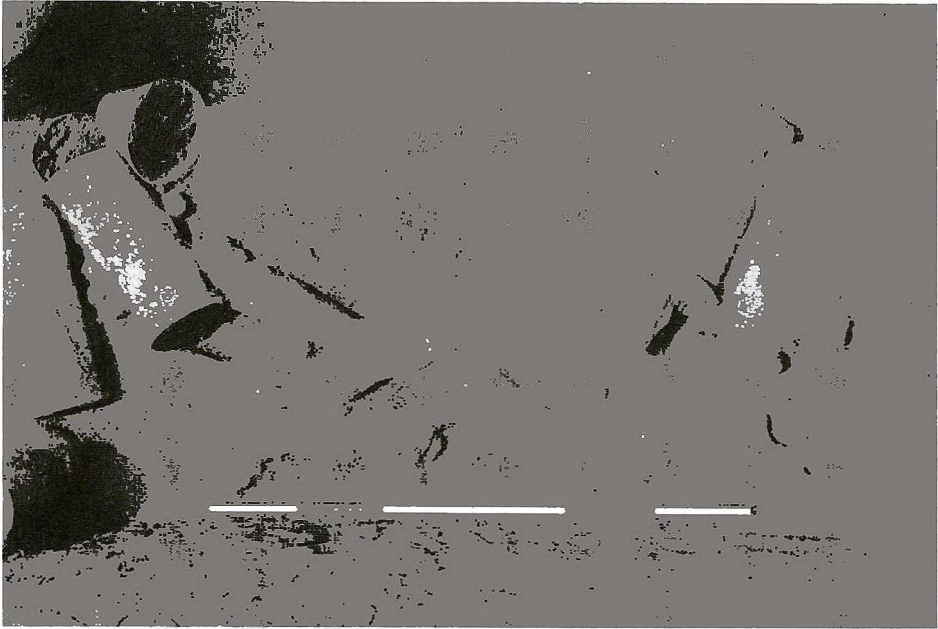


Fig. 2 – disordered body position in grave no. 114

in graves nos. 2 and 91 on their backs, the heads to N. In all cases the disorder concerned mainly limbs and mandibles. All bodies were identified as belonging to adults (half males, half females), usually around their thirties. The majority of the group of burials (except for grave no. 27) represents wealthy tombs beautifully furnished with carefully composed and valuable objects (like various types of pottery and stone vessels, cosmetic palettes, metal and bone objects, personal adornments). The internal space within burial chambers had been visibly well thought out and planned, whole structures had been strongly secured with over-ground structures (graves nos. 2, 24 and 114), mats and liquid mud poured into chambers that stopped robbery attempts but also contributed to the pitiful state of bones' preservation. It is a puzzling coincidence – so much care, planning and effort invested into preparation of a perfect burial – as it had probably been assumed – with such a friction represented by disordered bodies. The facts are clear, what their reason was, it is much more difficult to answer. In the author's opinion we should consider "postponed burials" here, that is eventuality when some amount of time (although not significantly long-lasting) elapsed between the funeral and the actual death date of a tomb owner – a situation slightly different from typical secondary burials with corpses intentionally reburied. While awaiting completion of bricked structure and funerary goods collection the body must have suffered fast progressing decaying process, which was the main

cause of limbs' disorder. It remains the question why – with all this perfection visible in structure and offerings' details – the deceased was not posed in the “proper” way. Graves nos. 2 and 114 seem to throw some light on the riddle. There, bodies were moved from their typical position in the chamber's centre towards one of the walls partially crushed by fallen pots, therefore the author considers a possibility that the corpses had been deposited in a kind of container made of some undefined perishable materials, most probably a bag, that kept the loosened body parts together but did not prevent from their disarrangement. If it really was the case, it did not applied to all postponed burials, since in grave no. 4 some phalanges and vertebrae were found scattered around the main part of the corpse. So, when accepting that the majority of so-called postponed burials had practical purposes, still some unknown ritual practices should be taken into consideration.

More questions on the ritual motivated practices comes into mind after considering the case of graves nos. 14 and 19. Both burials comprised only solitary skulls. In the former one the skull was found inside a pottery jar that might have been only an element of a larger set of offerings that perished with the actual tomb destruction (a single row of bricks was registered by the pot). Nevertheless, it does not explain why the human head was deposited into a jar. What is more, the doubts are even stronger when compared with grave no. 19, where nothing but a skull was discovered. We obviously deal here with a special practice, but its frequency gives little material for further analyses.

All the discussed above disordered burials are representative for the first phase of the cemetery at Tell el-Farkha and are dated at Dynasty 0/beginning of Dynasty 1. Graves nos. 52 and 53 are the last and youngest examples of incomplete burials to be mentioned here. They are connected to early Dynasty 2 times and belonged to the poorest members of the community. Both graves were presumably unintentionally disturbed by younger human activity, grave no. 52 was already presented (the one with three individuals), while grave no. 53 contained only some bones of the lower body part. The former structure causes some interpretational difficulties but the latter one seems to be just a simple, poor and much damaged grave. Detecting special and ritual practices there appears rather an overinterpretation, however, a margin of doubt should be left, too.

The practice of intentionally disordered burials appears to be related to the early phase of the cemetery at Tell el-Farkha. The majority of recorded cases was restricted to wealthy equipped tombs of affluent middle class representatives. All the quoted examples illustrate special funerary practices, although their meaning might have been diversified. The “postponed burials” were most probably side effects of some technical difficulties in a tomb preparation process that in the second phase were visibly solved since no such cases were discovered. Evolving embalming practices might have been one reasons of the situation as well as one of its results, apart from its presumable religious context. Really “suspiciously”

looking graves (in the search of ritual practices) are graves nos. 14 and 19, subsidiary burials from grave no. 100 and finally younger grave no. 52. We must admit that in these cases standard explanations fail.

Special funerary practices seem to be more representative for the younger period, when burial customs were on their early formative stage, whereas, changes progressing in time were accompanied by overall society evolution and adapted old rules for more and more stratified and internally diversified life organization. In the quoted cases we deal with atypical burial practices, but their reason remains satisfactorily undefined. Some examples are nearly explainable, though even then we must be aware the mass information that was inevitably lost due to advanced decaying processes which might have been in power to completely change our present opinions.

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