

# The ancestor worship in the third millennium BCE

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## *ABSTRACT*

Ancestor worship is a combination of many distinctive elements, beliefs and rituals that had an important social meaning in ancient societies. Remains of ancestors and associated beliefs and rituals have been found in numerous archaeological sites of the Near East and the role of ancestors in ancient communities should not be underestimated.

This paper examines the characteristics of ancestor worship, with a focus on the archaeological remains found in the major geographical centres of Mesopotamia dated to the third millennium BCE. Through the analysis of this phenomenon this article argues that the study of ancestor worship could be used to investigate many different aspects of ancient societies, such as changes in the political, economic and religious systems and the movements of populations or cultures.

## *KEYWORDS*

Ancestor, ancestor worship, ancestors' beliefs and rituals, Bronze Age, third millennium BCE, Mesopotamia, Syria, Israel

## 1. Introduction

Death and the loss of a relative, despite being a natural part of life which almost every human being has to face at some point, have been treated in many different ways throughout history and while death transforms the human body in an expected way, funerary practices may «mask, subvert, or re-imagine the social status of the dead with unexpected results».<sup>1</sup> Different cultures around the world have created several types of rituals involving ancestor veneration in order to manage problems related to the biological loss and the consequent social transformation. These differences are reflected in the meanings and categories of ancestor worship that are far from being entirely defined, although the term ‘ancestor’ has a long tradition of interpretations and epistemological backgrounds.

Using the case of Mesopotamian archaeological findings (fig. 1), this paper will analyse the archaeo-

logical remains and meanings of ancestor worship in the third millennium BCE. It will first define who was considered an ancestor and his/her characteristics, and then analyse the different stages of veneration. Three main veneration phases (fig. 2) can be distinguished:

- the pre-burial phase with the decomposition stages and the start of the ‘deification process’;
- the burial phase with the creation of the grave and relocation of the ancestral bones in the tomb;
- the post-burial phase with post-interment offerings (such as food) and rituals (such as *kispum*).<sup>2</sup>

This analysis aims to investigate the social significance of this cult, any similarities with ancestor rituals performed in Mesopotamia and the role that ancestor worship played in defining ancient cultures and social identities.

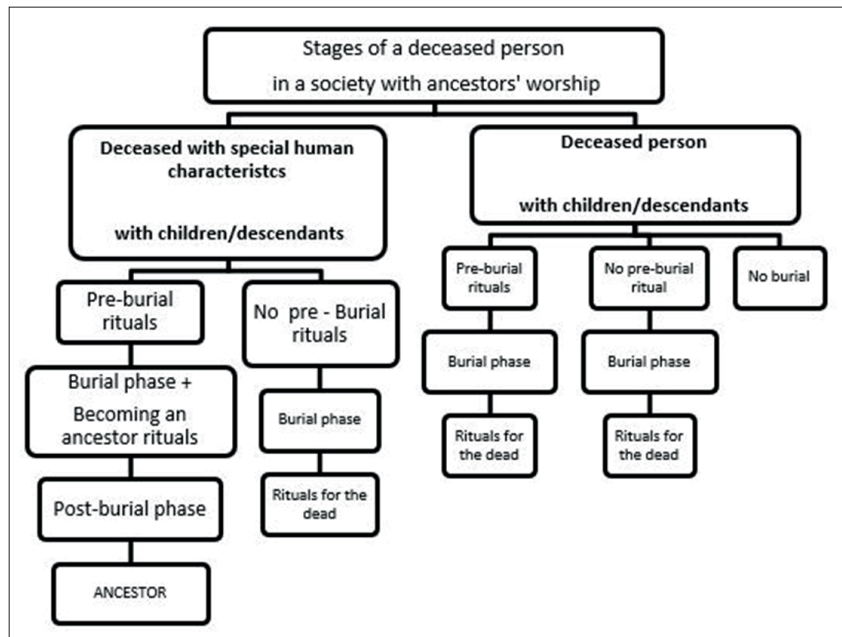


FIGURE 1  
Archaeological sites included in this study (modern names in brackets; source and date of photo: Google Earth 2019)

<sup>1</sup> CRADIC 2017, p. 219; see also UCKO 1969; PARKER PEARSON 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For similar categories see also CRADIC 2017, pp. 219-248.

FIGURE 2  
Ritual surrounding death  
in a society with ancestor worship<sup>3</sup>



## 2. Who was an ancestor?

The definition of who was considered an ancestor in the ancient Near Eastern society of the Early and Middle Bronze Age is still a debatable topic. The ancestor is primarily defined as a person who died and left behind a variable amount of living descendants. Ancestors are further defined as «dead member(s) of society who are remembered and venerated as the source of entitlement and/or identity by their descendants, periodically or intermittently, through active lines of communication usually in the form of rituals and sacralisation of places».<sup>4</sup> Such definitions by themselves, however, are reductive and as suggested by Campbell, the «myriad terms for something like 'ancestors' and their varied connotations in the many languages of the world alone should suggest the polyvalence and discursive nexus of memory, kinship, identity, power and place».<sup>5</sup>

In societies with some concept of the afterlife, as those of Mesopotamia and the Levant, the human

being was believed to exist beyond the death of the human body.<sup>6</sup> In those cultures, in fact, the death was seen not as a definitive separation but as a transitional phase from a 'physical human existence' to a more 'spiritual existence', as a ghost for example.<sup>7</sup> Death, however, even if it is a necessary step in acquiring ancestor-hood it is not a «sufficient condition for the attainment of ancestor-hood».<sup>8</sup> In fact, death itself «has no deifying virtue»,<sup>9</sup> as Durkheim affirmed, and the deceased «do not necessarily become ancestors automatically after they die».<sup>10</sup> Instead, ancestor-hood was a privileged status acquired after a series of pre-conditions were satisfied and through the performance of numerous rituals.<sup>11</sup> These series of rituals, performed by the living, activated a transformational process which enabled the deceased to lose their human characteristics and acquire supernatural powers, thus, developing from a

<sup>6</sup> TEINZ 2012, p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> TEINZ 2012, p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> FORTES, DIETERLEN (eds.) 1965, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> DURKHEIM 1915 (1964<sup>5</sup>), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> MATSUMOTO 2010, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> TEINZ 2012, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> For a similar graph see also TEINZ 2012, fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup> MATSUMOTO 2010.

<sup>5</sup> CAMPBELL 2016, p. 82.

status of deceased to the final status of an ancestor.<sup>12</sup> These protocols were performed periodically at the grave or in designated remembering places not only to 'transform' the deceased to an ancestor but also as 'means of remembering'.<sup>13</sup>

This 'deification' process ensured that the ancestor was an almost divine figure with potent powers which could affect human events and that he/she could not make mistakes in his/her judgments. In fact, after the 'deification' process, the ancestor held supreme authority, and no other living person maintained decision-making autonomy without the ancestors' permission because the ancestors had 'the last word' in every decision.<sup>14</sup> For their authority and control over human beings, ancestors were worshipped and revered many years after the death of the 'human body'. Ancestors were considered powerful spirits that could affect the life of their living descendants either by helping or punishing them and ancestor worship is based on this ambivalent power.<sup>15</sup> The descendants, through specific rituals, could either thank the ancestor, ask for his/her help or use special practices to change the will or placate the anger of the ancestor.<sup>16</sup>

The ancestors' interest could extend to the whole of human affairs and the decision-making of the entire community of the living, especially if the ancestor was a king or member of the elite before death. Ancestors were considered 'active agents' who could make decisions that affected human life or the choices of the living.<sup>17</sup> They also had an important role in political and economic dealings and decisions. Consequently political, social and religious aspects of ancient societies were closely linked with the worship of ancestors.

The studies of ancestor worship have created different interpretations used to explain reasons and meanings of this veneration. The most recognised interpretations state that ancestors could have been employed for creating a strong identity and a com-

pact social system, giving explanations to questions otherwise inexplicable to the living, resolving problems that cannot be managed by the living and justifying the leader and/or the elite family powers within the society. These interpretations are linked to different types of ancestors who have different characteristics, meanings and functions. There are three broad categories of ancestors:

- the biological ancestors tasked with supporting, protecting and guiding the family with which they were linked;
- the guardian ancestors who cared about the entire social system and the relationships between different families within the whole community; they were also able to protect people who were not blood-related to them;
- the spiritual ancestors who were worshipped by a large number of people and were considered important for the whole community because they had the critical task of guiding and advising the ruler and the elite leaders. Only people who distinguished themselves or helped the community during their 'mortal' life, such as heroes, rulers or elite officials, could become spiritual ancestors.<sup>18</sup>

Rituals and beliefs related to biological, guardian and spiritual ancestors were transmitted from generation to generation, initially in oral form. At the beginning of the cult, it took the form of memory that had been transmitted within families for generations through the use of oral stories and other forms of social interactions.<sup>19</sup> These stories led to the creation of a social memory based on a shared past and ancestors, which was used to legitimise the social position of a group as well as their role within society. In this belief system, ancestor worship became a social mechanism that served to affirm the connection of kinship between families and, in a society made up of family clans, it also helped the creation of a social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the

<sup>12</sup> MATSUMOTO 2010, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> MATSUMOTO 2010, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> FORTES 1959, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> FORTES 1959.

<sup>16</sup> SPIER 1957.

<sup>17</sup> LANERI 2011a.

<sup>18</sup> N.B. These categories have been created only for explicative purposes and to better categorise the different interpretations, therefore they should not be interpreted as a standard canon. The meanings of the ancestor worship changed according to cultural, chronological and geographical variables.

<sup>19</sup> JONKER 1995.

<sup>20</sup> GLUCKMAN 1937, p. 129.

social memory which led to the creation of a collective identity (a range of memories shared by a number of people within the same group), contributed to the development of a more stable social situation, in which the elite and the royal family could have a stronger authority and power. This social meaning acquired even more importance during the third and second millennium BCE, a period connected with a state of political, social and economic change, when ancestor worship (in some cultures of the Near East) was used with the purpose of strengthening relations and the social structure.<sup>21</sup>

During the Bronze Age, in fact, a primary interest of rising Near Eastern dynasties was control over every aspect of the funerary rituals and ancestor worship as these served to legitimate identity and power in a changing socio-economic system. Therefore, in this period, the various aspects of this worship were modified over time following the needs of the elite. In this period the Near Eastern ancestors played a preeminent role as active agents in supporting the elite's power in making political and economic decisions, as proved from the textual sources from Mari,<sup>22</sup> Ebla,<sup>23</sup> and Ugarit.<sup>24</sup>

Written sources can offer information useful to understand the thought processes behind certain archaeological remains and if we combine textual evidence with the latter, these suggest that ancestor worship in the Near East was evolving over time and some of its basic elements were shared among the Mesopotamian sites. These shared elements are: the presence of ceramic cooking and storage vessels, the occurrence of food, post-burial offerings, intramural and residential graves, underground burials, other types of tombs for 'special' deceased and tomb complexes.<sup>25</sup> This paper will analyse these categories in detail, following the discussion of the three phases (pre-burial phase, burial phase and post-burial phase) of ancestor worship.

In the next section the author will attempt to combine textual sources with archaeological remains

to study the main aspects of the Near Eastern ancestor worship during the third millennium BCE. Three case studies, Tell Banat, Umm el Marra and Jerablus Tahtani with their mortuary complexes and monumental tombs will be analysed as they exemplify a conspicuous corpus of data on this subject.

### 3.1 Ancestor worship

#### 3.1 The pre-burial phase

During the Bronze Age, and in particular throughout the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia «not all who died were mortal»,<sup>26</sup> in other words the death of the physical body, as already mentioned, did not mean a rupture of the relationship between the living and the deceased, but rather a moment used to reinforce the family relationship through a series of rituals.

In these ancient Near Eastern societies the veneration of the ancestors was usually performed using prayers, rituals, and offerings and accompanied or preceded by different kinds of burials. These sequences of reciprocal obligations were enacted, first of all, by the eldest son, who had the duty of 'taking care' of the deceased parent, and who acquired after that the ancestor's inheritance and privilege to continue the story of the family.<sup>27</sup> An important example of these obligations is provided by an ancient text, known as "Duties of an Ideal Son", from the city of Ugarit. In the text it is possible to read several responsibilities of the eldest son, who is designated to be the custodian of the family and has the responsibility to take care of the deceased father (the ancestor).<sup>28</sup> Similar ideas of duties and inheritance can be found in the customs and beliefs of the ancient city of Mari.<sup>29</sup>

The first rituals which allowed the deceased person to become a venerated ancestor started soon after the physical death and took place during the fu-

<sup>21</sup> LANERI 2011a, pp. 121-135.

<sup>22</sup> BONECHI, CATAGNOTI 1996, pp. 89-116.

<sup>23</sup> ARCHI 2015, pp. 1-854.

<sup>24</sup> HEALEY 1995, pp. 186-191.

<sup>25</sup> CREECH 2015.

<sup>26</sup> SANDERS 2013, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> CALHOUN 1980, pp. 304-319.

<sup>28</sup> CREECH 2015.

<sup>29</sup> CREECH 2015; see also SCHMIDT B. 1996. *The Beneficent Dead*. Winona Lake.

neral and before the burial. The second part focused on the decomposition stage. During this stage, the bones of the deceased could be: relocated in contexts with a strong political significance; divided among the relatives to create a physical connection between the ancestor and his/her family; divided among people not directly connected by family ties,<sup>30</sup> with the intent of creating new social connections under a common ancestor. In other cultures, some specific parts of the skeleton were considered with high level of value (e.g. the ancestor's skull in Mesopotamian prehistory<sup>31</sup>) and could be relocated to a secondary location, such as the house of the descendant or a shrine.

After the decomposition process and in some cases the division of the ancestral bones, veneration practices consisted of initially private rituals that took place in the presence of the family. These rituals were held first at home, later they were performed in a more elaborate structure such as a temple and/or a monumental tomb used by the whole community. Monumental and funerary complexes/mausoleums had been created for families and for elites and these were found all along the Euphrates Valley, as for example Tell Banat, Jerablus Tahtani, and Tell Ahmar,<sup>32</sup> aboveground architecture for deceased elites has also been unearthed at Tell Bi'a, Gre Virike, and Umm el-Marra.<sup>33</sup> In these different types of sepulchres the worship of ancestors went beyond the family and it was extended not only to close relatives. In fact, in these new types of funerary structures it was possible to bury large groups of deceased and thus these tombs contained more than one ancestor. The dead of these burial groups can either follow a kinship line of family type or race or community and they may also be of different generations.<sup>34</sup>

Disarticulated skeletons of 12 individuals (one infant, four children, two adults and five mature adults) were found in Tomb 302 (fig. 3) the largest and most elaborate grave of the mortuary com-

plex of Jerablus Tahtani.<sup>35</sup> This mortuary complex, located at the south end of the settlement, consisted of Tomb 302 and a series of adjacent pithoi and pit graves. The burial practices at Jerablus Tahtani, probably consisted of a many stage process which started with death, the disarticulation of the body, the creation of a primary interment and then continued with the secondary burial processes such as the relocation of the bones. During this last stage particular parts of the skeleton were separated from the body and deposited in specific locations, such as the skulls of adult which were carefully deposited on the floor near the visitors to the chamber.<sup>36</sup> This stage culminated with the transfer of the human bones inside the main chamber of Tomb 302 and the relocation of older inhumations.<sup>37</sup> The human remains inside Tomb 302 were not anatomically intact and this could suggest the interpretation that the disarticulated bones relocated in this tomb lost their individual characteristics to be admitted and worshipped into a collective identity.

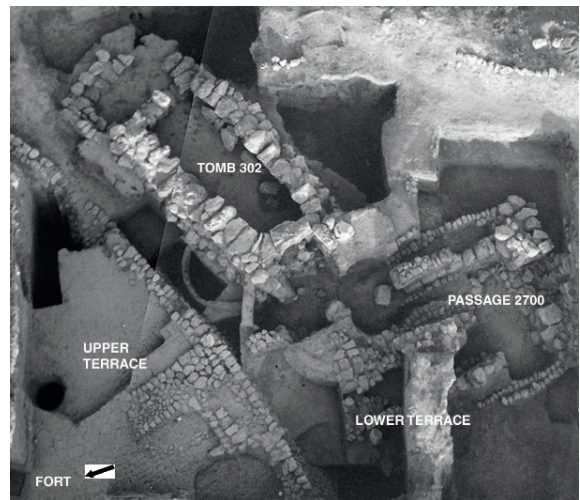


FIGURE 3  
Tomb 302 at Jerablus Tahtani (photo E. Peltenburg)<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> LANERI 2011b, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> KUIJT 2009.

<sup>32</sup> NISHIMURA 2015.

<sup>33</sup> NISHIMURA 2015.

<sup>34</sup> PORTER 2002a, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> PELTENBURG (ed.) 2015, pp. 37-98.

<sup>36</sup> SANG 2010, p. 208.

<sup>37</sup> SANG 2010, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> PELTENBURG 2008, fig. 8, p. 231.

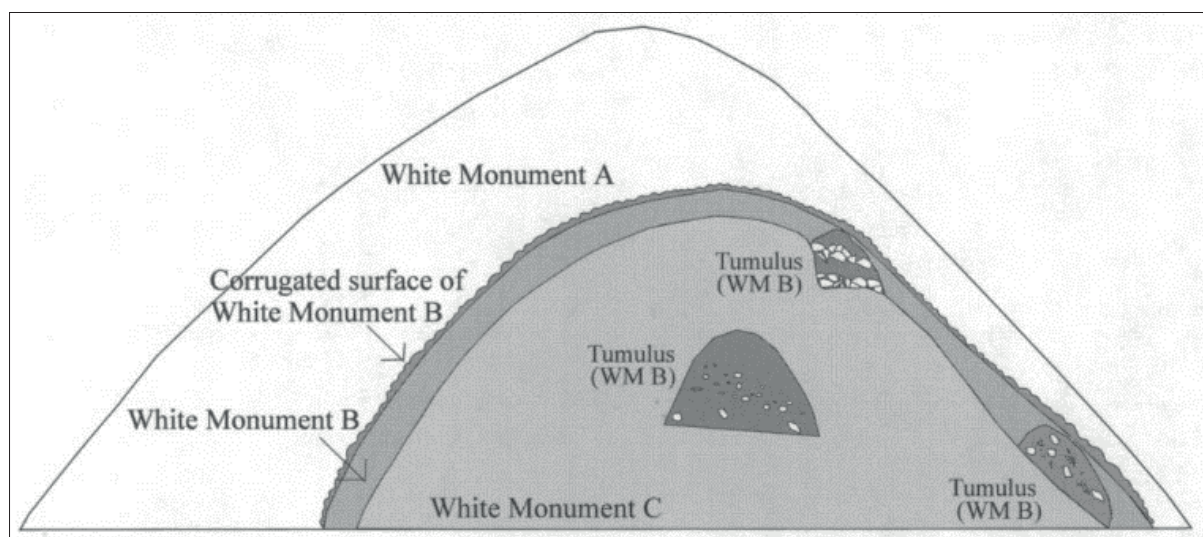


FIGURE 4  
White Monuments of Tell Banat North  
(schematic construction phases)<sup>39</sup>

A multistage burial process of disarticulation, selection, and burning of skeletal remains, which probably allowed the deceased to be part of an ancestral group, was performed at the site of Tell Banat.

The site of Tell Banat North (fig. 4) is composed of free standing and somewhat pyramidal mortuary monuments named the “White Monuments”.<sup>40</sup> These monuments were created and used over a period of three to four hundred years, «from at least about 2700/2600 BCE (but probably earlier) until 2300 BCE». <sup>41</sup> The last version of the White Monument, termed White Monument A, is the visible phase of these mortuary monuments and it represents a single act of construction.<sup>42</sup> Underneath there is White Monument B, a thick layer of white terra pisé which unified the more ancient White Monument C and a number of small tumuli constructed around the oldest monument. The White Monument B was built during the period of first expansive occupation (Period IV)<sup>43</sup> and the White Monument C indicated that it was used for a con-

siderable period. Inside the White Monuments of Tell Banat were buried a large number of deceased, but the selection criteria for these inhumations is uncertain. Individuals buried in those places may have been chosen because they could have been: part of a family, part of a particular group, significant members of the city or of a lineage or they may have had an ideological relationship.

Similar patterns can be observed in the mortuary complex of Umm el Marra (fig. 5). Umm el-Marra is an archaeological site located in Syria which has returned a set of data on the mortuary behaviour of the elites and the rituals associated with the worship of these. The site provides a large number of graves for people considered the elite of the city, but there are also other types of installations such as those for animal burials and for human infants.

During the Early Bronze Age, in the acropolis of Umm el-Marra a mortuary complex was constructed, which was used over three centuries from Early Bronze III to IVB (from ca. 2500 to 2200 BCE),<sup>44</sup> and composed of tombs (usually built adjacent)<sup>45</sup> and

<sup>39</sup> PORTER 2002a, fig. 4, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 158.

<sup>42</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> PORTER 2002b, pp. 158-159.

<sup>44</sup> SCHWARTZ 2012, pp. 59-60.

<sup>45</sup> SCHWARTZ 2007 (2008<sup>2</sup>), p. 41.

related installations.<sup>46</sup> Inside the tombs there have been found multiple interments which could suggest some sort of relations among the deceased either kinship of family ties.<sup>47</sup> Deceased members of the same family or group were buried and worshipped together judging from the offerings left for the ancestors.

Consequently, the mortuary remains of Tell Banat, Jerablus Tahtani and Umm el Marra suggest

that a multistage burial process was performed after the death, which started with the decomposition and disarticulation of the human body. Rituals such as disarticulation, selection, and burning of skeletal remains were performed at Tell Banat to destroy the human characteristics and «render them cultural artefacts to be used and manipulated in forming collective identities».<sup>49</sup>

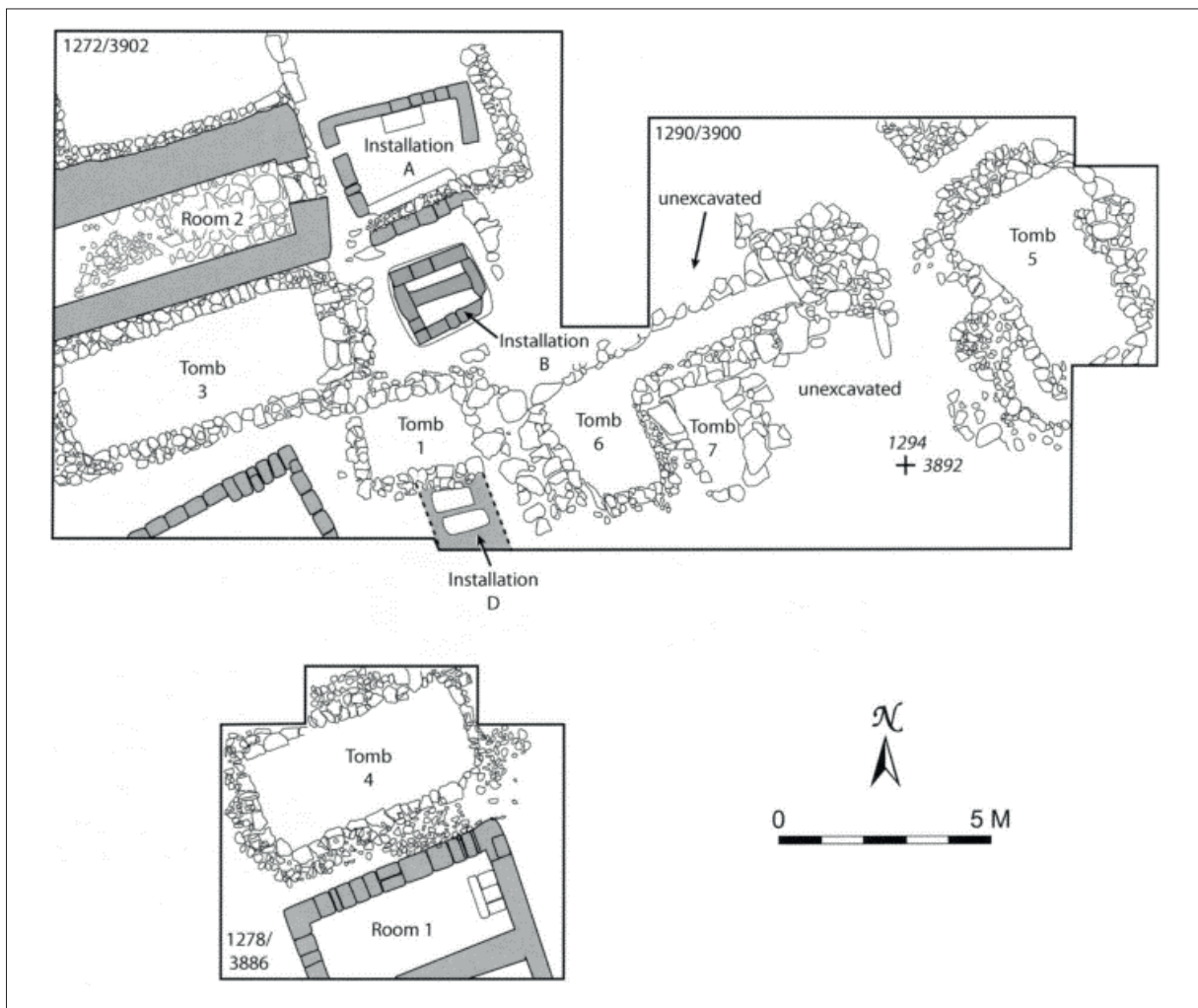


FIGURE 5  
The mortuary complex of Umm el Marra<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> SCHWARTZ 2012, pp. 59-60.

<sup>47</sup> SCHWARTZ 2012, pp. 73-74.

<sup>48</sup> SCHWARTZ ET AL. 2006, fig. 3, p. 606.

<sup>49</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 166; see also TILLEY C. 1996, *An Ethnography of the Neolithic*, Cambridge University, pp. 241-243.



In the case of Tell Banat and Umm el Marra and Jerablus Tahtani the graves became a monumental place for the persistence of memory, ritual traditions and a marker of descent lines or kinship on which the social order was based. Consequently, family crypts, temples, shrines and monumental tombs not only represented the physical location of the ancestors' remains, but they also symbolised the power and authority of the deceased and his lineage and the collective identity, with an important emotional, social and political significance for the whole community.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2 The burial phase

The burial phase is the placement of the skeleton (or part of it) in a grave with some grave goods (such as vessels, bowls with food offerings, drink and cooking ware etc.) useful to feed the deceased due to the scarcity of food and drink in the Netherworld.<sup>51</sup> The ancestor's body could be buried in a wide variety of graves types. Among these types, besides common burials, there are residential graves and large tomb structures used for collective burials.

The residential graves were funerary deposits created within the domestic dwelling which show a desire to keep the ancestor in proximity to their descendants. In this manner the ancestor could have been used «as a clear point of reference for the living family in the process of revising the memory of their ancestors (...) in strengthening familial lineages and reinforcing a sense of belonging among the family's members (...) as well as in the process of confrontation with groups that presented a different social, religious or ethnic identity».<sup>52</sup> The bond with the ancestors, therefore, could represent a desire to maintain the family identity in the context of the death of the head of the family and within the socio-economic, political and military changes

<sup>50</sup> CAMPBELL 2016, p. 88.

<sup>51</sup> In the ancient text the "*Death of Urnamma*" it was underlined the scarcity of food and drink in the Netherworld and in one line it was written: «Urnamma brings the ghosts of the Netherworld fresh food and drink, and so, his grave good nourish his own ghost and the ghosts of others» COHEN 2005, p. 103.

<sup>52</sup> LANERI 2011b, p. 44.

affecting Mesopotamian society during the Bronze Age. During the Middle Bronze Age, the focus on strengthening of the family bond became more evident in both the archaeological record and textual sources. An example of this phenomenon is the increasing occurrence of residential graves in both palatial and non-elite private dwellings.

In the same period, in addition to the residential graves, it is possible to note a growing number of large tomb structures created for high-status people. This variety of tomb structures include: funerary crypts, intramural mausoleums, royal tombs and funerary monuments.<sup>53</sup> Similar monumental structures, which were probably used to worship common ancestors, were found at Tell Banat (the monumental mortuary mounds),<sup>54</sup> Gre Virike (the monumental mortuary complex),<sup>55</sup> Jerablus Tahtani (Tomb 302)<sup>56</sup> and in the mortuary complex at Umm el Marra.<sup>57</sup> Inside the mortuary structures of Tell Banat North, named "White Monuments", for example, a large number of deceased were, instead, found in the White Monument B and A and the inhumations, age and gender of the deceased vary substantially over the time.<sup>58</sup> This suggests that the deceased buried inside the White monuments were not only probably bound by family/group ties but also that these subjects, after being placed in this mortuary mounds, lost their individual characteristics to become part of an «unnamed amorphous group»<sup>59</sup> of selected (common) ancestors. Nevertheless, the enormous efforts invested and the constant and difficult work of regular maintenance indicate that this place was considered highly important for the Bronze Age society of Tell Banat.

The monumental funerary structures were created not only to collect the bodies of the ancestors

<sup>53</sup> LANERI 2011a.

<sup>54</sup> PORTER 2002b, pp. 158-173.

<sup>55</sup> ÖKSE 2005.

<sup>56</sup> PELTENBURG (ed.) 2015.

<sup>57</sup> SCHWARTZ ET AL. 2003, pp. 325-361.

<sup>58</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 166.

<sup>59</sup> PORTER 2002b, p. 167; see also SCURDLOCK J. 1995, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought*, in: SASSON J.M. (ed.) *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. 3, New York, p. 1892.

but also to gather information on their memories, language, personal stories, desires, expectations and emotions.<sup>60</sup> For this reason these structures become important places to understand different aspects related of the ancestor worship and the society. Indeed, an important indicator of possible changes in the social relationships, in the political-economic system or in the religion system can be detected tracking the positioning and/or moving of the ancestors' skeletons or burials inside these graves.<sup>61</sup> These contexts, therefore, can provide important information about the relations between members of the society and about the evolution and/or changes in the social system. The Royal Hypogeum of Qaṭna is one of the most outstanding examples in this regard.

The Royal Hypogeum of Qaṭna is one of these large tombs and it is considered one of the richest and most important for understanding funeral rituals and the commemoration of ancestors. The tomb complex contained several skeletons and it seems to have been used for several hundred years. For this reason, it was necessary to re-arrange the 'too old deceased' periodically to find new space for the latest. In fact, after some years, when the remains were considered too old and no more worshipped, they were taken from the main chamber and moved in the eastern chamber «without respect to the unity of the individual person».<sup>62</sup> This act showed a special consideration for these bones as they were not thrown out but still kept in the Royal Hypogeum but in a separate chamber.<sup>63</sup> In this chamber were also found a number of animal remains and offering bowls (probably used as offerings containers) that could relate to the *kispum* ritual. For these reasons the archaeologist Pfälzner thought that this room could be related to a cult of 'collective ancestors'<sup>64</sup>, which are the dead that have lost their personal identity and are remembered simply as common ancestors. These common ancestors were not only the protectors of the community but also their presence created a com-

mon system of beliefs and cultural cohesion within the community which could be used to decrease the risk of social disintegration.<sup>65</sup>

The creation of tombs that can accommodate many ancestors leads to a frequent reorganization of the spaces that contained the remains.<sup>66</sup> This reorganization means that the oldest ancestors were moved to make room for the new ones, as in the case of the Royal Hypogeum of Qaṭna and Tomb 302 of Jerablus Tahtani. This pattern of displacement of skeletons, or parts of skeletons, and their replacement with new ones is clearly detectable in the archaeological record. In addition to the repositioning and moving of the skeletons within a mortuary complex, the reconfiguration of these places or the destruction or intentional modification/desecration had an important role for the collective memory. Evidence of destruction or modification of these mortuary complexes could mean denying a common past and/or the desire to create a new apparatus of beliefs and a new social order. This could be the case of the Early Bronze Age mortuary complex of Umm el Marra which shows evidence of disturbance, in antiquity, of nearly all burials: Tomb 9 contained significant traces of apparently deliberate damage to the grave contents and it was also robbed soon after its period of use (before Early Bronze Age IVB); Tomb 8 presents damage in the west part but curiously not in the entryway; Tomb 4 was damaged around Early Bronze Age IVA before the installation of the upper level. The archaeological evidence suggested that «some, if not all, of the tombs were disturbed while the mortuary complex was still in use».<sup>67</sup> This intentional violation of the ancestors' graves could be driven by different motives including the will to destroy the connection between the living and the deceased for personal or political reason and the symbolic abolition of the old social order to establish a new one. Therefore, these places with their different inhumations, objects and memories

<sup>60</sup> CHESSON 2001, p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> PORTER, BOUTIN (eds.) 2014, p. 3; see also JOFFE 1993; KESWANI 2004; RICHARDS 2005.

<sup>62</sup> PFÄLZNER 2012, pp. 213-215.

<sup>63</sup> PFÄLZNER 2012, pp. 214-215.

<sup>64</sup> PFÄLZNER 2012, p. 215.

<sup>65</sup> Some scholars argued that the worship of communal ancestors played a coordinating role in the group during the evolution of the latter. See BARRETT, CARNEY 2015, pp. 307-317.

<sup>66</sup> PORTER 2002b; see also PELTENBURG 1999, p. 432.

<sup>67</sup> SCHWARTZ 2012, p. 72.

could be also a valuable tool to understand the socio-economic and political systems and could be important for the understanding of socio-political transformations.

### 3.3 The post-burial phase

Throughout the post-burial phase, a set of more specific ancestor worship rituals were performed, as libation rituals, offerings especially of food and drink and remembrance rituals.<sup>68</sup> Rituals of regularly taking care of the ghost/ ancestor were performed using food and drink offerings and for this reason a recurrent discovery among the Mesopotamian burials dedicated to ancestor worship is the presence of cooking or drinking ceramics.<sup>69</sup> These vessels, usually ordinary cooking and drinking pots and only in rare cases examples of fine or rare ceramics, were used either to leave fresh offerings, such as food and drink for the deceased, or for rituals dedicated to ancestor worship involving food preparation or consumption (fig. 6). At Qatna, for example, were found a large amount of food remains and numerous animal bones associated with ceramic tableware and the meaning of these is still debated as they can be both remains of ritual community meals and/or offerings of food for the deceased/ancestor.<sup>70</sup>

Textual evidence from Mari confirmed the importance, during the Bronze Age, of providing a periodic remembrance of the dead with, performance of ceremonies of feasting, name-calling and post-burial offerings with offerings of food and drink to the dead.<sup>71</sup> The most significant example is the ritual of *kispum*.

The *kispum* ritual is attested in Syria and Mesopotamia during the second millennium BCE and it seems to share similarities with ritual meals recorded in the Levant.



FIGURE 6  
Vessels with remains of organic material, probably residue of food offerings, found at the northern end of sarcophagus 1, Qatna Royal Hypogeum (photo: K. Wita)<sup>72</sup>

The greatest proof of this ritual came from the Middle and Late Bronze Age texts of Mari. The *kispa kasdpu* or *kispum*, described in these texts, was an important ritual of remembrance and taking care of the deceased family members.<sup>73</sup> The *kispum*, KI-ŠI-GA in Sumerian, was effectively a ritual meal shared between the livings and their ancestors<sup>74</sup> which was believed to be essential for a good-quality existence in the Netherworld.<sup>75</sup> The failure of providing the deceased the rituals of *kispum* could transform the ancestor into a hungry and dangerous ghost who become 'restless' and able to send misfortunes and diseases upon the living descendants.<sup>76</sup> Information on when this 'shared meal' ritual should be performed and on the types of food to use during

<sup>68</sup> TEINZ 2012, p. 239.

<sup>69</sup> CHESSON 2001, p. 45.

<sup>70</sup> SCHWARTZ 2007 (2008<sup>2</sup>); see also AL-MAQDISSI M. ET AL. 2003, pp. 189-218.

<sup>71</sup> COHEN 2005, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> PFÄLZNER 2012, fig. 6, p. 213.

<sup>73</sup> COHEN 2005, pp. 106–108.

<sup>74</sup> JACQUET 2012, p. 130; BOTTÉRO 1992, p. 282.

<sup>75</sup> BOTTÉRO 1992, p. 282.

<sup>76</sup> COHEN 2005, p. 107.

the *kispum* could be found in the administrative texts of Mari's palatial archive. The *kispum*, according to Mari's texts, was performed firstly at the funeral and then regularly once a month, or twice in case of an elite person, and in special occasions such as during a full or new moon.<sup>77</sup> The food used during the *kispum*, as described in Mari's texts, seems to consist of mostly bread and oil, to which was added sometimes sauce, honey or sesame.<sup>78</sup> There were also some liquid offerings, such as milk, beer or water and the textual sources mentioned the use of libation pipes (*arūtum*)<sup>79</sup> to pour these liquids to the dead. Mari shares this attention to the *kispum* ritual with the ancient city of Ugarit. In the Ugaritic texts the term *r'phum* seems to refer to a festivity with the living, but there is no explicit mention if those who celebrate with the living are ghosts, spirits of the dead, gods or ancestors.

In addition to the textual sources the Near Eastern archaeological remains of the Early Bronze Age show the same attention to ritual with food and drink and in burial sites a constant discovery is the presence of ceramic for cooking or drinking and animal/food remains. Often the vessels were common ceramics, the same used by the living and only in rare cases archaeologists found fine or rare ceramics. One of the archaeological discoveries that can attest to the performance of this feast during the third millennium BCE is at Jerablus Tahtani, where next to a tomb (Tomb 302) were discovered numerous "champagne vessels" interpreted as being part of a mortuary feast.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the presence in the upper stratification of Tomb 302 of a large quantity of disarticulated and butchered animal bones, some of which were cooked as they show traces of burning,<sup>81</sup> reinforce the idea that post-mortem activities involving food consumption were held at Jerablus Tahtani. Hence, it could be inferred that the animal remains, and the champagne vessels could be part of post-mortem funerary banquets performed in the vicinity of the burials.

<sup>77</sup> BOTTÉRO 1992, p. 282.

<sup>78</sup> JACQUET 2012, pp. 129–30.

<sup>79</sup> BOTTÉRO 1992, p. 281.

<sup>80</sup> PELTENBURG 1999, pp. 427–42.

<sup>81</sup> SANG 2010, p. 45.

The archaeological site of Umm el-Marra, supports this hypothesis with remains of food offerings and cooking ware brought to tombs either at the time of the funeral rituals or during other rituals post-deposition.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, artefacts such as ceramics, bone fragments and a silver bowl found above the floor of Tomb 4<sup>83</sup> support the hypothesis of post-funerary libation rituals for the ancestors, as these finds could be brought to the tomb even several years after the burial phase and might be used for rituals involving food consumption. Therefore, it can be inferred that when the graves were no longer used to bury deceased the area was still in use for post-mortem rituals and thus as place deemed important for social identity and memory.

Vessels for food and drink offerings or used in rituals involving food consumption were found outside or near the entrance of ancestor graves or in front of statues. Statues holding bowls (fig. 7) and positioned at the entrance of graves, which could be identified as those of venerated ancestors, were found in some archaeological sites of the Levant and Mesopotamia, such as in Qatna, Ebla, Tell Brak, Hazor and Tell Halaf.<sup>84</sup>

Similar statues have been found in both the Levant and Mesopotamia and as suggested by Creech: «They may have been symbolic reminders of the living's responsibility to the dead, or genuinely used as receptacles for specific offering».<sup>85</sup> It remains difficult to know unequivocally the purpose of these offerings, they could represent either contributions to the maintenance of the deceased in the afterlife or gifts to ask for the help or blessings of the ancestors. The similarities shown by the Mesopotamian and Levantine Bronze Age textual sources and archaeological remains demonstrate that potential parallels in ancestor worship practices existed during the Bronze Age. Therefore, these aspects might reveal that cultural practices performed by these different cultures could have been based on similar beliefs. This might be the result of changes in the Mesopotamian and Levantine political, economic and reli-

<sup>82</sup> SCHWARTZ 2007 (2008<sup>2</sup>), p. 47.

<sup>83</sup> SCHWARTZ 2012, p. 66.

<sup>84</sup> TEINZ 2014, pp. 15-23.

<sup>85</sup> CREECH 2015.

gious systems and/or because of populations or cultural movements. For this reason, a deeper study of these aspects could reveal not only more and useful information on ancient cultures and beliefs, but it might also help to understand reasons for such similarities in beliefs and rituals.



FIGURE 7  
Two statues, representing individuals who are seated and holding bowls (probably ancestors) are placed on both sides of the entrance to the hypogeum at Qaṭna, Syria. The remains of food offerings were found in the bowls placed before the statues, as well as inside the tomb, which contained the bones of several generations of the royal family (Qaṭna excavations, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)<sup>86</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis showed that during the Bronze Age and in particular during the third millennium BCE, the central role played by ancestors within Mesopotamian societies is evident in both historical and archaeological sources. Thanks to these it is possible to outline the most important features of ancestor worship:

- the presence of a successor;

- a connection with the ancestor: genealogical linkage between the dead and the living successor (legitimisation);
- rituals of transformation of the deceased who become the ‘deified’ ancestor;
- characteristics or qualities of the deceased that helped his/her family or group (such as material properties or particular socio-political rights and/or power);
- the creation of the burial site and/or structure, and/or design of the place for the veneration;
- periodic services of ritual and votive offerings.<sup>87</sup>

In the monumental tombs, found all along the Euphrates Valley, the worship of ancestors went beyond the family and was extended not only to close relatives but also to a large section of the community. In these monumental graves, in fact, it was possible to bury a large number of deceased and, indeed, typically more than one ancestor was buried and worshipped. Therefore, the ancestors buried and worshipped in these monumental structures could belong to several generations of people linked by kinship, family bond, race or culture.<sup>88</sup> The presence of a large number of inhumations and more than one ancestor led to a frequent reorganization of the spaces and for this reason the positioning and/or moving skeletons or burials within these graves can be an important indicator of possible changes in the social-political relationship in a society. Consequently, the burial site becomes an important place to understand aspects of the worship and of the society because this context can provide us information about the relations between people in the same society and about so-called social memory.

It can be concluded that these funerary archaeological remains with their different inhumations, objects and memories can be a valuable tool to understand the socio-economic and political systems and important for the understanding of socio-political transformations. However, especially for the Early Bronze Age, this interpretation could encounter several unresolved problematic

<sup>86</sup> HERRMANN, SCHLOEN (eds.) 2014, fig. C9, p. 119.

<sup>87</sup> MATSUMOTO 2010.

<sup>88</sup> PORTER 2002a, p. 9.

issues, such as: what elements should we take into account when identifying relics of ancient ritual practices associated with ancestor worship and how can we correctly identify the ancestor worship from the archaeological remains? Hopefully answers to these questions can be found through an

intense analysis of the archaeological data, textual sources, human, faunal and botanical remains related to ancestor worship in ancient civilizations. It is clear that more and specific research on this topic is required.

### *Acknowledgments*

*I would like to thank my PhD supervisor Prof. Barbara Helwing and Dr. Andrew Wilson for their comments and suggestions and Prof. Nicola Laneri who first introduced me to the interesting topic of the ancestor worship. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to improve and clarify this paper. It goes without saying that any remaining mistakes must be entirely ascribed to the author.*

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