

/ The Natufian Burials from el-Wad, Mount Carmel: Beyond Issues of Social Differentiation

הקבורות הנאטופיות ממערת אל-ואד: מעבר לדיון בריבוד חברתי

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The Natufian Burials from el-Wad, Mount Carmel: Beyond Issues of Social Differentiation

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ABSTRACT

Over twenty years ago, G.A. Wright's article 'Social differentiation in the early Natufian' had the distinction of being the first published piece of research to deal solely with the social aspects of Natufian mortuary practices. While often disagreeing with Wright's conclusion – that social differentiation existed in the early Natufian of el-Wad, Mount Carmel – subsequent mortuary studies have tended to share the common assumption that burial data embody social categories and the nature of societal structure. To move away from concerns with social organization – concerns embedded in a heavily critiqued sociological perspective – an interpretive shift is required, to focus instead on the historical and material conditions within which mortuary practices were enacted. This paper discusses the implications of such a shift in perspective. Its purpose is not to offer a re-analysis or reinterpretation of the el-Wad evidence. Rather, the el-Wad example serves to identify a number of general theoretical problems, which currently characterize much mortuary archaeology of the southern Levant. Some suggestions are offered as to how 'archaeologies of death' may be profitably relocated within a wider program of enquiry which considers how mortuary practices relate to other strategies of social discourse and reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

The first discovery of human burials at el-Wad, Mount Carmel, took place in November

1928, during a sounding by Charles Lambert of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine. The following year, during the first of several excavation seasons at the site, directed by Dorothy Garrod for the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, a large burial pit containing 'four adolescents and six children' (Garrod 1929: 221) was uncovered in the outer chamber (Chamber 1) of the cave. Between 1929 and 1933, the remains of 96 skeletons were recovered (according to Belfer-Cohen *et al.* 1991).

Interpretation of the el-Wad burial data proves difficult due to a number of discrepancies existing between Dorothy Garrod's numerous preliminary reports, as well as between these and her final (1937) excavation report. These include not only numerical discrepancies, but also frequent differences between her various descriptions of the content and form of the same burials. Added to this, the lack of reference to the on-site 'H-number' system for the skeletons mentioned in several of the preliminary reports often hampers attempts to match these descriptions with those which appear in the final publication.

In their recent re-quantification and analysis of the el-Wad skeletal material, Belfer-Cohen *et al.* (1991) have shown that Garrod's 1929-1933 excavations at the site recovered the remains of ninety-six skeletons. This figure is somewhat higher than those given in Garrod's own excavation reports, from which the following figures are taken: 'at least forty' (1932: 268); 'more than fifty' (1934: 136); 'fourteen relatively complete skeletons...and the more or less fragmentary remains of at least forty-five individuals' from the terrace, plus thirteen from the cave, giving a total of at least seventy-two (Garrod and Bate 1937: 13); 'forty-four in varying states of preservation', plus scattered human remains (1940: 123); 'more than sixty' (1957: 214). The first (brief) bioanthropological study of the material, by Sir Arthur Keith, stated that Garrod had found the remains of eighty-seven skeletons at el-Wad, all of which, he said erroneously (1934: 46), came from the Natufian levels on the terrace.

Numerical discrepancies like these are by no means simply a consequence of the nature of early excavation practice. The presence of multiple primary and secondary burials in complex stratigraphic relationships, not to mention the accumulative effect of long-term taphonomic processes, is an area still fraught with interpretive difficulties. Nonetheless, these conflicting figures illustrate the nature of those difficulties encountered in studying complex mortuary data from early excavations. Needless to say, in the 1920s and 1930s there existed no explicitly formalized notion of the systematic collection of archaeological material, such as that introduced latterly by the likes of Bordes (*e.g.*, Bordes 1961). In the Levantine context, this issue has been highlighted by Valla (1984: 77), and Olszewski and Barton (1990: 43-46), who have demonstrated that significant biases exist in the lithic collections recovered during Garrod's excavations at el-Wad. These biases result from the lack of a formal,

systematic collection strategy, with limited or no wet sieving of deposits, and a preference for the collection of perceived diagnostic tool types, such as lunates and other geometric microliths. The worked bone assemblage, likewise, contains only complete or near-complete pieces (personal observation). Given this situation, similar biases are likely to have existed in the collection of other categories of material recovered during the excavations, including the human bones. The absence of wet sieving would have resulted in small or fragmentary pieces being overlooked, and given that many of the burials on the terrace at el-Wad were already 'badly preserved' and 'too fragmentary to describe' to begin with (Garrod and Bate 1937: 19), then it seems reasonable to assume that a certain amount of potentially significant information may have been lost.

It is nevertheless desirable to have an understanding of these problems so as to allow their incorporation into a critical study of subsequent interpretations of the evidence. Otherwise we are forced to rely on the kind of perspective taken by G.A. Wright in his study of the el-Wad burial data, in which he identified several of the problems encountered in attempting to assimilate the published accounts, but subsequently dismissed them in his analysis of the data: 'I shall now proceed as if there were no problems' (Wright 1978: 210).

'A VERITABLE CEMETERY': USING GARROD'S BURIAL DATA

To present the evidence as clearly as possible, the following survey lists in chronological order all those published reports, which include problematic descriptions of the el-Wad burial data. The abbreviations used here are: Q.S.P.E.F. (Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund), B.A.S.P.R. (Bulletin of the American School of Prehistoric Research), J.R.A.I. (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute).

1. Q.S.P.E.F. 62 (Garrod 1929). This first preliminary report deals with the 1929 field season. Mentioned, but not described in any detail, is the burial pit found in Chamber I of the cave. According to Garrod (p. 221), this was a collective burial of 'ten human skeletons', containing four adolescents and six children.
2. Q.S.P.E.F. 64 (Garrod 1931a). Here, Garrod mentions that, in addition to the burial pit in the cave, one skeleton had been found on the terrace during a small sounding in 1929. She goes on to describe the results of the 1930 season, which included the discovery of three burials at the base of the Natufian layer (layer B) on the terrace. Packed down by large blocks of limestone, each of these skeletons lay in different positions (no details given) on a hearth containing a considerable amount of animal bone. Two of these burials were found near the cave mouth, while the third lay at the

lower end of the excavation trench, close to a stone-built wall which enclosed a small (1.5m) stone platform into which was cut a V-shaped basin or mortar. Three similar, but smaller, bedrock basins/mortars were situated outside the platform area. The interior of these basins displayed no signs of wear, prompting Garrod to cautiously suggest that the entire construction may have been 'connected with a cult of the dead' (p. 102).

3. B.A.S.P.R. 7 (Garrod 1931b). This report describes the same three terrace burials as above, but with additional information regarding the positions of the skeletons. Of the two near the cave mouth, one lay crouched on its side, while the other lay on its face with the knees drawn up. The skeleton close to the stone construction lay on its left side, with the legs drawn up and the skull facing upwards. Problems arise, however, with the description of the collective burial in Chamber I. Instead of the four adolescents and six children mentioned in the 1929 report, Garrod here describes (p. 6) the burial as containing four adults and seven children, giving a total of eleven skeletons. Apparently, each lay in the extended position on top of a hearth, and was held in place by large pieces of limestone.

It is, of course, perfectly possible that between 1929 and 1931 the study of the skeletal remains from this burial revealed the presence of an eleventh skeleton which had been previously overlooked. To support this possibility, it is worth considering that Garrod's final report mentions 'a complete jaw, and the symphyseal region of another jaw' (Garrod and Bate 1937:15) which could not be allocated to any of the ten skeletons in the grave. It seems unlikely that these bones were intrusions, for despite the existence of several intrusive objects in the soft black earth of the Natufian layer in Chamber I, Garrod observed that in the proximity of the large grave pit the soil consistently changed to a 'stiff reddish clay' (*ibid.*) which effectively reduced the risk of intrusion. It is possible, then, that the grave may have originally contained the remains of eleven, or more, skeletons. Further, Theodore McCown, in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis, claimed that this grave 'comprises at least ten individuals' (McCown 1939: 15). Garrod's subsequent reports invariably describe the Chamber I grave pit as containing the remains of ten skeletons.

4. J.R.A.I. 62 (Garrod 1932). Contrary to the above report, Garrod states here (p. 258) that only two of the skeletons from the collective burial lay on hearths. This is reiterated in the final report (Garrod and Bate 1937: 14-15).

GARROD'S FINAL REPORT

As outlined earlier, there are several conflicting figures regarding the total number of Natufian burials at el-Wad. In the final report, Garrod implied that the remains of at

least seventy-two human skeletons were discovered during the course of the excavations. This total comprised, from the terrace, ‘fourteen relatively complete skeletons...and the more or less fragmentary remains of at least forty-five individuals distributed all over the area of the trench’ (Garrod and Bate 1937: 13); and from the cave, the ten skeletons in the large grave pit, two found in the cave entrance, and one infant burial close to the entrance of the south-west alcove. There are, in fact, references to seventy-four skeletons in this report. Forty-six of these (in either twenty-one or twenty-two graves, see below) are described (*ibid.*: 7-8, 14-19) in varying degrees of detail, while the other twenty-eight lack descriptions. The data can be summarized as follows (group burials bracketed):

Cave Chamber I: (H1-H10).

Cave Chamber II: H11, H?, H?, H?, H?

Cave entrance: H13a (see below), H59, H60.

Terrace: H12, H13b (see below), H14-H22, (H23, H23a, H23b), H24, (H25a, H25b, H25c, possibly H26), H27, (H28, H29, H30, H31, H32), H33-H56, (H57a-H57g), H58-H62.

Of the twenty-eight skeletons, which have no form of description, twenty-four are shown on Garrod’s ground plan of the site (*ibid.*: plate III). The remaining four (H24, H50, H52 and H61) are missing from the plan. Also missing are the five fragmentary skeletons from Chamber II. These were found in such extensively disturbed deposits that Garrod was unable to allocate them to any particular period. She suggested, however, that two of the unnumbered skeletons ‘dated from the time when the Natufian layer extended all over the cave’ (*ibid.*: 7). It seems reasonable to allocate the ‘missing’ four H. numbers 24, 50, 52, and 61 to these four unnumbered Chamber II skeletons. However, in McCown’s study of the el-Wad Natufian crania, he included several measurements of the skull of H61: the chamber 2 skeletons, with the exception of H11, all lacked skulls. One of the four must therefore remain unnumbered.

A further discrepancy surrounds Garrod’s allocation of H13 to two different skeletons (*ibid.*: 15, 16). To avoid confusion, these shall be referred to here as H13a and H13b, and the problem is dealt with more fully later.

On the question of group burials, it is unclear from the final report whether or not H25a, H25b, H25c and H26 constitute such a burial type. Again, this problem is addressed below.

EVIDENCE FOR SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION?

G.A. Wright’s article ‘Social differentiation in the early Natufian’ (1978) can justifiably lay claim to being the first published piece of research to focus primarily on

the social significance of Natufian mortuary practices. In the intervening years, while doubts may have been voiced over Wright's use of the el-Wad data, as well as his overall conclusions, (*e.g.*, Belfer-Cohen 1988a, 1988b, 1995; Byrd and Monahan 1995; Perrot *et al.* 1988; Valla 1995), the theoretical assumptions underlying his argument are often left unquestioned (*e.g.*, Henry 1985, 1989; Hodder 1990; Olszewski 1991). What follows takes its cue from Belfer-Cohen's 1995 article on the issue of 'social stratification' in the Natufian, the only (published) sustained critique of the material aspects of Wright's analysis. Building on this empirical critique, I then go on to discuss the theoretical problems in attempting to map social organization into archaeological burial data.

It was Wright's contention that the mortuary data from el-Wad display conclusive evidence for the presence of social ranking amongst the inhabitants of the early phase of Natufian occupation. To demonstrate this, he undertook a 'search for regularities' (Wright 1978: 205) in the modes of burial at the site. He recorded (a) the characteristics of the skeletons (position, head orientation, age), (b) the characteristics of the graves (location, number of bodies interred), and (c) the presence or absence of 'grave furniture' (*ibid.*: 206), such as skeletal adornment, artifact associations, and other material associations. By this method Wright identified (*ibid.*: 212) five modes of interment at el-Wad:

- Type 1: group burial in cave. All skeletons in the extended position; all lay on hearths; all associated with grave furniture. Grave reopened.
- Type 2: group burials on terrace. All skeletons flexed; one skeleton (the primary burial in each group) decorated with dentalium shell. No reopening of grave.
- Type 3: individual burials on terrace. All skeletons flexed; no grave furniture.
- Type 4: individual burials in cave mouth. All skeletons in the extended position; no grave furniture.
- Type 5: burials outside cave mouth. All skeletons flexed; all lay on hearths; possible grave furniture.

Bringing together Garrod's (1937) stratigraphic observations and the three available (in 1978) C14 dates for the Natufian levels at el-Wad, Wright placed the group burials, Types 1 and 2, in the earliest Natufian phase (1978: 214). He (and Garrod for that matter) considered these two types contemporaneous. They were followed 'slightly later' by Types 4 and 5 and, finally, by Type 3, which appeared late in the el-Wad burial sequence.

In his interpretation of the published material, Wright utilized certain aspects of Binford's classic ethnographic study of the 'social dimensions of mortuary practices' (Binford 1971). This study appeared to demonstrate that general structural correlates

exist between the complexity of the mortuary ritual and the complexity of the society to which the deceased belonged. Specifically, Binford proposed that the form of mortuary rituals is structurally related to status differentiation. According to this hypothesis, in an egalitarian society distinctions in mortuary rituals are generally based on age and sex, whereas in a ranked society such distinctions are based on social status and sub-group affiliation. In terms of the identification of social differentiation, the relevant ritual categories, according to Binford, are: (a) the preparation, treatment and disposition of the body, (b) the form, orientation and location of the grave and (c) the form and quantity of grave furniture.

Wright considered (1978: 213) categories (b) and (c) as particularly relevant to the Natufian burial data from el-Wad. He noted that – in Binford's ethnographic study – in seven cases out of a sample size of thirty-three, age was the determining factor as regards grave location. Adults were buried in cemeteries, whereas children and infants were interred at a location away from the cemetery, for example, under houses or at the edge of the settlement. This situation, Binford argued, occurs when social position is not inherited. In eight cases, grave location was determined by social position, and in a further fifteen cases, sub-group affiliation was seen as the determining factor. Adults, children and infants were interred in the same location, indicating, for Binford, the existence of inherited social status and ranking. In category (c), Binford's study showed (1971: Table 4) that in most cases the sex of the deceased determined the form of grave furniture. This suggested a male-female division of labor, characteristic of an egalitarian society. In a much fewer number of cases, social position was seen as the determining factor in the form of grave furniture. In these examples, the quantity of furniture seemed important in indicating the status or rank of the deceased. The same type of artifact included in different graves may be classed as a 'symbol of office', representing a particular social rank.

WRIGHT'S CONCLUSIONS

Wright took these general correlates and applied them to the early Natufian burial data from el-Wad (1978: 215). He identified six group burials:

Cave: (H1-H10)

Terrace: (H23, H23a, H23b), (H25a, H25b, H25c, H26), (H28, H28a-H28d), (H41, H43), (H57a-H57g).

Using the grave location hypothesis, Wright noted that his Type 1 (cave) and Type 2 (terrace) el-Wad group burials contained both adults and children. They differed in all other aspects (position of skeletons, grave furniture, *etc.*), leading him to infer that social ranking was present, and that two sub-groups existed 'whose membership was

symbolized through interment on different parts of the site' (*ibid.*: 215). The presence of artifact associations with child and infant burials, and the fact that the child in group (H57a-H57g) was decorated, suggested to Wright that social position was 'ascribed rather than inherited' (*ibid.*: 215).

As regards the form of 'grave furniture', Wright observed that dentalium shell artifacts (head-dresses, necklaces, etc.) appeared only in Type 2 burials. Further, only one skeleton in each grave displayed these particular types of decoration, implying that they represented a 'specific status position within the subgroup' (*ibid.*: 215). Wright explained the absence of dentalium in Type 1 graves by suggesting a lower rank for this sub-group than that represented by the Type 2 burials. Alternatively, the social role of the wearer may have been one which was restricted to this particular sub-group. No item of grave furniture could be identified as a recurrent symbol of internal rank or office in the Type 1 graves.

As an explanation for the function of social ranking during the early Natufian at el-Wad, Wright argued (*ibid.*: 218) that it served as a mechanism to maintain order within the local group at a time of population growth and increased sedentism. Lack of food resources, or social problems, caused parts of the group to break away and form new sub-groups elsewhere. Alliances were, however, maintained and reinforced through the exchange of high-status dentalium shells from the Mediterranean and Red Seas between the elites of different local groups.

WRIGHT'S USE OF THE PUBLISHED DATA

A number of problems can be identified as regards Wright's readings, and interpretations, of the el-Wad data. First, there are several 'factual' and statistical errors in his reading of Garrod's reports. Certain items of information are incorporated into his analysis, while others are omitted (see Belfer-Cohen 1995 for more such details). To give some examples:

Wright claimed (1978: 204-205) that sixty-two burials were discovered during Garrod's el-Wad excavations, and that fifty-four of these were described in the final report. As we have seen, however, Garrod made reference to seventy-four skeletons in the final report – contained in either forty-nine or fifty graves (see below) – and provided descriptions for forty-six of these. The problem here seems to be that Wright did not distinguish between burial and grave. For him, burial and grave appear one and the same, but at el-Wad there were seventy-four burials, *i.e.*, individual skeletons (or their remains), contained in forty-nine or fifty graves (see Belfer-Cohen 1995: 11 for further discussion).

In dealing with 'the H13 problem' – Garrod (inadvertently it seems) allocated the

label H13 to two different skeletons (1937: 15, 16) – Wright claimed that ‘careful reading of the papers...shows that one of them dates to the Early Bronze Age or later, the other to the Natufian’ (1978: 205). This argument cannot be substantiated. These two burials are described only in the final excavation report, so no comparisons can be made with descriptions in any of Garrod’s earlier papers. (According to his bibliography, Wright used only two articles, Garrod 1931b and 1957, as well as the final report). The first H13, described by Garrod on p. 15 of the final report, was found in the cave entrance at the base of the Natufian layer B, probably belonging to an early phase of the burial sequence. The skeleton, an unsexed infant, lay in the extended position on its back in a deposit of soft red earth. There were no intrusive objects. According to Wright’s ground plan (1978: 206) and data table (*ibid.*: table 9.1), this skeleton is H13. The second H13, described by Garrod on p.16 of the final report, is classed by Wright as Early Bronze Age or later. This burial was located on the terrace, but in an area where it was impossible to distinguish between the two Natufian levels B1 and B2. The skeleton was that of an adult female, lying on her face, with legs flexed. The surrounding deposit was ‘tough red earth’ (Garrod and Bate 1937: 16). Close to the skeleton was found a single sherd of early Bronze Age pottery, and because of this occurrence, it seems, Wright allocated the burial to that period. However, an Early Bronze Age date seems unlikely for two reasons. First, the sherd represents the only example of pottery found in the ‘tough red earth’ deposits characteristic of the lower part of layer B on the terrace. Secondly, Garrod stated (*ibid.*: 10 n.1) that extreme care was taken in the recovery and analysis of the pottery from el-Wad due to the importance, in terms of chronology and cultural development, of ascertaining whether or not the ‘Natufian Culture’ made use of ceramics. It is likely, then, that the single sherd was intrusive, originating from the Bronze Age deposits which overlay the Natufian levels on the terrace.

On the question of group burials, a category central to Wright’s argument, his creation of six groups – one in the cave and five on the terrace – is questionable. The cave group seems unproblematic. Similarly, there is little doubt that (H23, H23a, H23b), (H28, H28a-H28d – although Garrod numbered these H28-H32) and (H57a-H57g) form three legitimate group burials. It is unclear from Garrod’s reports whether or not H25a and H26 belong in the same group as H25, H25b and H25c. She stated that the latter three were ‘presumably part of the same burial’ (1937: 18), but that H25a (a skull) and H26 (a fragmentary skeleton) ‘lay behind its (H25) head’ (*ibid.*: 18). Nevertheless, (H25, H25b, H25c) at least can be regarded as a group burial. The same cannot be said for Wright’s (H41, H43) group. These two ‘very fragmentary skeletons’ (Garrod and Bate 1937: 17) lay against the terrace rock platform described earlier. No information was given regarding their age, sex, position or head orientation

(but see Belfer-Cohen 1995: 12). Stratigraphically they belong to an early phase in the burial sequence. Garrod remarked that the two skeletons 'lay close together' (*ibid.*: 17), but nowhere did she comment that they were contained in the same grave pit. In fact, in a later report she stated unequivocally that H41 'lay, not in a group, but alongside one other very fragmentary body' (H43) (Garrod 1940: 126). It seems reasonable to suggest that Wright brought these two skeletons together to form a 'group' (can two really be considered a group?) because H41 was decorated with dentalium shell (and bird-bone ornamentation). If he had regarded H41 as an individual burial – an interment mode characteristic of the later phases of the sequence – then his argument concerning the role of dentalium as a marker for social position solely during the early Natufian would have appeared inconsistent.

In addition, Wright claimed that all the skeletons contained in his group burials on the terrace lay in the flexed position. However, of his total of twenty-two individuals, the positions of sixteen were impossible to ascertain due to the fragmentary nature of their remains (Garrod and Bate 1937).

The allocation of 'grave furniture' raises further problems. Wright considered early Natufian grave furniture to consist of: limestone, mortars, dentalium, twin bone pendants, bird bone pendants, bone tools, hearths, flint and other artifacts (1978: Table 9.1). Taking these elements individually:

Limestone: Wright allocated limestone to all burials in the cave group (H1-H10). This cannot be stated with confidence. As outlined earlier, Garrod's preliminary reports often remarked that these skeletons were 'packed in' with limestone fragments. However, the final report described only H1, H2, H4 and H5 as having direct limestone associations. Garrod also clearly mentioned H21, a late Natufian burial, as having a limestone slab lying on its right humerus (1937: 17). Wright not only ignored this occurrence, but also allocated limestone to the (probably) early Natufian H18. This burial had no limestone associations according to Garrod's reports.

Mortars: Broken limestone mortars accompanied burials H57a-d and H60 only. Wright, however, allocated mortars to the cave burials H1 and H7.

Dentalium: Wright noted H28 as having dentalium decoration, but Garrod described beads made from gazelle phalanges decorating this skeleton. See also H41, above.

Twin bone pendants: No problems.

Bird-bone pendants: Wright gave H21 a bird bone pendant. Garrod made no mention of such an association.

Bone tools: Wright gave H1 a bone tool. Again Garrod mentioned no artifact association of this sort.

Hearths: Wright claimed that the early burials (H1-H10), H12, H18 and H62 all lay on hearths. There are differences in the descriptions offered by Garrod's preliminary and

final reports as regards the hearths in the cave burials, but it appears that H4 and H5 lay on 'a hard grey hearth' and 'a very black hearth' respectively (Garrod and Bate 1937: 14-15). No conclusions can be drawn regarding the other burials in the cave, and certainly no hearths were described by Garrod pertaining to H12, H18 or H62.

Flint: The cave burial H2 was given a flint item by Wright. No such item was mentioned by Garrod. A 'flint knife', inside a tortoise carapace, allocated by Wright to H4, was described by Garrod (*ibid.*: 14) as a flint flake, and was found above the skull of H3.

Other artifacts: Wright claimed that a small calcite carving of a human head was found in the grave of H10. Garrod stated that this artifact was 'close to H10' (*ibid.*: 15, my emphasis), but it is not clear from her report if it was actually in the grave itself.

It appears, then, that there exists in Wright's analysis a tendency to allocate excessive grave furniture to early phase burials (H1, H4, H12, H18, H62).

DISCUSSION

Given this series of problems, can Wright's conclusion – that social ranking existed in the early Natufian – be upheld? The grave location hypothesis, dependent for its verification upon the interment of adults, children and infants in the same location does not appear to be supported by the available data. In the cave group (H1-H10), there were six children or infants, two adults, and two unaged skeletons. In group (H23, H23a, H23b) there were two adults and one child. However, it was possible to age only one of the (H25, H25a, H25b, H25c, and possibly H26) group, and the same situation occurs in group (H28a-e) (but again see Belfer-Cohen 1995: 12). It was not possible to age any of group (H57a-g), and even if (H41, H43) could be classed as a group, again no age data are available. As regards the inclusion and role of 'grave furniture', we have already seen that H41 may not fit into any of Wright's types of interment mode. Further, it is impossible to identify whether or not certain artifacts cross-cut sex lines due to the paucity of sex data for the skeletons. Of the seventy-four skeletons, only fourteen were able to be positively sexed by Garrod. Of those relevant to Wright's analysis (H1-H4, H23), the only point of any significance in this regard may be that the four male skeletons (H3 is female) have limestone associations.

It is clear, then, that the nature of the el-Wad mortuary data is such that Wright's hypothesis cannot be supported, and this much at least is accepted by many researchers (Byrd and Monahan 1995: 281). His conclusion – that social differentiation existed to maintain group cohesion – must therefore be challenged, and indeed has been most effectively in a recent article by Belfer-Cohen, who points out that Wright 'was

mistaken in his representation of the data, as well as in ignoring the time trajectory implications by mixing in his typology Early and Late Natufian burials' (Belfer-Cohen 1995: 14).

Valid though such criticism is, thus far we have dealt only with the identification of statistical errors and problematic material traits in Wright's study of the el-Wad data. While often disagreeing with his conclusions – the existence of social differentiation in the early Natufian at el-Wad – most subsequent studies of Natufian mortuary practices uphold an adherence to the search for social structure/organization through mortuary (or other material) patterning. Belfer-Cohen states that 'the evidence for social stratification in the Natufian, inferred from the decorated burials, is actually non-existent' (1995: 16), and goes on to argue that even if 'social stratification'¹ was a feature of the Natufian then 'the indications of cultural activities associated with body and skeletal alteration do not provide the evidence for it' (*ibid.*: 15). She maintains, nonetheless, that a principal aim of archaeological analysis is to infer social stratification and societal structure through more excavations, new data or ethnographic structural analogy (*ibid.*: 9, 15). In a similar vein, Byrd and Monahan criticize a number of Wright's assumptions regarding archaeological criteria for the identification of social ranking (1995: 281), as well as his acceptance at face value of Garrod and Bate's assignation of 'grave goods' to specific burials at el-Wad (*ibid.*). They further acknowledge that 'social complexity during the Natufian need not be expressed through funerary differentiation' (*ibid.*: 254). Despite these criticisms, however, the objective of Byrd and Monahan's analysis is to present 'alternative interpretations regarding the nature and importance of changes in Natufian social structure through a rigorous analysis of mortuary data' (*ibid.*: 251).

To clarify: the (still widely held) theoretical assumption that mortuary (and other material) patterning reflects social categories and societal structure has been acknowledged as problematic in some recent studies of Natufian mortuary practices. However, so long as the primary aim of enquiry remains the recognition of general social processes, archaeologists have no choice but to continue to ignore these acknowledged problems of equating social roles with mortuary patterning.

With this in mind, we can return to the theoretical assumptions which structured Wright's analytical approach. He stated,

'If we assume that variations of interment mode within the group are indicative of

¹ It should be noted that Wright himself did not use the term 'social stratification'. There are considerable theoretical differences between 'social differentiation' and 'social stratification', primarily relating to the existence of, amongst other factors, class structure and state apparatus. It may be appropriate to reserve 'social stratification' for 'state' circumstances.

internal differentiation of individual group members – whether by age, sex, and/or social position – and that pattern variation among groups reflects differences in structural complexity, then archaeologists have at their disposal a powerful tool through which they may understand certain aspects of the organizational properties of extinct social systems’ (1978: 201).

This distinctly ‘Anglo-American’ perspective was first expounded by Binford (1971) and has since characterized much European and American mortuary archaeology (*e.g.*, papers in Chapman *et al.* 1981; O’Shea 1984; Morris 1991). It forms part of the broader intellectual program of processual archaeology, a program concerned with seeking, through a ‘search for regularities’ (Wright 1978: 205) in the archaeological record, general explanations for social events and processes (for the clearest statement of this position, see Binford 1983). Crucial to this approach is the building and testing of hypotheses in order to evaluate different ideas and theories about how the past may have been. As we have seen, Wright attempted to test Binford’s hypothesis on the nature of mortuary patterning in relation to social structure by applying it to the Natufian data from el-Wad, and subsequent studies (*e.g.*, Byrd and Monahan 1995; Henry 1989) have further developed this approach using data from more recently excavated sites.

The critique of the processual perspective is now well known (*e.g.*, Parker Pearson 1982, 1999; Shanks and Tilley 1982, 1987; Tarlow 1999), very broadly summarized by the view that mortuary patterning does not necessarily represent a record or reflection of past social formations. As indicated above, this position has been acknowledged in studies of Natufian data, but without necessarily signaling a theoretical shift away from wider analytical concerns with social organization: ‘of course, other aspects of ideology and social expression are undoubtedly embedded in mortuary practices as well, including denoting individuals with particular roles within the society’ (Byrd and Monahan 1995: 283). But, as Parker Pearson has argued, ‘the reconstruction of social organization through the identification of roles...can be challenged by the theoretical stance that social systems are not constituted of roles but by recurrent social practices’ (Parker Pearson 1982: 100). The former position regards the material remains as reflecting social categories, whereas the latter sees them as evidence for a range of social practices in which the living and the dead come together, or are brought together, at particular historical moments: a death, a funeral, ancestor rituals, and so on.

What are the implications of such a change in perspective? Primarily, ‘archaeologies of death’ must now address how mortuary practices related to other strategies of social discourse and reproduction if sense is to be made of the culturally and historically specific nature of our archaeological evidence. This position necessarily entails abandonment of the search for general models of society as the

object of archaeological enquiry, and a shift towards the investigation of how people understood and acted in certain material contexts, and how those understandings were carried from one social setting to another. In other words, the focus moves from the study of social organization to how people actively and knowledgeably created the conditions of their own existence through engagement with other people and material resources (Barrett and Fewster 2000; and for discussion of these ideas in relation to specific Levantine archaeological material, see Boyd forthcoming).

This emphasis on living practice and agency means that archaeological studies of mortuary practices can no longer hope to capture the totality of social structure, or indeed the termination or formation of any historical moment (such as 'transitions' from one archaeologically-constructed period to another). By accepting this position we make a break from a commitment to the analysis of the social totality towards the unraveling of particular practices and relationships, tracing their developments and changes however discontinuous and unsynchronized. The focus on specific cultural and historical conditions undermines the still-dominant concern with cross-cultural regularities and the 'predictability' of past practices. Wright claimed: 'Now that we have some idea of what to look for, cases similar to those presented by us will be 'discovered'' (1978: 220). Surely this is not the kind of procedure we wish to employ in writing histories of people, times and places; a procedure which involves 'so much cross-cultural generalization and model building that the past becomes increasingly uninteresting as we move from one study to the next' (Barrett 1988: 30).

ENDWORD

As mentioned at the outset, it has not been the purpose of this present article to rework the el-Wad (or any other) data set, so for specific studies which focus on elucidating Natufian mortuary practices from a variety of, what may be called, 'non-processual' perspectives see, for example, Boyd 1995 (on 'ritual space'); Boyd 2001 (on gender, embodiment and body practices); Kuijt 1996 (mortuary practices as ideological mechanisms); and Valla 1999 (a structuralist approach to grave assemblages).

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