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DEATH AND CULT OF DEAD IN MIDDLE BRONZE AGE II EBLA: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY ON SHAFT TOMB P. 8680, NEAR SOUTHERN PALACE (AREA FF)

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ABSTRACT

Preliminary report about shaft tomb P. 8680, discovered along the external southern street of Southern Palace in Ebla (Area FF). The shaft was the entry of a more complex tomb: a small tunnel starts from the bottom of the shaft and reaches a subterranean funerary chamber cut in a Middle Bronze Age I cistern. The excavations were stopped inside at seven meter deep, due to a structural collapse of the roof in the burial chamber. All the pottery and other funerary gifts as well as the human remains were recovered inside the shaft and in the small tunnel that after the closer of the burial chamber, were used for burials. The finds dated the structures to the end of Middle Bronze Age II, the same period of Southern Palace. The anthropological remains of upper layers show that last bodies were buried in primary position, while all the human bones discovered in the lower levels and in the small tunnel were rearranged when the tomb was reopened for new burials. The anthropological analysis had recognized at least 56 bodies deposited in P. 8680.

TOPOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE

The funerary pit P. 8680 was discovered in September - October of 2003, inside Area FF East of Ebla/Tell Mardikh during the excavations of Rome 'Sapienza' University directed by Prof. Paolo Matthiae (Fig. 1).¹ The opening was along street L. 8534,

- 1 Cemeteries, with typologically different tombs, dislocated inside the settlement and in topographical connection with domestic and public structures are present in the intramural Middle Bronze Age funerary tradition of Ebla. The most important funerary area is under Palace Q, where shaft tombs, often with *dromos* entrance connecting the shaft with the funerary chamber, were discovered (Matthiae 1980a; 1980b; 1995: 175-186); the funerary chamber associated to each shaft are one or more. They are excavated in the natural bedrock, often connected each other for the perpetuation of funerary rituals. The *dromos* entrance seems a peculiarity of the royal tombs of Palace Q, while under southern Sanctuary B2 only a shaft was the entrance to the tombs, without *dromos*. Therefore, the western funerary area comprises royal tombs under Palace Q and tombs of high functionaries linked to the royal family under Sanctuary B2. Another funerary area is the rampart: all along it, mostly near the MB II forts (areas EE, V, AA), several pit and jar burials were recovered (Baffi Guardata 2000), though it seems that these burials are all related to MB I (Peyronel 2000: 1354). It is reasonable to presume that the burials found near the palatial compounds of Ebla, like the tomb of the smith found near Palace E (Baffi Guardata 1988: 6), are relative to the persons involved in the palace administration: in this case it is the funerary

between two building: on the north side Palace FF, called 'Southern Palace',² and on the south side a building investigated only in the northern perimeter wall M. 8677, and three room: L. 8686, L. 8683, and L. 8693. Street L. 8534 runs along the southern wall of Palace FF, separating it from the other structures to the south. The street is two meter wide until the proximity of P. 8680; in fact, close to the pit, at four meters ca., L. 8534 enlarged, as it is clearly indicated by the turning of wall M. 9677 (the northern wall of the southern structures) toward south. This fact could be an indication of an open place close to the Southern Palace (on the south eastern side), where there was the opening of P. 8680. On the south of street L. 8534, close to the entrance of pit P. 8680, there is another building, partially excavated until now. The only three rooms partially recovered for the northern parts are L. 8686, where there was a steps entrance to the building toward the street, L. 8693, the eastern one, mostly not investigated and L. 8693: here, in the northern corner, we identified a small bench of bricks. Near the bench there was, under the floor, a secondary burial of a single adult, deposited inside a pottery basin.³

From the architectural point of view, P. 8680 is extremely accurate (Fig. 2). The pit is 2.80 m deep; the shape is a square with a side of 1.25 m at the base of the structures, that shrinks it to 80 cm on the upper part. The pit walls are covered on all side with middle and large stones for an height of 1.40 m; here the stones stopped, and the rest of the structure, perhaps plastered, is excavated in the natural limestone. The pit ends with two step of 20 and 10 cm high, cut in the limestone. The two step lead to an opening on the west side of the pit, arc shaped, 92 cm high and 70 cm wide.

gifts actually permit this attribution (Nigro 2003: 345-347). Lastly there are tombs, often jar burials, under the floor of the houses: these kind of burials are found in different areas (Baffi Guardata 1988). All the Middle Bronze burial, excavated at Ebla, seems to be primary, except for the adult jar burials.

- 2 The topographical connections between P. 8680 and Palace FF are clear: the tunnel discovered on the bottom of the pit runs toward north-east, to the area of the Palace, and the northern part of cistern L. 8557, probably the original funerary chamber of P. 8680, is extended under the foundations of wall M. 8518, the perimetric wall of Southern Palace. Moreover, P. 8680 is near the eastern part of the palace, constituted by an open court, L. 8500, and by some small room on the northern and the southern side. This part of Southern Palace, that seems added later to the first square part of the structure (Matthiae 2004), has many opening under the floor. In particular court L. 8550 presents in the lower level a stone floor with some large flat basalt stones that seem the upper part of the opening of *dromos* tombs type, like the ones of Palace Q. In a later period, probably in Late Bronze (Matthiae 2004) a big square pit was made to reach the opening to these tombs. Probably, under the whole eastern part of Palace FF were present many tombs. In fact, also northern on the floor of rooms L. 8688 and in the north-west corner of L. 8380 area, some opening of vertical shafts are evident in the bedrock. Due to the stratigraphy of Ebla Southern Palace it is clear that in a second phase of construction, when the structures was enlarged to the east (Matthiae 2004) the opening to these tombs, probably with their underground funerary chambers system, were closed; some of them perhaps were already sealed in the first phase of construction of Southern Palace.
- 3 Due to the topographical position of P. 8680 and its proximity to many typologically different tombs (tombs with *dromos* entrance, shaft tomb, jar burials), it is clear that the southern area of Lower City, where Southern Palace was constructed in Middle Bronze Age IIB, was an important funerary area of Ebla, probably since Middle Bronze Age I, until the destruction of the palace, the same phase of the later burials on level 5 of P. 8680.

The square shape of the pits is different from the typical round shape used for water pits; moreover, the accurate construction, the final steps and the other architectural characteristics point to a clear funerary aim of the structure.⁴

The opening at the base of the pit was the entry of a tunnel that leads to a cistern, called L. 8557. The cistern is a typical water cistern of the Middle Bronze I, recognizable by the 'bell' shape. The access to the cistern at the end of the tunnel was blocked by a stone wall; it was constructed with big stones, of one meter wide, piled one over the other along the southern wall of the cistern, that was recovered completely filled by collapsed stones. The function of the cistern, clearly reused in the Middle Bronze Age II, remains unclear. It is possible that L. 8557 was the funerary chamber of the tomb and P. 8680 was its monumental entrance, but the excavations stopped at five meters deep, before the identification of a floor in the chamber, due to a statical yielding of the rock.⁵ [A.P.]

STRATIGRAPHY AND FINDS

The excavation of P. 8680 has identified three phase of utilization of the pit as funerary structure, from the closure of the funerary chamber, until the closure of the pit, probably during the last phase of Southern Palace. The opening of the pit was on level 4, recovered from the excavations along the whole street L. 8534. The first level 5 was identified on the top of P. 8680, correspond to the later phase of utilization, and it is divided in four layers;⁶ level 6 is characterized by a more intense utilization, with

4 From an architectural point of view, the square shape of funerary pits spread along the Levant in a period between the end of Early Bronze and the start of Middle Bronze Age: in Palestine and Jordan tombs with this kind of entrance were discovered in Tell es-Sultan, dated to the EB IV, in Tell el-Mutesellim (EB IV) and in Bab edh-Dhra', tomb D1, dated to the EB IIIB (Polcaro 2006: 250-251, 261-263). In Lebanon an example of tombs with pit entrance of square shape are some royal tombs of Byblos (Middle Bronze Age I). The complexity and the accuracy in the construction of the square pits used as entrance to a funerary chamber, point to consider these structures as tombs of ideological relevance, made for an important commitment inside the society (Polcaro 2006: 263). The shaft tombs of various typology are diffused from the Early Bronze Age also in the whole Northern Syria and Anatolia: stone built type is widespread in the area, for example the 'hypogeum' at Til Barsip, or some tombs at Tell Hadidi (Carter, Parker 1995: 108); the type cut into earth or in the bed-rock, like our P.8680, is common in Middle Euphrates, like the elaborate shaft tombs of Halawa (Carter, Parker 1995: 108). The only shaft tomb found in Qatna is also to the Early Bronze Age IV (Al-Maqdissi *et al.* [eds] 2002). Finally, this typology of funerary architecture spread from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age in Syria and the Levant; it is also sure that always the shaft tombs were in the same cemetery with other kind of tombs, like pit tombs, characterized by a poorer presence of funerary gifts. The earth and rock cut shaft tombs could thus be an example of a local north Syrian development tomb type, perhaps inspired from an ED III Akkadian burial tradition, associated with urban populations and possibly with established lineages (Carter, Parker 1995: 113-115).

5 Perhaps when the funerary chamber of this tomb was closed in antiquity, the pit itself was utilized for the depositions from the same family group that used the funerary complex before.

6 The first layer of level 5 (5a) is characterized by compact brown earth and a single adult primary deposition, with all the bones in connection it was discovered at 1.5 m ca. below the surface of the pit (410.50 m asl.); the body, deposited on east - west direction, was buried in a crouch position, on his left

other three layers.⁷ The first phase of P. 8680 is represented by level 7, divided in two layers, recovered on the two steps on the bottom of the pit.⁸ Finally on the same level was identified an older phase of depositions, denominated D. 8697, discovered inside the tunnel connecting the pit with the funerary chamber.⁹

side. Under the first deposition (20 cm down) another series of burials was immediately discovered; this layer (5b) was characterized by a clear brown color earth, with limestone flakes, some carbons and only a few fragmentary pottery, and some human bones, with seven skulls not in connection, scattered on the surface. Only two objects, a fragmentary head of female figurine and a single small bead, clearly not relative to the funerary gifts, were recovered in this layer. Both the first two layers of level 5 depositions are thus characterized by the absence of a clear funerary equipment. In layer 5c (408.52 m asl) there were other five skulls, disconnected from others scattered long bones without articulation, with the only exception of a body, partially articulated, found along the northern side of the pit; this layer ends with the internal stones cover of the pit wall, at 1.40 m from the street level. Few centimeters below, on layer 5d, other two skulls were deposited in the north eastern corner of the pit. During the excavation of this layer, the opening to the tunnel at the bottom of the pit started to appear.

- 7 The second phase of utilization of P.8680 it is represented by level 6, separated by level 5 by a few centimeters of earth without burials (at 408.40 m asl), probably due to a little gap in the funerary use. It was characterized by earth of dark brown color, some carbons, small limestone flakes and stones. In the first layer, 6a, a partially articulated burial was found on the eastern side of the pit, with another skull deposited close to south without bones in connection. The characteristic of this layer is the first appearance of entire pottery, posed near the bodies; the costume of putting the vessels against the wall of the pit is immediately evident. Layers 6b and 6c are characterized by the absence of articulations between skulls and long bones and the presence of a rich funerary equipment with many entire vessels, scattered on the surface, duck-head pins and beads, deposited near the skulls. In layer 6b two group of two and five skulls each were discovered: the first group on the north eastern corner and the second on the south western corner of the pit. The disposition of the human remains point to a secondary arrangement of the dead, with the skulls and the funerary gifts impiled against the corners of the structure and the long bones scattered on the surface. Some animal bones, like teeth of equines, were also discovered in this layer. In layer 6c four skulls were discovered, one on the middle of the southern wall of the pit, one on the south western corner, one on the north western corner and the last on the north eastern corner of the pit. Mostly of the funerary gifts of this phase, in particular pottery, were discovered in layer 6c. This layer ends at 408.13 m asl.
- 8 Level 7 was identified by a compact dark red brownish color earth with carbons and without any presence of limestone flakes and stones. The two layers of level 7 are characterized by the bad state of conservation of the long and small bones of the dead, while only the skulls seem to be preserved. The first layer, 7a, covering the first step of plastered rock on the bottom of the pit, at 2.80 meter below the surface of the street L. 8534 (at 407.80 m asl); in this layer five skulls were discovered on the eastern wall of the pit and on the north western corner, in connection with a lot of entire vessels and other objects like beads and a bronze ring. In a case, an entire necklace of different stone beads was discovered around a skull, probably indicating that the bodies were decomposed inside the pit before the rearrangement. Twenty centimetres under this layer, layer 7b, covering the second step of plastered rock on the bottom of the pit, was identified. In layer 7b other four skulls were discovered scattered on the step and in front of the entrance of the tunnel, completely recovered on this quote. In connection with these first burial only few vessels and three pins were found. The bottom of the last step was at 407.60 m asl.
- 9 On layer 7b the complete section of the filling inside the tunnel was discovered. The tunnel, that opens on the pit west side, appeared to us completely full of limestone flakes, due probably to a collapse of the roof. The northern side was still preserved, and for ca. 10 cm the cut of the rock done to enlarge the passage between the pit and the funerary chamber was evident; the southern side of the tunnel was in part collapsed. Under the layer of detritus there were a layer of depositions, that we denominated D. 8697, disturbed by the rock chipping of the tunnel roof. During the excavation of the tunnel six skulls

In the first two layer of level 5, no funerary gift were discovered with the dead. In level 4, on the surface of the street L. 8534, near to the opening of P. 8680 a small bead and a head-duck pin, perhaps relative to the funerary gifts of the last burial (layer 5a), were discovered. Starting from layer 5c other two pins were discovered:¹⁰ the presence of these objects, without any entire vessels but with some pottery fragments only, points to the hypothesis of a sack of the later layers of P. 8680, operated during the destruction of the city. In fact, the human bones of level 5 was discovered scattered without order on the surface, while the older ones, were found with the skulls impiled on the walls. Moreover the last dead was found perfectly entire, with the bones in connection.¹¹ Probably, the sack of pit P.8680 did not reach the older depositions, due to the haste of the robbers, like in the royal necropolis of Palace Q.¹²

In layer 6a only a pin, was discovered under the first skull identified in the layer. The first vessels appeared near the later inhumations of layer 6b; two bowls with high flaring rim, pronounced shoulders and ring base,¹³ and a simple ware juglet with a small handle, piriform body and high shoulders.¹⁴ In layer 6c the two northern inhumations had a pottery equipment composed by two bowls and a piriform juglet of the same typology, with also a small simple ware jar with high neck,¹⁵ and three Black Burnished Ware bottles with inner stepped rim, piriform body and high shoulder.¹⁶ These two northern inhumation had also two cups, a greater one with an high base,

without any bones in articulation were discovered, with few entire vessels and the same funerary gift of the other dead deposited inside P. 8680: beads and bronze ornaments. The last burial, constituted by a single skull was discovered against the stone wall that closing the opening toward the cistern L. 8557/funerary chamber. Due to the stratigraphy inside the tunnel, it seems that the burials of D. 8697 were pushed inside the tunnel after the closure of the cistern. The closure wall is done with big and medium limestone stones; although we do not finish the excavation of L.8557, due to statical problems of the vault, it seems that the foundations of the closure wall were posed on the bottom of the cistern, probably many meters down the opening of the tunnel. Moreover, due to the small space of the tunnel, 92 x 70 cm for a length of 1.30 m, it is not possible that the dead were buried in primary position inside the tunnel (as it is also confirmed by the absence of any small bones), but it is very probably that the dead are posed inside in secondary burial after the decomposition. Perhaps the skulls of these ancient burials could be pushed inside the tunnel to make space to the new burials of layer 7 in P. 8680.

10 The pins found in layers 5c and 5d are of the duck-head typology, a typical bronze ornaments of the woman involved in the Middle Bronze palace administration (Matthiae, Pinnock, Scandone Matthiae 1995: 425, cat. 296), common in the Mardikh IIIB period.

11 Probably at the time of the sack, this dead was not decomposed yet, so the theft of the funerary gift did not disturb the inhumation; for the dead deposited before, yet decomposed, the robbers had scattered the bones in order to take away the funerary equipment.

12 Matthiae 2006.

13 This is an evolution of collared bowls, MB IIB (see Nigro 2002a: Fig. 22:4; 2002b: Pl. LVI:91), a drink vessel common in MB palaces (see Pinnock 2005: 41, Pl. XIX) or in the MB forts (Peyronel 2000: Fig. 11) of Ebla.

14 Dated to Middle Bronze Age IIB, see Nigro 2002a: 318, Fig. 22:2.

15 Similar to one found in a tomb of Tell Afis, US5604, see Aletta 2005: Fig. 31:6.

16 In use from the MB IB to the whole MB II, see Nigro 2002a: 310, Fig. 22:8.; this kind of vessel, possibly used for drug or perfume, was typical in the funerary equipment in the MB IB-IIA tomb and burials of Ebla (see Nigro 2003: 352).

and a smaller one.¹⁷ Moreover, the southern two burials of layer 6c had a similar equipment: three bowls and two piriform juglets of the same typology, three BBW bottles and a simple ware jug, with trifoil mouth.¹⁸ In layer 6c another duck-head pin near a skull and a single head of clay female figurine, apparently broken in antiquity and deposited fragmentary inside P. 8680, were also recovered.¹⁹

In connection with the five inhumations of layer 7a a pottery equipment composed by BBW bottles and three bowls with high flaring rim,²⁰ was discovered. The juglet typology of the upper layers is no more present, but there are two yellow bottles of medium and small size, with stepped rim, of an uncommon typology in Middle Bronze Ebla; the greater one presents traces of red painting on the surface. These bottles are very similar to imported Egyptian vessels of the Middle Kingdom, 12th-13th dynasties (1991-1640 BC), common for example in MB Sidon (Doumet-Serhal 2006). Between the pottery equipment of this layer there were also two bowls / plates with inturned rim, slightly concave walls and disk base of different dimension.²¹ In the funerary gifts of layer 7a there were also an entire necklace made of different stones, a bronze pin and small bronze ring. In relation with the four inhumations of layer 7b, on the second step on the bottom of P. 8680 in front of the opening to the tunnel, another well preserved pottery equipment was discovered. It is composed by five collared bowls and a simple ware jug, with trifoil mouth. The funerary equipment had also two simple bronze pins and a hear pin.²²

The analysis of the funerary gifts discovered in P. 8680 (Fig. 3), points to ascribe the majority of burials to Mardikh IIIB (Middle Bronze II 1800-1600 BC); most of the vessels are actually very similar to those of the royal tombs, in particular the Tomb of the Lords of the Goats (Mardikh IIIB1, MB IIA, 1800-1700 BC). Moreover, other pottery, ascribe the last phase of P. 8680 to Mardikh IIIB2 (MB IIB, 1700-1600 BC). Some forms and pottery typology discovered in lower layers could instead be related to Mardikh IIIA2 (MB IB, 1900-1800 BC). [A.P.]

THE HUMAN REMAINS OF P. 8680

The archaeological evidence of P.8680 shows that the burials from the upper level were found in primary burial position whereas bones found on the lower levels

17 This one is a miniature concave profile beaker, glassed inside, similar to some examples of the Middle Bronze Age Hama tombs: typology 235 B, Period H, see Thuesen, Ribbe 2000: 1643, Fig. 4b.

18 Common also in the MB IB, see Nigro 2000: 1197.

19 The presence of figurines in funerary contexts is well known in North-western Syria: this kind of object with a different typology dated to MB IIA appears also in a tomb at Tell Afis US 5604, see Marchetti 2001: Fig. 19; Aletta 2005: 38, 171, Fig. 31:13.

20 That in this case seem more similar to the typology of collared bowls, common in Mardikh IIIA2, Middle Bronze Age IB, see Nigro 2002a: 305, Fig. 7:1-5; 2002b: 105, Pl. XLVIII:29-31.

21 These vessels are typical in Middle Bronze Age IIA context of Tell Mardikh (see Nigro 2002a: 316, Fig. 19; 2002b: 109, Pl. LII:62).

22 The pins with a hole in the head discovered in level 7 are clearly used to sew and are possibly related to the activities of women inhumed in the tomb.

were mixed. The minimum number of individuals of the sample studied is of 56. In particular 24 infants, 7 subadults and 25 adults have been identified (Tab.1); most of which are incomplete and poorly preserved. It was possible to determine the sex of exclusively 9 of the 25 adults: 3 resulted male, 6 female. The sex was determined observing morphological features of the pelvis and of the cranium.²³ Age at death was determined, for infants and subadults, considering the chronological development of the dentition, long bone length and the degree of skeletal maturity reached²⁴ and for adults considering the degree of suture closure,²⁵ the degree of dental wear²⁶ and, where possible, the alterations of the pubic symphysis.²⁷ The cases of arthropathies identified were two: a case of vertebral fusion and one of osteophytosis. Minor lipping of limb articulations, in all cases with frequencies inferior to 6%, has been observed on the distal epiphyses of two humeri, on the proximal epiphysis of an ulna, on some hand phalanges and on the distal epiphyses of two femurs. Some post cranial districts, discovered in Level 5 and most probably belonging to a single individual show evidences of a possible osteomyelitis, a non-specific infective event.²⁸

Traumatic lesions, in this case represented by healed fractures of the post-cranial bones, have been identified on a humerus (incomplete fracture), a tibial malleolus, and two ulnae and in particular of the proximal portion of the diaphysis of one and a parry fracture of the distal portion of the other ulna. Moreover an evident bone proliferation (myositis ossificans) has been identified in the iliofemoral ligament region of a femur; this probably referable to muscular macrotrauma. Eight of the craniums observed showed cribra orbitalia (overall in 42% of the orbital roofs present)²⁹. The lesions observed show a relatively elevated frequency, however it must be remembered that this is relative to the overall number orbital roofs and not to the one of individuals. However all the cases observed are mild, suggesting good capabilities of surpassing the stressful events.

A certain number of phenomenons due to malnutrition or pathologies influencing calcium and phosphor metabolisms or growth rate, are likewise detectable through the analysis of dental enamel growth disorders. These alterations reflect, in particular, stress undergone during infancy.³⁰ In the sample from Ebla, 14,9% of the teeth observed show dental hypoplasia.³¹ The main tooth and alveolus affections observed,

23 Acsadi, Nemeskeri 1970; Day 1975; Ferembach *et al.* 1977-79.

24 Ubelaker 1978.

25 Meindl, Lovejoy 1985.

26 Lovejoy 1985.

27 Iscan, Kennedy 1989.

28 An evident microporosity, accompanied by circular cavities (cloacae) in the area interested by the lesion is evident on the distal epiphysis of a right humerus, on the proximal one of a right ulna and on the third trochanter of a left femur.

29 The aetiology might be ascribable to different causes such as, for example, malnutrition (anemia due to a diet poor in iron, scurvy and rickets), malabsorption (parasitosis), congenital anemias (thalassemia), inflammatory processes, hemorrhages, tumors (Ortner 2003).

30 Goodman, Armelagos 1985; Goodman, Rose 1990.

31 The distribution of the onset ages of the defect indicates stress is practically absent during the first five

the frequencies calculated on the total number of permanent teeth and alveoli present are apical abscesses (5,6%), caries (6,7%), alveolar recessions (11,2%) and ante-mortem tooth loss (19,5%). The distribution of these infective maxillo-dental lesions gives information regarding the general health conditions, the dietary habits and oral hygiene of the sample considered.³²

Musculoskeletal stress markers were evaluated through the examination of the principal muscular attachment areas on the limbs of the adult individuals. Overall, this sample, from the funerary pit, shows a low incidence of bio-mechanical stress markers. Moreover, when present, these alterations caused by repeated strains maintain low incidence. The individuals discovered in Ebla's funerary pit do not appear to have been particularly burdened by activities implicating prolonged and intense muscular exertion. The joints and muscular attachment areas showing exertion trauma which may be connected to intense and prolonged ergonomic activities, are scarce. Moreover, the percentages observed for the more solicited muscles are low and therefore not particularly significant and when excluding the markers which may have a hereditary origin the only ones remaining are pertinent to muscles of the lower limbs.

Individual 1 was one of the last burials to be deposited before the tomb was closed for the last time. He shows a cranial trepanation³³ (Fig. 4). The skull examined is thought to have been subjected to a quadrilateral incision of the bone through the use of a blade. The dimensions of the original cranial surgically made hole can be calculated by considering the approximately rectangular sclerotic and osteitic area, which is visible on the outer surface of the skull. The cut, which was probably 50 by 45 mm in size, was followed by an extensive deposition of new bone. This partly covered the original quadrilateral morphology of the surgical hole. The extensive healed area of bone suggests that the period of survival of this individual appears to be considerable.

The subject from Ebla dates back to the end of Middle Bronze Age II and is one of the most ancient example so far discovered of a quadrilateral trepanation in the Near East. In fact, the considerable deposition of new bone clearly indicates that the subject survived for a long period after the intervention.

On some of the skeletal remains discovered in Level 5, 6 and 7 there were traces

years and starts appearing during the sixth year of life therefore indicating a good nutritional intake during suckling.

32 Caries is caused by bacterial acid attack of enamel and it is favoured by sugar consumption and scarce oral hygiene. The lesions caused by caries favour, in their turn, the onset of infections and the formation of abscesses, phenomena which may bring to ante-mortem tooth loss. The presence of dental plaque and tartar may contribute to gingival inflammation and to the onset of infections. These may extend to the alveolus and cause its reabsorption and the tooth loss. Ante-mortem tooth loss was relatively frequent in the sample studied.

33 Mogliazza *in press*. The trepanation is located on the left side of the frontal bone very close to the coronal suture; the hole measures 35 by 29 mm. The surface of the border is irregular, rough and contains small pits of an osteitic nature, while the diploe has been completely obliterated by later deposition of bone as a result of healing.

of material later identified as vegetable fibre fabric (Fig. 5).³⁴ [S.M.]

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, from the archaeological and anthropological data, it is possible to assume that the people deposited inside P. 8680 were certainly members of a palatial elite. This hypothesis is confirmed by the analyses of the funerary gifts, including prestigious objects like the glassed beaker or the imported Egyptian bottles; other objects, like the duck-head pins, were also typical of the jewelry associated to the palatial elite clothing. The anthropological analyses confirm this hypothesis: in fact all the individuals deposited in P. 8680, although having signs of hereditary diseases and a high infant mortality, do not present trauma due to intense ergonomic activities, that could be an indication of the high social status of the dead. Moreover, the fact that the last individual buried inside the shaft had in life such a surgical operation as a cranial trepanation, carried out with an advanced technique, is another important indication of his status; it is in fact very probable that not all the population of the ancient Ebla can have access to such a difficult and advanced surgical operation. P. 8680 appears thus as the communal tomb of a big family, mostly composed by women (in fact from the total count of individuals, it seems that females are double than males), working in the administration of a palatial compound, very probably the Southern Palace, a public building that has a clear topographical connection with the shaft.

The use of a single shaft for the burials of an entire family comported of course the frequent reopening of the tomb due to the collocation of new dead. So, as showed by stratigraphy, each time the dead are deposited in a new burial layer, the ancient dead are rearranged in this way: the skulls, clearly an important symbolic part of the dead, are posed on the corner of the shaft with their funerary equipment, and the others bones were scattered on the surface. Then in the middle of the shaft the new dead body was buried in a flexed position on his side. This kind of funerary ritual was perpetuated for the whole period of use of P. 8680, but, probably, when the number of the dead increased, each time the shaft was reopened a purification of the bodies in decomposition was made by using fire. The proofs of that are the clear signs of burning discovered by the anthropological analyses on the human bones, because

34 This organic material, preserved because of the mineralization process it has undergone, is currently being studied by Dr M.L. Nosch of the Center for Textile Research of the University of Copenhagen. Preliminary results suggest this fibre might have been obtained from papyrus. The discovery of an ileum fragment with traces of this abovementioned fabric and showing, as do other fragments from Levels 5, 6 and 7, combustion traces seems significant. The presence of fibre on a fragment which has undergone combustion clearly indicates the fragment must have been burned before it was wrapped in the fibre. It therefore is not what remains of the sudarium but is, instead, indication the bones were wrapped in fibre or placed in bags after the complete decomposition of the body. This was, most probably, done when the tomb was re-opened as to introduce a new corpse, moment in which, most probably, the purification of the layer through the use of fire was likewise done.

burning occurred only after they were deprived of soft tissues. In the levels 5, 6 and 7, the traces of textiles found on the bones indicate that, after the intense and quick fire occurred in the shaft, the group of skulls and bones were collected together and posed inside sacks, probably deposited on the corners of the shaft. This ritual of multiple primary inhumations with the rearrangement of the bones after the decomposition operated by fire was not testified in Ebla before.

Finally, the funerary rituals indicate that an important elite family perpetuated a cult of dead, probably also implying a ritual banquet for the dead, proved by the animal remains (not yet analyzed) found in different layers of the shaft. The funerary rituals also included the deposition of status symbol objects, as the case of the two imported Egyptian bottles. It is actually probable that the elite family of P. 8680 had funerary rituals inspired by the royal funerary rituals, that also included a banquet for the dead (represented on the bone talisman founded inside the Tomb of the Lord of the Goat)³⁵ and the deposition within the funerary equipment of imported Egyptian objects as status symbol (for example the royal Egyptian mace found in the Tomb of the Lord of the Goat).³⁶ It is thus probable that in Ebla Middle Bronze funerary costumes there was a differentiation between the ritual operated by the different segments of the society, also indicated by the different architectural tomb typology (simple pit, shaft tombs, *dromos* tombs), but inside the horizon of a single culture, giving a special importance to the cult of dead. This cult was from one side very important for the perpetuation of the memory, and from the other for the maintenance of the status of the different social parts of the city: royal family, the elites, and common people. [S.M., A.P.]

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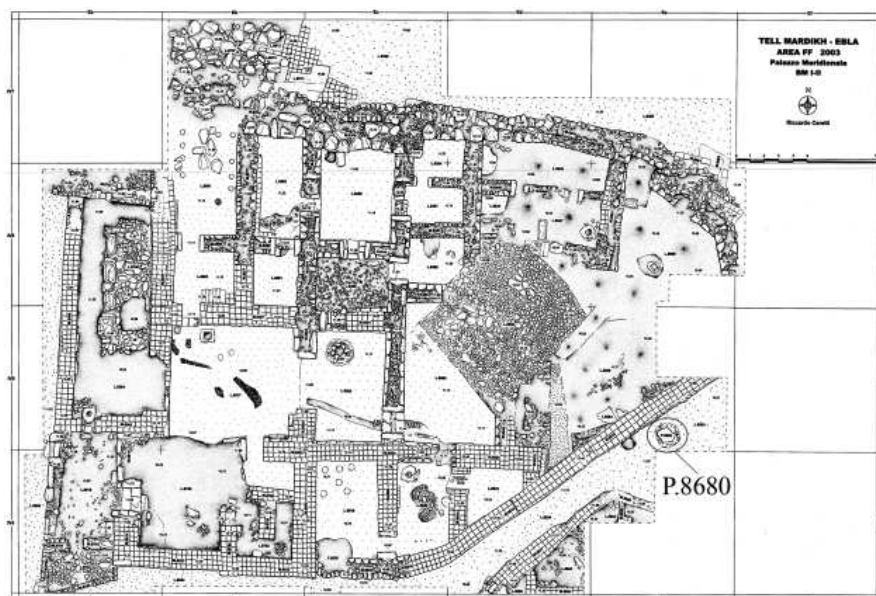


Fig. 1: Plan of “Southern Palace” - Tell Mardikh / Ebla, with the opening of P.8680 on street L.8534.
Source: courtesy of Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria (MAIS).

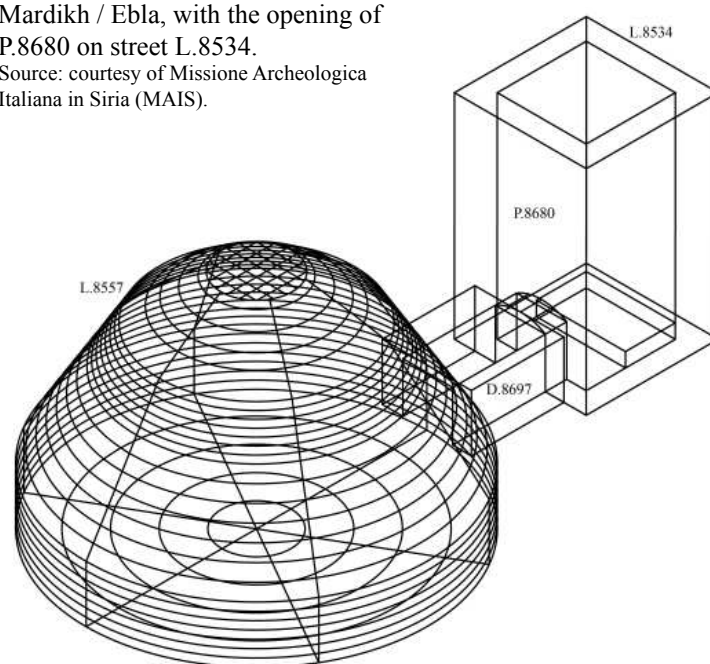


Fig. 2: CAD drawing reconstruction of the funerary complex of P.8680 and L.8557.



Fig. 3: General view of the finds discovered in P.8680: pottery equipment and two pins.
Source: courtesy of Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria (MAIS).

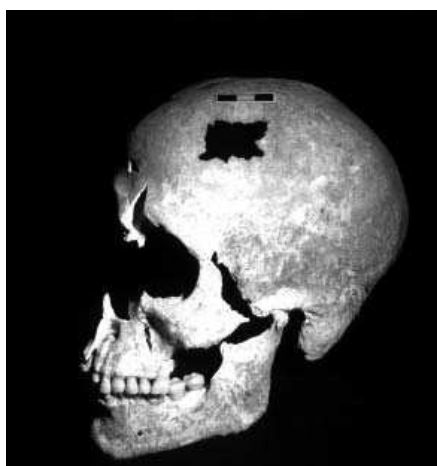


Fig. 4: The skull with trepanation opening.
Source: courtesy of Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria (MAIS).



Fig. 5: Textile fragment on the iliac bone.
Source: courtesy of Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria (MAIS).