

The Reuse of Tombs in Eastern Arabia

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von Stephanie Döpfer

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Cover illustration: Reconstruction of the reuse of an Umm an-Nar tomb (drawing: Maily Beyrens).



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1 Introduction

Reuse of ancient monuments and other sites is a well-known phenomenon in all periods all over the world. People in the past were always confronted with surviving remains from previous periods, and reacted to and engaged with them in most varying ways. This is particularly true for liminal places like tombs. Reused structures are by definition used.¹ This can be unmarked and thus neutral in meaning, but if intentional and conscious, significantly value-laden.² It is the latter that this study concentrates on. Reuse differs from continuous use by a period of non-use and can take destructive and additive forms. The former is characterised by (partially) destroying and/or taking away human remains, grave goods or the architectural structure of the tombs itself. Additive reuse refers to the adjoining of objects or even complete burials to an older tomb after a significant gap in the occupation, in some cases when the original monument was already in a state of ruin.

Reuse and other later activities at tombs can range from a few changes of the inventory to the complete emptying of it.³ For the archaeologist, identifying such later activities is challenging, not least because one and the same action can result in very different archaeological records.⁴ Likewise, it is possible that very differently motivated actions can lead to the same visible changes in the archaeological material. For example, a completely empty grave could be the result of a secondary burial at another location, or grave robbery. Furthermore, natural, non-anthropogenic influences, such as the decomposition of the body, animal burrows or the collapse of the tomb structure, can generate disturbances within the tomb and are often difficult to differentiate from anthropogenic ones.⁵ In addition, not all anthropogenic influences have to be intentional, for example, ploughing.

The majority of research on reuse of tombs has focused so far on Europe, with special emphasis on mega-

lithic architecture in its north and the medieval period.⁶ Despite how tombs have been the main focus of archaeological research in Eastern Arabia, i.e., the north of the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates, in the past decades, reuse of tombs has received only little attention. Oftentimes, it is discounted as an exceptional case not worthy of further exploration or it is often over-simplified as grave robbery, although there is plenty of evidence contradicting this interpretation, as will be argued in this study. When mentioned in publications, it is mostly in the form of a negative comment about the disturbance to the actual focus of research, i.e., the first use of the tomb. This relates to the still dominant perception of archaeological sites as static entities belonging to a specific time period and not as ever-changing entities within a multi-layered world. In consequence, reuse has never received the same appreciation as the first use of a tomb. This results in later objects found within older tombs being rarely described or illustrated in detail in the publications of the excavations, rendering it impossible to reconstruct their depositional contexts and time period. Further, it makes it distinctly possible that some evidence is not recorded at all.⁷

This attitude to archaeological sites might be the reason why so far no comprehensive research has been undertaken on reuse in Eastern Arabia, neither into the temporal and nor into the spatial range of this phenomenon. Ignoring the complex use-history of such tombs, however, prevents not only understanding the burial customs of a specific time period, but more importantly the social conditions of the past communities that favoured or prevented such activities. The present work will investigate the phenomenon of reused tombs in Eastern Arabia from the beginning of the Early Bronze Age around 3100 BC until the end of the Sasanian period around AD 630, when the onset of Islam in Eastern Arabia profoundly changed the burial customs, in order to understand the underlying purposes and social context of this

1 Kinney 2011: 3.

2 Kinney 2011: 2.

3 Aspöck 2003: 230.

4 Baitinger 1992: 337 fig. 4; Aspöck 2015a: 24.

5 Baitinger 1992: 336.

6 Bradley 2002: 112–148

7 For similar handling of this phenomenon by archaeologists in other regions of the world, see Vejby 2012: 8.

praxis. For this, all published evidence for reuse of tombs in this region was collected and statistically analysed. Different ideas concerning the underlying research question of why tombs in Eastern Arabia were reused will be

discussed. These include grave robbery, change of status of the deceased, offerings and other depositions of single objects as well as reusing tombs as burial sites. Most of these can be placed in the context of cultural memory.