Fig. 1. Ring cairn in the Jabal Qurma region, with its typical conical shape (Photo: Peter Akkermans)

JABAL QURMA

Peter M.M.G. Akkermans
Leiden University

The Jabal Qurma Archaeological Landscape Project seeks to examine settlement and subsistence practices in Jordan's north-eastern basalt desert from the Palaeolithic up to the present day, through survey and excavation in the Jabal Qurma region, some 30 km east of Azraq.

Our surveys in the area have identified many hundreds of burial cairns of different shapes and sizes. Fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 focused on the excavation of a number of these cairns (cf. Akkermans and Brüning 2017). Investigation of cairns is not always easy. An unfortunate (predominantly modern) development is the very considerable looting of tombs. Other constraints relate to matters of skeletal preservation (often poor) and the palimpsest of contents resulting from the continual reuse of the tombs. Often the reuse could only be accomplished through disturbing or even obliterating older burials in the mounds. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the burials in the desert are often notoriously difficult to date. The earliest securely dated cairns in the Jabal Qurma basalt uplands belong to the late 3rd millennium B.C., while many more cairns date to more recent historical periods. The custom of constructing cairns for burial seems to have ended in the Jabal Qurma range around the 3rd century A.D., although many preexisting cairns received new interments long after that.

Basically there are three types of cairns: ring cairns, tower tombs, and cist graves. The ring cairns, up to 10 m in diameter and 2 m

Fig. 2. A partially intact tower tomb in the Jabal Qurma region (Photo: Peter Akkermans)

in height, had an oval, corbelled burial chamber in the center, surrounded by an outer ring of large basalt boulders. The area between the burial chamber and the outer ring was entirely filled in with basalt stones, giving these cairns their typical conical shape (Fig. 1). Inside the burial chamber were the skeletal remains of one or more individuals, often accompanied by some jewelry made of stone, faience, glass, bronze, or iron.

The second type consists of tower tombs: relatively monumental round structures up to 5 m in diameter and 1.5 m high, which differ from the other cairns by their distinct tower-like shape and their clear, straight facade made of large, flattened basalt slabs (Fig. 2). Each tower was solidly filled in with basalt boulders, except for the small, corbelled burial chamber covered with capstones in its center. Although in most cases the chamber had been breached, some human bones and grave goods (beads, earrings) were still in and around it. The towers tend to have large numbers of Safaitic inscriptions and petroglyphs in their immediate surroundings. A number of radiocarbon dates suggest a date for their construction between the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century A.D., although they appear to have been reused repeatedly for burial in later periods.

The third type of cairn consists of rectangular cist graves, usually attached to tower tombs. The cairn graves were up to 2.7 m long, 1.5 m wide, and 1 m high, had carefully constructed dry-stone walls, and their interiors were entirely filled with rocks. Underneath the piles of stone were the skeletal remains of one or more individuals in crouched positions. Finds included necklaces made of colorful stone, glass paste, and shell, as well as rings made of bronze and iron. One cist grave had several Seleucid bronze coins, one of which could be securely dated to the reign of Antiochus IX (114–95 B.C.). Cist graves remained into use until the second century A.D.

REFERENCE:

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