

Kay Prag
The Manchester Museum,
Manchester University,
Manchester M13 9PL
UK

Kay Prag

The Foothill Cemeteries Behind Iktānū: The Vanishing Landscape

Jordan is still especially rich in monuments that are well preserved in arid regions and which provide a strong visual image of the past. Even when lacking documentation, they affect our feeling for the landscape and evoke a response. In lonely places one stands and considers who were our predecessors, and when and why they came there. While not among the top tourist destinations in Jordan, it seems to me, after many years, that the once quiet aridity of the south-east Jordan valley, the Ghawr around ash-Shūna al-Janubiyyah, is still one of the most interesting landscapes in the country, featuring as it does in biblical and historical events. Far older, is its dimension as a prehistoric mortuary landscape. The sense of time and permanence is strongest for a burial ground, which marks more than the material presence. In considering the peoples who passed through or crossed Jordan, these silent memorials in the landscape have their place.

Working at Iktānū provided the opportunity to observe this landscape, as the inhabitants do, at all times of day and night, at different seasons of the year, and under varied conditions. Sunrise over the eastern plateau, with Mt Nebo on the horizon, provided an almost daily drama at the beginning of the working day; the full heat of the sun at midday in summer is harsh; in winter, floods down the escarpment gush onto the alluvial plain.

This is an area that has been frequently, but not intensively, explored. The Chalcolithic site of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl is its best known and most extensively excavated site. The Pontifical Biblical Institute project between 1929 and 1932 did not just excavate on the site, but made extensive explorations of the hinterland (Mallon *et al.* 1934).

The Explorations of Koepfel, Mallon and Stekelis
Koepfel's map of the south-east Jordan Valley,

published in 1934, illustrated a complex landscape, with the Dead Sea to the south-west, foothills to the east, and a network of major and minor watercourses draining from east to west (Mallon *et al.* 1934: fig. 3). Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl is prominently marked in the north-west. Dotted the landscape are dolmens, round graves and rectangular graves, some occurring in isolation or small clusters, but also there are numerous cemeteries, some described as containing more than fifty graves. Stekelis estimated that the cemeteries in this region covered 25 square km., from the Wādī Muhtardja (the lower, western course of the Wādī 'Uyūn Mūsā) in the north, to the Wādī al-Abyaḍ in the south, and from Khirbat Suwayma in the west, to the foothills of Moab on the east (Stekelis 1935: 38). Mallon was aware that the cemeteries covered an even greater area, and he recorded yet more cemeteries north of the Wādī Muhtardja, extending almost to the Wādī Ḥisbān, near Iktānū (Mallon *et al.* 1934: fig. 67).

Two of the cemeteries were excavated, one just 2km. south-east of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl by Stekelis in 1933; and one 3km. east of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl by Mallon and Neuville. In the latter cemetery, spreading across both sides of a little wadi in the plain, more than 200 tombs were visible, including dolmens, cists and many row cists. The latter were constructed in series, sharing a common wall, normally with two or three in a row, but there was one series of ten in a row (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 154). In the cemetery Stekelis excavated, he recorded 168 cist graves and 11 tumuli, spread over an area of 140 x 80m (Stekelis 1935: 40). Rectangular cists, generally oriented east/west, were found more or less adjacent to tumuli and ring graves. Some of the tumuli and ring graves contained material dating from the late Early Bronze Age and beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 152).

More recent work, by the Dead Sea Survey in 1995 ('Amr *et al.* 1996), indicates that there was more settlement and at least a dozen more cemeteries south of Suwayma. Altogether the area dotted with these cemeteries stretches for at least 13km. in a broad arc around the eastern foothills, and the dolmen field extends a further 3km. north of the Ḥisbān.

At and near Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl itself, Mallon considered that the dolmens and cists were related structurally, with cists built below ground and dolmens above, suggesting continuity in ritual forms, and it seems likely that he was broadly correct (Prag 1995). Also it seems likely that many of the cemeteries were associated with the settlement at Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl. According to Lee (1978: 1213) this view "cannot be upheld on the basis of current information", but he does not say what that information is. However the occupation of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl appears to have been continuous from the late Neolithic to the very latest Ghassulian phase (Lovell 2001: 49), and the assemblage recovered by Stekelis and Mallon from the majority of the cist graves they excavated is certainly Chalcolithic.

The only graves recovered from the settlement site at Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl itself were those of infants, in jars in cist graves that were very similar in construction to the silos, which were regularly encountered on the site. Mallon excavated silos built in stone, brick or clay at Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl, in which they found grain and olive stones. Not only are the stone silos of virtually the same construction as that of the child burials on the site, but the construction is the same as for the cist graves in the cemeteries (Mallon *et al.* 1934: cf. Pl. 18:1 with Pl. 24:5). All the evidence suggests they were contemporary.

In the cemeteries, cist graves were found in different sizes, and were often tiny, especially the row cists (Mallon *et al.* 1934: Pl. 59:3). Stekelis believed from the evidence of the bones (which were rarely found), that the dead were inhumed in a squatting position, sitting on their heels, with the head propped against the short north or west end of the graves, looking up at the rising or the mid-day sun (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 153, Pl. 59:2). Graves recovered further south near Bāb adh-Dhrā' led Clark (1979) to assume that such bones indicated that burials were disarticulated, with the head laid on the top of the bone pile. Both interpretations are possible (we note parallels from the burials of chieftains of the Zimbabwe culture on the Limpopo River in Africa who were "interred in semi-sitting

postures", Caton Thompson 1971: 24), but in the case of the tiny row cists, only disarticulated burial seems possible in the space available. Such factors raise the question of whether during Chalcolithic period the region was a cemetery for more people than just the inhabitants of al-Ghasūl, possibly for people coming from a distance and participating in annual or seasonal rituals.

Mallon and Neuville had already noted that in the cemeteries towards Wādī 'Uyūn Mūsā, series of 6, 8, 10 and 13 row cists could be seen, and noted that their isolation from modern settlement had preserved them from the looting. With one of his workmen Mallon opened one of the little tombs in this area, in which the bones were disposed like those in the cemetery near Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl, with the head at the top against the north side of the grave, a disposition which Mallon again described as looking up at the noon sun (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 154).

The Iktānū Cemeteries

The type of cist graves Mallon describes are distributed in small discrete cemeteries close to Iktānū. During the first excavations at Tall Iktānū in 1966 we explored briefly four of these cemeteries (FIG. 1), and we have attempted to re-locate them in more recent years.

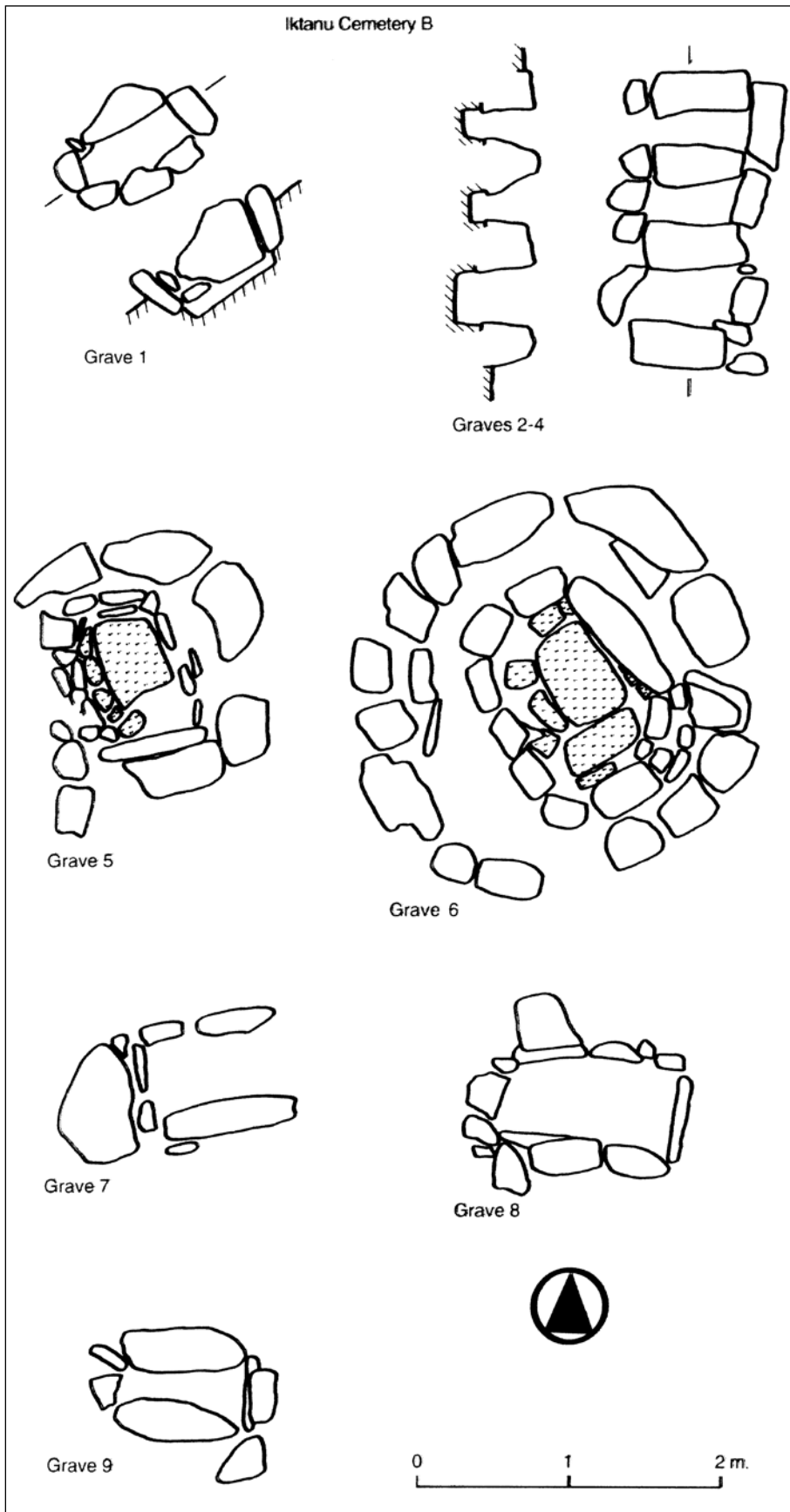
Cemetery B was approximately 35m. in diameter, with two ring graves on the east side, oriented *c.* north/south. There were many small cists and row cists occupying the rest of the area, and these were oriented east/west (FIG. 2). The six cists graves we opened were all empty, except for a single sherd recovered in the fill of Grave 6, which is certainly Chalcolithic and from a small V-shaped bowl or cornet.

Cemetery F, further south, explored in 1989 (Prag 1990: 128, fig. 7, Pl. II), covered an area *c.*



1. Cemetery B, south of Iktānū. Work in progress during April/May 1966; from the west.

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2. Cemetery B, south of Iktānū.
Plans of graves 1-6.

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36 x 42m. It was densely packed with at least 200 graves, again with two ring graves on the east side, and with huge numbers of row cists, mostly oriented east/west, but with a significant number oriented north/south in a separate group on the west side of the cemetery.

Ring graves, one from the Iktānū cemeteries and one seen at Adaima, are very similar but unfortunately dating evidence is sparse. The ring grave from one of the Iktanū cemeteries is 4.78m. in diameter, and appears to have a round or sub-rectangular cist within the circle. A single holemouth jar rim of probable EB I date was found with some Roman-Byzantine sherds in the looted remains. It was an isolated grave when seen in 1989, but the extensive development taking place in the area may have removed cist graves which once accompanied it.

Whatever the date of the ring graves and tumuli, there is at the very least a strong suggestion of spatial continuity in burial practice in this region over a long period.

The dolmen fields of the region, at ‘Udhayma, al-Maṭabba, Umm al-Quṭṭayn, Rawḍa and Ḥabbāsa, have been described elsewhere, with the evidence indicating that they date to the EB I period, some being reused (or possibly built) late in the third millennium in the Intermediate Bronze Age (Prag 1995: 79). Some of the dolmens at al-Maṭabba are aligned in a close-set north/south row of rectangular structures, and have the appearance of giant row graves.

Ritual at Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl

For the Chalcolithic period, and perhaps lingering into the Bronze Age, it is hard to escape the idea that this is not just a mortuary landscape, but also a ritual landscape. The people of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl conducted rituals of which we have glimpses, in their wall paintings and material assemblages. At Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl, processions played a significant role, with colourful costumes, obscure symbols and dramatic masks (Mallon *et al.* 1934: Pls 66-70; Cameron 1981). Whether religious, magical or secular, these ritual activities were part of the normal human process of re-formulating and mediating past experience “as a social animal, man is a ritual animal” (Douglas 1966: 62-69, 72).

Masks play a considerable role in traditional religions and shamanistic rituals in both the ancient and modern worlds. They are found in several Neolithic and Chalcolithic contexts in the south Levant (e.g. Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988: frontispiece and Pl.

XI) and it is likely that the repeated depiction of black and white eye images represents such masks at al-Ghasūl. Cameron (1981: 10) suggested these masks were linked to death rituals.

Just one of many modern ethnographic images of the ritual use of masks (made of vegetable fibres and shells) can be seen amongst the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa, who celebrate the living in an annual funerary ritual (Griaule 1963: fig. 154: E, Pl. XX: B; DeMott 1982: fig. 21). The Dogon have a great variety of masks and other symbols associated with ceremonies, and they record many of the symbols in the form of rock-paintings (Griaule 1963: e.g. fig. 165) which are reminiscent of some of the al-Ghasūl images painted on walls, though the meanings of the latter are lost to us.

I have long wondered about the origins of a carving on a flattish piece of bedrock about a kilometre south of Tall Iktānū, recorded one day in 1989, not directly associated with a cemetery, but in the same landscape (FIG. 3). It is about 20cm. in length, and carved in medium relief. It is weathered, suggesting that it is not modern. It does not resemble any of the tribal wasms recorded by Conder (1889: 210-211, 297-299) although in many ways this seems to be the most likely origin; but it was not recognised as a form of Islamic graffito by Geraldine King or M.C.A. Macdonald, both of whom have conducted extensive surveys of Islamic epigraphic material in eastern and southern Jordan and who kindly looked at the photograph. When similarly consulted, J. Malek noted that it “does not look Egyptian. A *serekh* (palace facade) might be considered because of its general shape, but there are too many difficulties associated with it, so it is not a very good choice”. Its origin and significance remains unidentified. Again there are similarities to it in some of the Dogon paintings of masks from West Africa (e.g. Griaule 1963: fig. 168: B, 185: D; 187), and other paintings, which depict bags carried by Dogon men at festivals (Griaule 1963: 671, fig. 207: centre). It might just be possible to see it as a depiction of a ‘porthole’ dolmen, as an elevation viewed from the entrance at the narrow end of the structure, but whether as such it can be linked to the dolmen builders of the EB I or possibly the IB period or incised by a much later passer-by, is unknown.

The great red and black star, the best known feature of the Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl wall paintings (Mallon *et al.* 1934: frontispiece) is a very ancient symbol of the sun, but equally could represent other celestial



3. Graffito on bedrock, south of Iktānū.

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bodies (as Cameron 1981: 5). Whether variation in orientation of graves is a chronological distinction, or has other, perhaps astral, significance we cannot know. In the south Jordan Valley we do know that the appearance and disappearance of the sun, and the heat of the noon sun, are marked factors in the landscape and environment, and this undoubtedly influenced Stekelis and Mallon in their interpretation of the skeletal remains found in the cist graves.

The survival of the cemeteries was due largely to the lack of later large-scale settlement in the arid foothills and in the vicinity of Tulaylāt al-Ghasūl; thus the location in itself serves to reinforce the early date of the cemeteries, before the desiccation of the western Ghawr (Prag 1995: 84). Why the foothills? As in most traditional societies, the burial of the dead was often in the poorer, rocky and dry land adjacent to, but not impinging, on the agricultural land. For both cist and dolmen burial a supply of suitable stone was needed. Wadi boulders could be made to suffice for small cists, but generally the cist graves were constructed with smallish stone slabs from the foothills: so the dead were taken to the stones, rather than the stones to the dead. Such events comprise rituals, or are commemorated in rituals.

For the foothill cemeteries and this landscape however, the present is much more bleak. The expansion of the gravel extraction operations came as a shock to me in 2005, and today the quarries and their dumps threaten to encroach on Iktanū itself (FIG. 4). The roar of quarry lorries now fractures a quiet crossing of the landscape.

In reflecting on those who have crossed Jordan, the theme of this tenth conference, I think not just of the ancient inhabitants of this region crossing a landscape perhaps ritualized by mortuary practices, but also of Father Alessio Mallon, who died of illness in 1934 in hospital at Bethlehem at the age of 58; his record of this ancient landscape is invaluable, and in every aspect that I have seen, beautifully observed and most accurate.

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