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The View from the Sahara

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Introduction

This book is the second volume of four proposed thematic books on aspects of the archaeology and history of what we term the Trans-Saharan zone – broadly conceived of as the vast spaces of Maghrib, Sahara and Sub-Saharan Sahel between the Atlantic in the west, the Mediterranean in the north, the Nile in the east and the equatorial African forests in the south. The territorial expanse of this zone is huge and, given the hostile climate and environment of the Sahara across the last 5,000 years, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholarly research has become regionally segmented. A good starting point for this volume is to consider to what extent the idea of a Trans-Saharan region makes sense? The chapters touch on places as far flung as the Western Sahara, the Tunisian Steppe, the Upper Nile and Lake Chad, an area of c.12,000,000 km² within which there are significant environmental challenges to movement. This is an area so vast and, in many places, so empty of significant human habitation that many scholars have considered it to have been impassable prior to the medieval period.¹

Because of the physical and environmental separation, past study has been regionally fragmented and compartmentalised. Archaeologists have most commonly self-identified with the Classical or Medieval Maghrib, with the Nilotic civilisations, or with the precocious polities of West Africa. Saharan proto-historical and historical archaeologists have been fewer in number, vastly outnumbered by prehistorians (and especially the devotees of rock art). In consequence, when considered at all, the proto-historical and historical Sahara has often been viewed from the outside, looking in. The *Trans-Saharan Archaeology* series seeks to explore the interconnections across this zone in new ways, bringing together archaeologists,

¹ Austen 2010; Lydon 2009; Fauvelle 2016 for the latest attempts to deny or minimise the existence of Trans-Saharan trade before the Islamic era. Compare with Mattingly *et al.* 2017a.

anthropologists and historians from different regions, varied academic traditions and multiple time periods and cultural phases. A novel aspect of this book is that we seek to place the Sahara more centrally in the discussion and to look out from the Sahara towards its neighbours in search of parallels and contrasts. We also see the Sahara as somewhat similar to a great sea like the Mediterranean and have been influenced in this enterprise by recent scholarly debates about the Mediterranean and the attempts to construct pan-Mediterranean histories and archaeological overviews.²

A few words are necessary at the outset concerning changes to the climate and environment of the Sahara in the past.³ At various times in prehistory, the Sahara has oscillated between wet and arid phases. The concept of a 'green Sahara' is now well appreciated in relation to the pluvial phases, which created substantial river systems and vast lakes.⁴ The last significant wet phase was in the Early-Mid Holocene period, broadly 10,000–3500 BC. During this period, the wide availability of water in the form of seasonal rivers, small lakes and a high water table supported Saharan connectivity and mobility.⁵ As a general trend, mobile human communities of hunter-gatherers adapted to herding of domesticated animals – primarily cattle.⁶ Although there is evidence for periodic climatic oscillations already within the Early-Mid Holocene phase, with a major abrupt arid spell recorded at around 6200 BC, it is apparent that with the Late Holocene, at c.3500 BC, there was a significant step in climatic change, which marked the start of the modern hyper-arid phase in the Sahara. Minor climatic oscillations are still recorded in some parts of the Sahara, such as certain areas of the mountain massifs, which receive somewhat higher rainfall than the region as a whole. However, the human experience of and interaction with the Sahara over the last 5,000 years has concerned a harsh desert environment that imposes limitations on settlement, movement and lifestyles. That is not to say, of course, that the desert denies long-range movements and contacts, but that these have necessarily become more focused along axes where water is more readily available in

² Abulafia 2011; Broodbank 2013; Harris 2005; Horden and Purcell 2000; Lichtenberger 2016.

³ For some of the most recent syntheses on the subject see: Brooks *et al.* 2005; Cremaschi and Zerboni 2011; Gatto and Zerboni 2015; Kuper and Kröpelin 2006; Mattingly 2003, 37–74, 327–46 with reviews of earlier literature.

⁴ Barker *et al.* 1996a, 291–302; Cremaschi 2001; Cremaschi and di Lernia 1998; deMenocal and Tierney 2012; Larrassoña *et al.* 2013; Mattingly 2003, 37–74, 327–46 for detailed discussions of climate change in the Sahara and fuller references; see also <http://www.greensahara-leverhulme.com/>.

⁵ Drake *et al.* 2011; Manning and Timpson 2014. ⁶ di Lernia 2013.

the form of springs and a high water table. There has been progressive decline in water availability in the Sahara as non-renewable subsurface water sources have been diminished by natural and anthropogenic action, and this has had implications for both Saharan populations and the ease of movement.⁷ The domestication of key pack animals like donkeys, horses, mules and camels has been another crucial factor in facilitating the navigation of the arid spaces of the Sahara.⁸ All the beasts of burden mentioned above were present in the Sahara by the later first millennium BC, though the importance of the camel increased over time with the progressive drop in water tables increasing the distance between and the delivery capacity of wells on Saharan trails.⁹ It is precisely because of such constraints on movement and on habitation that the Sahara is such an interesting theatre in which to explore themes related to human connectivity across space.

There are three interlinked themes in this book. Indeed, the key objective of this volume is to explore the interrelationships between human burials, migration and identity in the Trans-Saharan zone in the late prehistoric and historic periods (broadly covering the last 4,000 years, but with a core focus on the first millennia BC/AD). Burial, migration and identity are not equal categories and the connections between them are variedly reflected in the chapters that follow.

Burials are a fundamental human behaviour and are commonly distinctive and reflective of profound ideological beliefs.¹⁰ As well as providing information on the body, funerary archaeology involves the study of a series of processes and material attributes – from the basic mode of treatment of the body, to the typology of formal structure of monuments and graves in which remains were placed, to the evidence of attendant funerary rites and grave furniture, to the grave goods included in the burial or offerings left alongside it, to integrated approaches to human demographics, health and diet.¹¹

Migration, as a form of mobility, is an important factor in human history, sometimes documented and easily traceable, and more often in earlier historical periods it has to be inferred from a variety of material and biological markers.¹² Burials are thus potentially a good barometer for

⁷ Cremaschi and Zerboni 2009; Drake *et al.* 2004. ⁸ Lichtenberger 2016, 269.

⁹ Mattingly *et al.* forthcoming. ¹⁰ Tarlow and Nielsson Stutz 2013, for a broad overview.

¹¹ Scientific techniques have greatly added to the discussion in recent years through DNA and isotope analyses, material composition and provenance studies, as well as entomology, see Gowland and Knusel 2009; Tarlow and Nielsson Stutz 2013.

¹² For good historiographical overviews on the debate about migration, see Burmeister 2000; Hackenbeck 2008.

detecting societal change, identity affiliation and mobility among populations.¹³

Identity is another significant theme in modern archaeological study and frequently takes funerary archaeology as a key dataset. In modern societies, ethnicity, religion and nationality are the predominant identity types. However, in antiquity multiple identity markers were more common, linked to varying groups (and ideas of groupness) and often socially contingent on situation, audience, status, gender or age.¹⁴

In the rest of this introductory chapter, we shall offer some further commentary on these key themes and on current theoretical underpinnings of their study in archaeological work. In discussing burials, we shall review the historiography of burial archaeology in the Maghrib, the Sahara and sub-Saharan in general and provide some essential background to the Central Saharan region of Fazzan in particular. We conclude the chapter with a commentary on the structure of the book and some indications concerning how the chapters relate to the three key themes.

Approaches to Funerary Archaeology

There is a long tradition in archaeology for exploring the social dimension of burial rites, with approaches becoming increasingly sophisticated over recent decades with the accumulation of large datasets and the development of new theoretical frameworks.¹⁵ As we shall see, when we turn to the Saharan and related material below, the African datasets are much smaller, especially in regards to well-excavated and analysed burials, and their study has been less influenced by the wider evolution of theoretical thinking. Environmental constraints and past colonialism, with its 'eurocentric' perspective, have certainly had a strong impact on their study.

The mundane and inevitable event of death has, in human societies, become linked to complex processes of commemoration. Funerary evidence is often read as a sort of transcript of social complexity. Several separate issues need to be recognised here. Communities have often developed normative rules for the treatment of the corpse immediately after

¹³ Cool 2004 is a good attempt to merge these themes in a report on a single cemetery in Britain.

¹⁴ For useful introductory overviews see Diaz Andreu and Lucy 2005; Insoll 2007.

¹⁵ Barthel 1982; Chapman 1981; Duday 2009; Meskell 1999; Parker-Pearson 1999; Saxe 1970; Silverman and Small 2002; Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013. See, for example, Pearce 2013; Pearce *et al.* 2000; Philpott 1991, for studies with a focus on Roman Britain, and which can serve as exemplars of what can be done with large datasets of well-excavated burials.

death (washing, laying out, dressing, etc.), with specific choices also regarding the mode of disposal (inhumation, cremation and excarnation) and, where buried in the ground, as regards positioning of the body or ashes within a grave cut. The selection of material to accompany the body can also be revealing about ideas of an afterlife or social status; however, this is not just a reflection of the dead but also of the living communities associated with the burials, as they are the ones who select and place the objects into the grave.¹⁶ Sacrifices may be made and ritual meals consumed at the graveside, indicating the longer-term experiential dimension of these features for the ancestors. In some societies memorialisation includes visual imagery added to the tomb or formal inscribed grave markers, which can include significant biographical detail relating to the deceased. Increasingly, archaeologists have recognised the importance of contextual approaches to ancient burial practice and the need to carefully consider the theoretical dimension when examining social implications.¹⁷

Much of this evidence relates directly to the ceremonies of disposal of the body, but additional aspects bear on the memorialisation of the individual after death.¹⁸ The creation and enhancement of social memory through funerary rituals and monuments appear to be a key motivation behind mortuary practices in many societies.¹⁹ The form of the burial structure²⁰ and the incorporation of inscriptions or relief carvings on the monument represent long-term visible reminders of the individual.²¹ Indeed, the careful placement of monuments within the landscape was a common strategy to establish symbolic importance for tombs of ancestors.²² In many cultures, the grave or tomb was provided with funerary furniture, such as stelae and offering tables, indicating the maintenance of specific funerary rituals after the closure of the grave. In many societies, such memorialisation has created a significant role for ancestors in the lives of succeeding generations.²³ As such, it is also important to consider the funerary landscape beyond the tombs as individual phenomena, not just in terms of single-period aggregations

¹⁶ See Tarlow and Nielsson Stutz 2013, in particular the contribution by Ekerngren.

¹⁷ Ucko 1969 is a seminal work for challenging assumptions in the interpretation of funerary remains and encouraging a more theoretical approach.

¹⁸ See, for example, Williams 2003; 2006. ¹⁹ Chesson 2001; Daróczy 2012; O'Shea 1984.

²⁰ Dillehay 1995; Hope 2001. ²¹ Carroll 2006; Carroll and Rempel 2011; Hope 1997.

²² Arnold 2002; Barrett 1990; Pearce 2011. On funerary landscapes in general, see *inter alia*, Ucko and Layton 1999. An interesting aspect of the work of Williams (2003; 2006) is the way he has demonstrated that the social meaning of funerary monuments in the landscape could change over time, with reworking and reuse of such structures in later phases.

²³ Buikstra 1995; Graham 2009; Parker-Pearson 1999; Parker-Pearson and Ramlisonia 1998; Whitley 2002.

but as complex formations that evolved over centuries or millennia and are reflective of changing (or, indeed, constant) burial customs.²⁴

Since Saxe's important thesis that attempted to produce cross-cultural models of funerary behaviours and mortuary ritual, there has been considerable discussion about the degree to which funerary identities correspond with the identity of the deceased when alive.²⁵ There is certainly evidence that in many societies lower order groups attempt to emulate the funerary behaviours of more elite groups as a means of bolstering their social standing.²⁶ At the very least, this suggests that we should be cautious about assuming that there were neat relationships (and that are easily mapped) between funerary material culture/behaviours and social identity.

Funerary Archaeology in the Sahara and Beyond

Funerary archaeology in the Sahara and its neighbouring lands has a long history. There are regions such as the Nile Valley where the study of pyramids and tombs of different types have been paramount for reconstructing the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Nubia.²⁷ However, in some other regions, like the Middle Niger Delta or Mauretania, settlement archaeology or graves relating to recent periods have received more attention in archaeological research.²⁸ These excavation imbalances between settlement and funerary archaeology are not uncommon, but they do present some challenges for attempts to synthesise data about burial practices across the Trans-Saharan region. Another challenge comes from the timing and scope of archaeological research, which developed earlier in the Nile Valley, the Maghrib and Mediterranean Africa and at its inception had a major interest in finding evidence of cultural influence from the Near

²⁴ Stone and Stirling 2007. The work of the UNESCO Libyan Valleys Survey demonstrates the complexity of many clusters of funerary features within sites (Barker *et al.* 1996a; 1996b), a theme that is continued in many of the contributions in this volume.

²⁵ Saxe 1970, who concluded that the post-mortem identity presented in the mortuary rituals was a selective and often composite of life identities, and often dependent on choices of the living, rather than of the deceased; cf. discussion in Chesson 2001; Parker-Pearson 1999; Silverman and Small 2002.

²⁶ Cannon 1989; cf. Mouritsen 2011, on Roman freedmen in Italy who sometimes constructed extravagant funerary monuments imitating those of the elite, only for the highest elite groups to modify their own behaviour and make their tombs less ostentatious.

²⁷ See Edwards, Chapter 6, this volume.

²⁸ See, for instance, the research at Dhar Tichitt and Jenné-jeno: Munson 1980; Holl 1986; MacDonald *et al.* 2009; McIntosh and McIntosh 1980.

East, the Mediterranean and Europe. An approach that certainly had an impact on data interpretation.

The earliest known burials across the Sahara, either isolated or in clusters, open air or in shelters, lack superstructures.²⁹ From the Middle Holocene onwards, however, the Sahara was dotted by funerary stone structures, which only in Proto-historic periods clustered around settlements to create spatially discrete cemeteries. The earliest evidence of stone monuments comes from the Eastern Sahara (the deserts on both sides of the Nile), dating to the Early Holocene (c.7000 BC). They represent ritual monuments, which initially had nothing to do with human burials.³⁰ Later, around 5500 BC, stone structures of different size and shapes were used to cover animal burials,³¹ a practice that developed alongside pastoralism. It was only from the fifth millennium BC that stone tumuli were used to mark human graves.³² From the Eastern Sahara, they spread westward quite rapidly, following pastoral mobility. In the Central Sahara, animal burials, particularly of cattle, are recorded from the fifth millennium BC and human burials soon after.³³ Some of those structures became very complex in shape and monumental in size, and although isolated in the vast Saharan landscape, they surely could make an impression, at least on those who participated in building such labour-intensive constructions. They have been interpreted as graves of important members of mobile groups used to mark their territory.³⁴ In the Western Sahara, funerary stone structures, as well as other kinds of ritual megaliths, arrived later in time, again following a general westward cultural movement.³⁵ An emphasis on the presence/absence of stone superstructure and on its typology has become a characteristic of Saharan funerary archaeology, as thus far actual excavations of tombs have been rather limited.

In the sub-sections here below, an east to west trajectory is followed across the Trans-Saharan zone to provide a brief review of the more regionalised history of research (Fig. 1.1). We want to emphasise here that one of the aims of this book is to look out from the Garamantes to wider issues of comparisons and contrasts in funerary culture and behaviour in and beyond the Saharan zone, to the north, east, south and west. Placing the Sahara at the centre of such a study is novel, but we think will provide an interesting perspective on the data.

²⁹ See, for instance, di Lernia and Tafuri 2013; Garcea 2013; Petit-Maire and Riser 1983; Usai *et al.* 2010.

³⁰ Bobrowski *et al.* 2014. ³¹ Wendorf and Schild 2001. ³² Gatto 2012.

³³ di Lernia and Manzi 2002. ³⁴ di Lernia *et al.* 2002, 285, with bibliographical reference.

³⁵ See Chapter 11 by Clarke and Brooks, this volume.

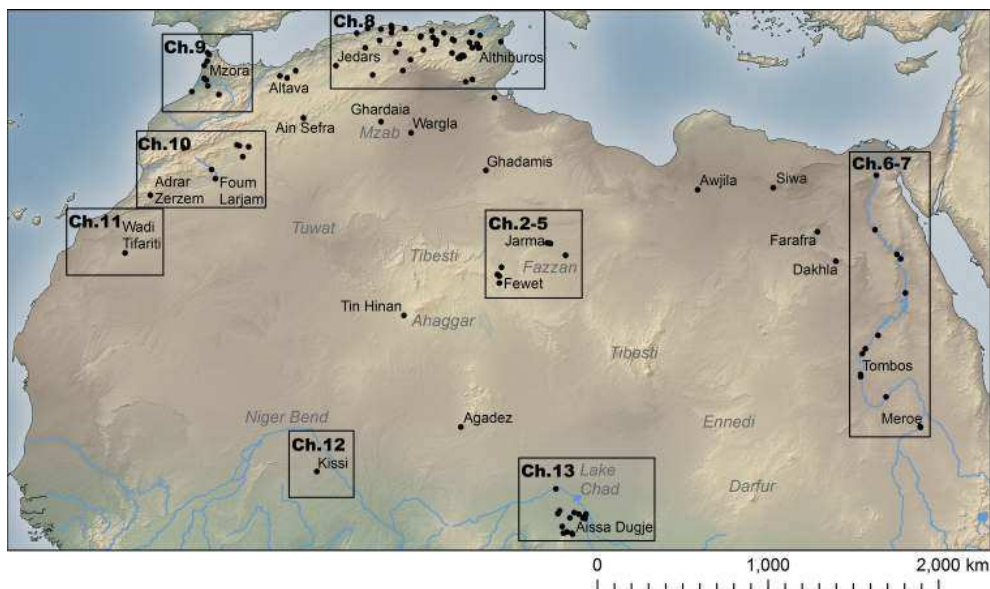


Figure 1.1. The Trans-Saharan zone, with indication of the major areas and sites covered in this volume. (made by M. Sterry)

Egypt, the Nile Valley and the Eastern Sahara

From the monumental pyramids of Giza to the hidden rock-cut tombs of the Valley of the Kings, ancient Egyptian funerary architecture and practices are celebrated worldwide. Their number and variety is overwhelming and it is difficult to synthesise in few sentences more than 200 years of research on the subject.³⁶ The Egyptian funerary traditions (including the rise of mummification) branched out from a common Nilotic background, shared with cultures from Nubia and Central Sudan,³⁷ only with the rise of the Pharaonic civilisation. Predynastic burials mainly consisted of a shaft dug into the ground, circular to rectangular in shape, with no superstructure. However, elite tombs, such as those found in Hierakonpolis, had complex superstructures made of perishable materials like wood, and wattle and daub.³⁸ It was only with the Early Dynastic period that mudbrick/stone superstructures became a common element of the Egyptian funerary architecture.³⁹ From the bench-shaped mastabas developed the pyramidal structures of the third millennium BC, which disappeared in the

³⁶ For good recent syntheses see Dodson and Ikram 2008 and Ikram 2015.

³⁷ Gatto 2011; Wengrow et al. 2014. ³⁸ Friedman et al. 2011.

³⁹ The earliest being the royal tombs of Dynasty 0 in Abydos, dated to the end of the fourth millennium BC, Dreyer 1992.

next millennium to be replaced by hypogea. Non-royal tombs occasionally preserved small pyramids marking their surface, but they had gone out of fashion before the Greco-Roman period.

The practice of mummification and of wrapped bodies can be traced from Egypt through the oases of the Western Desert to Siwa and beyond.⁴⁰ The most westerly examples of the Egyptian mummification rite appear to be at al-Jiarabub on the Libyan/Egyptian border between Siwa and Awjila.⁴¹ A few examples of mummified bodies have been found in Fazzan, but these seem to be accidental outcomes of burial in hyper-arid conditions, rather than the chemically assisted and invasive processes of handling the corpse.

In this book, we particularly address the Nubian funerary tradition, which in comparison to the Egyptian one retained more Saharan connections.⁴² As mentioned already, the concept of a stone structure covering a grave developed among the (Nubian) nomads of the Eastern Sahara. From the beginning of the historic period, in the third millennium BC, stone superstructures became characteristic of the Nubian funerary landscape also along the Nile, and in some areas continued to be so up until the arrival of Islam. The C-Group tumuli of the second millennium BC are particularly interesting for our discussion, as they consisted of drum-shaped structures with stone slabs used as stelae and outer offering areas, sometimes in the form of built 'chapels'.⁴³ From the second half of the second millennium, however, with the colonisation of Nubia by Egypt, Egyptian funerary tradition was adopted in northern Nubia and by the successive Napatean and Meroitic elites. Meroitic pyramids are well-known, but, although resembling Egyptian prototypes, they differ in terms of dimensions, construction techniques and materials. Nubian tumuli of various dates have also been found in Egypt, but apart from those related to the Pan-Grave culture of the late second millennium BC, they have not received much scholarly attention.⁴⁴

The relationship between Saharan and Nilotic burial traditions represents an interesting line of enquiry. There are striking structural similarities between certain Nile Valley burial monuments and those of the Garamantes. Some, like the construction of mud-brick pyramids and of rectangular, stepped tombs similar to the mastaba type appear to be distant echoes in relative isolation, rather than part of a more generalised cultural

⁴⁰ Bahariya golden mummies: Hawas 2000; Siwa: Mattingly 2000.

⁴¹ Mattingly 2000; Mohammed 1998. ⁴² See Edwards, Chapter 6, this volume.

⁴³ Bietak 1968.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Friedman 2001; 2004; 2007; Gatto 2005; 2013; Gatto *et al.* 2014; Ralston 2002.

adoption of the burial form within the Sahara. However, stone-built tumuli in general, and the C-Group ones in particular, which are very similar to Garamantian tumuli, are evidence of a shared Saharan tradition that goes far back in time. The laying out of the corpse on its back in an extended posture is a characteristic of Egypt, the Western Desert oases and of some of the late historic Nubian graves, whereas as we shall see for much of the rest of the Sahara, starting from Nubia, the body was placed in a contracted position, laid on one side, and covered by a leather shroud of some kind.

The Central Sahara and the Garamantes

The Libyan Saharan region known as Fazzan is notable for the range and complexity of its pre-Islamic funerary archaeology. Since pioneering excavations by an Italian mission in the 1930s,⁴⁵ some of the most spectacular evidence has been recognised as relating to the Garamantes, a Libyan people contemporary with the Greco-Roman civilisations of the Mediterranean (Fig. 1.2a/b for summary map of the settlement and funerary evidence relating to the Garamantes).⁴⁶ The burials of the Garamantes are notable for the abundance of Roman ceramics and glass found within them and an array of distinctive monument types.⁴⁷ In the early phases of research the nature of the 'Roman' finds somewhat overshadowed Saharan aspects of their burial context.

In the last two decades, there has been important renewed work by an Italian team on the Pastoral (Neolithic) peoples of the Libyan Sahara and their burial practices.⁴⁸ Although, as previously said, the earliest stone monuments in the Libyan Sahara relate to cattle-based pastoral groups of the Middle Pastoral period, these were chronologically separated by up to a millennium from the first monuments with human burials that were constructed from the third millennium BC onwards.⁴⁹ Many were simple stone cairns, but increasingly complex and larger forms were created so that by the end of the period there were types such as antenna tombs, crescents, keyhole tombs and cairns up to 15 m across. Some of the larger cairns were used for multiple interments. It is within these

⁴⁵ Caputo 1937; 1949; 1951.

⁴⁶ See also Bellair *et al.* 1953; Camps 1955; Daniels 1970; 1989; el-Rashedy 1988; Fontana 1995; Mattingly and Edwards 2003.

⁴⁷ Ayoub 1967a; 1967b; 1967c; Mattingly 2010.

⁴⁸ di Lernia and Manzi 2002; di Lernia *et al.* 2001; di Lernia and Tafuri 2013.

⁴⁹ di Lernia and Manzi 2002.