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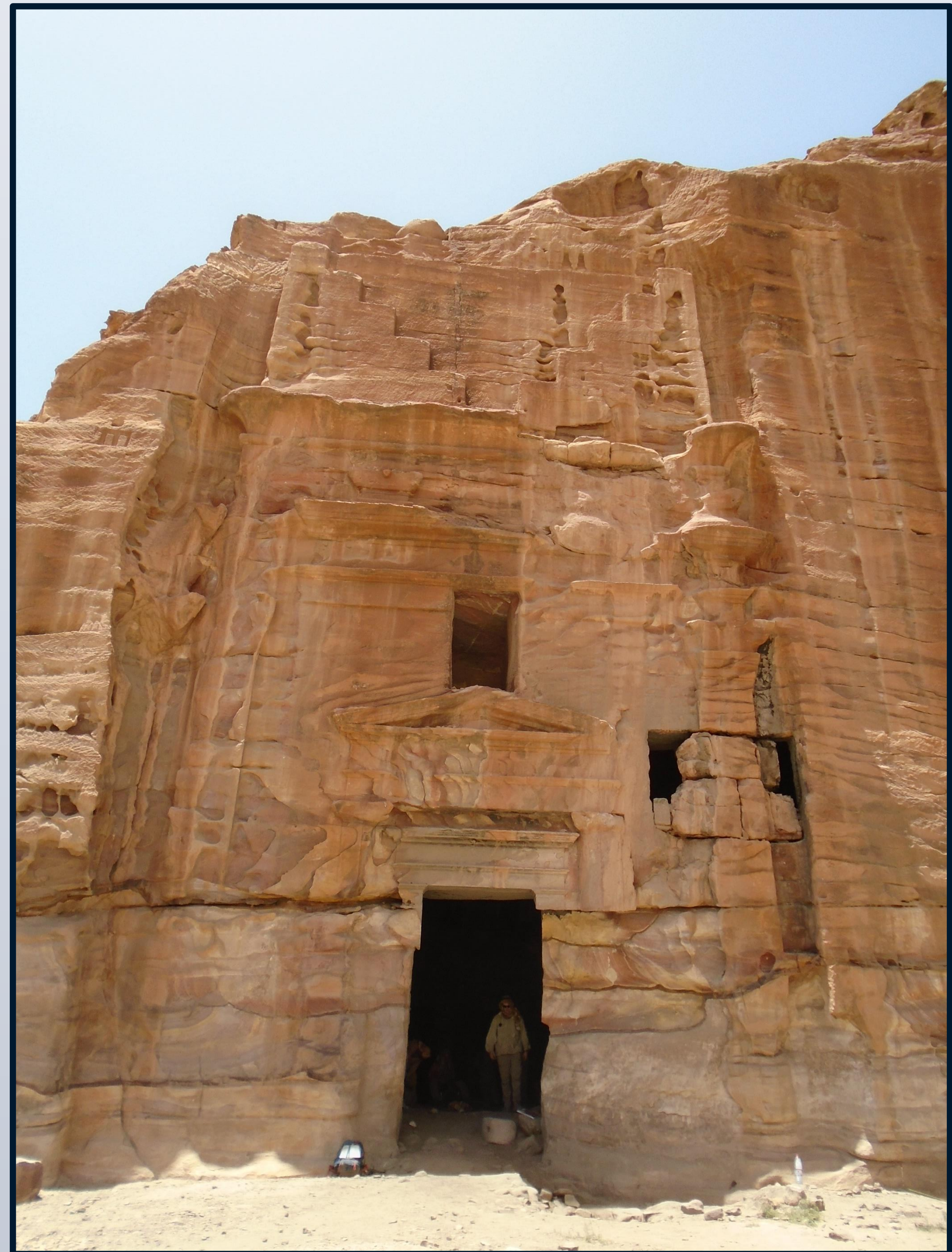
A Closer Look at Nabataean Burials

Anna Nielsen

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Overview

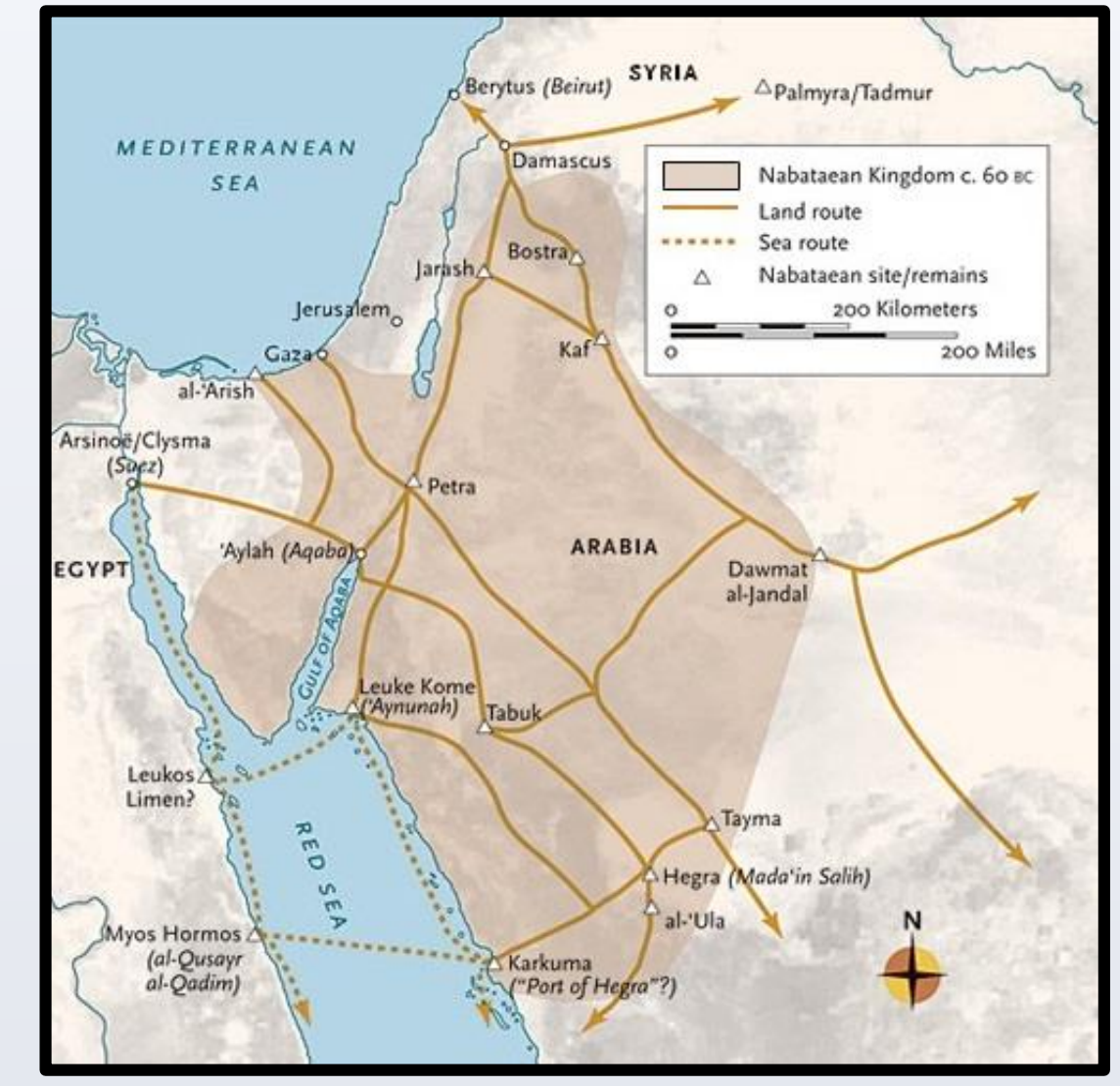
The ancient city of Petra, capital of the Nabataean kingdom that flourished in present-day Jordan from 300 BCE to 300 CE, is famous for monumental rock-cut tombs. While much is known of their construction and artistic influences, little research has been conducted on the types of burial found inside them. The Nabataeans interred their dead in two principal ways: primary burial, in which a corpse was placed in a grave without significant postmortem alteration, and secondary burial, in which a corpse was exposed until the flesh had fully decomposed and bones could be collected and buried. It is still unclear under what circumstances individuals received primary versus secondary burial.



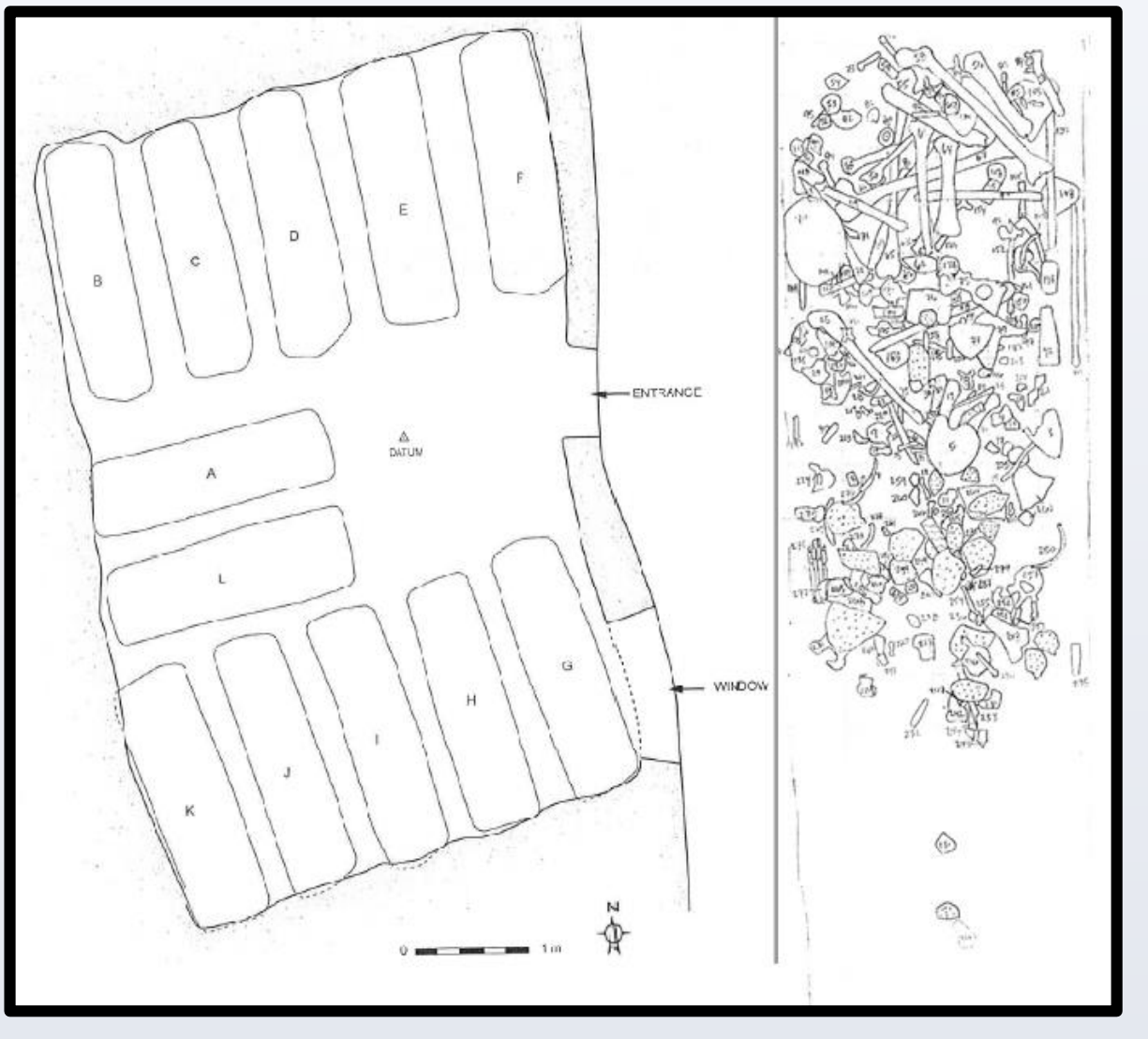
Wadi Mataha Site 15, one of the monumental tombs excavated by BYU where multiple primary and secondary burials were found. (Photo by author, 2017.)

Objectives

- In identifying factors determining whether individuals received primary or secondary burial, I explore three hypotheses:
- Nabataeans valued the concept of a "homeland" centered on the capital
 - Settlers in towns founded during the kingdom's first-century expansion period transported some bodies back to Petra for burial in ancestral crypts
 - Nabataeans believed that an individual's soul was tied to the flesh, complete decay of which would facilitate a full social transition to the afterlife



The extent of the Nabataean kingdom and its overland trade routes around the first century CE. (From Fahad Mutlaq Al-Otaibi, 2011.)



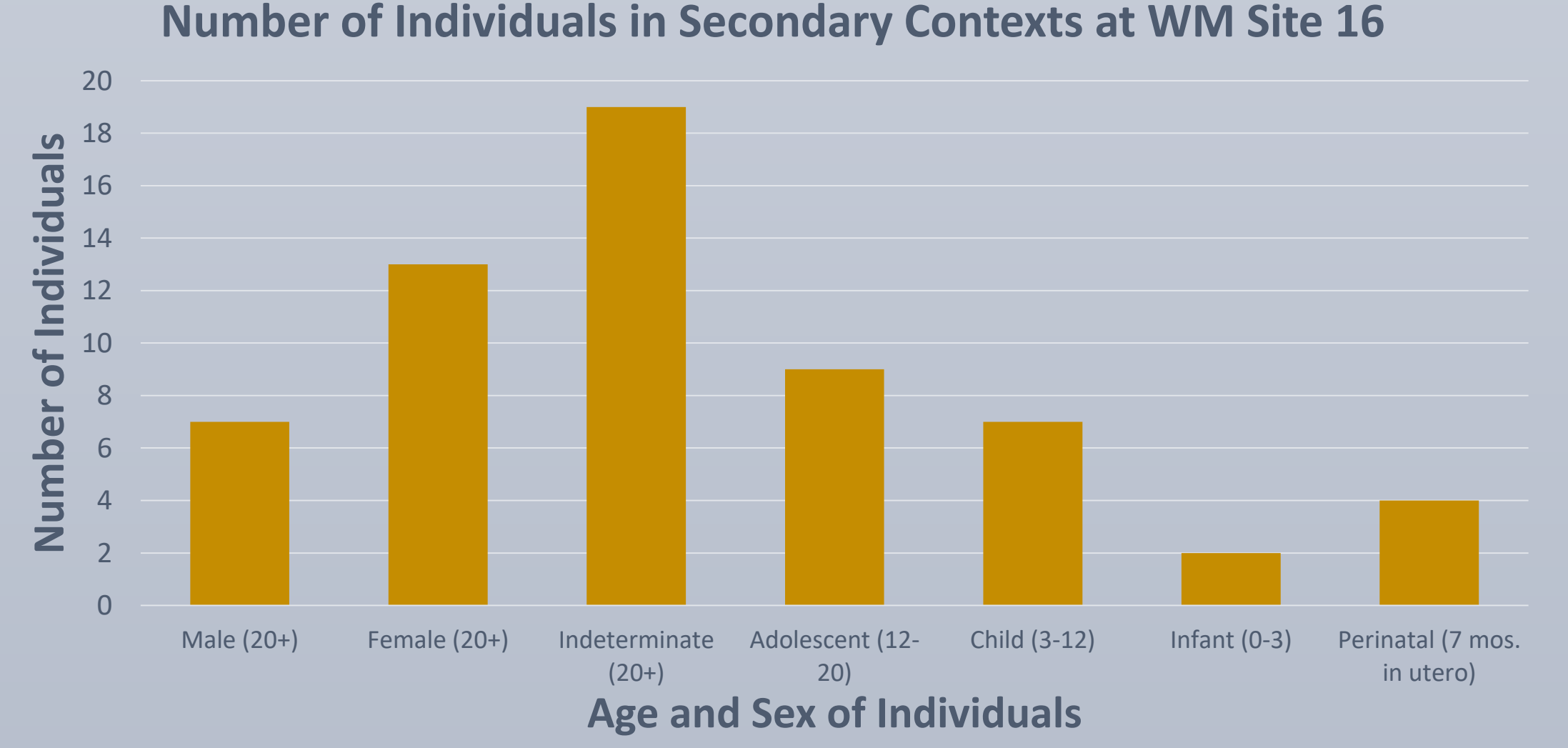
Plan of Wadi Mataha Site 16, a typical rock-cut chamber tomb, and detail of Cist A, containing the disarticulated remains of at least six adults, one adolescent, one child, and one newborn. (Drawings by David Johnson, 2008.)

Methods

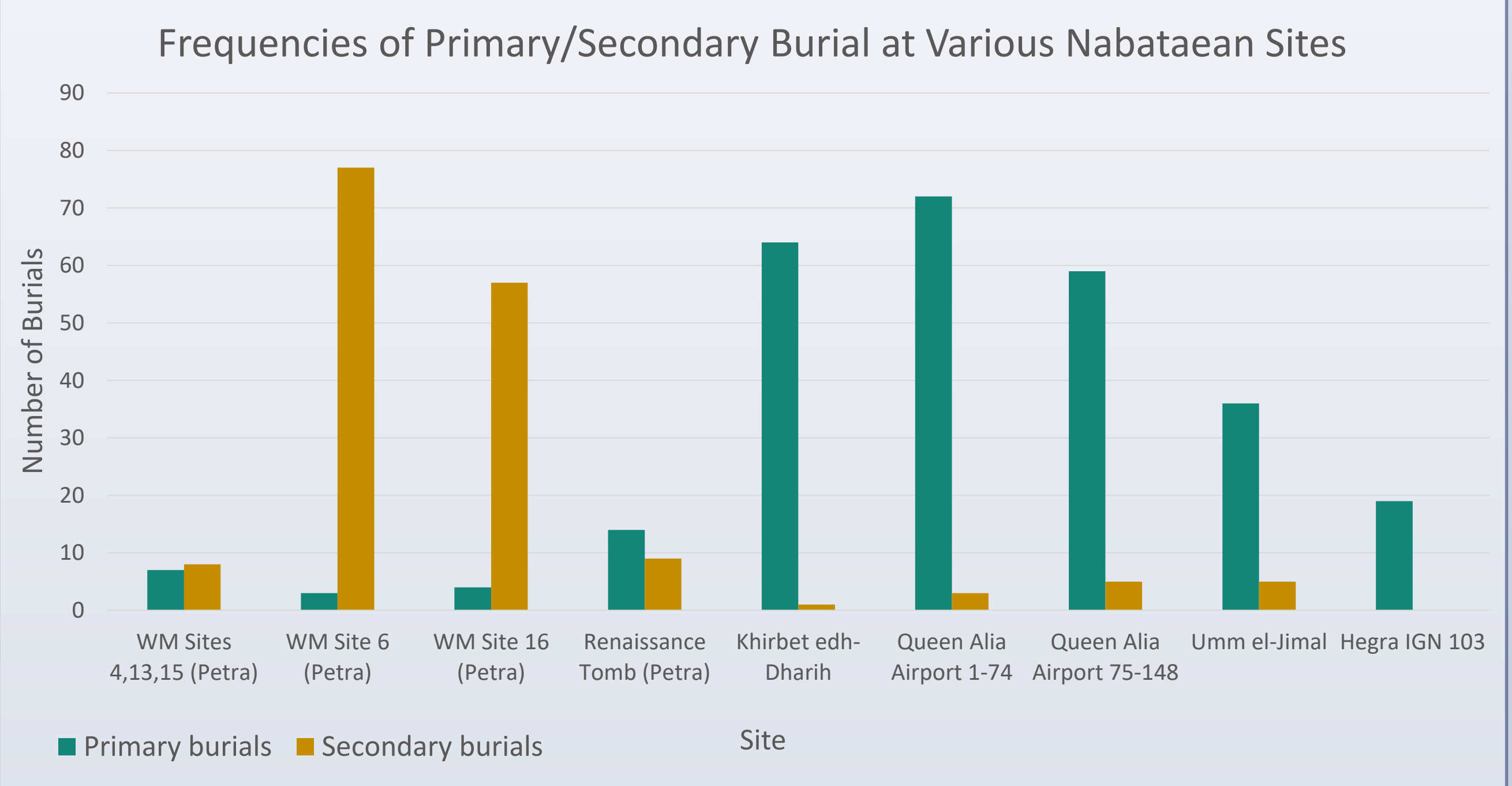
I studied trade routes and the expansion of the Nabataean kingdom in the first century CE, examined frequencies of burial types from Nabataean sites, and analyzed human remains in BYU's Petra collection for evidence of post-decarnation manipulation of the bones. I also explored a possible emphasis on defleshing through comparative analysis of similar Near Eastern burial practices. Given the extensive contact Petra had with cosmopolitan Mediterranean cultures in the first century CE, there was likely mixing of religious ideas.



Plastered, painted, and carved human bones from Wadi Mataha Site 6, showing evidence of ritual manipulation of human remains after defleshing. These modifications, along with the presence of grave goods and images of deities in tombs, indicates that the Nabataeans believed in both an afterlife and a soul that left the body at some point to travel there (Photos by author, 2018.)



Age and sex of at least 61 individuals buried in the 12 loculi of Wadi Mataha Site 16. As substantial numbers of females, children, and infants are present in these secondary burials, this evidence contradicts the theory that secondary burial was only practiced among Nabataean incense traders (presumably adult men) who died while traveling the trade routes. (Figure by author, 2018.)



Proportions of primary and secondary burials at major tomb sites inside and outside Petra where data are available. These results indicate that secondary burial was practiced widely within Petra during the first century CE but was rarely practiced at contemporary Nabataean sites elsewhere. (Figure by author, 2018.)

Results

- Both primary and secondary burials occurred alongside one another in the first century CE among both elite and lower-class families, with no apparent divisions based on age or sex
- Secondary burial is primarily seen in or near the city of Petra
- Comparative analysis indicates that the soul was closely linked to the flesh of the body (rather than the bones) in similar Semitic and Greek burial customs

Conclusions

These results indicate that to Nabataeans, the way in people were buried was less important than the place where their remains were interred. Nabataeans who traveled extensively or settled new towns still probably felt strong ties to their central "homeland". Defleshing bones was not only the most practical way of transporting a body back to Petra, but such remains were also free of dangerous, contaminating flesh and the lingering presence of the deceased's spirit.

Selected References

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