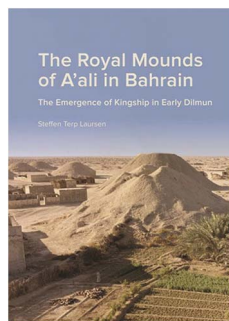


STEFFEN TERP LAURSEN, with contributions by GIANNI MARCHESI, JESPER OLSEN & THOMAS VAN DE VELDE. *The Royal Mounds of A'ali in Bahrain: the emergence of kingship in Early Dilmun*. 2017. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press; 978-87-93423-19-0 £54.



This is an exceptional work of scholarship that situates Dilmun squarely on the map of ancient Near Eastern civilisations. It sets Dilmun's royal dynasty on empirical foundations for the first time, identifying named kings and their tombs, confirming that the royal house was an Amorite

dynasty and providing a radiocarbon chronology for a canonical list of Royal Mounds at A'ali. It clearly characterises and distinguishes royal and elite tomb architecture, and architectural development through time, as well as providing a detailed reconstruction of royal funerary rituals and their relationship with ancient practices known from Iraq and Syria. The combination of archaeological data, historical information and theoretical reasoning is exemplary.

The overall aim of the study is to “examine the Royal Cemetery and Kingship as institutions in Early Dilmun society” (p. 9). Bahrain is famous for its vast burial mound fields (mainly late third to early second millennia BC), among which is a cluster of huge monuments at the village of A'ali. These were assumed to be the tombs of the Kings of Dilmun, who ruled an extensive trading civilisation based in Bahrain and extending to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Despite detailed information on the Dilmun trade in the Mesopotamian records, these kings had remained largely ahistorical. The best clue until now had been a giant inscribed stone foot mentioning the Palace of Ri'mum, servant of Inzak of Akarum (Inzak being the tutelary god of Dilmun).

The main author and editor is Steffen Terp Laursen, who starts with a comprehensive account of previous work. Various late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missions include Captain Durand's infamous use of gunpowder to blow his way into the mounds. But the first formally

trained archaeologist to investigate the mounds was Mackay in 1925, followed by Glob and Bibby's Danish team in the 1960s, bringing knowledge of the Dilmun civilisation to the wider world. The account culminates with recent work by the Bahrain National Museum and Laursen himself since 2010. Building on his earlier work on the wider mound fields, Laursen's investigations between 2010 and 2013 include meticulous documentation of the architecture of 40 royal and elite mounds; their internal sequences of construction; the probable rituals enacted before, during and after burial; their contents; their relative and absolute chronology; their relationship to other funerary monuments and practices in the ancient Near East; and their meaning to the inhabitants of Dilmun. Accordingly, this account is on a monumental scale, replete with data and running to nearly 450 pages, with more than 500 illustrations providing exhaustive documentation including the reproduction of new and earlier plans, photographs, reconstructions and artefact drawings.

Fifteen tombs have been excavated or intensively re-documented by Laursen (Chapter 4), of which 10 have been classified as royal. All had been partially opened by archaeologists or antiquarians previously and largely emptied of their contents. They were massive, circular two- and three-tiered structures, with drum-shaped storeys containing monumental chambers, each with side annexes and monumental doorways. Large tombs with chambers of four alcoves, forming a H-shape, are identified as elite and royal burials, the latter being double-tiered with superimposed chambers. Laursen distinguishes between an earlier type, accessed by a *dromos* passageway, and a later one entered by a vertical shaft. The final examples have additional alcoves, an elongated form and an extended appendix at the end of the main chamber. The interior finishing of the final 'Palatial Style' is exceptional. For example, the tombs of Kings Rim'um and Yagli'el featured plastered walls and huge limestone doors, originally nearly 3m high. We do not know where the body of the king was laid, but it was feasibly in the lower chamber. In two later mounds, the appendix holds a podium, perhaps for a cult statue of the dead king.

Laursen's analyses are scientifically grounded. Chronological and social distinctions are not established by intuition, but by a correspondence analysis of architectural features from 24 tombs, and a principal component analysis of metrics. Bayesian

modelling of radiocarbon dates (by Jesper Olsen) and specialist studies of bitumen provenance (Thomas Van de Velde) and the cuneiform texts (Gianni Marchesi) add significantly to the scholarly weight of the volume.

The contents of the tombs were scattered through the chambers and alcoves. An ivory figurine, ivory 'wands' and inlays, raw ivory and an isolated gold ring hint at former riches. Carved softstone bowls were an important part of the royal furnishings in life and in death, and it was cuneiform incised on such vessels that yielded the name of Yagli'el, son of Ri'mum.

The relative chronology is drawn together in Chapter 8, which sums up the structural data presented earlier, and builds on Laursen's previously published GIS analyses of the vast A'ali mound field. It includes a useful map and table of the Royal Mounds and elite tombs, including their internal structures. Here we see their development and geometry, expanding from a somewhat hypothetical early Royal Cemetery with five or so large but relatively low mounds around 2050 BC (destroyed in the 1960s and known only from aerial imagery), aligned along a processional way; this was followed by a quartet of very large, high Royal Mounds with *dromos* (or shaft) entrances and two tiers, with a fifth to the south of the processional way; and finally, the symmetrical addition of new royal tombs to the west of the first quartet, as well as the construction of the last royal tombs to the north-east of the Royal Cemetery's core. The last dated example (Yagli'el's tomb) has a calibrated range of 1738–1658 BC. This appears to be the termination of the A'ali dynasty, although following an apparent hiatus, a brief 'Neo-Dilmunite renaissance' may be indicated by a royal mound at the nearby site of Al Maqsha, calibrated to the late seventeenth or early sixteenth century BC.

At A'ali, burial rituals evidently took place over an extended period of time, completed by the final sealing of the entrances with stone doors, and filling of the entrance *dromos*. Prior to this, ceremonial activities of increasing levels of privacy are indicated by: the ceremonial way and external monumental platforms; evidence for wooden platforms in the shaft entrances where rituals probably took place; and the presence of internal wooden doors to the chambers that could only be closed and locked from the inside.

After closure, offerings may have continued on external plinths around the tombs.

An extended analysis of funerary rituals and attitudes to death includes well-versed theoretical considerations of transformation, liminality and the perilous passage to the afterlife, as well as detailed comparisons with practices and beliefs in Mesopotamia (Chapter 6), and the burial mound traditions of Arabia and the Middle Euphrates region up to Jebel Bishri, the legendary home of the Amorites (Chapter 7). These chapters are exhaustive works of research in their own right. Laursen draws parallels with the *kispum* ancestral cult ceremonies of third- and second-millennium Mesopotamia (e.g. at Ebla, Ur and Qatna), whereby food and libations were offered to the dead by their descendants, firstly in ceremonies immediately after death, and then via effigy and/or periodic visits to the royal tomb. Shared beliefs and practices are to be expected, as contacts between the kings of Dilmun and other Amorite royal houses are known from cuneiform sources.

Chronological connections to the wider region are demonstrated in the final chapter, in which a revised chart of synchronicities and absolute dates is given for Dilmun. This can be tied into the Mesopotamian historical framework, and enables significant new insights. The synchronicity between Hammurabi's conquests with the emergence of the Palatial style at A'ali, for example, allows us to reconsider the effect of his conquests in a favourable light. Subsequent turmoil in southern Babylonia (the emergence of the Sealand Dynasty and war with the Babylonians) seems to have been met with increased prosperity in Dilmun, rather than collapse.

In sum, this diligent and insightful study not only anatomises the most visible expression of Dilmunite royal power, it also demonstrates that Dilmun was an integral part of the mosaic of late third- and early second-millennium Near Eastern civilisations, sharing in the wider literate, mercantile, diplomatic and religious and ceremonial culture of the region, yet distinctively of itself.

ROBERT CARTER
UCL Qatar, Qatar
(Email: robert.carter@ucl.ac.uk)