DILMUN: INTERNATIONAL BURIAL GROUND

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It has been recently suggested¹) that the enormous number of burial mounds present on the island of Bahrain and in the coastal areas of northeastern Arabia near Dhahran and Abqaiq and which belong incontestably to the Sumerian land of Dilmun "represent an elaborate funerary cult reflected in Sumerian literature referring to Dilmun. The association of these tumuli with the significance of Dilmun as referred to in Sumerian literature has not been pointed out by archaeologists or philologists"²). The readiness of identification of Bahrain with the adjacent coastal Arabian regions as a burial ground of singular pertinence is self-explanatory. It needs no further emphasis, considering the almost inestimable number of interments in both places of prehistoric and late 1st millennium B.C. date.

Thousands of similar tumuli in the Yabrin Oasis and around Dhahran in northeastern Saudi Arabia should be added to Larsen's most recent estimation of the total number of 172,093 tumuli on the island of Bahrain which is based on a study of aerial photographs. It is self-evident solely numerically, and leaving aside the fact that we should allow for a re-use of a percentage of these tumuli at certain periods in their history, that a far more satisfactory explanation is required than the over-simplified consideration that these interments should be regarded as indigenous during the total span of Dilmun's existence. We should, therefore, be aware of the vagaries of such an

oversimplification and realize that we are dealing with a matter of considerable intricacy. It is fitting that Lamberg-Karlovsky has recently opened the case of the Bahrain tumuli in an attempt to provide a satisfactory answer, although it is felt that he has underestimated certain relevant factors which themselves militate against his theory. Lamberg-Karlovsky propounds that the deceased in the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian tumuli belong to the Greater Mesopotamian population and include the populations of northern Arabia, who were buried there as "the silent witness of those who shared an eternal ideology, as did Ziusudra, that interment here provided "life like a god" and "breath eternal"."3)

It is to be deeply regretted that we still have no inkling of the religious practices and/or burial rites—even assuming that such existed—of the indigenous Arabian-Bahrain population, as this might enable us to distinguish between burial mounds occupied by local inhabitants and, for instance, those belonging to non-Arabian-Bahrainis or to those of mixed Arabian-Bahrain—non Arabian-Bahrain stock. We will discuss the differing possibilities more fully later on in this paper. A potential working model can only materialize by conducting a systematic and careful study of the integration of all the various grave goods. This includes observing their position in the burial structures in which they were found, their relation to the body of the deceased and the posture of the body, and the association of each category of burial gifts with the type of burial structure, because differences in appearance within this group of Bronze Age tumuli have been decisively noted.

Karlovsky's proposal to regard Bahrain and the coastal Arabian appendages as the burial ground par excellence, for not only, a localized sedentary population, but also for "foreign" populations, is a revival in some respects of Mackay's interpretation which considered the island to be little more than a necropolis for a population living in Arabia. Although I agree with Lamberg-Karlovsky that Bibby's