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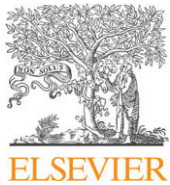


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Remodeled human skulls in Köşk Höyük (Neolithic age, Anatolia): a new appraisal in view of recent discoveries

Metin Özbek*

Hacettepe University, Department of anthropology, Beytepe, 06800 Ankara, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Between 1985 and 2007 overall nineteen human skulls dating to the Late Neolithic period were recovered at Köşk Höyük, which lies within the borders of Bor, a district of the Niğde Province in Central Anatolia. One of these skulls belongs to a child and the remainder to adult males and females. The plastered skulls may have been laid on or wrapped in mats and exposed either singly or in groups on a plaster surface inside the house. Among thirteen of these skulls the mouths, noses, eyes and ears were depicted with clay and painted with red ochre, while the remaining six were untreated. Two headless skeletons were also found in situ underneath the floor inside the house. One of these skeletons belongs to a child aged approximately 15–16 years old and the other belongs to an adult female. The modeled human skulls were encountered in the second and third cultural levels of the Late Neolithic period indicating that this characteristic mortuary practice lasted for quite a long time and likely disappeared by the Chalcolithic at Köşk Höyük.

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1. Introduction

One of the most remarkable mortuary practices from the early agricultural villages of the Middle and Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (MLPPNB) in the Near East was the spectacular remodeling of facial features on the skull removed from the rest of the skeleton (Kuijt, 2008: 959). Such examples have been reported from several sites such as *Tel Ramad* (Ferembach, 1969; Ferembach and Lechevalier, 1973) and *Tel Aswad* (Stordeur, 2003) in Syria; *Jericho* (Strouhal, 1973; Rollefson, 1985), *Nahal Hemar* (Yakar and Hershkovitz, 1988; Arensburg and Hershkovitz, 1988), *Kfar Hahoresh* (Goren et al., 2001; Simmons et al., 2007), *Beisamoun* in Israel; and *Ain Ghazal* (Butler, 1989; Simmons et al., 1990) in Jordan. Recent similar discoveries during the excavations in *Çatal Höyük* (Hodder, 2005) and *Köşk Höyük* (Öztan, 2002; Bonogofsky, 2004; Özbek, 2005a) allow us to infer that skull plastering extended beyond the Levant, well into Anatolia during the Pottery Neolithic period. Although the samples excavated in Central Anatolia did not arise due interest within the scientific community, the number of findings reflecting this behavioral pattern is rising significantly (Özbek, 2005a; Bonogofsky, 2005).

Archaeological researches on the Neolithic settlements of Anatolia have revealed a high degree of variation and also a marked

regional similarity in funerary practices (Mellaart, 1967; Özbek, 1988a,b, 2005a,b; Özdoğan and Özdoğan, 1990; LeMort et al., 2000; Molleson et al., 2005). Even if there is no direct evidence that would elucidate the motives behind these various mortuary practices, they can still be considered among the conceptual changes surrounding life and death during this new cultural period known as the Neolithic. With the founding of relatively large agricultural villages in Anatolia and other countries of the Near East, mortuary practices and household rituals changed dramatically (Özbek, 2005a).

The aim of this study is to open discussion about the practice of remodeling skulls revealed through the architectural levels II and III in Köşk Höyük, dating to the Late Neolithic, on the basis of new discoveries brought forth by the excavations of 2005, 2006 and 2007 and to make some comparisons with the similar findings from other sites of the Near East.

Köşk Höyük is situated within the borders of Bahçeli town of Bor, a district of the Niğde Province in Central Anatolia (Fig. 1). The archaeological excavations of Köşk Höyük are being carried out under the joint responsibility of the Museum of Niğde and Professor Aliye Öztan from the Major Branch of Protohistory and Western Asian Studies of the Faculty of Linguistics, History and Geography in Ankara. The author of this article has been participating in the excavations at Köşk Höyük since 2004. Radio-carbon dating of the site has yielded a calibrated date of 5211 ± 84 B.C., placing it in the Late Neolithic (Öztan et al., 2006). The plastered and unplastered skulls are stored at the Niğde Museum. Other

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 312 2978225; fax: +90 312 2992085.
E-mail address: mozbek@hacettepe.edu.tr



Fig. 1. Map showing locations of the Neolithic sites with plastered skulls in Central Anatolia.

skeletal remains of Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic ages unearthed at Köşk Höyük are being studied by M. Özbek and housed in the Department of Anthropology of Hacettepe University (Ankara).

Excavations at Köşk Höyük have produced important information about the prehistoric period of Central Anatolia. The architecture is predominantly Central Anatolian in plan and material. Pottery is monochrome or painted, and the vessels with relief decoration were produced by local potters. Relief decoration was used to render natural representations of local fauna, which must have been considered sacred (Öztan, 2002: 55). More details concerning the archaeological context of Köşk Höyük can be found in the publications of Silistreli (1985, 1986, 1989) and Öztan et al. (2006, 2007).

2. Materials and methods

Köşk Höyük, known to academic circles since the early 1980s (Silistreli, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1990; Özkan et al., 2001; Öztan, 2002; Öztan et al., 2006, 2007), is particularly interesting due to its most extraordinary mortuary practice dating to the Late Neolithic period and corresponding to the levels I, II and III of the domestic residence (Silistreli, 1989; Öztan, 2002; Bonogofsky, 2004; Özbek, 2005a). The skulls of one child and 10 adults unearthed during 1985–2000 attest to this interesting burial custom. Two additional skulls found in 2006 were decorated in the same manner raising the total number up to 13. The presence of six untreated skulls discovered along with the plastered ones during the excavations of 1990, 2006 and 2007 adds a new dimension to the funerary practice of Köşk Höyük. To date a total of 19 skulls have been found at Köşk Höyük. All the skulls were arranged either alone or in groups. Ten plastered and two unplastered skulls discovered between the years 1985 and 2000 have already been studied and published by Bonogofsky (2004). Table 1 shows a distribution of these skulls according to sex, age and pathological observations.

The plastered and unplastered skulls were deposited separately from their corresponding and unknown postcranial skeletons, therefore, sex and age estimates of the individuals are based solely on the skull. The regression formulae of cranial suture closure (Masset, 1982) were applied for the age of the adult skulls. In assessing the sex of the adult skulls, several standard morphological criteria were used (Ferembach et al., 1979; Ubelaker, 1989). For

the age of the subadult (headless body recovered during 2005 field season), the epiphysial union on the postcranial bones was used (Brothwell, 1981; Bass, 1987; Ubelaker, 1989).

3. Results

In 2006, five adult skulls (Kşk. M.1.00) were recovered from level II in area I/10. These plastered and unplastered skulls were originally located 30 cm deeper than the ones previously found. According to the excavators (Öztan et al., 2007), it can be suggested that all these skulls were recovered from the same building in the northeastern part of the settlement (Fig. 2). This part was disturbed by cuttings for a recent water reservoir. As a result, this activity severely damaged the state of preservation of the skulls (Bonogofsky, 2004; Öztan et al., 2007). They were laid in a row; two were decorated and three undecorated (Fig. 3a,b). It was observed that the plastered skulls were placed at the front and back extremes of the row, whereas the untreated skulls were laid in the middle. All these skulls were carefully deposited on a plastered floor in the house, their fronts facing eastward and they were surrounded by a wall measuring 2 cm thick and 40 cm long. As the remains of fibrous materials on the skull surfaces attest, they may have been laid on or been wrapped in mats. Three vessels and a 4–5 cm high headless figure of a goddess accompanied the skulls. The following observations are based on the findings recovered since the 2005 field season.

3.1. Plastered skulls

3.1.1. Kşk. 2006. No. 1

Although the cerebral part of the skull is partly deformed, probably as the result of postmortal pressure of overlying destruction in the building, this is the best-preserved skull discovered at Köşk Höyük. It completely retains its plaster coat in the facial region (Fig. 4a,b). Based on the morphological details of the skull (Ferembach et al., 1979) and the degree of robusticity within the sample of Köşk Höyük this skull is estimated to be male. The sutures of the preserved sections of the skull vault are open (Masset, 1982) suggesting a young age (between 18 and 30 years).

A surface layer of clay was applied over the entire face. The modeling of each particular individual feature is naturalistic. All the

Table 1

List of plastered and untreated skulls in Köşk Höyük.

Reference	Sex	Age	Pathology
<i>Plastered skulls</i>			
1. Kşk. 1985	Child	Unknown	
2. Kşk. 1987	Female	Young adult	
3. Kşk. 1989.1	Male	Young adult	
4. Kşk. 1989.2	Male	Young adult	
5. Kşk. 1990.1	Female	Middle aged	Healed ellipsoidal depression (right parietal) (Bonogofsky, 2004)
6. Kşk. 1990.2	Female	Young adult	Healed circular depression (right parietal) (Bonogofsky, 2004)
7. Kşk. 2000.1	Unknown	Young adult	
8. Kşk. 2000.2	Unknown	Young adult	
9. Kşk. 2000.3	Unknown	Young adult	
10. Kşk. 2000.4	Unknown	Middle aged	
11. Kşk. 2000.5	Unknown	Young adult	
12. Kşk. 2006.1	Male	Young adult	Osteoma
13. Kşk. 2006.5	Male	Young adult	
<i>Untreated skulls</i>			
1. Kşk. 1990.3	Female	Aged	Healed circular depression (right parietal) (Bonogofsky, 2004)
2. Kşk. 1990.4	Male	Young adult	
3. Kşk. 2006.2	Male	Adult	
4. Kşk. 2006.3	Unknown	Adult	
5. Kşk. 2006.4	Female	Adult	
6. Kşk. 2007	Female	Young adult	Anemia

facial features were skillfully and carefully made. The life-like face was remodeled with clay creating a mask nearly 8 mm thick. The facial mask continues on both sides in the temporal regions towards the temporal lines. Its superior border reaches the upper margins of both orbits in the frontal bone. The facial features such as eyes, ears, nose and mouth are meticulously marked. The eyes were depicted by two 3 mm wide horizontal lines. They are modeled as large and prominent and appear to be closed as if falling asleep or perhaps near death. The reconstructed eyes were well placed into the mid-point of both orbits. Both eyelids were depicted. The nose is straight and well defined with marked nostrils and some slight post-mortem damage on the left side. The modeled mouth is slightly visible. Facial traits are completed on both sides by

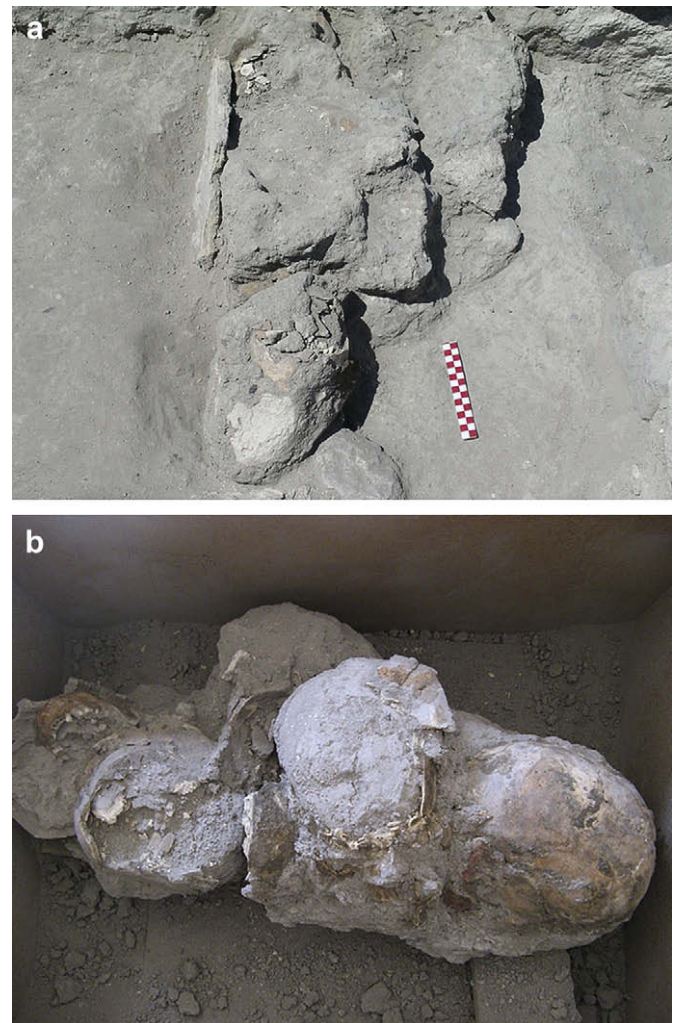


Fig. 3. Five plastered and untreated skulls arranged in groups; (a) in situ, (b) during cleaning in laboratory (Kşk. Nos. 1–5.). Late Neolithic period, 2006 Field season.

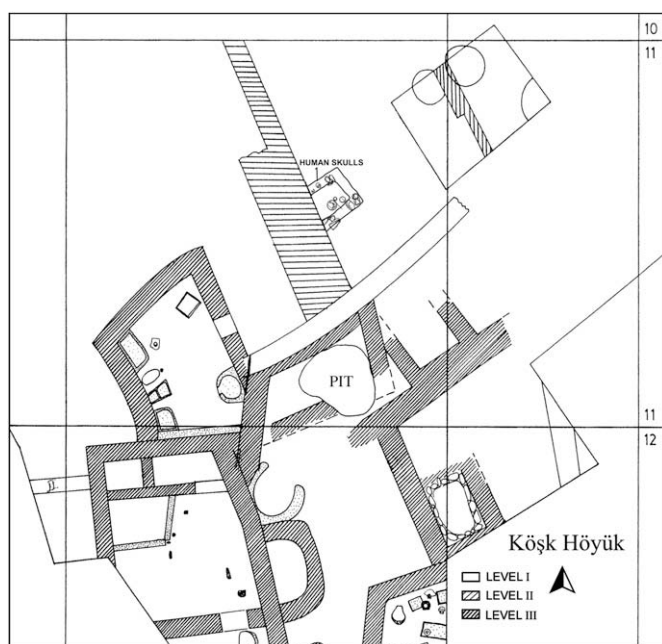


Fig. 2. Plan showing main excavation area and the setting of the plastered and unplastered human skulls of Köşk Höyük. Courtesy of Prof. Aliye Öztan.

the prominent ears. The remodeled cheeks are not very prominent. The facial mask is completely colored by red ochre (Öztan et al., 2007). The top and back of the skull are untreated. The skull was provided with a flat base of clay allowing it to stand upright.

In order to inspect anatomical details we have obtained computed tomographical images (CT) of all sides of the face and a horizontal section through the mandible (Fig. 5a,b). We were surprised to discover that all the lower and upper teeth were missing from their alveolar sockets. The alveolar edges of both jaws are in close contact, held by the plaster coat, so that it was impossible to loose any teeth after the remodeling was finished. It is also interesting to see that premolars and molars remained buried in the clay mold at the base of the skull.

On the right tuber parietale at a distance of 73 mm from the sagittal cranial suture a bony formation with a diameter of 16 mm was noted. Its smooth surface is not distinguishable from the surrounding bony tissue. This formation resembles an osteoma, a non-malignant tumor, described by Ortner and Putschar (1985: 368–369). No other pathological conditions were observed on the skull.

3.1.2. Kşk. 2006. No. 5

This skull is well preserved and includes the mandible. Like the specimen No. 1, it was provided with a flat base of clay allowing it to stand upright. The skull was deposited on its base like skull No. 1

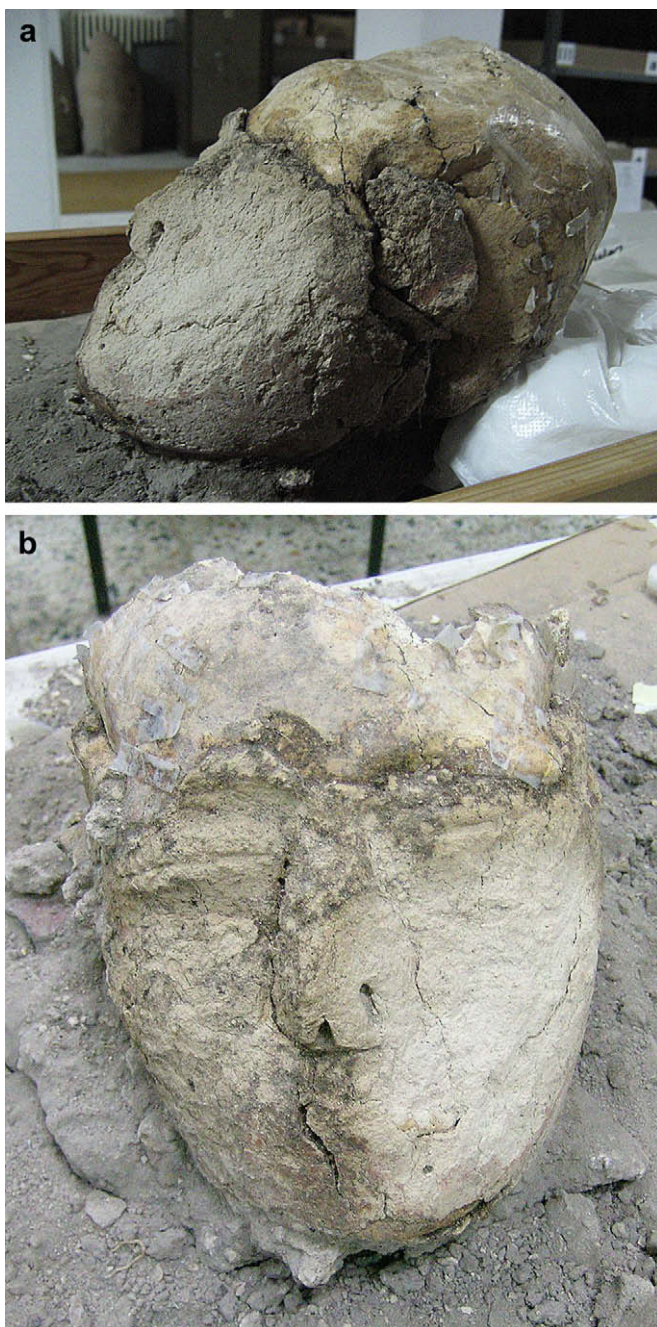


Fig. 4. Plastered skull. Kşk. 2006. No. 1. (a) Lateral view. (b) Frontal view (before restoration).

(Fig. 6). From the osteological details of the skull (Ferembach et al., 1979) and also taking into account the degree of sexual dimorphism within the Köşk Höyük skeletal sample, this individual is inferred to be a male. The skull belongs to a young adult, since all the cranial sutures were open (Masset, 1982). Due to post-mortem conditions, the skull seems to be slightly compressed on the left side. A thick clay coat (9–10 mm) was used to recreate facial features. By the secondary breaking of the plaster coat, zygomatic bones and bridges, malars, upper and lower jaws were partially exposed. The exposed part of the facial mask allowed us to suggest that the remodeling of the face on the skull might have been in two principal stages; first, orbits, nasal cavity and external auditory meatus were filled with the clay and second, a continuous layer of clay with a smoothly finished surface was applied. The clay was pinched into

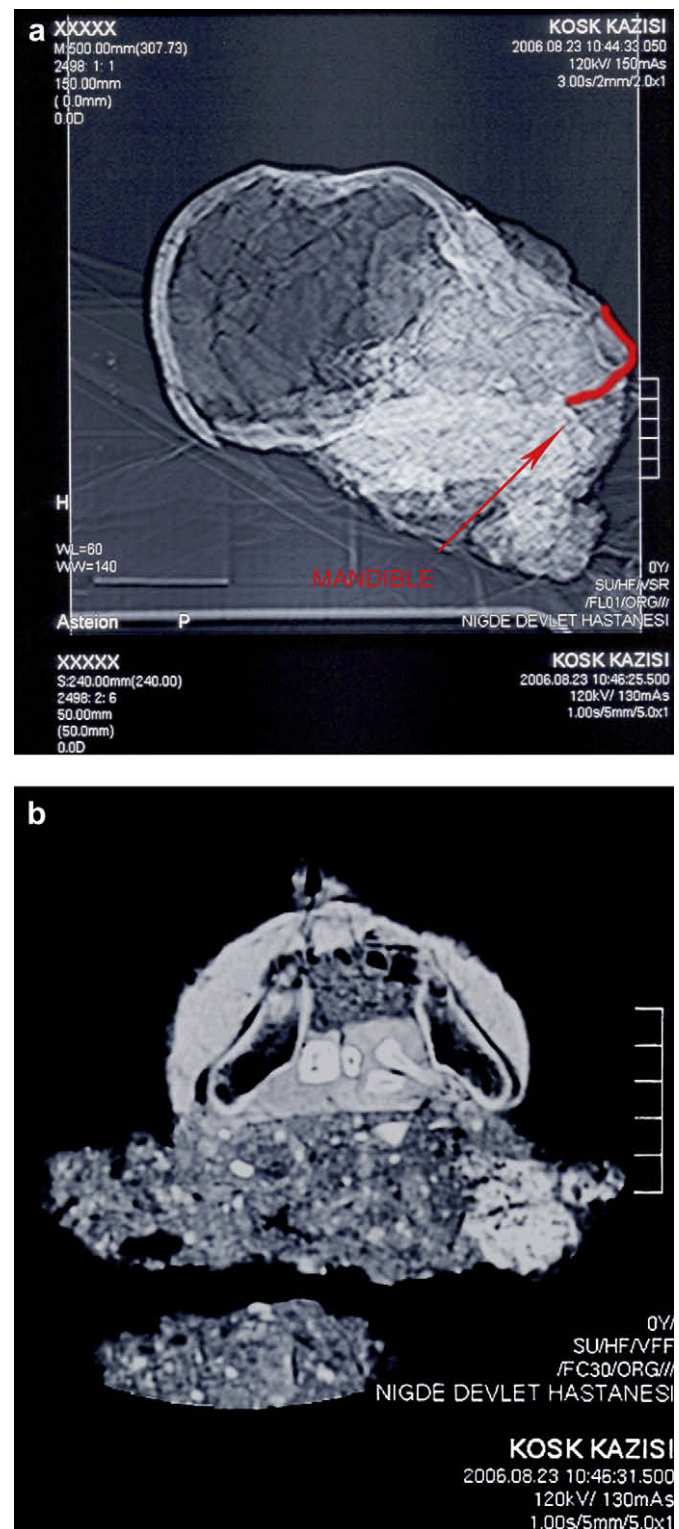


Fig. 5. CT scan of plastered skull No. 1, lateral view of the skull (a) and horizontal section through mandible (b). Courtesy of the Medical Imaging Center, Niğde Hospital.

a broad horizontal incision when the clay was still fresh to represent closed eyes. As the clay was seriously damaged at the level of the maxillary region we could not view the details of the mouth. Nevertheless, the well-preserved right ear displays all the morphological details (Fig. 7); it is depicted as a crescent shape. The facial mask was evenly covered with red ochre. Coloring was a secondary treatment given to the skull. All the upper and lower teeth were present in their alveolar sockets. Marks of fibrous



Fig. 6. Plastered skull Kşk. 2006. No. 5. Frontal view.

materials visible on the plastered surface of the skull imply that the modeled skull may have been laid on or been wrapped in mats.

The porotic formation distinguished on the top of the vault, in the parietal and frontal regions near bregma, is characteristic of anemia due to iron deficiency. There are wormian bones on the right and left sides of the lambdatic suture.

3.2. Untreated skulls

Out of the five skulls unearthed during the 2006 field season, three (Nos. 2–4) displayed no signs of remodeling, and were not



Fig. 7. Morphological details of the right ear. Kşk. 2006. No. 5.

Painted. Skull No. 2 was placed on its base like all the others. The top of the cranial vault shows serious post-mortem damage. All the teeth were preserved in their alveolar sockets. The overall appearance of the cranium, the robustness of the mandible, and a comparison with the rest of the Köşk Höyük series suggest that this skull belongs to an adult male. As the cranial bones carrying sutures were completely lost, the age at death of this individual cannot be accurately assessed. Skull No. 3 belongs to an adult; however, due to poor preservation we were not able to precisely determine sex and age at death. Contrary to skull Nos. 2 and 3, the fourth skull was in good condition. The mandible was attached. This adult is a female who died at a young age, as all the cranial sutures are open. The well-preserved alveolar sockets indicate that all the lower and upper permanent teeth were erupted and functioned until her death (Fig. 8). However, not a single tooth crown was found in its place, nor were any isolated teeth found around the skull. The mesial roots of the right first and third mandibular molars were broken and conserved inside their alveolar sockets. All the evidence seems to reveal that post-mortem dental evulsion was performed in this unmodeled skull.

In addition to these three untreated skulls mentioned above, three well-preserved jars were found during the 2007 field season within the cellar of the house No. 24 in the level I from the northern part of the domestic residence, dating to the Late Neolithic period. While cleaning them, we were surprised to find a skull without a mandible in the largest of the three. This type of funerary practice had never before been observed at Köşk Höyük during the Late Neolithic. No traces of plaster were found on the face and no mortuary gifts were found near the skull. Osteological details of the skull (Ferembach et al., 1979) indicate that it belongs to a female. As there is no sutural closure on the vault and the synchondrosis sphenoccipitalis in the basilar part of the skull is not yet synostosed, the individual seems to have died before reaching the age of 20. In addition, the roots of the third upper and lower molars were not fully developed when the individual died. All the preserved teeth were slightly worn, which is a bit surprising given her young age. No infectious or traumatic lesions were observed on the skull.

3.3. Headless bodies

During the 2005 field season, we unearthed a complete in situ skeleton without a skull (Fig. 9). This is a primary burial. The specimen was found beneath the floor of a house No. 26 within an oval grave measuring 0.57×0.39 cm corresponding to the level III



Fig. 8. Untreated skull Kşk. 2006. No. 4, before separating from plastered skull No. 5.



Fig. 9. Headless body of the 15–16-year-old child (Kşk. 2005).

in the northern part of the site. The skeleton was in a flexed position with arms at the level of the head. The body was on its right side oriented northeast to southwest. Taking into consideration some of the osteological details (Ferembach et al., 1979; Ubelaker, 1989), the body was identified as male with an estimated age of 15–16 according to the criteria of Ubelaker (1989) and Bass (1987). All the skeletal parts preserved their anatomical connection including the atlas and axis. However, the skull and the mandible were missing. A total of six permanent teeth (maxillary: right central and lateral incisors, left central and lateral incisors and left canine; mandibular: right lateral incisor) were found near the cervical vertebrae. It is very clear that the individual was first buried intact beneath the room and then, after decomposition had occurred, the skull with mandible were carefully removed from the rest of the skeleton. As for mortuary gifts, two pots were deposited in front of the body and another was placed behind the body at the level of the hipbone. Since the skull was missing, our observations on pathological traits were limited to the postcranial remains, which remained silent as to the cause of death. The slight degree of wear on teeth seems to match the young age of the individual. Neither dental caries nor calculus was observed on the preserved teeth. Marginal enamel crests are fairly well developed on the lingual surface of the upper lateral incisors reminiscent of the shovel shaped teeth of the Chalcolithic inhabitants of Byblos (Özbek, 1976: 137; Fig. 35).

A second headless body was found during the 2007 field season. The corpse is buried underneath the floor inside the house without mortuary gifts in a flexed position like the other, and the skeleton was fully articulated including cervical vertebrae. As suggested by some of the osteological details of the skeleton, conforming to the propositions of Ubelaker (1989), Ferembach et al. (1979) and Bass (1987), the body belongs to a female aged approximately 50–55. She was laid in the northwest–southeast direction within grave No. 17 in area 4/A from the level III of the Late Neolithic. This is the same level that yielded the other headless body (child of 15–16 years of age) discovered during the 2005 field season.

It should also be noted that the excavations of Köşk Höyük in 2007 yielded two normal adult burials associated with domestic architecture. Like the headless bodies they were found to have been buried beneath the floor inside the home.

4. Discussion

These findings serve as a most interesting example of how the Neolithic people in the Near East recreated life through the

portrayal of the body by remodeling the facial features on skulls of both sexes. Although all the plastered skulls are part of the same funerary tradition of remodeling the facial features of the dead, they differ in chronology, context, technique, manufacture, colour and style (Ferembach, 1970; Strouhal, 1973; Goren et al., 2001; Wright, 1988; Goring-Morris, 2005; Bonogofsky, 2004; Kuijt, 2008).

The Köşk Höyük excavations between 1985 and 2007 have provided a large number of plastered and untreated human skulls that reveal the most fascinating examples of this mortuary practice. The importance of the Köşk Höyük settlement comes from the fact that no other site in the Near East has yielded decorated and undecorated skulls dating to the Late Neolithic.

Overall 19 human skulls were exhumed from the first, second and third levels corresponding to the Late Neolithic at Köşk Höyük. Thirteen of them were plastered and covered with red ochre while the other six were untreated. All the plastered and unplastered skulls appeared to have faced the same direction. Marks of fibrous materials visible on the basilar and lateral parts of the skulls imply that the plastered skulls may have been laid on or been wrapped in mats. All the archaeological evidences suggest us that they were exposed rather than buried either separately or in groups on a plaster surfaces in the building situated on the northeast part of the settlement (Özcan et al., 2007). It is interesting to note the association of plastered and unplastered skulls and the special location with stone and plaster settings.

The remodeled skulls have been incised so as to accentuate the features of the face. The eyes are depicted either as open or closed, the nose is straight and fine with well marked nostrils, and the mouth is reduced to a slit. The ears, nose, eyes and mouth are modeled in their normal localization and depicted with their naturalistic features. The combined plaster and ochre treatment that was restricted to the face is comparable to that of the Levantine skulls. Some remodeled skulls of Köşk Höyük were provided with necks of plaster just like the Tell Ramad skulls in Syria (Ferembach, 1970: 252).

All the normal burials and headless bodies dating to the Late Neolithic were found beneath the floors of houses in the domestic architecture. They were not attached to the plastered and unplastered skulls which were deposited on plaster surfaces inside a house as if they were seemingly exposed for display.

One of the skulls belongs to a child and the others to young (18–30 years) or middle aged (30–40 years) individuals. These findings permit us to infer that this mortuary practice does not solely pertain to adults and there is evidence indicating that skulls were removed from individuals regardless of age and sexes. All of the human skulls, treated or remodeled, were buried with their mandible except the one found in the jar during the 2007 field season. While the faces of the dead were remodeled with clay and painted with red ochre, the top and back of the skulls may also have been decorated with hair or some special plants. But this remark remains purely speculative since all these decorations must have decayed and disappeared in time, if they ever existed.

The fact that we come across bodies without heads from the same cultural level where the human skulls were recovered provides us with important evidence about the proceedings of this spectacular ritual behaviour. It appears that the corpse is first buried underneath the floor inside a house in a flexed position with or without mortuary gifts and after the flesh had decayed the grave was probably reopened in order to carefully remove the skull without disturbing the rest of the skeleton. It should be very interesting to investigate the relationships, if any, between the headless bodies and the skulls unearthed at the same cultural level. For instance Prof. U. Silistreli (1986: 174) mentions the skull of a child recovered in 1985. According to him, it was decorated with clay and covered heavily with a red-painted plaster substance. This child's skull was deposited intentionally on a plastered mud brick

bench in level III. No physical anthropologist was accompanied to U. Silistreli to estimate the age at death of the child. Perhaps this plastered skull could be related to the headless body belonging to the 15–16-year-old boy unearthed during the 2005 field season. It should be remembered here that both findings correspond to the third cultural level in the domestic area. Unfortunately, we have searched all of the boxes containing the Köşk Höyük human remains unearthed between the 1985 and 2007 field seasons and we were unable to find the plastered skull described by Silistreli. As far as we understand, this child's skull is somewhere outside the Niğde Museum. And unfortunately, Mr. Silistreli, the first excavator of the site, passed away in 1989. It is necessary to emphasize that no headless skeletons had been found in Köşk Höyük until the 2005 field season. Therefore, these recent findings have the potential to help us to interpret Köşk Höyük burial practices.

As seen on the computed tomography (CT) scan of plastered skull Kşk. 2006.1 (Fig. 4a,b), no teeth are present in the mandible and maxilla, and the well-preserved alveolar sockets seem to be completely empty. The CT scan clearly shows some isolated teeth (premolars and molars) buried in the clay mold at the base of the skull. Evidently, these teeth would not be visible without the help of tomography. We estimate that all the upper and lower teeth were intentionally pulled out just before the dry skull was modeled. A second similar example is the well preserved but untreated skull Kşk. 2006.4 (Fig. 8). This skull belongs to a young adult, without any teeth. It is interesting to remark that both skulls belong to males. When inspecting carefully the mandible of individual No. 4, one can clearly distinguish the parts of mesial roots corresponding to the first and third right molars remaining in their alveolar sockets. These two examples permit us to ask whether we are faced with an intentional post-mortem dental evulsion in both plastered and untreated skulls. The evidence indicates that the teeth did not fall out accidentally post-mortem. It is important to note that only two of the 19 skulls display this curious practice; therefore, in order to make a conclusive remark on this subject we must wait for further similar findings in Köşk Höyük. We know that teeth were deliberately removed from some of the plastered skulls in Jericho (Strouhal, 1973: 238), Beisamoun (Ferembach and Lechevalier, 1973) and Tell Ramad (Ferembach, 1970: 250) dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period. The removal of the teeth has also been discussed concerning the PPNB plastered skulls from Israel (Goren et al., 2001; Bonogofsky, 2003: 5). These recent findings at Köşk Höyük suggest that this post-mortem dental extraction is maintained later on into the Late Neolithic.

If we take into consideration that no plastered skulls dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period were found in Anatolia until now, we can suggest that this curious mortuary behaviour appeared as a new practice in the Near East (the oldest examples are from Tell Aswad in Syria and dating to approximately 9500 B.P.) (Stordeur, 2003) which thereafter spread to the North, towards Anatolia in time. Çatal Höyük and Köşk Höyük are two Pottery Neolithic sites that also contain plastered skulls. However, it is prudent to wait for new similar findings in Anatolia to situate this practice in the context of cultural diffusion.

In view of the fact that the practice of remodeling human faces on skulls persisted throughout the levels II and III of the Late Neolithic period at Köşk Höyük, it can be suggested that this ritual behaviour continued for a certain time until the end of the Neolithic period and disappeared by the beginning of the Chalcolithic, since no untreated or remodeled human skulls dating to this period have been discovered.

Who were the owners of these remodeled or untreated skulls? What was the reason behind this interesting mortuary ritual? It is no doubt that the treatment afforded the dead represents an obvious example of differential status within the Neolithic people. There is no archaeological evidence to support the theory that

remodeled and unmodeled skulls were venerated ancestors. We have no clue as to whether these skulls were grouped according to special ties, such as kinship, or whether they were simply placed haphazardly. Up to now, the researchers suggested various interpretations on this mortuary practice. According to Garfinkel (1994: 170), the skulls either plastered or unplastered became a cultic object with their own significance, which could be used in a center cult or other ritual activity. This type of mortuary practice from the Late Neolithic of Köşk Höyük seems to be related to complex rituals focused on the ancestor cults (Silistreli, 1989: 502; Özbek, 1988b: 130, 2005a: 132). Similarly, the remodeling of skull has been interpreted as evidence for ancestor cult veneration (Bonogofsky, 2001, 2005: 17; Bienert, 1991: 20). Simmons et al. (1990: 109) think that individuals whose skulls were removed and deposited in a particular area in the building were revered members of the village, and once they died, their plastered skulls were displayed as a tribute. Verhoeven (2002) argues that symbolism such as the representation of the human face was one of the structuring principles of PPNB rituals and ideology. According to Kenyon (1953), the plastered skulls are survivals of some form of ancestor worship, in which their descendants in the village attempted to preserve the personality of tribal or family elders. The same researcher (Kenyon, 1957: 62) also suggests that plastered skulls represent real portraits: each head has a strongly marked individual character. Besides, Kuijt (2000, 2008) argues that, rather than being a reflection of ancestor worship, Neolithic mortuary and ritual practices highlight integrated systems of memory and embodiment that initially focused on remembrance but through time facilitated the forgetting of the dead. Hertz (1960) notes that Neolithic skull removal, circulation, and caching commemorated the dead and that the use and construction of such ritual skulls highlight the interlinking of physical and ritual embodiment. Strouhal (1973) suggests that the main interest was to restore the skull of the venerated deceased person by adding a substitution for the decayed fleshy parts. According to him, remodeled facial features changed the bare skull into a life-like monument of the ancestor and red coloring applied to it the colour of life.

In brief, the use of clay to recreate human facial features seems to be one of the more characteristic aspects of the mortuary practices during the Neolithic and reflects the development of local and community level traditions in the context of shared general belief systems.

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