

What does the study of archaeological remains – ancient burials, cemeteries, tombs etc. - tell us about ancient burial practices and/or beliefs in an afterlife? Discuss in relation to one of the case studies covered in the module.

This essay will be concentrating on the burials and tombs of the Natufians from the Levant and what the evidence implies about their culture around burial practises and the afterlife. The Natufians were one of the first societies to adopt a sedentary lifestyle which had a major affect on their social behaviour as well as affecting their socioeconomic organisation (Grosman, L et al 2008). Although there is little evidence to suggest there was social stratification, like every sedentary society there would be a need for regulatory mechanisms to share a living space with non kin groups (Grosman, L et al 2008). We can see evidence of this in the burial sites found in the Levant. Over four hundred individuals have been found from Natufian cemeteries which is a huge increase from burials found from preceding periods (Grosman, L. Et al 2008). The evidence of cemeteries in itself shows the progress in their journey from a nomadic to a more structured way of life.

One of the most interesting sites found in this area is the 12,000 year old 'Shaman burial' at the Hilazon Tachtit cave in Western Galilee. Although it is called the 'shaman burial', this has been debated as there is not enough evidence about her cultural significance in the Natufian society. What is clear though, is that this woman was elderly, disabled and an important figure for the local Natufians. The grave was plastered by mud from just outside of the cave and the walls and floor were lined with limestone slabs (Grosman, L et al 2008). Bearing in mind that the cave is a hundred and twenty metres above the Nahal Hilazon, it would have taken a significant amount of effort and care to take the slabs, the grave goods and the body to the cave. The 'shaman' was found with ten large stones placed directly on top of her head, arms and pelvis alongside fifty complete tortoise shells, a fragment of a basalt bowl, two stone marten skulls, a tail of an auroch, a wing of an eagle, a leg of a boar, a gazelle horn and a complete articulated human foot (Grosman, L et al 2008).

What does this say about the burial practises and the belief in an afterlife for the Natufians? It is easy but not necessarily accurate to make the connection between the grave goods, specifically the tortoises, the auroch tail and the eagle wing to other shamanistic roles across different human cultures as these are still important symbols to many cultures today. This, alongside her deformities and her purpose built structure are the reasons scholars such as Grosman have called her a 'shaman' (Grosman, L et al 2019). One of the most prominent arguments around the inclusion of the tortoise shells is that they were used for feasting, specifically with the deceased. As they were found with repeated breaks where the plastron meets the carapace, it indicates that the tortoise was removed from its shell and likely consumed as a part of a feast surrounding the deceased (Grosman, L et al 2008). Evidence of funerary feasting has been found in different cultures such as Anglo-Saxon Britain and in Early Byzantine Sicily so it is not unrealistic to suggest the same could have happened in the Natufian culture. If true, then this burial would be the earliest evidence of funerary feasting found to date and would be a significant step towards understanding the beliefs and practises of the Natufian society.

On the other hand, they might not have been feasted at all. The tortoises could have represented each year of her life or had meaning within their spiritual beliefs. In many of today's cultures, the tortoise represents resilience, patience and strength. This could have been similar for the Natufian societies. The depositing of the shells could have been referencing her disability and her endurance and resilience with regards to her life.

As tortoises are solitary creatures, it could have potentially taken a substantial amount of effort to find fifty of them to place into her grave. Whatever the meaning of them are, we can be assured that she was an important and cared for member of society as that is clearly reflected in her grave.

As the 'shaman' grave is an unique example of Natufian burial practises, let's look at evidence from other sites in the Levant. In the pre-pottery neolithic B period (7200-6000BC), the dead were usually buried underneath plaster house floors (Kenyon 1981). Once the body had decomposed, the cranium would be removed and often painted or plastered. The Natufians would use plaster or marl to model facial features and to re-create the lower jaw (Bonogofsky 2003). As the skulls were often buried together and separate from their skeletons, specifically the pelvis, it was hard to sex the individuals and led to a narrowly defined interpretation which was the skulls are male and elderly (Bonogofsky 2003). Excavations at Tell Ramad suggests otherwise as more female plastered skulls have been found compared to male skulls (Bonogofsky 2003). Why did the Natufians plaster the craniums of their loved ones? Or were they even loved ones? Kenyon spoke about a skull found underneath a floor at the site of Jericho; she said 'either he was an enemy whom it was desired to keep under control or a venerated member of the community whose wisdom it was hoped to perpetuate in the house'. It could also be implied, as Kenyon did, that 'they are survivals of some form of ancestor worship, in which their descendants attempted to preserve the personality of tribal or family elders' (Kenyon et al 1953) but we cannot rule out that it is possible that the skulls of enemies were used and buried as a sign of power or dominance.

Mike Parker Pearson makes a similar case as Kenyon with regards to ancestor cults. He suggests that the plastered skulls are closely related to clay figurines found in many Natufian graves, who's facial features are painted on and seashells were used for eyes (Pearson 1999). As this is often how the plastered skulls were found, it is likely that they are in some way related. His argument towards the figurines and plastered skulls representing ancestors is based on a few reasons. Normally, children were excluded from becoming ancestors as they have not procreated and have not taken part in maintaining the generational chain. He links this with the fact that the clay figures do not portray children unless it is physically attached to the adult, therefore suggesting the clay figurines and in turn, the skulls must represent an ancestor cult of sorts. Another point he makes is that the figurines and skulls do not show any evidence of duplication. They are quite clearly individual, possibly representing individual ancestors and are not created to represent a deity or spiritual being (Pearson 1999).

To circle back to the idea of burying the skulls, Pearson suggests the skull cult needs to be looked at within a wider context of social competition and conflict. It is important to consider the possibility of non-kin taking skulls from graves as is suggested at Jerf el Ahmar. The floor of a burnt down house was found with a burnt body lying on its back and head appearing to have been removed before the house caught on fire (Pearson 1999). If this is the case, then it would have been of significant importance for family to remove the skulls of the deceased so they are not taken by enemies. This could possibly be a reason for removing skulls from the skeleton but the theory of non-kin stealing them suggests that there is already an importance and value in the skulls of the deceased.

Although Kenyon's idea of burying the skulls of enemies makes an exciting story, many of the skulls found have been evidently plastered, decorated and buried with care. More care than expected with the skull of a hated member of society. Evidence of a collagen substance from 6 skulls found at the cave site of Nahal Hemar suggest that wigs and headdresses were placed on the cranium. Some examples include details of stripes across cranial vaults, tattoos, moustaches and eyelashes painted on the skulls (Croucher,

K. 2017). If we consider the quality of some of the plastered skulls found, it could and has been argued that they were created by highly skilled craftspeople or artists. Examples suggest that they weren't thrown together in a quick and careless way but they were thought out, handled with care and even possibly modelled to resemble the deceased. Would the Natufians go through the trouble of asking a skilled craftsperson to plaster and decorate the skull of their enemies? Perhaps but it seems unlikely. Two skulls found at Tell Ramad had evidence of intentional postmortem dental evulsion which has been linked with the third tablet from the poem of Aqht (Ferembach 1969). It is believed that the skulls were uncovered by later inhabitants as the knowledge of dental evulsion was found in the poem of Aqht (Margalit 1984). A new translation of the poem states that the goddess Anat performed dental evulsion on the deceased corpse of the god Aqht and then proceeded to put plaster on his head (Bonogofsky 2003). This could be one of the reasons why the Natufians performed dental evulsion and plastered the skulls of their close circle or enemies but other scholars have different opinions. Arensburg and Hershkovitz believed that the skulls were selected to be plastered based on the facial characteristics of a wide face and a broad vault. As there was only a small number of neolithic people who fit this requirement, they go on to suggest that the skulls would be artificially deformed by removing the mandible and/or dental evulsion (Arensburg et al 1989). They suggest that this is because of a want to attain gerontomorphic characteristics which are found in older males of a species and in turn, makes a connection to a 'concept of rule and seniority of the elders' and to an ancestor cult. (Arensburg et al 1989). It's worth noting, however, although dental evulsion could very well have been a regular practise, this has been contested as the dental evulsion could have been caused by natural tooth loss or damage to the plastered skulls.

But what were the skulls used for? Croucher speaks about evidence of wear and tear on many skulls found in the neolithic Middle East, including Tell Aswad in her 2017 article 'Keeping the dead close'. She states that they were not kept pristine but were used, handled and displayed. What if the skulls were used in story telling? Possibly to remember and commemorate the life of the deceased? As their belief in an afterlife is unknown, it could be implied that the circulation and use of skulls was a way to keep them alive, whether that would be spiritually or by sharing their stories of the deceased. It has been suggested that the shift from mobile "hunter-gatherer" groups to a more sedentary lifestyle could possibly have created the need to mark territories to prove an association with a specific location. The worship of ancestors and earlier generations through the ceremonial display of their plastered skulls could have been a part of an effort to establish "ancestral property rights" for their land (Slon, V., et al 2014). The evidence infers that the skulls would have more than likely served as an intermediary between the living and the dead which in itself is evidence of a belief in some sort of an afterlife.

What does the evidence suggest about the beliefs and burial practises of the Natufian society? Due to the links between the plastered skulls and the clay figurines, physically and contextually, it is a strong argument towards the presence of an ancestor cult. Not only were they decorated very similarly but they were also sometimes found together which is a direct contextual association. It is also very possible that they had a spiritual belief in deities as seen in the poem of Aqht that also could be linked back to an ancestor cult. It is highly probable that the celebration of the deceased, whether that would be an elaborate 'shaman burial' or the modelling of skulls and figurines, is evidence of a fearless attitude towards the afterlife and that the dead were a part of their daily life.

Reference List

- Arensburg, B., Hershkovitz, I. 1989. *Artificial skull 'treatment' in the PPNB Period: Nahal Hemar*
- Bonogofsky, M. 2003. *Neolithic Plastered Skulls and railroading Epistemologies*
- Croucher, K. 2017. *Keeping the dead close: grief and bereavement in the treatment of skulls from the Neolithic Middle East*
- Ferembach, D. 1969. *Etude anthropologie des ossements humains neolithique de Tell Ramad*
- Grosman, L., Munro, N., Belfer-Cohen, A. 2008. *12,000 year old Shaman burial from the Southern Levant*
- Grosman, L., Munro, N., Goldgeier, H. 2019. *Remembering a sacred place - The depositional history of Hilazon Tachtit, a Natufian burial cave*
- Kenyon, K. M. 1981. *Excavations at Jericho, Vol 3: The architecture and stratigraphy of the Tell*
- Kenyon, K. M., Tushingham, A. D. 1953. *Jericho Gives up its secrets*
- Margalit, B. 1984. *'The neolithic connexion' of the Ugaritic poem of Aqht*
- Pearson, M. P., 1999. *The Archaeology of Death and Burial*
- Slon, V., Sarig, R., Hershovitz, I., Khalaily, H., Milevski, I. 2014. *The Plastered Skulls from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B Site of Yiftahel*