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Including Women and Children: Neolithic Modeled Skulls from Jordan, Israel, Syria and Turkey

A reinterpretation of Neolithic plastered skulls from Jordan, Syria, Israel and Turkey is changing the way scholars think about cult, death and the afterlife in the Neolithic of the ancient Near East. Current findings, based on scientific studies as well as bioarchaeological evidence, indicate a funerary practice that focused on the special treatment of the skulls of adult females, males and children.

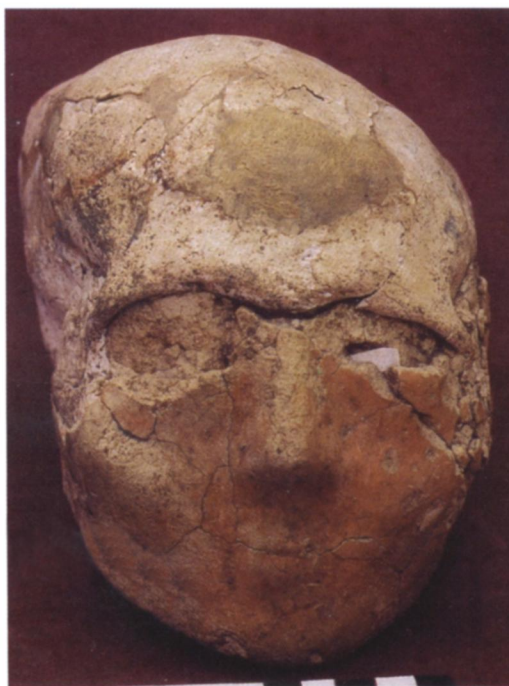
Seventy-three Neolithic modeled skulls have been found in Jordan, Syria, Israel and Turkey. Substances such as plaster, marl, animal collagen, shell and paint were applied to the skulls and crania (skulls without mandibles) to imitate facial or other features such as the eyes, nose, neck and a type of head covering. A plaster chin was fashioned when the lower jaw was missing. Before modeling, the skulls were removed from the skeletons of females, males and children. In the excavation of Neolithic settlements, these plastered skulls have been found grouped together without their postcranial skeletons. The lack of pelvic sexing information, along with the care involved in their crafting, in part led scholars to assume the practice of modeling facial features on dry human skulls was evidence of ancestor cult veneration.¹ Some anthropologists and archaeologists suggested the plastered skulls belonged to toothless men who represented elders and community leaders.² This led other scholars to conclude that the teeth of relatively young men were pulled out to make them look as if they had died in old age, thus promoting the notion of the veneration of old men and the importance of males in Neolithic society.³

However, recent scientific analyses of these skulls contradicts this interpretation of ancestor cult veneration. Osteological examinations, DNA analysis, and/or Computed

Tomography (CT scans) of a sample were conducted, along with a review of the various methods used to age, sex and determine the presence of dentition in the remaining skulls and crania.⁴ Not all of the skulls belonged to males or even adults who would have lived long enough to have procreated, and thus be termed ancestors. Many of the modeled skulls belonged to children and females. There is no evidence that teeth were intentionally removed after death. More than half of those examined retained some of their dentition post-mortem. Factors such as extensive

cranial damage, missing skeletal elements or obscured alveoli may explain an apparent lack of teeth in some of the skulls. Third molars are naturally absent in at least six of the ten existing plastered skulls from Jericho, possibly indicating these individuals were genetically related.

In the Levant, sixty-one modeled skulls of females, males and children have been recovered from the sites of Jericho, Beisamoun, Tell Ramad, Nahal Hemar, 'Ain Ghazal, and Kfar Hahoreh. These skulls, which date to the early Neolithic (ca. 7,200–6000 BCE), were placed in a variety of locations, either individually or in groups consisting of as many as fifteen skulls. They have been found in an abandoned and built-over house, under a plastered antechamber of a house, in a cave, in pits, beneath floors and below plastered surfaces not associated with architecture. Plastered skulls were recovered



A cranium with modeled facial features, shell eyes and paint from Jericho. Photo of J5756 courtesy of the Jordan Archaeological Museum. Mohammad Fayyez, Photographer.

from the floors of burned-down houses at both Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan. Human and faunal remains as well as stones, collapsed brick and burnt timber surrounded the skulls. Statuary fragments and clay balls were also found with plastered skulls at Tell Ramad, Syria.

In Anatolia, eleven late Neolithic plastered skulls (ca. 6,000–5,000 BCE) of females, males, and children have been recovered from the site of Köşk Höyük. These skulls were recovered in various combinations, either individually or in

groups of two or five, from locations on top of mudbrick furniture, in an earthen grave, and on a floor in a destruction level, all presumably associated with domestic architecture. Horn cores, faunal bone, ceramic, obsidian, stones, ash and charcoal were found with some of the skulls, while funerary offerings such as beads, bone tools and possibly copper were found with others recovered in 2000 as a group of five. In addition, a plastered skull was found at Çatal Höyük in 2004. The skull was held in the arms of an adult female buried inside a house platform.

The combination of realistic and caricature-like modeling of facial features on the skulls from Jordan, Syria, Israel and Turkey, with their detailed applications of red, white and black paint, suggest individual identities remained with the skulls of the deceased. The skulls may have been modeled and decorated in a manner that captured the essence of a personal trait or quality that reminded the living of the deceased.

The location of pathologies and markings on the plastered skulls, as well as objects included with them, offer clues to the treatment and function of the individuals before and after death. Two adult female skulls as well as an undecorated skull from Köşk Höyük, Turkey, exhibit healed depressed fractures. The wounds on all three, all on the right side, appear to have been inflicted as the women fled a right-handed attacker. One of these skulls may have been laid on or wrapped in reed matting, as indicated by striations and imprints in the plaster. Analysis of striations on another skull from 'Ain Ghazal indicates a sanding process that was likely the result of Neolithic human intervention during preparation of the deceased's cranium for either application or removal of a modeling substance such as plaster or bitumen.

The objects included with the skulls have decorative and practical functions. They may have been included with the skulls because they were treasured or useful to the deceased or held an emotional value. The objects may have been needed in the afterlife.

The modeling of the skulls of adults and children, their recovery from a variety of locations and contexts, and the



Plastered skull Kş 1987 of a woman twenty to twenty-five years of age. A black line represents a closed right eye.



Plastered skull NM 57.03 from Jericho lacking upper third molars and mandible. Photo courtesy of the Nicholson Museum.

recovery of funerary offerings suggest multiple functions for the skulls that could have included their use as fertility or apotropaic devices, or as mementos of the deceased. This information, taken as a whole, does not support the interpretation of an exclusionary form of ancestor worship. Rather, it supports an inclusive type of funerary ritual that focused on the handling, modeling, and care of the skulls of females, males and children.

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Notes

1. E.g., Kenyon and Tushingham (1953: 870).
2. Arensburg and Hershkovitz (1989: 129), Bienert (1991: 20).
3. Bar-Yosef (1997: 165, 172), Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal (2001: 672, 686).
4. Bonogofsky (in press).

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