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Neolithic Plastered Skulls and Railroading Epistemologies

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Assumptions about Neolithic plastered skulls in the Levant are “railroaded” upon us in two different ways: concerning age and sex, and the use of intentional postmortem dental evulsion. These two paths are eventually united to solidify the argument in favor of an ancestor cult of male elders. New scientific evidence is presented to disprove the old epistemologies regarding age, sex, and the use of postmortem dental evulsion.

INTRODUCTION

She extracts (?) the “stones” of his mouth
She seizes his teeth and consumes (them)
On the crown (of his head) she puts a groove/
plaster (?)

Baruch Margalit, Poem of *Aqht*, 1976

In the “railroad industry of epistemology . . . facts can only be made to run on the tracks laid down from (paradigmatic early work) and those who control the railroads control the surrounding territory” (Gero 1995: 175–76, in reference to Haraway 1988: 596–97). The Ugaritic Poem of *Aqht*, as it has been interpreted by one researcher (Margalit 1976: 170; see above), exemplifies the two tracks of the railroading epistemology discussed in this paper: the plastering of adult male skulls and the use of intentional postmortem dental evulsion as mortuary practices. Both of these processes are interpreted as fundamental funerary rituals that were practiced on certain elite male members of the Neolithic community in the Levant (Bonogofsky 2001a).

The tracks for the interpretation of the Neolithic plastered skulls have been laid down to exclude dissensions and evidence that does not fit the ideal of toothless male elders, while protecting the “epistemological authority” (Gero 1995: 175) within. In

essence, an archaeological interpretation—plastered skulls of venerated male ancestors (Kenyon and Tushingham 1953)—was connected with an anthropological interpretation—plastered skulls of venerated toothless ancestors (Ferembach 1969; Strouhal 1973; Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973)—which in turn influenced a textual interpretation—the combined use of dental evulsion and skull plastering on a young adult male (Margalit 1984), which came full circle to justify an archaeological interpretation regarding the “special treatment” (Bar-Yosef 1997: 165, 172) of adult male skulls (Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 672, 686). The current paper shows how this railroading argument solidified to basically exclude women and children and evidence for the presence of teeth in the plastered skulls.

BACKGROUND

During the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (ca. 7200–6000 B.C.) in the Levant, the dead were typically buried beneath plaster house floors (Kenyon 1981). After the body decomposed, the skull, or at least the cranium without the mandible, was removed from the burial. Many of these skulls and crania have been found archaeologically grouped together. Some of the caches contained skulls and crania that had been painted and/or plastered. The term “plastered skull” is commonly applied to both skulls that were

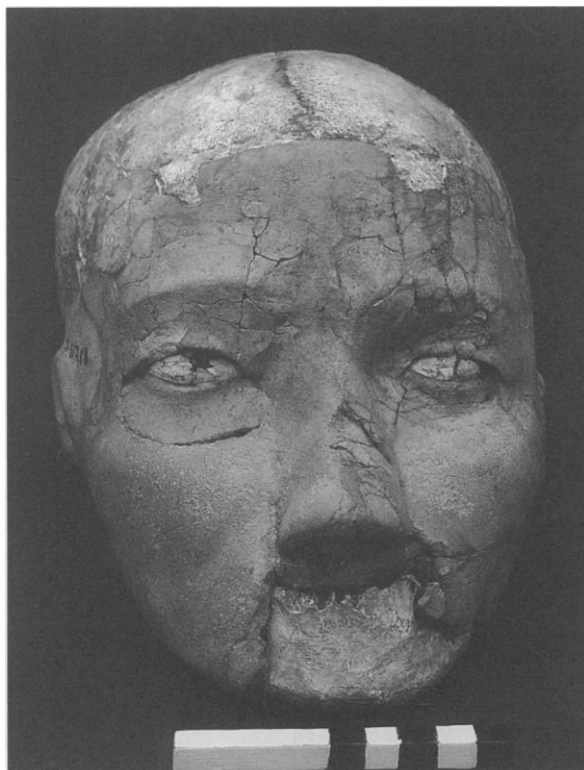


Fig. 1. Plastered skull J 5758 from Jericho. Photo courtesy of the Jordan Archaeological Museum. Mohammad Fayyez, photographer.

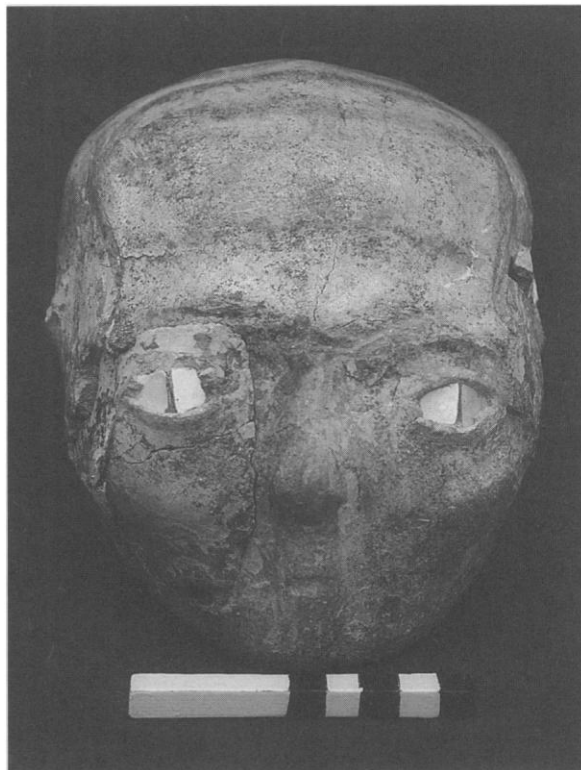


Fig. 2. Plastered skull J 5757 from Jericho. Photo courtesy of the Jordan Archaeological Museum. Mohammad Fayyez, photographer.

plastered (fig. 1) and to crania that were plastered to look like skulls in which the lower jaw was re-created in plaster (fig. 2; see Bonogofsky 2001a: pls. 2a–5q, and references therein).

Sixty-one plastered skulls (Bonogofsky 2001a; 2001c) have been recovered from six sites in the Levant (fig. 3) dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) period: Jericho, Tell Ramad, Beisamoun, Nahal Hemar, 'Ain Ghazal, and Kfar Hahoresh. A type of plaster or marl (Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001) was used to model facial features on the skull as well as to re-create a missing lower jaw on the cranium. At Nahal Hemar, a different substance, initially thought to be bitumen or asphalt but now identified as collagen (Bower 1997), was applied to the cranial vault without any apparent attempt to re-create the facial features or lower jaw. The plastered skulls were usually buried in groups in abandoned houses (Kenyon 1981: 77, 309–10, pls. 50–51), beneath plastered house floors (Rollefson and Simmons 1985: 46–47, figs. 8–9; Simmons et al. 1990: 107), or in association with plastered surfaces (Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 675).

The plastered skulls were reportedly buried separately from their corresponding and unknown postcranial skeletons, thus lacking postcranial information in general, and of the pelvis in particular, to assist in aging and sexing the individuals. This lack of criteria upon which to base a sound estimation of age and sex, combined with the excavator's presupposed beliefs about the first plastered skulls in the Levant (Kenyon 1957a: 114; 1957b: 63; Bonogofsky 2002a: 3), contributed to a narrowly defined interpretation of the plastered skulls from Jericho as the skulls of male elders and leaders. This limited view was perpetuated by later discussants of plastered skulls at Jericho and other locations in the Near East who, in a manner initiated by Kathleen Kenyon (1953: 86) at Jericho, referred to them as proof of an ancestor cult in which the skulls of community elders, notably males, were “decapitated” (Rollefson 1985: 55) and deprived of dentition (Strouhal 1973; Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989; Cauvin 2000: 113; Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 687), and then modeled with plaster or an asphalt-like substance before they were eventually buried.

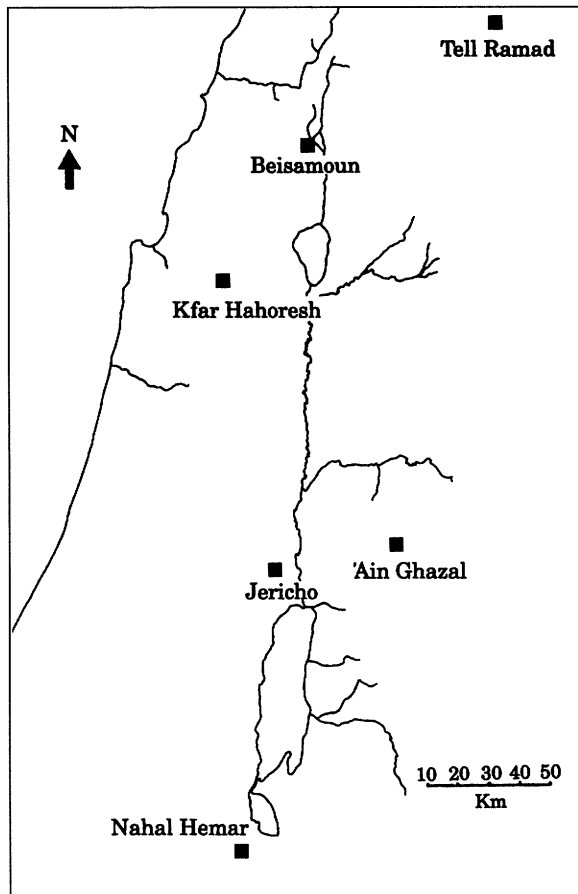


Fig. 3. Neolithic sites in the Levant with plastered skulls. Modified from Hershkovitz et al. 1995: fig. 1.

The Beginning of the Interpretation

The early discovery of the skull of an “elderly man,” sitting on its mandible in a corner beneath the floor of a house at Jericho, helped set the stage for the interpretation of the later finds of plastered skulls as male elders at Jericho in 1953. Kenyon (in Kenyon and Tushingham 1953: 870) surmised that “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.”

Kenyon made similar comments when ten plastered skulls were found at Jericho: “One cannot help but feel that they are portraits, which bring the men of the earliest Neolithic period astonishingly to life. But why were they made? Probably they are survivals of some form of ancestor worship, in which their descendants attempted to preserve the personality of tribal or family elders” (Kenyon and Tushingham 1953: 870). Kenyon did not elaborate or

subsequently consider enemy skulls as a viable alternative (Bonogofsky 2001a: 14). The assumption was that the skulls were from male relatives, and that these men, by implication, had been powerful elders in a patriarchal system.

The practice of skull plastering evident at Jericho was soon equated (Good 1958) with an Ugaritic translation—“Glaze will be poured on my head / And quicklime upon my pate”—found in the first tablet of the Poem of *Aqht*. This Late Bronze Age passage about a young male was suddenly interpreted as a burial custom (Good 1958: 74) rather than as denoting the white hair of old age (Ginsberg 1950: 151, cited in Margalit 1984: 93 and n. 7) or a type of punishment (Albright 1945: 24), based on the finds at Jericho. This analogy was harshly criticized at the time by Anson Rainey (1971: 154; see Margalit 1984: 94 and discussion therein), yet it lingered on for decades to fuel further embellishments of the Jericho interpretation of the plastered skulls (e.g., Margalit 1984).

Meanwhile Kenyon’s interpretation regarding an ancestor cult of male elders at Jericho appeared in numerous journals over the next twenty years. Her interpretation became so entrenched in the literature that no new information would change the general assumption regarding a cult of venerated male elders.

An Elaboration of the Interpretation

A second aspect of the interpretation was created when plastered skulls were excavated at the site of Tell Ramad in 1965 and 1966. An anthropological study (Ferembach 1969) of at least 28 plastered skulls was published in 1969. Two significant statements were made by Ferembach (1969: 66–67, 70, pls. 4–5) about the plastered skulls from Tell Ramad. The first one, the importance of which was generally overlooked by later scholars (e.g., Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 165, 172), was that the skulls of more females than males were plastered at Tell Ramad; the two best-preserved plastered skulls from the site belonged to young adult females. The other, which paved the way for all similar interpretations, was that intentional postmortem dental evulsion must have been practiced on the two best-preserved plastered skulls, thereby accounting for the appearance of a low face (fig. 4). This initial claim was made and repeated for decades (e.g., Bienert 1991), even though teeth were clearly intact in other plastered skulls from Tell Ramad (Ferembach 1969: pls. 1–7).

Two plastered skulls were then found at a third location in 1972 at the site of Beisamoun. Only one

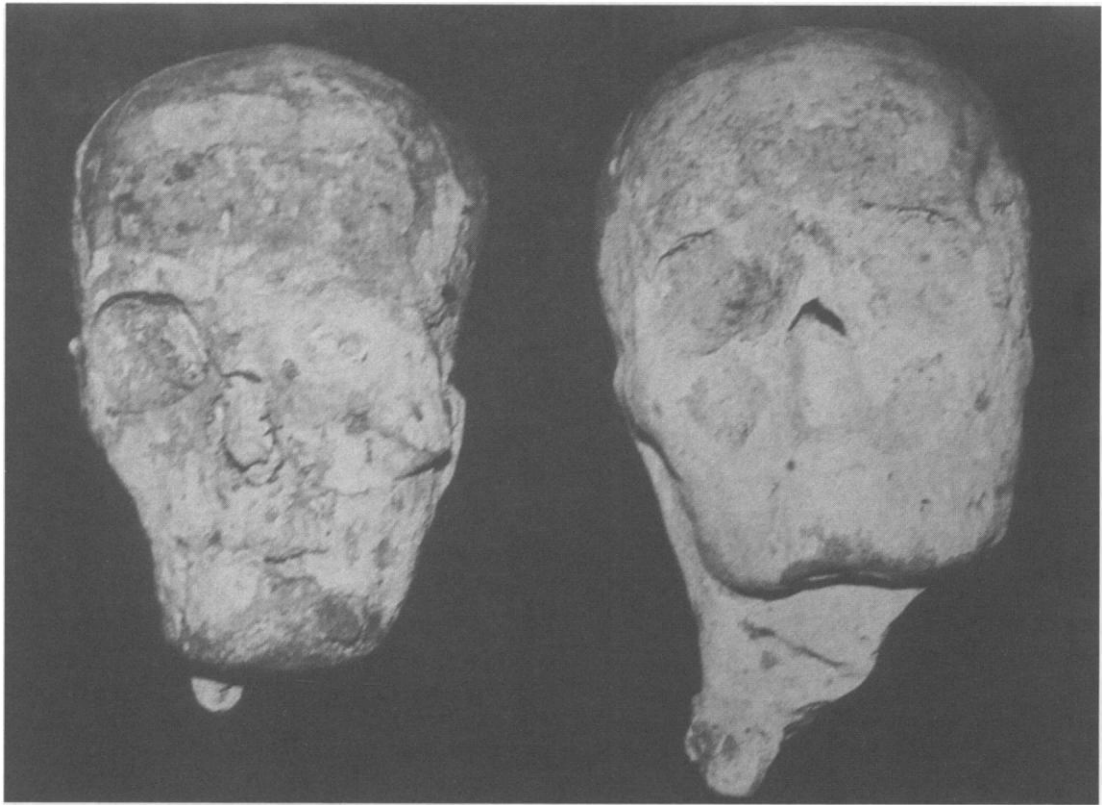


Fig. 4. Two plastered female skulls, R 66-3 and R 66-2 from Tell Ramad. Photo courtesy of Henri de Contenson.

of the two skulls was studied (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973). It was sexed as a female, who appeared to be elderly based on suture closure. Because no teeth were visible in the mouth area where the plaster had broken away, it was claimed that the teeth had been evulsed. There were now reports of intentional postmortem dental evulsion in plastered skulls from two sites, Tell Ramad and Beisamoun, with an additional third claim about to be made concerning a skull from Jericho.

Although plastered skulls were first found at Jericho in 1953, they were treated as archaeological finds (Röhler-Ertl 1978: 156; Kurth and Röhler-Ertl 1981: 437) and thus were not examined by a physical anthropologist until 1967 (Strouhal 1973). The results were published only after other plastered skulls, including those of females, had been found at the sites of Tell Ramad and Beisamoun. Four of the plastered skulls from Jericho, with a cast of a fifth (Bonogofsky 1999: 5; 2001a: 59), appeared to be males, with ages ranging from young adult to old adult (Strouhal

1973). Strouhal (1973) cautioned that this did not imply that the remaining plastered skulls from Jericho belonged to males, particularly since the plastered skulls of females had been recently found at the sites of Tell Ramad and Beisamoun. The report on the five plastered skulls from Jericho (Strouhal 1973) was published in the same volume of *Paléorient* as the report on the plastered skulls from Beisamoun (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973).

Claims concerning dental evulsion in the plastered skulls from Tell Ramad and Beisamoun clearly influenced the interpretation of a toothless plastered skull at Jericho. Empty alveoli were perceived in the maxilla and mandible where plaster had broken away from the mandible in the only true skull, J 5758, from Jericho. Because the plaster “mask” held the alveolar edges of both jaws close together, the examining anthropologist (Strouhal 1973: 240) postulated that the front teeth had been intentionally removed before the plaster had been applied. He further made the expansive statement that all teeth had

been evulsed from all plastered skulls from all three sites (Jericho, Tell Ramad, Beisamoun) in which both jaws were present, so that the facial height was lessened. The reason for the replacement of the bony mandible with a plaster jaw in the other plastered skulls from Jericho was unclear. It was proposed that the mandible may have been lost or was too difficult to fasten to the cranium (Strouhal 1973). Still more obscure was the reason behind the supposed dental evulsion.

Reports of dental evulsion continued to affect interpretations of successive finds of plastered skulls. Not surprisingly, these reports further affected the interpretation of the Poem of *Aqht*, the previously discussed Late Bronze Age text from Ugarit.

A Coalescence of Interpretations

A connection between the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B archaeological finds and the Poem of *Aqht* surfaced once again when a new translation of the third tablet from the Poem of *Aqht* (Margalit 1976) was linked (Margalit 1984) with the perceived mortuary practice reported at Tell Ramad (Ferembach 1969), Beisamoun (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973), and Jericho (Strouhal 1973). It was believed that the plastered skulls from the Neolithic period might have been uncovered by later inhabitants of the area, because knowledge of the practice of dental evulsion in plastered skulls appeared to have been recorded in the Ugaritic Poem of *Aqht* (Margalit 1984). According to the new translation, the goddess Anat performed oral surgery along with dental evulsion in both jaws on the corpse of the dead god *Aqht*, and then put plaster on his head. The translation (Margalit 1976: 169)—“She extracts (?) the ‘stones’ of his mouth/ She seizes his teeth and consumes (them)/ On the crown (of his head) she puts a groove/plaster (?)”—was interpreted as such, based on “anthropology” (Margalit 1976: 170) which included the earlier analogy from the Poem of *Aqht* (Good 1958: 74) in reference to the plastered skulls. Although this “educated guess” (Margalit 1984: 94) was not supported by later translators of *Aqht* (de Moor 1987: 239, 248; Parker 1989: 136; 1997: 67; Pardee 1997: 347, 351; Wyatt 1998: 274, 290), this particular textual translation was eventually used to justify the “special treatment” of the Neolithic plastered skulls (Bar-Yosef 1997: 165, 172), while at the same time criticizing Kenyon for overlooking the presumed evidence for dental evulsion at Jericho (Margalit 1984).

The alleged practice of dental evulsion was elaborated upon by still others who overlooked the presence of teeth in the plastered skulls just as they overlooked the plastered skulls of females and children (Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 672, 686). The practice of dental evulsion also extended to those plastered skulls that did not have their true mandibles (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989). By the early 1980s, more plastered skulls had been found at two additional locations in the Levant: Nahal Hemar and ‘Ain Ghazal. The reportedly all male crania from the two additional sites also happened to be missing all of their teeth (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988; 1989; Butler 1989; Simmons et al. 1990). These studies fit well with the previous assumptions regarding male elders and dental evulsion, providing one did not point out that the crania from Nahal Hemar and ‘Ain Ghazal were incomplete and damaged, or that plaster, as noted by Butler (1989; in Simmons et al. 1990), protruded from the alveoli of the three plastered crania from ‘Ain Ghazal.

Some researchers (e.g., Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989) further believe that male skulls were selected for decoration based on characteristics of a broad vault and low and wide face. Since only a small number of the Neolithic population fit this so-called requirement, according to morphometric analyses (summarized in Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989: 123, table 1), they suggest that the skulls were either artificially deformed *in vivo*, or that removal of the mandible and/or dental evulsion in the maxilla and mandible was practiced postmortem (Cauvin 2000: 113). The resulting skull provided a low vault and face enhanced in width by plaster in order to attain “gerontomorphic” characteristics (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989: 127). The now shortened and toothless faces were related to a “concept of rule and seniority of the elders” (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988: 57), even though the modeled skulls from PPNB sites did not all derive from biologically old adults (Strouhal 1973; Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981; Ferembach 1969; Ferembach 1978; Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989; Butler 1989; Simmons et al. 1990).

A motive behind the removal of the mandible and all teeth from the plastered skulls was suggested (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989) when the perceived mortuary practice of intentional dental evulsion in the plastered skulls (Ferembach 1969; Strouhal 1973; Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973) was linked with the naturally occurring rates of tooth loss in

older adults during the Early Neolithic period. It now was generally believed that dental evulsion was practiced on the plastered skulls to make them look as if they had lived long enough to lose all of their teeth (e.g., Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989: 129).

The problem of biological age was circumvented by the proposal that “relatively young adults were given at death this desired elderly appearance, perhaps in order to symbolize the fathers or leaders” (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988: 57). The implications of dental evulsion were further extended to imply that a toothless mouth was held in esteem in the PPNB. Notions of the elderly and the wisdom gained by men who lived into old age during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period in the Levant were evoked (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989: 129). Such assumptions continue to emphasize the interpretation of an ancestor cult of elderly males and leaders that first began at Jericho (Kenyon 1953), as they work to solidify claims regarding the selection for male skulls and the use of dental evulsion in those skulls.

At least five plastered skulls were found in the 1990s at a sixth site, Kfar Hahoreh (Kangas and Goring-Morris 1999). The only well-published cranium from this location was aged and sexed as a young adult male (Hershkovitz et al. 1995: figs. 2–11). Five upper molars protrude from the maxilla through the modeled base. Plaster fills some of the empty alveoli, notably that of the right third molar (RM3). In spite of the clear presence of teeth in this most recent find, claims are still being made that intentional postmortem dental evulsion was practiced on the “spiritually oriented” plastered skulls of adult males (Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal 2001: 686, 688).

However, this latest shift in the interpretation no longer includes the skulls of both old and young males. The interpretation now focuses instead only on the skulls of young males who were made to look old. Even the written Ugaritic mythical Poem of *Aqht* is used to support the interpretation of the “special treatment” of the skulls of young men in the Neolithic (Bar-Yosef 1997: 165, 172). The skulls of women and children are still largely excluded from these discussions, as exemplified in Goren, Goring-Morris, and Segal (2001: 686): “The plastered skulls recovered from the five sites [Jericho, Tell Ramad, Beisamoun, Nahal Hemar, ‘Ain Ghazal] . . . are all of young adults. Furthermore, there are some indications, still inconclusive, that they may all be males.”

Not everyone agrees that all of these had their teeth pulled out, are males, or ancestors (e.g., Wright 1988; de Contenson 2000: 56) yet the primary data remain largely unheeded. Instead, the initial interpretations are continuously reinforced in the scholarly literature.

CRITICAL ANALYSES

The present author tested the hypothesis that these skulls were all male, adults, and toothless in a study of 61 modeled skulls from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period in the Levant (Bonogofsky 2001a; 2001b; 2002b). An osteological examination of a sample ($n = 25$) of the plastered skulls, along with a review of the various methods used to age and sex the remaining ($n = 36$) plastered skulls from the Levant, indicates that the skulls and crania of males, females, and children were included, without a significant bias toward any one age or sex.

Computed tomography (CT), a physical examination of the dental area, and/or an examination of photographs reveal teeth in the plastered skulls, notably in two of the plastered skulls (R 66–2 from Tell Ramad and J 5758 from Jericho; Bonogofsky 2002b: figs. 1–3) that began the series of interpretations regarding dental evulsion. The information gathered via CT scans and through a study of excavation photographs is contrary to the reports (Ferembach 1969; Strouhal 1973) that all teeth were evulsed in these particular individuals. Furthermore, the mandible in skull J 5758 is a modern cast of the repaired original (C. Western, personal communication, 2000). Teeth are present in other plastered skulls from Tell Ramad as well, including the skulls of children (e.g., fig. 5). Teeth are also present in at least another seven of the existing ten plastered skulls from Jericho and in one plastered skull from Kfar Hahoreh. Many of the plastered skulls could not be tested for dental evulsion because they consisted of cranial fragments only, or because the necessary CT procedure was not permitted on the plastered skulls. The absence of teeth in the remaining modeled skulls from the six sites in the Levant can be explained simply by pre- and postmortem loss through natural attrition and damage, rather than through intentional postmortem dental evulsion (Bonogofsky 2002b).

Curiously, the alveoli of four plastered skulls had some pieces of plaster inserted into them. At ‘Ain Ghazal, no teeth are present in any of the crania. Yet, a small amount of plaster had been inserted into

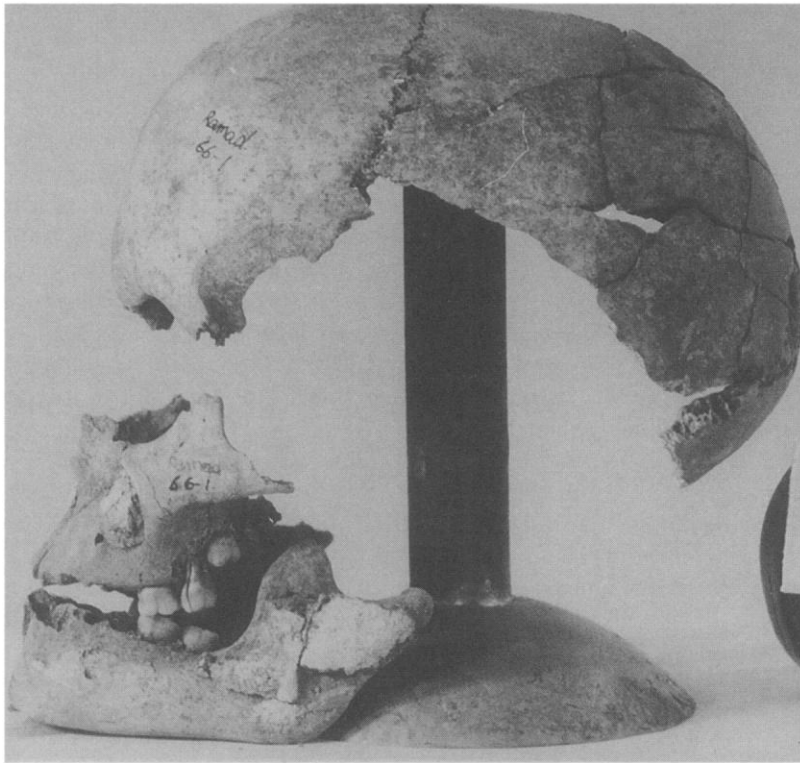


Fig. 5. A plastered skull of a juvenile, R 66-1 from Tell Ramad. Note the eruption of the first two molars, supporting Ferembach's (1969) age assignment of 13–14 years. Photo courtesy of Henri de Contenson.

an unspecified alveolus in cranium AG 1983 C. The second and third molars of cranium AG 1983 D “were simulated through the use of plaster to fill the tooth crypts” (Butler 1989: 144). One unspecified anterior tooth socket of AG 1988 contained a plaster “plug” (Simmons et al. 1990: 108). Likewise were some of the alveoli of Homo 1 from Kfar Hahoresh filled with plaster, including the right third molar (Hershkovitz et al. 1995: 782, fig. 5). This information implies that modeled plaster was also used as a substitute for lost teeth.

DISCUSSION

In the “railroad industry of epistemology” (Haraway 1988: 596), once an interpretation is made it is accepted without question by others who in turn build upon the now-assumed facts without a critical examination of the new, much less the old, data. By accepting certain assumptions about the plastered skulls, various archaeologists, anthropologists, and

philologists failed to think critically as they interpreted their material. It was immediately assumed by Kenyon and her adherents that at Jericho the skulls of elderly men had been selected for modeling as part of a male ancestor cult. Following this model, skulls from Jericho and other sites in the Levant were modified in appearance by the evulsion of all teeth to produce facial features found in the elderly. The assumptions that were “railroaded” upon us were constructed through a selective emphasis on the age and sex of the Neolithic plastered skulls, and through the use of intentional dental evulsion in these same skulls. These two paths were eventually united to solidify the argument in favor of an ancestor cult, presumably of male elders.

The forces that sustain the “social construction of archaeological knowledge” have been examined by Gero (1995: 175) as they apply to Paleoindians and gender. In Paleoindian interpretations, “early Man could only be a big-game hunter, with all the ideological loading that that entailed and all that it left

out: women!" (Gero 1995: 177). The same is relevant in the interpretation of the plastered skulls from the Levant: the skulls of elite elders and leaders of the Neolithic community were subject to a special form of mortuary treatment, with all the ideological assumptions that that entailed and all that it overlooked: females and children (Bonogofsky 2002a).

CONCLUSION

Information derived from the plastered skulls does not support claims that age or sex were consistent factors in the selection of skulls for special treatment, nor were all teeth intentionally removed after death. The skulls of both young and old males are included among the plastered skulls, but so too are the skulls of females and children. Teeth are present in the plastered skulls of men, women, and children. Computed tomography clearly illuminates the presence of teeth in the maxilla and mandible in one of the intact plastered skulls from Tell Ramad. Excava-

tion photographs clearly indicate that teeth were also present in the mandible of the only true skull from Jericho. These most important examples are among the skulls that sparked a series of publications regarding dental evulsion in the plastered skulls. None of the skulls or crania from any of the sites demonstrates intentional postmortem evulsion of all teeth.

Thus the interpretation regarding an ancestor cult of toothless male elders is a created mythology of modern scholars. The framework for the interpretation of the plastered skulls as elderly male ancestors was skewed from the beginning. Later researchers continued to build upon this shaky foundation. Claims made for the intentional pulling-out of teeth before the dry skulls were modeled are inaccurate and can be misleading. However, questions regarding the construction and function of the plastered skulls may be answered with further scientific analyses of primary data, hopefully with an eye toward illuminating the roles of women and children as well as men in the Neolithic Near East.

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