

Negotiating Equality through Ritual: A Consideration of Late Natufian and Prepottery Neolithic A Period Mortuary Practices

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Received December 12, 1995; revision received May 23, 1996; accepted June 6, 1996

Mortuary rituals, specifically secondary mortuary practices with the socially sanctioned removal of all or some parts of the deceased, are a powerful means of social integration during periods of social, economic, or environmental change. Integrating ethnographic data on the social impact of secondary mortuary ceremonies with archaeological evidence from the Late Natufian and Prepottery Neolithic A periods of the south-central Levant, this study explores how the development and maintenance of intentional secondary mortuary rituals, such as with the removal and reburial of skulls, served as powerful communal acts that symbolically and physically linked communities and limited the perception or reality of social differentiation. Continuity within, and meanings behind, secondary mortuary practices during the late Pleistocene and early Holocene prompts the researcher to reevaluate previous interpretations of the relationship(s) among the appearance of formalized social inequality, food production, and the definition of personal relations within Levantine Neolithic communities. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

Later—after no long interval—came the skull-quarriers, intent only on their thorough search, for not one cranium in the whole mass escaped them. Legs and arms, whole trunks they dismembered, wrenching the mandibles from the skulls as they were found and throwing them down among the rest of the unwanted, rotting remains. Whether these ghouls were strangers, or the surviving kin of the deceased intent on ritual preservation of the most characteristic parts of their late relations, cannot now be told for certain, but the existence of the plastered skulls points to some such motive.

Cornwall (1981:401)

If decorated burials are a symbol of social ranking, what happened when they disappeared in the Late Natufian?

Belfer-Cohen (1995:15)

INTRODUCTION

There are few topics more central to anthropology than understanding how, when, and why formalized social inequality developed in the past. In studying the emergence of social inequality, researchers have focused considerable attention on the critical

role of ritual behavior as a framework in which people and communities define and modify social relationships. From some perspectives ritual is a device of powerful social regulation and a consolidator of political, economic, and social power among select individuals within communities, and a potential means of social advancement facilitating the breakdown of egalitarian belief systems (Fried 1960, 1967; Johnson 1982; Service 1962, 1975). Alternatively, a number of recent anthropological and archaeological studies have examined how ritual practices can actually maintain egalitarian social systems and serve to maintain or increase solidarity between individuals and households by stressing a series of shared egalitarian themes (Berreman 1981; Flanagan 1989; Flanagan and Rayner 1988; Gerlach and Gerlach 1988; McKinnon 1991; Paynter 1989; Rayner 1988). These studies have increased our awareness of the dynamic and multidimensional nature of equality and inequality inherent in most mortuary ritual practices, illustrated that mortuary ritual can serve as

both a symbolic and a physical expression of the views and beliefs of general communities, and inspired researchers to reevaluate previous models of the emergence of social inequality in the past.

Recent reexaminations of Natufian culture mortuary practices by Byrd and Monahan (1995) and Belfer-Cohen (1995) have challenged previous claims that this period was characterized by ascribed social status, hereditary inequality, and an incipient chiefdom and have refuted arguments that formalized social inequality existed in the Natufian period (see Earle 1987; Henry 1989; Wright 1978). Beyond highlighting the lack of consensus among archaeologists as to when and how formalized social inequality first emerged in the Near East, these studies, as well as those of a number of other researchers, have outlined or commented upon similarities in mortuary practices between the Late Natufian (c. 11,000–10,300 B.P.) and following Prepottery Neolithic A period (c.10,300–9300 B.P.) (Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995; Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1991; Belfer-Cohen 1991; Bienert 1991; Byrd 1989; Byrd and Monahan 1995; Olszewski 1991).¹ Despite these observations, many archaeologists continue to envision the transition from the Late Natufian and Prepottery Neolithic A periods (PPNA) from an evolutionary framework of relatively complex hunter–gatherers evolving into early agriculturists living in sedentary villages with the concomitant development of domesticated plants and animals as subsistence resources (see Mellaart 1975; Moore 1985). There are many sound reasons for which this transition

has been and still is perceived as being so dramatic, including that: (1) researchers have primarily focused on the issues of changing subsistence practices; (2) the periods in question were originally, and understandably continue to be, largely defined on the basis of differences in stone tool technology; and (3) early general reconstructions of the Natufian were largely based on the Early Natufian period (c.12,500–11,000 B.P.) rather than the Late Natufian, and were contrasted with the material culture, architecture, and mortuary practices of the Middle and Late Prepottery Neolithic B (MPPNB) periods (9300–8000 B.P.). For all of these reasons, many archaeologists' perception of the Levantine late Pleistocene to early Holocene cultural transition has traditionally been one of drastic economic, social, environmental, and technological change, without recognition of some of the important yet subtle cultural links through time.

Although many Levantine prehistorians have reflected upon perceived continuity in different aspects of Late Natufian and PPNA period lifeways (readers are referred to Bar-Yosef 1983, 1991; Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995; Belfer-Cohen 1991; Byrd 1989; Kuijt 1994; and Henry 1989 for published syntheses of these periods), surprisingly little archaeological research has explored the degree to which mortuary ritual and social organization may reflect continuities. This paper explores how similarities in mortuary rituals between these periods are more pronounced than previously recognized by some researchers and, ultimately, how mortuary rituals of these two periods were probably based upon very similar belief systems or worldviews. Moreover, I illustrate how careful examination of similarities in mortuary practices aids researchers in understanding why Late Natufian mortuary practices changed along the lines that Belfer-Cohen (1995) and Byrd and Monahan (1995) have outlined and helps us identify previously unrecognized aspects of social and ritual continuity during times of economic and demographic change. Briefly, I will develop

¹ Although differing as to the exact timing and terminology, the Natufian is generally subdivided into the Early Natufian (12,500–11,000 B.P.) and Late Natufian (11,000–10,300 B.P.), although see also Valla (1987). The PPNA period lasts from about 10,300–9300 B.P. For the purposes of this essay, I divide the PPNB into three stages consisting of: (1) Middle (9300–8500 B.P.), (2) Late (8500–8000 B.P.), and, (3) Final PPNB period/PPNC (8000–7500 B.P.) (see Bar-Yosef 1991; Belfer-Cohen 1991; Cauvin 1987; Kuijt 1995; Kuijt and Bar-Yosef 1994; Rollefson 1989; Rollefson et al. 1992 for more detailed discussions).

three main ideas in this paper. First, previous reconstructions of the Late Natufian and PPNA periods have emphasized technological and economic practices rather than similarities in mortuary practices, including skull removal and secondary mortuary rituals. Second, similar mortuary practices provide evidence of considerable ritual/social continuity between these two periods. Finally, the appearance of individuals and secondary burials in the Late Natufian reflects a strategy to emphasize social cohesion and the collective community over the individual, rather than an indicator of increased settlement mobility due to environmental or subsistence resource variability. As a first step in developing these arguments, it is necessary to outline the theoretical context within which mortuary rituals are viewed in this study, as well as to briefly review what is known about PPNA mortuary practices before comparing these to those of the Late Natufian periods.

MORTUARY PRACTICES AND SOCIAL INTERPRETATION

Since the early 1960s archaeologists have actively debated how social structure, ideology and worldviews are expressed through and mediated by mortuary practices (Binford 1971; Chapman et al. 1981; O'Shea 1984; Tainter 1978). As part of this discussion, several recent studies (Carr 1995; Hodder 1982; McGuire 1992; Metcalf and Huntington 1991) have directed new attention toward the processes by which mortuary practices idealize and mask daily social relations; additionally, they have explored the importance of the living vs the perceived status of the deceased in structuring mortuary practices in order to further understand the social impact of specific mortuary ritual upon individuals and communities (readers are referred to Carr 1995 for an expanded discussion of different approaches to mortuary analysis adopted by archaeologists, as well as arguments for

their historical developments). Following these works, I view mortuary practice as a form of human behavior that is actively chosen by actors in relation to specific beliefs and a broader worldview and symbolic themes, rather than a direct reflection of social organization. Mortuary practices are often a communal event, usually controlled and directed by a limited number of individuals and enacted for an audience of individuals present at the event. The power of ritual as a cohesive force is based, in part, on the realization that mortuary practice is a form of public action, a social drama designed and conducted by the living, often to elicit community participation, and is not always, therefore, a direct reflection of the status, authority, and importance of the deceased (Geertz 1973; Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; van Gennep 1960). In this framework the broader social ethos and mortuary practices are viewed as being interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Geertz (1973:131) emphasizes the centrality of the relationship between ritual symbols and the broader social ethos, stating that: "The force of a religion in supporting social values rests, then on the ability of its symbols to formulate a world in which those values, as well as the forces opposing their realization, are fundamental ingredients." Moreover, the standardization of symbols in household ritual or mortuary practices, such as the number of objects and significance, is central to their intended meaning and can be employed so as to reinforce broader spiritual beliefs and community ethos within and between households (Hodder 1982; McKinnon 1991; Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

Several researchers have also described how and why under different conditions specific mortuary practices can have different political and social impacts upon the individual, household, and community (Carr 1995; Hodder 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). In many household societies ritual action provides the framework for community cohesion, in that links be-

tween households are established, supported, and extended by elaborate codes of social reciprocity that ensure participation in collective rituals by individuals from multiple households. Following other researchers (Joyce 1993; Levi-Strauss 1983; McKinnon 1991), I use the term "household" to refer to a cooperative coresidential economic unit characterized by internal ranking and some centralized decision-making authority. Membership within households would have been through kinship links, but not all members of the household were kin. Households are viewed as a corporate body which perpetuates itself through the exchange of goods, titles, and membership along real or imaginary lines. Within such small-scale social groups, individual and household level relationships are negotiated, based on real or perceived reciprocity, and are frequently reaffirmed through gift exchange and reciprocal participation in household mortuary events, such as mortuary rituals.

While addressing the links among mortuary practices, social distinction, and material culture, several researchers have recognized that mortuary practices not only reaffirm the kin and economic links between households but also that the actual or perceived coparticipation in mortuary practices impacts communities by symbolically and physically linking or defining individuals (Binford 1971; O'Shea 1984; Hodder 1982; McGuire 1992; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Carr (1995), in a recent examination of mortuary practices and their determinants, illustrates that while funeral attendance and the overall energy expended in mortuary rites often reflects the social position of the deceased within communities, it can also be linked to communal ancestor worship, responsibility to the deceased, beliefs about the soul's nature, and the nature of the afterlife. As illustrated by Radcliffe-Brown's (1964) research among the Andaman Islanders, it is important to consider how participation in mortuary events expresses attachment between individuals and households and that: ". . . the purpose of the rite is to affirm the

existence of a social bond between two or more people." In many ritual contexts individuals may not recognize the sentiments or actions that reiterate group membership, but the very act of coparticipating in such actions will minimally serve to strengthen existing feelings and develop new relationships. From this perspective, then, mortuary practices enact an important integrative function within communities by encouraging participation in a powerful communal act that symbolically and physically links community members in a logical and articulate form, leads to the development of new or extension of existing networks, and reaffirms broader beliefs and worldviews (Fentress and Wickham 1992; McKinnon 1991; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Radcliffe-Brown 1964).

Secondary Mortuary Rituals and Community Identity

Despite the growing awareness among researchers of the social dimension of primary mortuary practices, few anthropological and archaeological studies have examined how secondary mortuary practices are linked to broader belief systems, social arrangements, and community identity. Within this paper I define secondary mortuary practice as a social act focused on the regular and socially sanctioned removal of objects, pieces, or all or part of a deceased individual from some place of temporary storage to a permanent resting place. Archaeologically this is expressed by the intentional removal of skeletal materials from one location to another location and is often, but not always, exemplified by the recovery of disarticulated and relatively incomplete skeletal remains. It is important to keep in mind, however, that primary and secondary mortuary practices need not be mutually exclusive from a classification standpoint (especially given that they are usually perceived by ethnographic groups as being interlinked as parts of a broader belief system). For example, secondary mortuary practices can involve

the defleshing of the complete skeleton and then reburial as a bundle or the removal of only the cranium, leaving the rest of the skeleton in its original articulated context. Previous studies illustrate that broader beliefs and worldviews fundamentally affect and perpetuate secondary mortuary practices through ancestor worship, ties to ancestral lines, responsibility to the deceased, and beliefs about universal orders (see Crocker 1977; Hertz 1960; Lopatin 1960:90–114; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Although the means and rationale behind secondary mortuary rituals vary considerably among ethnographic groups, secondary mortuary rituals throughout diverse cultures impact individuals within and among households of a community as an extremely powerful means of defining, shaping, and maintaining identities and social relationships. One aspect to this is that, even if they focus on specific individuals from separate households, secondary mortuary practices involve, be it perceived or unperceived, an element of communal ancestor worship as part of a collective social memory and identity. The broader articulation of a shared identity requires that the message be conventionalized as well as simplified so as to make it understandable to all (Fentress and Wickham 1992). This is partially accomplished by reference to generalized ancestors and the development of highly standardized social rules. Importantly, secondary mortuary practices permit scheduling of funeral events at a prearranged time that does not conflict with other tasks and are at times envisioned as a season of festivities (Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). This facilitates extensive coparticipation in secondary mortuary events from within the community as well as for initial primary mortuary events and by extension, broader recognition of a worldview and beliefs (Fig. 1).

Characteristic of many other ethnographic groups employing secondary mortuary rituals, the mortuary rituals of the Bara and Berawan emphasize the transitory nature of death through a series of ritual acts and mortuary practices spaced over time (Metcalf

and Huntington 1991). Among the Bara, burial consists of three stages in the process of providing a final resting place for deceased individuals, including: (1) the burial occurring a few days after death; (2) the gathering, which is a great feast celebrated after the harvest following the death; and, (3) the exhumation and reburial after defleshing. The initial burial, envisioned as a temporary location in which flesh can decay and the body is “naturally” prepared for later final interment, is usually attended by between 50 and 100 people. Unlike the primary burial, the later gathering and reburial are planned and organized far in advance. The gathering is the most important and elaborate event of Bara social life, involving a well-prepared, organized celebration occurring each year at the same season and bringing several hundred people together for several days, often from a distance of hundreds of kilometers. The actual reburial ceremony may be delayed for several years, but it is viewed as an obligation of the descendants toward the deceased. Similarly, the Berawan practice a form of secondary disposal of the deceased which involves two major mortuary ceremonies (depending on the status of the individual), each lasting several days, and involving several hundred people from neighboring communities. These rituals are separated by a period of at least 8 months and sometimes as much as 5 years (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:85–97).

A final dimension is that among many societies, of which our most extensive documentation comes from Indonesia and Borneo, secondary mortuary practices are organized as to facilitate participation in community events that crosscut kin and household lines (Downs 1956; Hertz 1960; Hudson 1966; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Among the Ma'anyan of Borneo, for example, corpses from different households are removed from a primary burial context after a number of years and are collectively given funeral rites as part of a week-long community festival (Hudson 1966:361–398). Similarly, Downs (1956:78–91) outlines how

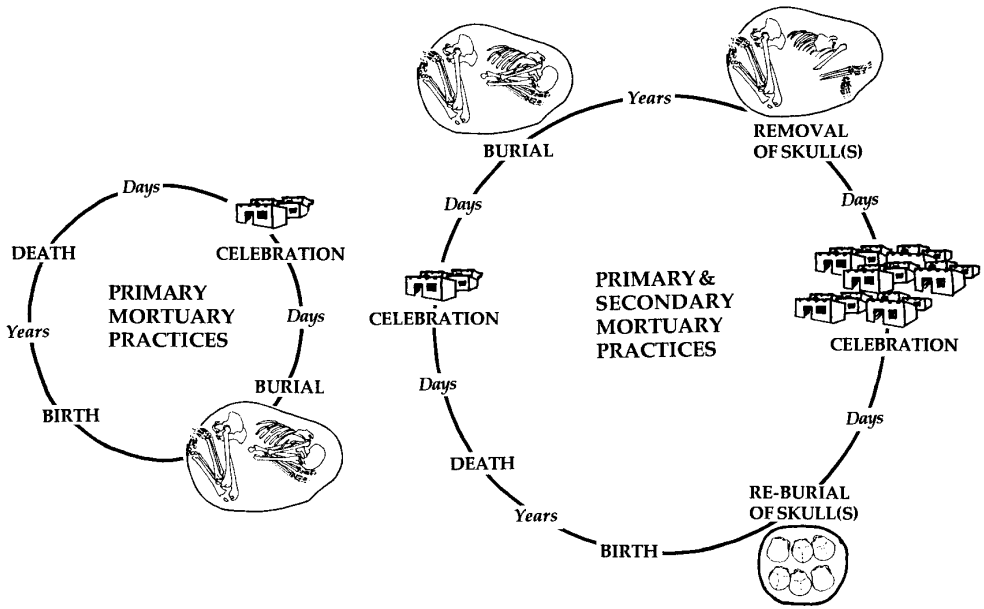


FIG. 1. Generalized stages of Aceramic Neolithic primary and secondary mortuary practices. Note differences in timing, community participation, and possibilities of coparticipation by multiple households.

community-level secondary mortuary practices occur among the Toradja of central Celebes for deceased individuals from multiple households. These studies reiterate that broader beliefs and worldviews fundamentally affect and perpetuate secondary mortuary practices. Moreover, I believe that in many cases these beliefs and mortuary practices are mutually reinforcing and serve as a physical and symbolic framework in which a shared identity is expressed.

Ultimately, these ethnographic data illustrate how purposefully ritual practitioners and communities organize secondary mortuary rituals as part of high profile public ceremonies; therefore, we can view these as spiritual and symbolic acts that have social, political, and personal meanings. In contrast to primary, single-stage mortuary practices, aspects of multistage secondary mortuary practices are planned in advance, are often held in conjunction by multiple households as part of a community festival, and require extraordinary levels of community involvement. Beyond these logistical

dimensions, secondary mortuary practices, with the deliberate removal of some or all of the skeleton, such as skull removal, are often linked to broader beliefs in ancestor worship. For all of these reasons, secondary mortuary rituals differ from primary burial of individuals, as these ceremonies often crosscut kin and household lines, thereby emphasizing the community over the individual. It is from this ethnographic and theoretical perspective, then, that we turn to a consideration of mortuary practices of the Prepottery Neolithic A period of the south-central Levant and their possible relationships to those of the Late Natufian period.

LEVANTINE PREPOTTERY NEOLITHIC A PERIOD (10,300–9300 B.P.) MORTUARY PRACTICES

As noted earlier, in some cultural contexts mortuary practices serve as a means of acting out competitive social strategies (Cannon 1989; O'Shea 1984; Tainter 1978), while

in other contexts they are believed to define, shape, and maintain the identity and social relationships of individuals within and between households (Hertz 1960; Levi-Strauss 1983; McKinnon 1991; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Previous discussions of skull removal in the south-central Levantine Aceramic Neolithic have advanced our understanding of secondary mortuary practices in a prehistoric context by providing descriptive accounts and preliminary interpretations of how these practices may have been linked to ancestor worship (Amiran 1962; Bienert 1991; Garfinkel 1994; HersHKovitz and Gopher 1990; Kenyon 1957; Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981). Expanding upon these studies, I argue that skull removal as a form of secondary mortuary practice reflects one of several thematically interrelated aspects of a ritual belief system focused on enhancing community cohesion and reaffirming household and community beliefs in the PPNA and later the MPPNB (see also Cauvin 1994 and Byrd 1994). As is argued elsewhere (Kuijt 1995), I believe that standardization and homogenization of MPPNB residential architecture, as well as the reiteration of regular themes in figurine and skull caches, were linked to an expansion of previously existing Late Natufian/PPNA period practices of skull removal. Extending this argument, I argue that Late Natufian and PPNA mortuary practices, specifically the absence of grave goods, burial of individuals, use of simple graves, and practice of skull removal, served to integrate communities and downplay socioeconomic differences between individuals and kin-groups in the face of considerable economic and social change from 11,000 to 9300 B.P.

In comparison to the wide variety of Natufian mortuary practices outlined by Byrd and Monahan (1995) and Belfer-Cohen (1995), excavations at the Aceramic Neolithic sites of Jericho, Netiv Hagdud, Hatoula, and Nahal Oren illustrate that burial systems of the PPNA period were relatively standardized and differentiated between

adults and children (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1991; Bar-Yosef et al. 1991; Belfer-Cohen et al. 1990; Kuijt 1995; Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981). Young children and infants, who usually account for about 40% of the total observed burials in the PPNA period, were usually buried singly, without grave goods, and often interred in shallow graves roughly dug out of previous deposits. In a few rare cases, the cranium was removed from an infant and in even fewer cases, multiple skulls of infants were collectively cached in a single location. At Jericho, for example, there was the burial of four or five infant skeletons, complete and articulated, placed underneath the original clay floor of PPNA house/structure BE 4 in Trench I (Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981) as well as a cache of five infant skulls placed below a plastered basin in room AV, Square FI, Stage VIII C (Table 1) (Fig. 2). In some cases at Jericho and Netiv Hagdud infants were buried in intramural locations, often located under or in walls, or in some cases at Jericho under post holes in the center of structures. Characteristic of this is the structure identified in Sq. E I, II, V, Stage IV, Phase ix, where a single complete infant was interred under a post foundation, possibly as part of a dedicatory ritual (Fig. 3).

The burial of adults in the PPNA was characterized by the primary inhumation of single individuals in either a subfloor intramural or a courtyard/fill extramural context. Similar to the Late Natufian, the structure of graves was very simple, with no preparation of the floor or walls of the grave, with individuals placed on their back or side, articulated, and with the legs drawn up on one side of the body. Similarly, grave goods were not placed with the burials, although there are a few examples of utilitarian objects recovered with burials, such as pins for holding items of clothing together (Kenyon 1981). At Netiv Hagdud, deceased adults were usually placed in open spaces or yards or in the fill of abandoned houses (Bar-Yosef et al. 1991:412). Kurth and

TABLE 1
Mortuary Caches from PPNA Period Occupations in the Near East

Site	Period	Date	No. of skulls/ skeletons	Age	Context
Jericho, D II, Stage VI, Phase vii	PPNA tower burial	c. 9400 B.P.	12 skeletons	Mostly adults	Burial of 12 articulated and relatively complete individuals inserted into the tower passage after that entrance was abandoned. Based on bone articulation and placement, Kenyon (1981:33) argues that the individuals were inserted through a hole cut through wall CA at the same time, likely associated with the Stage VI occupation. After interment an overlying bricky fill was inserted to block the hole.
Jericho, D I, Stage VIII, Phase xvi	PPNA	c. 9320 B.P.	4 or 5 skeletons	Infants	Four or five infants, complete, articulated, and apparently facing east, interred in a deep grave sealed by the original floor of house BE4.
Jericho, F I, Stage VIIC, Phase xviii	PPNA	c. 9300 B.P.	5 crania	Infants	Skulls placed beneath the center of a large plastered basin feature surrounded by a low plastered wall AT. Kenyon (1981:49) suggests that this could be foundation sacrifice or a single dedicatory burial. No recorded orientation of the crania.
Netiv Hagdud	PPNA	c. 9300–9700 B.P.	3 crania	Adults	Bar-Yosef et al. (1991:412) indicate that three adult human crania were found on the floor of Locus 8. It is unclear if these were left on the floor when the structure was abandoned or if they were placed in an intrusive pit feature that occurred after the abandonment of this structure.
Qermez Dere	PPNA	c. 9700 B.P.	6 crania	Adults	Watkins et al. (1989:21) report that field work at Qermez Dere resulted in the recovery of a single skull cache, with six human crania placed in the northwestern half of the house.

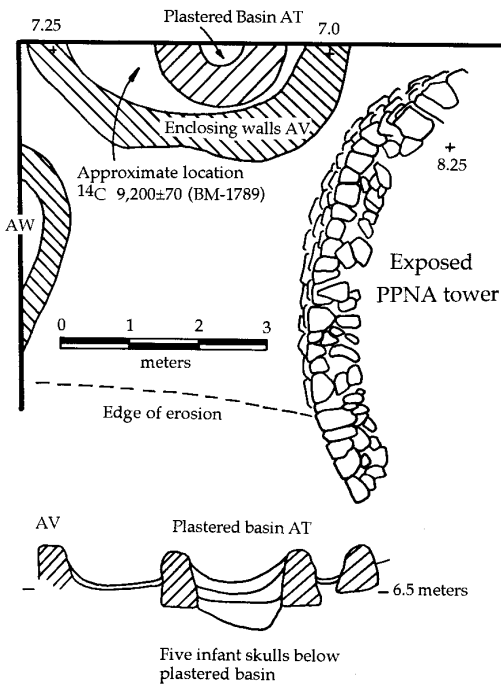


FIG. 2. Plan view of infant cache from Square FI, Stage VIII C, (c. 9200 $\pm$ 70 B.P. BM-1789).

Röhler-Ertl (1981) argue that adult burials from Jericho were almost always associated with architecture, although this definition includes both intra- and extramural loca-

tions, and it is not clear if such associations were intentional or a by-product of abandonment and reuse of select areas of the village during the occupation.

Although only limited research has addressed the topic, existing data on mortuary practices among PPNA adults and adolescents indicate that the overwhelming majority of PPNA adults appear to have had their skulls removed as part of a secondary mortuary practice, while it is more rare to find children who have had their skulls removed (Bar-Yosef 1991; Belfer-Cohen et al. 1990; Herskovitz and Gopher 1990). Within primary adult graves the remaining skeleton, including the mandible and hyoid bones, is often found in an anatomically correct position, with no evidence of cut-marks near the neck region, and it is generally assumed that the cranium was removed once the skeleton was defleshed. It is important to recognize that this practice first appears in the Late Natufian period at Hayonim Cave IV-V (Belfer-Cohen 1988a, 1988b) and possibly at 'Ain Mallaha Final (Perrot and Ladiray 1988:74) (Table 2). Moreover, it is interesting to note that in Early/Late Natufian burials at el-Wad, 'Iraq ed-Dubb, Nahal Oren, Kebara, and 'Ain Mallaha, limestone blocks were placed over the torso or head of the deceased

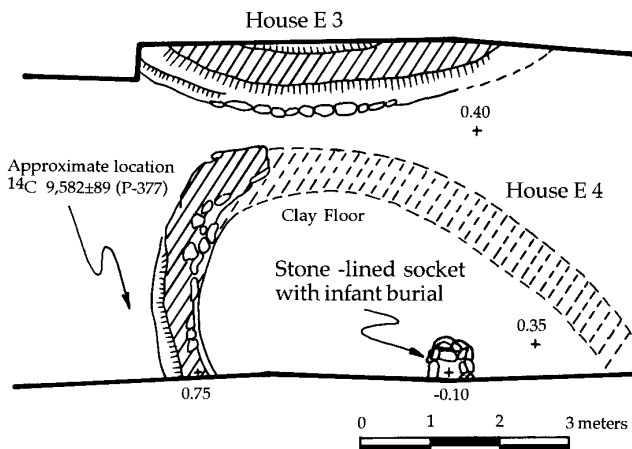


FIG. 3. Sq E I, II, V, Phase IV, Stage ix. Plan view of infant burial under oval cist/roof support.

TABLE 2
Early Natufian through to MPPNB Period Burial Interment Type for Adults and Adolescents

Occupation horizon	G-?	G-P	G-S	S-P	S-S	S-?	SKR	SMC
Early Natufian								
'Ain Mallaha Early	23			3				
El-Wad B2	20	12			2			
Hayonim Cave I-II		9	4	1				
'Ain Mallaha Middle		8						
Wadi Hammeh27			3?	?				
Late Natufian								
'Ain Mallaha Late		9	19					
El-Wad B1				3				
Hayonim Cave IV-V			1	1			6	6
'Ain Mallaha Final				6	1	7	?	
'Iraq ed-Dubb				1			1	
PPNA								
Hatoula			1				2	
Netiv Hagdud				1			11	4
Jericho				c. 48			c. 37	c. 11
MPPNB								
Yiftahel				9			11	5
Jericho				c. 53			c. 41	c. 59
Ain Ghazal				c. 12			c. 23	c. 10

Sources. Belfer-Cohen (1988b), Belfer-Cohen et al. (1990), Edwards et al. (1988), Garrod and Bate (1937), Hershkovitz et al. (1986), Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl (1981), Le Mort (1989), Perrot and Ladiray (1988), and Rollefson et al. (1992).

Note. G-?, group indeterminate; G-P, group primary; G-S, group secondary; S-P, single primary; S-S, single secondary; S-?, single indeterminate; SKR single/group and primary/secondary skeletons with skull removed; SMC, skull or mandible cache.

(see Bar-Yosef 1991; Belfer-Cohen 1995:16; Byrd 1989; Byrd and Monahan 1995). This marking of the location of the head by rock cairns or individual stones may have facilitated the later removal of the skull and provides insight into how PPNA communities kept track of burials for future skull removal.

Despite considerable research on Natufian and Neolithic mortuary practices, archaeologists have yet to fully explore the potential social reasons for and organizational processes behind skull removal. It is clear that skull removal was fairly common in the Late Natufian and PPNA and that there is a discrepancy between the numbers of postcranial skeletons and skulls recovered in excavations (Table 3). Why do we see this pattern? While is quite likely that part of this

is due to archaeological sampling, I suspect that the main reason is that, as in the MPPNB, skulls were being curated and eventually cached as a means of recognizing a collective shared past and identity, and thereby countering social stresses linked to changing economic and subsistence practices. There are, in fact, a few known cases where the skulls of Natufian and PPNA period adults were collectively cached. At Netiv Hagdud, for example, where almost all adults had their crania removed, a single cache of three adult crania was recovered from the floor of Locus 8 (Bar-Yosef et al. 1991:412), probably dating between 9600 and 9400 B.P. Similarly, in Jericho Trench I, Sq. FI, Stage VIII C, Phase xviii, excavators uncovered the remains of five infant crania placed in a single pit (AT) beneath the center

TABLE 3
Early Natufian through MPPNB Adult and Adolescent Mortuary Practices

	Early Natufian	Late Natufian	PPNA		MPPNB		
	Hayonim Cave (<i>N</i> = 20:14 adolescents & adults)	Hayonim Cave (<i>N</i> = 16:8 adolescents & adults)	Hatoula (<i>N</i> = 4:3 adolescents & adults)	Jericho ^a (<i>N</i> = 189:85 adolescents & adults)	Netiv Hagdud (<i>N</i> = 26:12 adolescents & adults) ^b	Jericho ^a (<i>N</i> = 189:94 adolescents & adults)	'Ain Ghazal (<i>N</i> = 81:35 adolescents & adults)
Total No. and % of adolescents/adults:							
Primary burials	10 (71.4%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (33.3%) ^c	c. 48 (56.5%)	1 (8.3%) ^f	c. 53 (56.4%)	c. 12 (34.3%)
Secondary burials	4 (28.6%)	1 (12.5%)	0	??	0	??	??
Combined with skulls removed	0	6 (75%)	2 (66.6%)	c. 37 (43.5%)	11 (91.6%)	c. 41 (43.6%)	c. 23 (65.7%)
Individual skull/mandible	0	0	0	c. 11 (12.9%)	1 (8.3%)	c. 21 (51.2%) ^d	c. 5 (14.2%)
Grouped skulls/mandibles	0	6	0	0 ^e	3 (25.0%)	c. 38 (92.6%) ^e	c. 5 (14.2%)
Missing skulls ^f	0	-6 (75%)	-2 (66.6%)	c. -26 (30.6%)	-7 (58.3%)	c. +18 (43.9%) ^g	c. -31 (37.1%)

Note. Note changes in skull removal and caching.

^a Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl (1981) indicate that 491 individuals, including separate skulls and mandibles, were recovered from PPNA and PPNB contexts at Jericho. The revised numbers provided in this table are based on postcranial remains as an MNI count. This total has been multiplied by the percentage of adolescents and adults presented in Chart 6 to develop estimates for the relative mortuary practices. In light of the lack of detailed information on relative use of different kinds of mortuary practices at Jericho these estimates should be treated as provisional.

^b Following Belfer-Cohen et al. (1990), this combines skeleton H.12 and H.17.

^c Listed as a young adult.

^d Includes 10 mandibles listed by Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl (1981:433)

^e Based on previous arguments (Kuijt 1995), it is believed that of the 52 crania found in skull groups, all but 10 are from MPPNB pit features, some of which truncate PPNA deposits. All of the 10 PPNA skulls are of infants and are therefore not included in this list.

^f Calculated by subtracting the number of recovered skulls from number of recovered skeletons with cranial removal.

^g This estimate is interesting and can be interpreted one of two ways. Either it is usually high due to underestimation of the number of burials missing skulls or it is reflective of the relative frequency of skull caching in this area of Jericho.

of a plastered platform feature (Fig. 2). This plastered bin, argued by Kenyon to have been an altar of some form, appears to have been a dedicatory or foundation burial placed inside of circular structure AV, dated to 9200 ± 70 B.P. (BM-1789), at the end of the PPNA period. Archaeological field work at Qermez Dere, in northern Iraq, has also produced evidence of skull caching, in this case six human crania placed in the north-western half of a residential structure (Watkins et al. 1989:21). In his excavations of the Early Natufian layers of Erq el-Ahmar to the west of the Jordan Valley, Neuville (1951) uncovered the remains of seven individuals placed in a single feature, four adults and three children, six of whom were represented by only their crania. Viewed collectively, these data illustrate a pattern of collective removal, use, and later caching of skulls from marked graves as part of a secondary mortuary practice.

The PPNA Tower Burials at Jericho

Although there is considerable standardization in PPNA period mortuary practices, excavations of the tower at Jericho provide one very important and somewhat puzzling exception to the mortuary patterns observed at all other contemporary sites. Buried inside the lower passage landing of the large 8-m-high tower was a group of 12 skeletons, all interred with no secondary removal of their skulls, and including males and females, adults and children (Cornwall 1981). In fact, this is the only group of adults of the 254 PPNA period skeletons recovered at Jericho, or any other excavated PPNA period site, cached together in an unambiguous context and without cranial removal. The 12 bodies were pushed through a hole cut into wall CA on the east side of the tower, generally interred head first with the heads and torso on the fill at the base of the stairs and the legs and feet toward the entrance (Fig. 4). Kenyon (1981:32–34) argues that these were part of a single, mass burial interred in the

partially filled passage way (1.8 by .7 m). As outlined by Kenyon (1981), the tower and associated passageway appear to have been constructed at around 10,000 B.P., the tower entrance and passage were abandoned after some point around 9800–9600 B.P., and the burials occurred between approximately 9600 and 9500 B.P.

The architectural context of these burials, the number of individuals, and the absence of secondary mortuary treatment stand in stark contrast to the common mortuary practices at Jericho and all other PPNA sites, suggesting that traditional mortuary behaviors were bypassed due to some unusual circumstance. While these individuals may have been interred in mass due to some catastrophic death, it is puzzling that none of the crania were removed from the adults as part of a secondary mortuary practice as was commonly practiced at the time. One possibility is that the specific organization of these burials and the overall use of the tower (Bar-Yosef 1986) differed from other burials for symbolic or ritual reasons. Assuming that the stairs and passage were originally constructed for access to the top of the tower, which appears logical, then the blocking and sealing of the skeletons may well be linked to some form of ritual dedication. If nothing else, the placement of the skeletons in the passageway reflects the dynamic and changing use of architecture at the site, because blocking the passage required either the creation of a new method of accessing the top of tower or significant functional and ritual changes in the use of the tower.

The lack of secondary skull removal among these individuals and the grouping of these individuals together in a collective grave combine to challenge our model linking cranial removal to ancestor worship. Two possible explanations exist. This case may indicate either an intentional means of differentiating some individuals from others or, alternatively, that the ritual act of placing these individuals within the tower repli-

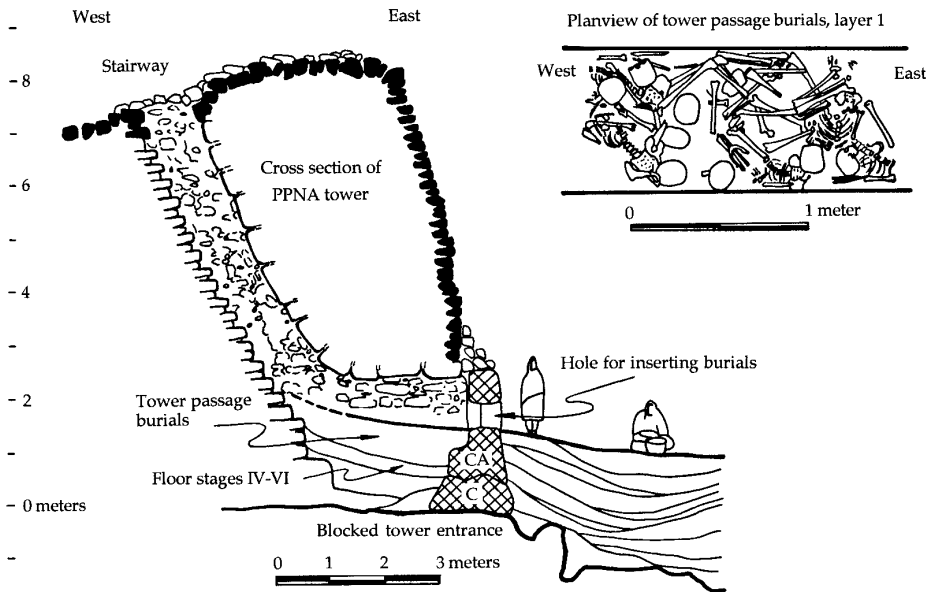


FIG. 4. Cross-section of the tower passage and plan view of layers one of the excavated burials (based on Kenyon 1981).

cated or mirrored the beliefs expressed through cranial removal and, therefore, symbolically replaced the need for actual cranial removal. Although this is subject to further research, on the basis of the physical location of the skeletons in the tower and lack of grave goods, I believe that the burial of these individuals was related to ritual use of the tower, perhaps as a means of delineating sacred space within the community by ritual practitioners, and that the burial of individuals in the tower probably symbolized the same beliefs as those expressed through cranial removal.

In sum, excavations at multiple PPNA period sites in the south-central Levant illustrate a highly standardized mortuary system involving primary burial and secondary skull removal, as well as some differences in the treatment of adults and children. After death, adults and young adults were buried individually as part of a primary mortuary practice, without grave goods and in very simple graves. Although very difficult to trace archaeologically, it appears that the lo-

cation of the skull was also noted at this time, possibly through the creation of small rock cairns in extramural locations or the placement of individual stones for intermural locations. The repeated recovery of articulated adult skeletons in anatomically correct positions illustrates that many, if not most, crania were removed after initial burial. After decay of soft tissue, community members in charge of ritual practices returned to the marked grave, excavated an area around the skull, removed the skull and sometimes the mandible, and then refilled the excavated pit. While very difficult to trace archaeologically, several ethnographic accounts suggest that removed skulls were cleaned and prepared for collective reburial as part of a community event. After completion, the skulls were reburied in extra- and intermural areas of the settlement, or perhaps even areas outside the settlement. Currently, archaeologists are unable to determine the spatial relationship between the original postcranial skeletons and the reburied skulls, although this is likely to provide

considerable insight into the rationale of mortuary practices and the beliefs that structure them. Similarly, excavations have yet to unequivocally determine if adults and children were systematically interred in different kinds of locations. Existing evidence from Jericho indicates that at times infant skeletons were placed in dedicatory contexts within individual houses, such as post foundations. In contrast, it appears that adult community members were interred in either intramural or extramural locations, but again, it is not clear if some of this patterning is fortuitous or planned.

LATE NATUFIAN AND PPNA PERIOD MORTUARY PRACTICES: CONTINUITY, SKULL REMOVAL, AND SOCIAL COHESION

How, then, do this examination of Prepottery Neolithic A period mortuary practices and the examination of ethnographic accounts of secondary mortuary practices help us to understand the development of and potential meanings for Late Natufian period mortuary practices? When viewed in combination with previous studies, similarities in Late Natufian and PPNA period mortuary patterns, specifically the lack of grave goods, the burial of individuals, and the appearance of cranial removal, can best be understood as the development and expansion of ritual practices that emphasized collective community beliefs and identity and the deliberate restriction of social differentiation as a stabilizing force during a period of considerable economic and social change. Specifically, I believe that Late Natufian mortuary patterns reflect the development of community-based mortuary rituals, such as the removal and reburial of skulls, that crosscut household and kin-group lines and emphasized group membership over the status of individuals. The Late Natufian absence of grave goods, lack of personal adornment, and similarity in grave preparation as a symbolic and physical attempt to limit the per-

ception or reality of social differentiation within and between households and individuals probably reflect a significant modification of Early Natufian beliefs and practices. In making this argument, it is important to briefly review some of the profound differences between mortuary practices of the Early Natufian and those of the Late Natufian and PPNA.

Individual and Community Identity in the Natufian and PPNA

In examining existing literature on the Early to Late Natufian period, one is struck by the fundamental shift in how individual and community identity was expressed through mortuary practices, specifically the control of burial goods and increased appearance of individual vs group graves of the Early Natufian. As noted by Belfer-Cohen (1995), this transition is characterized by the disappearance of shell and bone beads in graves of the Late Natufian. Grave goods, such as dentalium or bone beads and pendants or fox teeth, occur relatively frequently among Early Natufian burials, but very rarely if ever in Late Natufian and PPNA period occupation horizons; Byrd and Monahan cite 1 example out of 90 cases that may be due to mixed deposits (Belfer-Cohen 1995:10; Byrd and Monahan 1995:277). It is important to note, however, that dentalium shells and other beads continued to be used during the life of individuals (presumably as personal decoration or adornment), since these objects are frequently found individually mixed in with Late Natufian deposits. Regardless of whether one interprets the use of these objects as luxury goods or as a means of personal identification, the development of social prohibitions for the burial of these items with the dead was an intentional attempt to deemphasize social differences and identity.

A second important aspect of the Early to Late Natufian transition involves the widespread, but by no means comprehensive, transition from primary burial of individu-

als in group graves to individual primary burials. Although I agree that our current data indicate that there were differences in Early Natufian mortuary practices, which are probably linked to the development of variation in local community traditions (Belfer-Cohen 1995:15–16), it is my belief that by some point in the Late Natufian there probably was a comprehensive shift to the single interment of individuals. In making this argument I am assuming that our exceptions to this pattern are the result of either (1) a limited understanding of chronological transition from the Late Natufian to Final Natufian to the PPNA within the south-central Levant (e.g., 'Ain Mallaha and Nahal Oren) or (2) the impact of spatial limitations of individual settlements, such as caves, on the nature of burial practices (e.g., Hayonim Cave). In general, Late Natufian burials from El-Wad and Nahal Oren are typically single interments (Garrod and Bate 1937; Henry 1973; Stekelis and Yizraely 1963). The two obvious exceptions to this patterning are some of the Late Natufian burials from Hayonim Cave and 'Ain Mallaha. The situation at Hayonim Cave is complex; the interment of individuals occurred in a relatively small area between or under structures which continued to be utilized in the Late Natufian occupation. It is difficult to determine, however, to what degree the burial of these individuals in close proximity to each other was the result of limited usable area within the cave or the reflection of a formalized mortuary practice. Belfer-Cohen (1988b:306) points out that "stone-pipe" fragments, used as grave markers at Nahal Oren, were found in secondary contexts (Locs 4, 6, and 9) at Hayonim Cave. This reuse of materials, as well as the incorporation of primary and secondary burials in the same location, may suggest that some collective burials at Hayonim Cave combine different burial events that occurred during the same cultural historical period. It is also possible that current interpretations of the burial evidence from 'Ain Mallaha is problematic, albeit for differ-

ent reasons. As noted earlier, transition from the group to single interment also exists at 'Ain Mallaha, but it seems to occur in the Final rather than Late stage. Unfortunately, the lack of radiocarbon dating of the Recente (Late) and Finale (Final) occupation of Beds I and II does not allow us to reconstruct when this transition occurred.

Secondary Mortuary Practices and Skull Removal

Another important dimension of the Early to Late Natufian and PPNA transition was the increase in two different, yet potentially interrelated, mortuary practices: secondary burial of entire skeletons and secondary skull removal from primary burials. As noted before, the transition from the Early to Late Natufian was characterized, at least to some degree, by an increase in the occurrence of secondary mortuary practices, specifically the appearance of relatively incomplete and unarticulated burials. One possible explanation is that these practices were linked to changing settlement practices, a relationship that Hershkovitz and Gopher (1990) term "nomadism = secondary burials," such as individuals dying away from camp, being defleshed while away from the community, and being brought back for burial (see Byrd and Monahan 1995; Perrot 1966; Perrot and Ladiray 1988; Smith et al. 1984). Under this theoretical rubric, then, select secondary mortuary practices are viewed, either explicitly or implicitly, as being linked to changing subsistence resources or environmental conditions. Although there does appear to be evidence for increased settlement mobility in the Late/Final Natufian (see Valla 1987), and it is clearly possible that some relatively incomplete and unarticulated burials are from individuals who died away from their year-round home, I believe that the appearance of cranial removal was linked to changes in broader beliefs and ideology within Late Natufian communities rather than to settlement patterns (see also Carr 1995). At the moment, however, it is difficult to evaluate the merits of these alternative views due to a varia-

tion in definitions of secondary burials among scholars (Byrd and Monahan 1995:278; Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990:18–19), the limited number of radiocarbon dates directly associated with individual burials, and a surprising lack of published data reflecting how the nature of burial practices changed through time.

While the reason(s) for and timing of the first appearance of secondary mortuary practices continue to be a subject of debate, in many ways this question remains tangential as the skulls of individuals are being removed from both unarticulated relatively incomplete burials and primary burials in the Late Natufian at Hayonim Cave IV-V (Belfer-Cohen 1988b). Belfer-Cohen (1988b:300) notes “. . . in later burials (either primary or secondary) the skulls are usually absent (only in two out of 16 burials in seven graves were the skulls present).” This brings up the possibility that while some deaths occurred off site during the Late Natufian, the bodies were still being subjected to skull removal and, by extension, to the rituals and associated social beliefs of the community. The formalized removal of crania as part of a secondary mortuary ritual may in fact be linked to, or an expansion of, contemporaneous/previous Late Natufian practice of secondary burial practices, as they both involve the intentional removal, preparation, and ritual reburial of some or all skeletal remains. Removal of human skulls at Hayonim Cave IV-V (Belfer-Cohen 1988b) and 'Ain Mallaha Final (Perrot and Ladiray 1988) and the Final Natufian occupation at 'Iraq ed-Dubb (Kuijt 1994) indicate that skull removal was widely practiced after 11,000 radiocarbon years BP, if not before (e.g., the Early Natufian skull cache at Erq el Ahmar [Neuville 1951]) (Table 3). As noted earlier, by the PPNA, skull removal occurs with many, if not most, adults. Furthermore, mortuary practices of the later Middle Prepottery Neolithic B period (8500–c. 8000 B.P.) provide evidence for an elaboration of PPNA practices, including: (1) the increased and varied use of secondary mortuary ceremonies; (2) the caching of cultic ob-

jects, including groups of human skulls, large anthropomorphic figurines, and faunal remains in extramural and intermural locations; (3) the development of other expressions of ritual action, probably focused on the household, that involved caching of animal figurines; and (4) the deliberate standardization in the number of votive offerings in groups of three (see Byrd 1994; Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1991; Cauvin 1994; Kuijt 1995; Rollefson 1986; Rollefson et al. 1992 for more detailed discussion of these practices).² Moreover, the standardization in mortuary practices is echoed through the standardization of residential architecture with very little variation in shape, size, or organization of structures, all of which appear to be related to increased social control within communities (Banning and Byrd 1987; Byrd 1994; Kuijt 1995).

Mortuary Practices and the Crafting of Identities in the Natufian and PPNA

When viewed independently, some of the mortuary practices of the Late Natufian, specifically the burial of individuals as well as skull removal, can be interpreted as representing a renewed emphasis upon individuals within communities or the emphasis of specific kin lines over others. As an alternative I argue that when these behaviors are considered as part of an interrelated set of social practices, we can see multiple ways by which individuals and kin-groups were woven together within Late Natufian and PPNA communities through the manipulation of ritual and mortuary practices (Table 4).

Many authors have argued (see Bar-Yosef

² Interestingly, it appears that the standardization in numerical ordering in groups of three may also hold for the Late Natufian as well. Supporting this, Belfer-Cohen (1988b:300) reports the recovery of three mandibles, with a few axial bones, from Late Natufian graves V and XIV but no other mandible caches from either Early or Late Natufian contexts.

TABLE 4
Generalized Mortuary and Ritual Practices for the South-Central Levantine Early Natufian through Middle Prepottery Neolithic B Periods

Attribute	Early Natufian c. 12,500–11,500 B.P.	Late Natufian c. 11,500–10,300 B.P.	PPNA 10,300–9300 B.P.	MPPNB 9300–8500 B.P.
Adult group burials				
Primary (articulated) ^a	Common	Present?	Absent ^c	Absent ^d
Secondary (disarticulated) ^b	Common	Present?	Absent?	Absent
Adult individual burials				
Primary (articulated)	Present	Present	Absent/rare?	Common
Primary (skull removal)	Absent	Dominates ^e	Dominates	Dominates
Secondary (disarticulated)	Present	Present	Absent?	Absent?
Reburial of multiple crania	Absent	Rare	Rare	Common
Skull plastering	Absent	Absent	Absent	Rare
Grave goods	Common	Absent	Absent	Absent
Grave preparation				
Cobbles/blocks on or around skeleton	Common	Common	Absent	Absent
Simple earthen burial pit	Common	Common	Dominates	Dominates

^a Defined as relatively complete and articulated.
^b Defined as relatively incomplete and disarticulated.
^c Only one example is known, that being the PPNA tower passage burials at Jericho.
^d Kenyon reports the discovery of 30+ skeletons in the MPPNB levels in Square D. Although she considers this as some form of mass internment, it is unclear if this is a single mass internment or an area with an unusually high concentration of burials. Nothing similar is reported from other MPPNB excavations.
^e Skull removal is documented at Hayonim Cave IV-V (Belfer-Cohen 1988b) and possibly at 'Ain Mallaha Final (Perrot and Ladiray 1988:74).

and Belfer-Cohen 1991; Belfer-Cohen 1995; Byrd and Monahan 1995; Henry 1989), and I agree, that Early Natufian group graves are probably linked to kin-group distinctions. If we are correct, then the abandonment of these practices in the Late Natufian for unmarked individual graves and no burial goods may actually reflect the development, be it in reality or perception, of a means of limiting social differentiation among kin-groups and emphasizing the group by ensuring similar treatment of all community members. Furthermore, if there had been a shift in the importance of individuals over the collective group, or for that matter increased competition between kin lines in the Late Natufian, then it is hard to understand why we do not see an increased use of, rather than total abandonment of, personal adornment and other material means of distinguishing individuals from the community within Late Natufian burial contexts. Personal adornment and grave goods are two of the more important means by which social differentiation is symbolically and physically expressed (Carr 1995; O'Shea 1984). Paradoxically, our existing mortuary data, as well as those of Natufian mobiliary art (Belfer-Cohen 1991), indicate that there was an abandonment, or perhaps even a rejection, of material means commonly employed to differentially identify and remove individuals from the community in the Late Natufian and the PPNA.

Similarly, the appearance of secondary mortuary practices in general, and skull removal specifically, in the Late Natufian reflects a communal rather than an individual emphasis. Admittedly the process of skull removal can be used to differentially identify community members under select conditions, but if nothing else, the study of the social impact of secondary mortuary practices outlines that acts such as the collective removal and reburial of crania facilitate increased contact and connections between and across household and kin lines. In the case of the PPNA and MPPNB, and possibly

in the Late Natufian, it appears that skulls and anthropomorphic figurines were cached collectively, often in groups of 3, as a means of symbolically and physically reiterating common themes which created a focus on collective ancestors and emphasized a shared identity and common membership with the community (Kuijt 1995). Extending this argument, I believe that the initiation of cranial removal in the Late Natufian was intentional, was preplanned, and provided a means by which community social interrelationships, beliefs, and values were reaffirmed in a way that crosscut kin and household lines. Although the ultimate reason for this transition is subject to debate, I suspect that these social actions developed out of the desire to maintain household and community solidarity by physically and symbolically minimizing real and perceived differences within communities and to provide an important stabilizing force within communities during a period of significant economic change.

I am not suggesting that no variation existed in mortuary practices between the Late Natufian and PPNA periods or within individual communities. Rather, this overall trajectory occurred on a broad regional scale and mortuary variation is at least partially linked to the physical location of settlements and our limited control of chronology within and between settlements, and that these changes should be viewed within the context of increasing standardization and sharing in household and community beliefs and ideology through the Late Natufian and PPNA periods. Although expanded research is needed, it is quite likely that at least some variation in mortuary practices between the Natufian and the PPNA was linked to a changing scale of human occupation and the geographical location of settlements. It is possible, for example, that the density of individuals buried within Late Natufian communities was higher than that within the PPNA period, although the placement and number of burials may be linked to the loca-

tion and nature of the broader settlement. Many Natufian occupations were located inside or in front of caves (El Wad, Hayonim, and 'Iraq ed-Dubb) and contained limited horizontal space for burials, compared to PPNA period communities situated on alluvial fans with few physical limitations as to where individuals were buried. One possible difference between mortuary practices for these periods is the degree to which these practices were standardized and employed. In comparison to some of our Natufian burial data, there appears to be a greater degree of standardization in PPNA mortuary practices within and between communities. At Netiv Hagdud, for example, all adult individuals recovered in excavation were subjected to secondary cranial removal (Bar-Yosef et al. 1991), a pattern seen at other PPNA settlements. The clearness of this patterning, however, may reflect sample size rather than past mortuary practices. On the whole, however, archaeological studies at individual Late Natufian and PPNA period settlements, or at the regional scale, such as those of Byrd and Monahan (1995) and Belfer-Cohen (1995), draw increasing attention to the existence of considerable continuity in mortuary practices through time.

DISCUSSION

Expanding upon earlier works on the Late Natufian and PPNA periods (Bar-Yosef 1991; Byrd 1994; Cauvin 1994; Kuijt 1995), I argue that to understand the possible links between these periods we must first consider what kinds of beliefs and values were physically and symbolically expressed through mortuary and ritual systems. Although many Levantine prehistorians recognize a degree of similarity in mortuary practices and architectural systems between the Late Natufian and PPNA periods, general overviews of this transition, for example, from introductory textbooks, often deemphasize these data in contrast to perceived and real differences in subsistence practices, chipped and ground stone tool tech-

nology, settlement systems, and the long-distance exchange of goods. One, but by no means the only, interpretation of the Late Natufian and PPNA envisions mortuary practices as a reflection of the development of a series of ritual events organized for the veneration or worshipping of ancestors while simultaneously serving to reaffirm community identity and egalitarian beliefs. This belief system was materially expressed through: (1) the control and restriction of the display of social differences (lack of grave goods, homogeneous grave construction, and individual burials) and/or (2) the development of mortuary rituals that emphasize a community identity and a shared ancestor (cranial removal, secondary mortuary practices). Ultimately, when we look at these lines of evidence, we can see considerable data that argue for an overall continuity in mortuary practices and, by extension, cultural links and overall beliefs and ideology between these periods.

Not only are such shared mortuary rituals viewed as a part of a shared belief system that explains material similarities during the Natufian–Neolithic transition but perhaps more importantly, these behaviors should be recognized by anthropologists as a form of social action that holds implications for how personal relations were defined within these communities. Over the past few years a number of scholars (e.g., Belfer-Cohen 1995; Byrd and Monahan 1995), at times employing different data sets, have argued that there is no significant archaeological evidence for hereditary social inequality during the Late Natufian period. Expanding upon these works, the analysis presented here indicates that Late Natufian and PPNA communities adopted specific mortuary practices, including the lack of grave goods, the homogeneous grave preparation, the skull removal, and the focus on individual burials, to intentionally limit and control the accumulation of power and authority at the individual, kin-group, household, and community level. As outlined elsewhere (Kuijt 1995), considerable mortuary and architectural evidence from the later PPNA

and MPPNB periods indicates that social codes were expanded and increasingly standardized within the Levantine region to reinforce a shared community ethos and limit the development of social inequality. When considering Early and Late Natufian practices from the lenses of the PPNA and MPPNB, I believe that the genesis of Late Natufian mortuary and ritual practices is best explained as a system of social codes for limiting the development and centralization of power and authority within early agricultural communities.

This reconstruction emphasizes a number of interesting implications for our anthropological and archaeological understanding of the relationships among emerging hierarchy, community relations, and human social evolution. First, this interpretation suggests that the Late Natufian was characterized by the development of a series of elaborate social controls, materially expressed through mortuary practices and ritual, that brought about the abandonment of select Early Natufian social practices. One major aspect of this process was an increased emphasis on broader community membership over that of the individual as a means of dealing with potentially fissive social, environmental, and economic changes. Second, material continuity in many aspects of mortuary and ritual practices indicates that some of the associated beliefs and values continued, or were expanded, in the Neolithic period. While these beliefs and values were not static, I believe that both the geographical spread and the temporal stability of many aspects of cultural practices shared among the Late Natufian, PPNA, and perhaps even the MPPNB collectively outline a pattern of cultural continuity.

This reconstruction of Late Natufian society also reflects the social conditions under which food production first occurred in the south-central Levant. Data presented in this essay indicate that the transition toward food production and population aggregation in the Late Natufian and PPNA was one in which elaborate attempts were made to maintain a shared identity by individuals, households,

and kin-groups. It was, in short, a period in which egalitarian beliefs were further expanded through social means to deemphasize social, economic, and environmental changes that threatened the status quo. In this context, if left uncontrolled, the development of hierarchy and food production as commonly articulated by anthropologists was probably seen as threatening to the social cohesion of the community. Furthermore, I believe that it was this perceived threat to the status quo and fear of loss of authority by one household to that of another, a constant fear expressed within any egalitarian based group of people, that reinforced existing codes and led to the development of new, egalitarian social codes. The appearance of food surpluses in the PPNA may not have provided the opportunity for political and economic usurpation among the few; rather, it would have necessitated the social development of elaborate codes of behavior to ensure equal, be it real or perceived, access to resources, prestige, and authority across household and kin-lines. Ultimately, if we as a group of researchers are to understand the social context of the Natufian to Neolithic transition, it will be necessary to expand upon existing interpretations by examining how ritual and social actions were actively employed to balance dimensions of equality and inequality and to maintain the household unit during a period of dramatic and potentially sudden demographic, environmental, and social changes. While a detailed examination of these arguments is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, this present study and other critical reevaluations of arguments of how formalized social inequality first appeared in the Natufian period collectively outline the opportunity that anthropologists and archaeologists now have to move beyond the labeling of social systems to systematically exploring the nature of and variation within Natufian and Neolithic social systems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was directly and indirectly supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

of Canada (Grants 753-91-0218 and 756-95-0073); the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University; the Peabody Museum, Harvard University; the Mellon Foundation; the National Science Foundation (Grant 91-12725); the American Schools of Oriental Research; the British Institute in Amman for Archaeology and History; a Frederick Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard University; and most recently, the Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley. This study would not have been possible without the kindness and assistance of W. Lancaster, P. Watson, A. McQuitty, A. Gopher, A. Belfer-Cohen, I. Gilead, B. Byrd, G. Rollefson, and E. B. Banning. While this was derived from work conducted in the course of my dissertation research, a much needed postdoctoral research position at the Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley has provided the opportunity to expand upon this previous work. Discussions with and critical editorial comments by Ofer Bar-Yosef, Brian Byrd, Anna Belfer-Cohen, Rosemary Joyce, Bob Preucel, John O'Shea, one anonymous reviewer, and, most of all, Meredith Chesson have been crucial to the development of this paper. I thank John O'Shea and Brian Byrd for pushing me to address the broader implications of these ideas. Although they did not agree with some of the concepts and interpretations presented in this paper, the constructive criticism, willingness to share information, and patience of all of these individuals have immeasurably improved the clarity and organization of this work.

This article is dedicated to my mother, Jean D. Taylor. In the process of educating a very diverse and independent brood at home, Jean single-handedly provided us with the timeless gift of an education based on what we were interested in, rather than material mandated by the Alberta school system. If nothing else, time has made me aware of the extent of your sacrifice over these years, the value of the gift that you provided us, and the important ways in which you have shaped my life and education.

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