

In Centro

Collected Papers
Volume II

Memory

Editors:
Guy D. Stiebel
Doron Ben-Ami
Amir Gorzalczany
Yotam Tepper
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Central Region



TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology

The Jacob M. Alkow Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures

The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Archaeology

The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities

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Plastered Skulls, “Memory” and Social Fabric in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Southern Levant

Ianir Milevski | Israel Antiquities Authority

Introduction

This paper suggests that the plastering of skulls in the southern Levant and mortuary practices of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic are interwoven. They should therefore be interpreted in the framework of the social fabric of the Neolithic and within the process of what Gordon Childe (1942) once called the “Neolithic Revolution.” Furthermore, this phenomenon appears to be part of a process of “social memory,” understood following Ruth M. Van Dyke and Susan E. Alcock (2003: 2) as a variable phenomenon that depends on class, ethnicity, gender, religion beliefs and other factors, in the framework of social conflicts in ancient societies.

Archaeologists have understood materialized memory in the archaeological record in various ways. The primary domains include monuments; places; treatment of the dead; ritual practices and senses; the recent and contemporary past; and forgetting and erasure (Van Dyke 2019). The discussion here focuses on memory while also analyzing the disposal of the dead in the framework of

* I am indebted to the organizers of the conference that led to this volume and the paper published here. Thanks are also extended to my colleagues Hamoudi Khalaily and Nimrod Getzov, with whom I excavated the site of Yiftaḥel, which gave me inspiration to research the burial customs of the southern Levant in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period. Illustrations from Yiftaḥel are courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

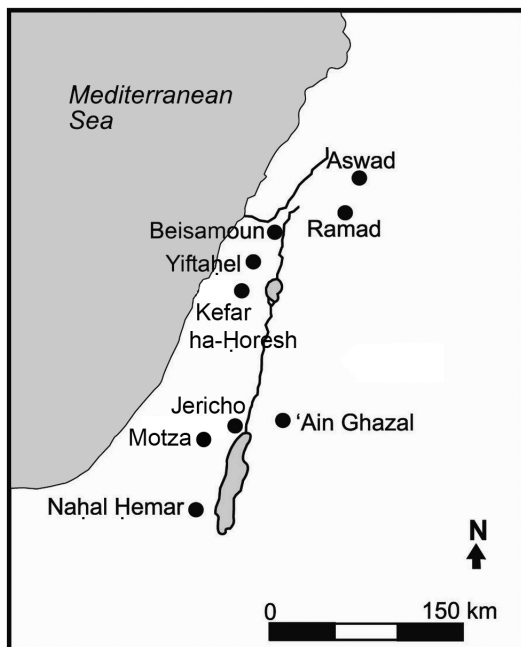


Fig. 1: Map of the Levant showing the main sites mentioned in the text

the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the southern Levant, including the plastering of skulls. In addition to the data previously available on plastered skulls, this study also includes the finds from the site of Yiftahel in the Lower Galilee (Milevski *et al.* 2008; Slon *et al.* 2014). The finds and social processes presented here are mainly related to the southern Levant, although some references to the northern Levant and other regions of the Near East are also addressed (Fig. 1).

The Neolithic Revolution, as almost scholars agree, generally replaced the hunter-gatherer mode of production and lifestyle, beginning with the domestication of plants and agriculture and followed by the domestication of animals and herding. It seems that, following Childe (1936; 1942), labor division was the result of the Neolithic/Agricultural Revolution, producing a social division that probably influenced the different ways people accessed lands, tools and livestock.

Recently, Yosef Garfinkel (2014: 156) denied that the plastered skulls phenomenon of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (henceforth PPN) B represent an ancestor cult, a fertility cult or a regeneration cult.¹ He further suggested that the ceremony of removing and plastering the skulls could have served as verification of rights to lands and territories both in competition within the community and in conflict with other communities.

The Neolithic Social Fabric

Marion Benz, Hans Georg Gebel and Trevor Watkins (2017) have suggested that the establishment of the social order of the Neolithic period relied on establishing claims to certain commodities for the exclusive exploitation by certain segments of the society, leading to the establishment of corporate kinship groups based on descent. They suggested that unilinear descent groups were the most effective means of maintaining social order during the threat of warfare and intensive competition for resources. A notable outcome of the emergence of unilinear corporate groups was manifest inequality in terms of what has been described as “inalienable possessions”; these include both physical assets as well as social entities such as names, myths, ceremonies and other intangible goods.

It has been suggested that Neolithic sites in the Levant exhibit long-term formal and functional continuity. While the architecture of houses in the PPNA was mainly circular, the PPNB saw a change in space utilization, and houses became rectangular for millennia (Goring-Morris 2005). Noting this continuity, several ethnoarchaeological studies have examined relationships between

1 For the chronology of the southern Levantine Neolithic, this discussion follows the division by Bar-Yosef and Garfinkel (2008): Pre-Pottery Neolithic A = PPNA; Pre-Pottery Neolithic B = PPNB; Pre-Pottery Neolithic C = PPNC, 7,400–6,500 BCE; Early Pottery Neolithic (6,500–5,800 BCE); Pottery Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic (5,800–4,500 BCE); Late Chalcolithic (4,500–3,700 BCE); Early Bronze I–III (3,700–2,500 BCE).

Neolithic household social organization and the built environment, in both its PPN and PN phases in the Levant and Anatolia (Banning 2010; Watkins 2012).

Studies of household spaces have included gender division of tasks within the households (Tringham 1994). Gender and household themes have been investigated by Diane Bolger and Rita P. Wright for Neolithic societies (Wright 1996; Bolger and Wright 2013), with a specific emphasis on grinding and cooking (see also Molleson 2007). Wright (1996) concluded that the division between men's and women's activities increased through time, with women's tasks becoming related to household settings.

Household spaces should be understood as social spaces (see further below). These domestic spaces became more complex from the PPNA to the Late PPNB/PPNC, with many multi-storied structures, agglutinated or arranged in cellular plans with contiguous rooms. The "spatial syntax" in these sites documents increasing control (Banning 2010).

Property and Possession in the Neolithic Period

Property and possession are the relationship of the entire community to the world of things and the way to accede to the means of production (Marx 1993). But during the PPN, the pre-condition for everyone to accede to possession was the family and the community. It seems that in general, property was actually shared by the whole community or household in Neolithic society, although individual possession, such as tools, could have also existed.

Kinship groups form a version of social security for their members, a source of communal holdings for each person. The absence of this kind of corporate protection could lead to loss of the access to means of production in these Neolithic communities. It seems that changes present in the burial system of the PPN are also the result of the Agricultural Revolution.

In a few cases, anatomical research based on the study of teeth point to the existence of biological relationships among some of the analyzed individuals at Kefar ha-Ḥoresh (Alt *et al.* 2015). The researchers suggested that matrilineal

biological relationships may have played a role in burial practice. However, other individuals buried in the same location did not show biological relationships.

In recent years, further interpretations on Neolithic villages have been raised. For Benz and colleagues (Benz 2010; Benz and Bauer 2013; Benz, Gebel and Watkins 2017), the symbolic repertoires of Neolithic societies were consistent with communities at a liminal stage. In other words, the symbols and ideas of the PPN must be interpreted as signs of communities beginning to free themselves from natural mutability and from nature as the sole frame of communal space. Benz and Bauer (2013) also stressed the importance of symbolic devices as well as social and burial practices for the need to strengthen social networks in danger of disintegrating into conflicts in the transition between hunter-gather lifestyle and sedentism/agriculture. However, it must be clear that some elements of the "past" continue within the Neolithic, mainly in the treatment of the dead, i.e., in the ideological concept of life and death. This is one of the interesting cases where some periods contain elements from earlier societies, incorporating them despite substantial social and economic changes.

Burial System of the Southern Levantine Natufian Culture

It could rightly be sustained that the burial system of the PPN had begun previously in the Epi-Palaeolithic Natufian culture. This synthesis on the Natufian is based mainly in the work of Belfer-Cohen (1988), Bar-Yosef (1998) and Bocquentin (2003; Bocquentin, Kodus and Ortiz 2016). The Natufian population had graves in base camps and caves, both in the Natufian heartland as well as in smaller sites.

The pattern of body disposition in primary burials is supine, semiflexed or flexed, with various orientations of the head. The number of inhumations per grave may vary from single to multiple. Secondary burials were either isolated or mixed with primary burials. Secondary burials, more often in the Late than the Early Natufian, are interpreted as evidence of increased group mobility.

Children comprise about one-third of the dead, indicating a relatively high mortality rate.

A special type of mortuary practice is indicated by human and dog burials in two graves, one in Ain Mallaha and the other at Hayonim Terrace. According to Bar-Yosef (1998), these burials mark a departure from the Paleolithic vision of the natural world as a dichotomy between humans and wildlife (see further below).

Most important for the present discussion is that in several cases, skull removals were observed in the Late Natufian at Hayonim Cave, Naḥal Oren and Ain Mallaha (Eynan) (Bocquentin, Kodus and Ortiz 2016). At the el-Wad Terrace (Bar-Yosef 1998), the skull was also decorated to resemble the future decoration of the removed skulls from the PPNB. The past suggestion that differences in mortuary practices should be viewed as reflecting social hierarchy does not seem sustainable (see Belfer-Cohen 1991).

Most burials are single burials with no grave goods. Skull removal, a practice that began during the Late Natufian, was performed only on adults; child burials were left intact. One current interpretation views skull removal as evidence for the veneration of ancestors (Bar-Yosef 1998).

Neolithic Mortuary Practices of the Southern Levant

Skull removal continued during the PPNA, with sites in both the northern (e.g., Kanjou *et al.* 2013) and the southern Levant (Bocquentin, Kodus and Ortiz 2016). Detailed archaeological documentation of mortuary practices and the spatial and conceptual relationships between the dead and the living are now available for the southern Levant in the Neolithic period. Although there have been several new excavations in recent years, the point of departure for the present discussion is the excavations at Yiftaḥel (Khalaily *et al.* 2008; Milevski *et al.* 2008, Slon *et al.* 2014), which will be compared to data from other sites.

The variability of mortuary practices in the Neolithic has been treated by Bocquentin (2003) and Goring-Morris (2005). The Neolithic population

had graves in permanent sites. Stratigraphic indications from Beisamoun, Kefar ha-Horesh, Yiftaḥel, Jericho, Ain Ghazal, Abu Ghosh, Motza and others demonstrate that graves were dug in the dwellings under and close to the houses, i.e., within active households (Fig. 2). Graves were in pits, many of which were covered by new plaster layers. In several instances, limestone slabs covered the graves; graves were generally filled in with sediment. The pattern of body disposition in primary burials is supine, semiflexed or flexed, with the heads oriented in various directions. The number of inhumations per grave can vary between single and multiple. Some burials probably designate family groups, with children (Goring-Morris 2005). Secondary burials appear together with primary burials.

Sometimes, primary burials also appear with caches of skulls, as in Tell Aswad (Stordeur and Khawam 2007). Human bones appear above the occupational deposits, indicating that in Neolithic times, burials also occurred after the sites were abandoned, such as in Yiftaḥel Area C (HersHKovitz, Garfinkel and Arensburg 1986; Garfinkel *et al.* 2012: 13–35). Babies and children comprise a significant portion of the dead—17% at Yiftaḥel—probably indicating a relatively high mortality among unborn, infants and small children (Abramov 2018: 8, 70).

In general, animals are not buried with humans, but a special type of mortuary practice during the aceramic Neolithic is indicated by the burial of anatomical parts of animals, mainly *Bos primigenius* (aurochs), but also fox, wild capra and others (Horwitz and Goring-Morris 2004; Khalaily *et al.* 2008). This can be interpreted as marking the transition of human departure from wild species, still present in the Neolithic world, and the beginning of animal domestication. For example, a complete *Bos taurus* was found at 'En Zippori in Wadi Rabah levels (Milevski and Getzov 2014).

Several cases of skull removal were observed in PPNA (Bocquentin, Kodus and Ortiz 2016), but in the PPNB, a special part of burial practice was the decoration of the skull. Even so, some undecorated skulls are found in several contexts (see further below). Since only a few objects were found attached to



Fig. 2: Burial 5228 (Homo 4, adult, and Homo 5, child without skull) under the floor of Building 501, Yiftahel, looking northwest (courtesy of the IAA)

the skeletons, the suggestion that differences in mortuary practices reflect social hierarchy is difficult to prove from this point (again, see below).

The Plastered Skulls

Skull removal was performed on adults, both men and women, as well as children (Bocquentin, Kodas and Ortiz 2016). Skull caches were found in several sites as Tell Aswad (Stordeur 2003), Ain Ghazal (Rollefson, Kafafi and Simons 1999) in Jordan, Kefar ha-Ḥoresh (Goring-Morris *et al.* 1995) and Yiftaḥel (Milevski *et al.* 2008), and in some cases were not decorated.

The study of plastered skulls in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the southern Levant has evolved since the exemplars in Jericho were found; at the time, Kenyon (1981) suggested that they were related to an ancestor cult. Several theories and reconstructions were given on the meaning of these practices, including Bonogofsky (2003), Fletcher, Pearson and Ambers (2008) and Garfinkel (2014). Some classifications include the fact that in some skulls, eyes were depicted closed, as at Beisamoun (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973) and Kefar ha-Ḥoresh (Goring-Morris *et al.* 1995), while others were depicted open, as at Yiftaḥel and Ain Ghazal (Rollefson, Kafafi and Simons 1990) or Jericho (Strouhal 1973; Kenyon 1981). The appearance of ears or the lack thereof and a complete or a partial mask on the face could be additional criteria for classification of the skulls.

Yiftaḥel provided three skulls: one skull (Homo 2) completely decorated and two (Homos 1 and 3) only decorated in the orbits of the eyes (Fig. 3). We suggested elsewhere that this trio of skulls in this specific order (two male and one female) represents some kind of different social principles, but this is no longer certain. Over time, it has become clear that the practice extended to all ages and genders, including several sites of the (mainly mid-)PPNB, and not exclusively sites considered regional centers.

The phenomenon of plastered skulls was accompanied by other types of skull decoration, such as that from Naḥal Ḥemar (Yakar and Hershkovitz 1988)



Fig. 3: Plastered skulls from Yiftahel (Homo 1, 2 and 3, from left to right) at the lab of the Medicine School, Tel Aviv University

with a kind of hairstyle and masks that were probably designated to be part of a ceremony perhaps related to death (Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988: Fig. 15). Plaster statues as at Ain Ghazal (Rollefson, Kafafi and Simons 1990) could be a continuation of burial or ancestor cult practices, but this subject is beyond the scope of this paper.

The geographic limits of skull-plastering practice was established in the southern and central Levant, including the area of Damascus, mostly in the mid-PPNB (Stordeur and Khawam 2007). Skull removal appeared in PN Anatolia (Hodder 2005, Bonogofsky 2006, Özbek 2009), but explanation of this late phenomenon is also beyond the scope of this paper.

New interpretations have also been given for the decapitation and decoration of skulls, and even ethnographic interpretations based on the decapitation of the enemy in several parts of the world were given by Alain Testart (2008), but this interpretation does not fit the Levantine archaeological record.

Reconstructing the Burial Practices

Kuijt (2008) and Garfinkel (2014) have suggested an archaeological reconstruction of the burial practices including the removal and the decoration of skulls. We (Slon *et al.* 2014) have suggested a similar reconstruction based on the skulls from Yiftaḥel (see also Khalaily *et al.* 2008, Milevski *et al.* 2008) that takes all other examples into consideration. The steps in the burial, skull removal and decoration indicate:

1. Burial under the house floor, marking of the burial
2. Opening of the burial and removal of the skull
3. Storing of the skull(s)
4. Decoration of the skulls (see below)
5. Public exhibition of the skulls
6. Secondary burial of the skulls

Taking the case of Yiftaḥel, we try to understand all of the details in the plastering of the skulls in the framework of the different types of more than forty inhumations at the site (Milevski *et al.* 2008; Slon *et al.* 2014). According to the CT conducted on the skulls, we found that their bottoms were filled with plaster, which created a base for them (Fig. 4).²

This situation is similar to the skulls of Aswad (Stordeur and Khawam 2007) and Kosk Hoyuk (Özbek 2009). The meaning of these bases is that the skulls were put on places to stand and were probably on display. In some cases, such as Yiftaḥel (Milevski *et al.* 2008) and probably Motza (J. Vardi, personal communication), skulls were found above or near benches in these sites, a fact that strengthens the idea of exhibition prior to being put in caches and hidden in special places. Alternatively, it could be suggested that the skulls were placed on benches for the entire process of decoration.

2 In order to preserve the status of the skulls as they were found in the site, attached one to another, we decided to keep them together.

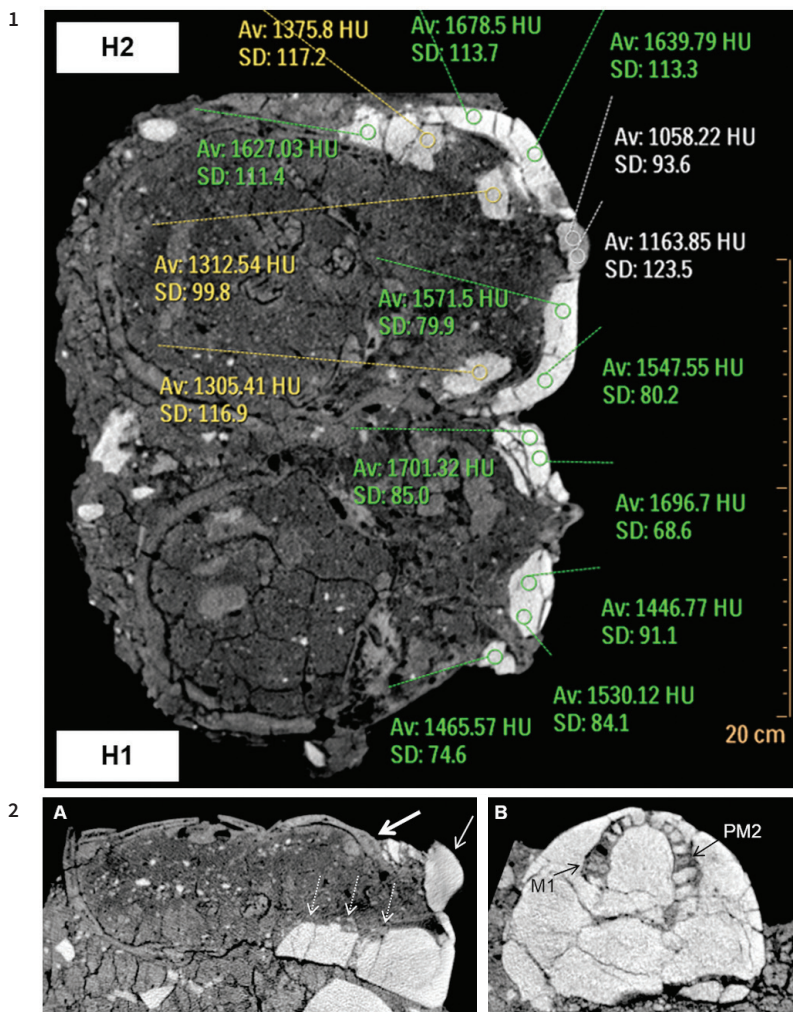


Fig. 4: CT on the plastered skulls from Yiftaḥel (adapted from Slon *et al.* 2014: Figs. 5 and 7); 1) scans of Homo 1 (lower half of figure) and Homo 2 (upper half of figure), showing results indicating the density of the plastered masks; 2) sagittal section (A) with plastered nose (thin arrow) ending at the level of the supraorbital ridge (thick arrow) and thick layer of plaster (dashed arrows) at the base of the skull, instead of the missing mandible; in the axial section at the level of the maxilla (B) the teeth are filled with plaster

At any rate, based on the skulls from Yiftaḥel, there seem to be several steps in the decoration process (Fig. 5):

1. Removing the skull (without the mandible)
2. Filling the base of the skull with plaster
3. Filling the orbits and other spaces with plaster
4. Making the plaster of the mask
5. Giving a face to the mask
6. Painting the mask and giving it a hairstyle

The Concept of “Burial Modes”

In a more ideological analysis, Kuijt (2001; 2008) has argued that mortuary rituals were organized by a series of ordering principles. These were based on

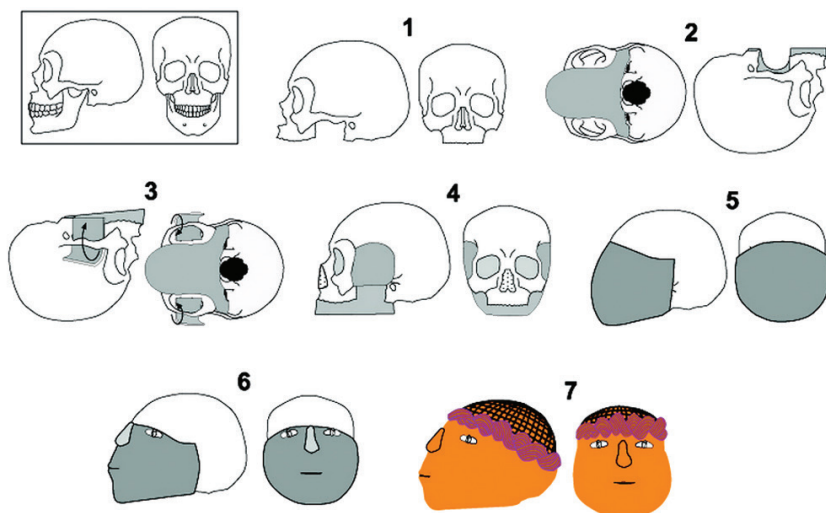


Fig. 5: Steps in the decoration of the skulls of Homo 2 from Yiftaḥel (adapted from Slon *et al.* 2014: Fig. 10, drawing by Anna Behar)

the age, and possibly status, of the deceased. The effect of gender on these principles is unknown, but it seems that gender, like age, played an important role in social differentiation in these Neolithic communities. However, Peterson (2002; 2010) and Wright (1996) have suggested that during the Neolithic period, male activities began to resemble the female pattern more closely, while activity patterns became more intense for both sexes. Several dimensions of regional mortuary practices were pointed out concerning the social impact of secondary mortuary practices and skull caching on community integration and cohesion.

Kuijt (2008) and Watkins (2012) argued that the development of specific ritual practices was linked to the need for maintaining existing household political, economic and social ties during times of social, resource and environmental stress as result of the changes undergone within the Neolithic communities. Watkins (2012) concluded that communal consciousness was kept alive through the manipulation of symbols for the individual and the community. Ceremony and performance are embedded in the manipulation of symbols and the way that ceremonies and rituals are repeatedly performed. For Watkins (2012: 154), based on the work of Assmann (1995), this is the key to understanding the nature of collective memory and sense of identity in the Neolithic communities.

Understanding burial practices within the social fabric of the Neolithic period is best illuminated through the concept of “burial modes” (see also Milevski 2019) (Fig. 6). Burial modes are a combination of burial customs and a society’s concept of the mode of production, i.e., the way that graves and human burial accord to cultural and ideological constraints (e.g., Alekshin 1983).

The mode of production of the aceramic Neolithic period could be a variant of what Marx (1993) defined as the “primitive” or “communal” mode of production and what other anthropologists such as Sahlins (1972: 82–92) defined as the domestic mode of production, albeit in a neo-evolutionary understanding. This mode of production, which could be understood as household social formation as previously described above, represents a formation in which the productive

Period	Settlements	Burial Mode	Burials
Natufian			
Pre-Pottery Neolithic	Houses Primary and secondary burials, skull removals	Household →	Burial within and around the houses
Pottery Neolithic/ Early Chalcolithic			
Ghassulian Chalcolithic	Villages Primary burials on site	Community →	Secondary burials outside the settlements
		Community →	
Early Bronze Age I	Villages		
Early Bronze Age II–III	Towns and villages	Social ranks →	Primary burials outside the settlements

Fig. 6: Chart of burial modes in the late prehistory of the southern Levant (adapted from Milevski 2019: Fig. 2)

unit is mainly the household, based in the extended family within the village (see further Wolf 1982).

While the burial mode of the Natufian graves is in abandoned houses, burials in the Neolithic are below the houses or attached to them. The Chalcolithic period displays a bimodal burial practice with primary burials in the settlement and collective secondary burials in caves or other places outside the settlements (Milevski 2019: 16–17). Since the Neolithic burial mode is based on households, this includes not only the graves within the houses but also the plastering and decoration of the skulls and all the ceremonies and the cycle including reburying them.

Discussion: “Memory” as Right to Inheritance

Discussion of the Neolithic ritual and mortuary practices reveals near-unanimous scholarly agreement that these were intentionally employed as means of consolidating community membership in the PPNB of the southern and central Levant, illustrating the importance that these practices played as vehicles for the suppression of conflicts among these communities. For Parker Pearson (1982), a sort of “social advertisement” existed in death ritual that expresses changing relations of domination and new social positions. In the present case, these occur with the consolidation of the agricultural communities of the PPNB.

In general, Kuijt’s (2008) reconstruction of the burial practices seems the most reasonable, as also indicated by the finds at Yiftaḥel. According to this interpretation, the inhabitants of Neolithic villages participated in public rituals. These interactions trespassed the various age boundaries as reflected in the attitudes toward the dead, which itself is evidence for the veneration of ancestors or village founders. From this, it appears that mortuary practices were not related to the individual, but to the individual as part of the household in the Neolithic village, since this burial mode continued to dominate the Levant even in Pottery Neolithic times; skull removal as part of these household burial practices even occurred in some Anatolian sites during this period (Hodder 2005, Özbek 2009). Therefore, in this case, “memory” is the “memory” of the first settlers’ establishment of the Neolithic villages and the right to inheritance within the households and villages.

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