

Burial Practices in Neolithic Greece and Anatolia

PREFACE

The aim of this study is the collection of data referring to burial practices of the Neolithic in Greece, Anatolia and Cyprus. These are often fragmentary or very limited, yet they serve as the base of our knowledge of how death was conceived by the first settlers and eventually how their thought had evolved. Neolithic burial practices originate from analogous customs of the Paleolithic and the Mesolithic, to which this study refers whenever necessary.

The geographical limits of the study include the frontiers of the modern Greek State, since no data actually exist further than South Macedonia while they are absent from the region of Thrace as well. In Anatolia an imaginary line has been traced, starting from the sea and the Taurus mountain chain, passing at the East by the sources of Halys River and ending to the Pontic Mountains and the Black Sea, thus separating the Anatolian peninsula from the rest of Asia. It has been judged that Cyprus should be included in the Anatolian ensemble, first because of its geographic coordinates and then for its verified contacts with Anatolia in other cultural fields.

The text is completed by geographical maps, chronological tables, tables of existing data and illustrations. Chronology is discussed in a special chapter.

Difficulty or sometimes impossibility to make integral statistics is due to the fact that bibliography is often poor in furnishing important information.

The indication of the limits of our knowledge in what concerns certain domains has been considered quite important, as well as of some thoughts resulting from the practical and eventually metaphysical perception of death in the Neolithic. Our typology aims to be a modest attempt towards the institution of a method for the isolation of certain essential points rather than for the establishment of any theory.

There has always been a tendency among archaeologists to look for influences between sites or regions. However there is great difficulty to identify an “intrusive” culture in a continental site where cultural frontiers are often not well defined, in opposition to an island culture, the relative isolation of which permits a better perception of its development.

Ethnographic comparisons do not constitute a separate chapter in the present study, because the latter aims principally to furnishing archaeological data than creating an illusionary revival of the past.

INTRODUCTION

The present study on burial practices in the Aegean region, Anatolia and Cyprus covers about five thousands of years, i.e. it spans from 8000 to 3000 B.C. and is tightly connected to their evolution in the Near East and the Balkans. As early as the 9th mill. B.C., a proto-Neolithic culture appeared in the Near East which was developed during the next millennium. During the 7th mill. B.C., many communities settled from South East Europe to the end of the central Asian desert and from Caucasus Mountains to South Palestine. Data from the next two millennia show that Neolithic cultures expanded to Central Europe and that metallurgy and painted pottery appeared in the Near East, all witnessing individuality among early communities.

Burial customs reflect a very important aspect of man's activities and social behaviour through time, since death has always been crucial regarding human group potential, especially in Prehistory. Those small communities lied upon personal work and the death of any of their members troubled the pace of everyday activities. Since the real causes of death were not understood by prehistoric people, the latter reacted in ways which -although varying from one region to another- had some points in common. Burial practices were (and still are) the result of that reaction to death; and their study permits us to intrude in human mind and follow the development of its maturity, which was eventually the cause of a belief in some kind of transcend to another state through death. In other words, mental evolution possibly created the first elements which evolved to a primitive religion.

During the Paleolithic and the Mesolithic and despite of the limited archaeological funerary data, especially those related to the early phases, man reacted similarly from England and France to the Crimean and the Mt Carmel: he inhumed his dead inside the caves where he lived. It seems that he considered death as a kind of temporary sleep and that the individual would be in need of food just upon awakening. Henceforth the corpse was not completely inhumed but placed in shallow shafts around the hearth, covered with some stones, head resting on a larger stone. Pieces of meat, silex tools (axes, scrapers), toilet articles (ochre) and jewels completed the list. In Mallaha, the hand of a skeleton was placed on that of an animal identified as a canis. In the exceptional case of Shanidar Cave /Iraq, the dead body was covered by flowers. However, it is uncertain whether some cases of Late Paleolithic human skulls found together were really intentional deposits, since their conservation might have been due to physical/chemical causes or to good climatic conditions.

On the other hand, burnt bones of at least seventy five Neolithic individuals (females in majority) have been found in Kebara Cave /Palestine. It seemed that they had been incinerated after inhumation or exposition and after decomposition of their flesh. That shows that though inhumation predominated, other ways of dispensing a dead body existed as well and that Neolithic incinerations had very old ancestors.

Given that only part of the data has been included in final publications up to now, the present study has been based for the most on preliminary reports and notes. So data give a modest picture of the evolution of burial customs. An archaeologist can well measure and classify man's relics; but it is very difficult for him -rather impossible- to classify human behaviour, predict man's actions in the future or imagine his reactions in the past. Besides, he cannot formulate any global interpretational theory with

limited evidence in what concerns the philosophical aspect of the phenomena. Consequently, there is a great uncertainty about the spiritual needs of man, his thought, his magic, his religion and his burial practices. It seems though that primitive man, especially Neanderthalian man, did not reject the dead and gave serious thought on the situation of death.

Contrary to rich mortuary data from Paleolithic and Mesolithic Europe, Near East and North Africa, Greece and Anatolia have been poor in producing relative evidence. In Greece, the remains of a Homo Erectus (Archanthropus) dating from about 700.000 years B.C. found in Petralona Cave in Chalkidiki, together with traces of fire in the same cave are witnesses of a Paleolithic burial. The skull was hanging at 1,5 m. above ground level, attached to a stalactite and under a rock in the form of a natural niche. The skeleton was contracted and placed on its right side.

Mesolithic burials are known from Franchthi Cave in Argolis: a man and a woman in contracted position were found in shallow shafts dug into the ground of the cave. One of them was covered by small stones, his head having a South orientation, face to the East.

Site prospection in Maroula site, Kythnos, produced a kind of Mesolithic "cemetery": four ochre burials have been found, one of which was complete including a contracted skeleton in a shaft, head to the South, face to the West, bearing a large stone on the chest. The incomplete burials included a complete skeleton and two others which belonged (according to the excavator) to secondary burials.

It is obvious that no conclusions can be made on burial customs in Mesolithic Greece, as it was also the case for the Paleolithic in the same area. On the contrary, Neolithic gives much more evidence on the issue.

In Late Paleolithic Anatolia, data are analogous and contracted ochre burials were found as well. Fragmentary Middle Paleolithic skeletons were found in the caves of Karain and Magiaracik, while a Mesolithic rock sheld in Kumbucagi near Beldibi produced small skull fragments of a fossilized Homo Sapiens.

In Mesolithic Beldibi were unearthed fragments of a human skull bearing traces of combustion, together with animal bones and silex tools. The case of combustion was an isolated one and if it were a burial (which is well uncertain) it would have been an exception in the generalized Epipaleolithic practice of inhumation.

Cyprus did not produce any Paleolithic or Mesolithic burial.

The present study is based on absolute chronology based on C14 half life proposed by Libby (5568 +/- 30), but it refers also to the relative chronology instituted by stratigraphy whenever possible. Dating has been based mainly on the studies of Mellaart, Tringham and Theocharis but on others as well. Some modifications have been made in regard to the differentiation between Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic because during the Chalcolithic (at least during its early phase) metals were used as minerals or as simple objects (often as ornaments) without having any impact on the life of the communities. On the other hand, the Early Chalcolithic in Anatolia has lost its meaning since metal objects have been used as early as the 8th mill. in certain

regions of the Near East. Therefore in the present study Chalcolithic has been integrated to Late Neolithic.

It must be noticed that certain Anatolian sites dated to the Late Chalcolithic, such as Alisar Huyuk and Kusura, presented burial rites which differed completely from the known Neolithic or even Chalcolithic ones, and resembled more to those of the Early Bronze Age. These rites are mentioned without being discussed or compared.

As one can see, Anatolia and the Near East had a cultural evolution which preceded that of Greece and happened much earlier than in the Northern Balkans. I have tried to study the burial customs of sites belonging to the same cultural level (in spite of any chronological difference among them) with the aim of tracing the evolution of human reaction to death, of course always taking into account any eventual influences among cultures. The study ends in the Final Chalcolithic, since mortuary practices did not really change before the Bronze Age. Chalcolithic sites do not seem to have different customs from Late Neolithic ones; therefore they have been incorporated to the Neolithic.

Cyprus, discussed separately, has its own chronology which presents many difficulties, due to the chronological gap between the Aceramic (period I) and the Ceramic (period II). It seems to be culturally closer to Anatolia, therefore it has been studied parallel to the latter.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One of the issues related to sedentary life was man's attitude towards death and the disposal of the dead. The problem was very serious since it involved hygiene of the settlement environment. Man could not any more abandon dead corpses as he did when he was a nomad hunter. He had to confront all the consequences of decayed bodies while living in a close proximity. Because of that he tried to find solutions in order to prevent being attacked by fatal diseases.

The evolution of burial customs in Greece, Anatolia and Cyprus was analogous to that of the Balkans and the Near East in what concerned the essential points. However, since chronology of the Neolithic (which reflected basic changes in the ways of life) differs from one place to another, the evolution of the correspondent burial practices evidently did not take place at the same time in terms of absolute chronology. A LN site in the Near East would not forcedly be synchronous to a LN site in Anatolia, and so on. That difference becomes serious according to the distance between sites. Besides, burials in Greece are attributed to four distinct chronological Neolithic periods, while in Anatolia burials by period are limited in number with the exception of Catal Huyuk, which though is almost the only representative for the Late Neolithic. Middle Neolithic is completely absent. The same happens with Cyprus, where Aceramic Khirokitia is almost the only EN representative in the island, while there is a marked absence of Ancient and Middle Neolithic. Because of the above divergences in dating, burial customs are studied in respect of the dating of each particular area, given that their study is tightly connected to human mental evolution and knowledge which led to the experience of similar situations at different times.

The Aceramic Hacilar cemetery in Anatolia led to general presumptions about the existence of cemeteries next to Aceramic settlements of Anatolia. In fact, these suppositions were due to the absence of intra-settlement burials. During the Early up to the beginning of the Middle Neolithic, graves were found almost always inside settlements. During the Ancient Neolithic, burials of Hacilar and Catal Huyuk were found in the broader settlement areas, while children and infants seem to have been always inhumed inside the houses themselves during all Neolithic periods. Burials outside habitation zones were effectuated from the Late Neolithic onwards in all regions.

Cases of isolated burials could be found in settlements, while burials outside them were always grouped in cemeteries. That grouping does not imply forcedly any fear of the dead. Human soul and the deriving burial customs cannot change to the point of creating alternative feeling situations of fear and no fear of the dead at the same place.

It rather seems that those cemeteries were created for reasons of hygiene and this witnesses a social structure in which each neolithic group was submitted to almost precise rules. Children and infants continued to be buried inside settlements - as mentioned above- but it seems that no particular attention was given to them. That implies that they were considered either good or unimportant, but in both cases inoffensive.

Data on grave orientation is limited, yet it seems that there was no regularity, with the exception of the cases of Catal Huyuk (EN) and Kephala (LN). Undoubtedly ground surface played an important role in grave (or body) orientation.

The oldest grave type was the simple shaft and its variations. Shafts were dug in the ground, had irregular shapes and small dimensions (they measured less than the average height of an adult, i.e. about one metre). That type resulted by the facility of digging in connection with the high percentage of mortality during the Neolithic. In certain cases, stones of various sizes put on or around shafts produced more carefully made shafts but real built tombs as the cists appeared only from the Late Neolithic onwards in Greece and Anatolia. However, it is not known whether a carefully made tomb witnessed the will to differentiate it from others. Sometimes infants were buried inside vases, that practice continuing throughout the whole Neolithic up to the Bronze Age in different times and areas.

Old Paleolithic traditions were reflected in the custom of placing a stone pillow under the head of the dead or a larger stone / grind mill on his corps. This custom, characteristic of Cyprus, first appeared in Aceramic Greece and was generalized in later periods.

Inhumation was the principal burial custom from Europe and the Balkans to Anatolia and the Near East. Cases of incineration existed throughout the Neolithic in Greece and Anatolia and rarely in the Northern Balkans and the Near East but were for the most uncertain.

Cremation burial was present in Greece as early as the Ancient Neolithic, a fact which makes this practice an indigenous ancestor of the later cremation burials of Mycenaean

and Geometrical times. That practice may have been developed separately in different regions without any influence from one to another, and may eventually have been caused by unknown practical reasons, since nothing distinguishes cremation from inhumation burials. Besides, one must not exclude the possibility of cremation burials in the Paleolithic and the Aceramic Neolithic, which would be made along with inhumations.

Burials in the Aegean were principally primary and contained one individual. The same happened in Anatolia with the exception of AN Catal Huyuk where secondary multiple burials were the rule. There as in other places too, the number of individual burials seems to increase with time. Contrary to the Greece and Cyprus where multiple burials were doubtful, the latter were well presented in Anatolia and the Near East from the Mesolithic onwards. That Mesolithic practice seems to have existed in a lesser extent in the Balkans and affected in some way Middle and Late Neolithic practices in the area. Cremations were possibly imposed by reasons of hygiene or by shortage of space for new inhumations. J. Perrot assumed that secondary burials contained those who died away from their homeland and had been temporarily inhumed. This seems quite reasonable and is very probable, at least for the interpretation of early burials of that kind.

In any case, secondary burials were of Anatolian / Near East origin. Anatolia had established contacts with Aceramic Palestine and was the natural link to the Aegean. Isolated skulls were also of Near Eastern origin. They were found in large numbers in Palestine, but also in Greece (EN Prodromos, LN Alepotrypa) and the Balkans (Lepenski Vir II, Vlassak I). They are witnesses of complex practices and many hypotheses (often exaggerated or contradictory) have been formulated by archaeologists. I believe that skulls were collected among the members of a Neolithic society independently of their social rank. The custom stemmed from the double desire to keep the most important (and most expressive) part of the body intact by making less effort, since the same grave was re-used. The head might be the symbol of the individual itself, and could be kept in the houses or shrines and worshiped as an intact body. That could explain eventually the skull's modelling and painting as an attempt to create an illusion of life by giving to it the natural aspect of a living head. The figurine- like supports of the skulls could be miniatures of the bodies, serving to the prevalence of the heads.

Partial burials were of two types: a) burials of decapitated bodies and b) burials of memberless bodies. The first case is connected to the skull collection discussed above. The second rather implies fear of the dead. This hypothesis could be sustained by the stances of some corpses and the way they were inhumed (i.e. on the belly, distorted, having arms tight-up, bearing large heavy stones on the chest, being inside reversed funerary urns, etc.). That fear, if existing, seems to regard some members of the community only. Beliefs of that kind have survived up to present as it is revealed by Ethnography.

The bodies and the heads had not a steady orientation in any of the areas discussed here. However, there could be a dominating orientation in a particular site, regardless of the isolation of the burials or their grouping in a cemetery.

The head often lied on a stone pillow, thus continuing similar Paleolithic practices,

but this applied only to EN/LN Greece and LN Cyprus.

In all areas, the body was placed on the side (right or left), bended knees or legs brought up to the chest in various degrees of flexion (“hocker”). Some exceptions to the rule are bodies with extended legs (except for Greece), but also positions on the back, on the belly or on the back with bended knees. Those exceptions may be seen mainly in the MN and LN Balkans, where there have been unearthed considerable numbers of bodies on their back or their belly with outstretched legs.

The “hocker” position has been largely preoccupied many scholars, who discussed its possible connection to prehistoric religious beliefs, involving life after death. According to one of those hypotheses, the dead had this position because they were thought to be sleeping; according to another, they were tight-up for fear they might be reincarnated and harm the living community. A third hypothesis compared the position to that of a fetus inside the mother’s belly and proposed that it aimed to give to the dead a fetal security, permitting their rebirth in another world. “Hockers” laying on their back were also explained as having a position of adornment: if seen from the side they gave the impression that they laid on their knees, their folded members having the various positions of praying. The dead would have been represented as a humiliated individual, praying to acquire the benediction of the gods. To my opinion, contracted position was rather an attempt to make less effort and save human strength together with saving ground space in a society with high mortality rates.

Nevertheless, some rare cases of sitting individuals inhumed in a deep vertical shaft, might be expressions of the desire to mark those specific graves, which possibly belonged to respectful members of the community.

Red ochre powdering of the corpses already well known from the Late Paleolithic, might symbolize blood colour-therefore life. It was a common LN practice in the North-East Balkans, Near East and the Transcaspian region. On the contrary, it did not exist in Greece and Cyprus, while in Anatolia it was represented only in AN Catal Huyuk. To the same symbolism were connected eventually the “red pottery sherds” probably placed intentionally near or inside the funerary vases of LN Plateia Magoula Zarkou in Greece.

It is obvious that the principle Paleolithic sang symbol (i.e. the ochre) was assimilated and used as a symbol by Neolithic farmers as well. However, it is difficult to explain the introduction of other colours which were neither live nor often used. I refer to Catal Huyuk Anatolia, where there was an additional custom of painting the bones of some secondary burial skeletons in blue, green or grey, that seeming quite unique in the area.

As occurred in the Paleolithic, most of the Neolithic individuals were buried wearing their dresses and jewels. However one cannot distinguish with certainty garments from shrouds. Traces of textiles were found but in Anatolia and Mesopotamia (6th mill) and impressions of textiles in Chalcolithic Varna, Bulgaria.

Grave goods were generally few objects of everyday use, such as vases, tools or weapons. Their number and quality varied and they were unequally distributed in the graves of a region or of a site, so one can assume that their presence depended on the

richness of the dead and not on any homogeneity of burial customs. Thus the unequal grave goods in Catal Huyuk can be easier understood.

Intentional breaking of vases, attested in EN / LN Greece and LN Cyprus, was also well known from MN Balkans. This practice did not exist in Anatolia but was present in the Halafian graves of the 5th mill. and seems to expand with time. It was possibly related to funeral libations but does not seem to be applied in cremation burials (at least in the Near East and the Balkans where there are not any cremations anyway). Zervos had assumed that this practice aimed to free the soul which was enclosed and derived from a Mousterian custom of breaking bones. This hypothesis may be partially convincing but does not explain why breaking involved only vases and not other objects which would be equally related to the dead, such as animal bones and figurines. It is also possible that broken vases of a long everyday use accompanied their dead owners as important gifts, since they were specimens of the first fabrication of pottery. Certain graves of Aceramic Khirokitia may be considered as witnesses of this rite. Those vases (which were often repaired several times in order to be reusable) had been possibly filled with libation liquids and placed in the graves of their owners after having being broken on their bodies and the liquids spread all over it.

Another issue is that of the contents of the pottery offered as grave goods. If vases containing human bones (therefore being of pure funerary use) were excluded, the rest could contain food, perishable jewels, toilet substances or small objects precious to their owner. In other words, it is probable that vases contained objects which could not be placed directly on the ground for fear of being poured out or lost. Food deposits, though not attested but in some cases in the Balkans Anatolia and the Near East, seem quite probable, since food was essential to Neolithic communities, therefore their living members might consider it important to share it with their dead.

Sea shells, found in graves which were even away from sea, are witnesses of a special import and could be explained rather as an individual property of the dead than as a particular offering in the frame of some kind of ritual. The same applies for the so-called "cult objects": They may have been indeed a property of the individual which had served in the cult of some deity during his life; but nothing testifies their identification as objects having any relation to a cult of the ancestors.

The existence of animal in certain graves has been often related to animal sacrifices. However, there was a differentiation in what concerns the grave contexts: So, there have been found graves with a) animals obviously belonging to the dead and accompanying him with the rest of other grave goods. In that case they were buried next to the human body b) animals sacrificed for some reason which was independent from human burials, for example on the occasion of a house foundation. Analogous paradigms still exist in modern Greece, where the animal preferred for sacrifice is the rooster.

Human sacrifices were rare and very uncertain.

All the above make one can realize that funerary practices evolved very slowly, permitting a coexistence of various types of graves and burial modes. With the exception of a possible fear for certain dead individuals, burial customs (especially those of Greece, Anatolia and Cyprus) witness respect for the dead and unwillingness of vandalizing their corpses. It is uncertain whether that respect were a real cult of

ancestors, at least in what concerns the Aegean region and Cyprus, given also that grave goods were objects of everyday use, i.e. of the same types found in the settlements. The view that the presence of grave goods does not prove any belief in supernatural forces (to any deity or deified ancestor) is also reinforced by their absence from some Neolithic burials.

Of course, one cannot speak about a total absence of grave goods in such a distant era. Material offers could have been made and perished with time; or they might not have been given at all if they were considered as discrimination symbols of poverty versus richness and the excavated tombs belonged to the category of poor individuals. Childe believed that grave goods would not be witnesses of a rich or a poor society, primitive or modern, nor of a single individual: he stated that, through history, people in rich societies have shown to be scrooge in grave offers; and that, on the contrary, in many cases of primitive or poor societies burials were relatively richer in offerings. The latter is supported by modern ethnological data.

However, the lack of grave goods could be simply due to a complete lack of personal belongings: if the custom was to place in the grave only the personal belongings of an individual and the latter did not have any, his grave would contain only his body.

In Anatolia, the variety of burials, in what concerns their mode or their grave goods, witnesses rather an organized society with isolated families and family clans, which were reflected in the isolated and multiple burials respectfully; individuals of different social rank, rich and poor, authorities and people. That is underlined also by the fact that AN Catal Huyuk comprised whole quarters of priests buried there, in rich graves which contained both their belongings and grave goods of independent provenance.

Of course, other factors, such as personal desires, the nature of the death or eventually his religious beliefs, could have influenced the richness of grave deposits. Analogies exist mainly among sites of the Near East, while burial practices of the Central Balkans seem to have more points in common with the Aegean region. What is impossible to establish, because of absence of data, remains the relation between burial practices and the age and sex of the dead, with the exception of course of child/infant burials in large funerary vases.

Summing up, Anatolia, Cyprus and Greece functioned as a crossroad in what concerns burial customs exchanges between the Near East and the Balkans, but this does not imply that these practices originated from one area and influenced the other respectfully. Certain archaeologists believe that burial customs of the Balkans were the result of an absolute influence of the Near East through the bridge of Greece and possibly of Anatolia as well. However, data have proven that the Balkan Peninsula was autonomous and not a province receiving the Near Eastern culture. South-Eastern Europe, just like Turkmenia, the Caucasus region, the Persian gulf and the Sinai have been long neglected and their importance underestimated. Anatolia, Cyprus and Greece were not only receivers of foreign influences. Each region had its particular way of facing death and configured particular burial practices focusing always on the disposal of dead corpses in order to maintain some hygiene conditions for the rest of the community while keeping a part (such as the head) as an abstract symbol of a respectful ancestor.