

**INFANT BURIALS IN THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD
IN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT - ISRAEL : A SOCIAL VIEW**

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In a good old paper published in 1981 in "The Archaeology of death" James Brown presents the search for social ranking through burials. He writes about a set of expectations based on theoretical considerations and case studies from the eastern parts of the U.S.A. In general he expects :

1. a high correlation between simple societies with no social hierarchy and a non differential burial system and;
2. a high correlation between complex social units, including chiefly authority and so-called "invested" burial.

This sounds in many ways like stating the obvious but following for example the presentations and discussions of Jacobs and Patton (this volume) it is probably not as obvious as it seems. In his paper Brown also raises the point that complex societies emphasize infant burial. This is done since their ascribed status does operate, and has meaning, even if they died as infants. In other words, stated from the archaeologist's point of view, elaborate burials of infants can be interpreted as reflecting inherited inequality or some kind of hereditary status. This caught my eye in relation to the record of the Levant and my own experience in recent years and that is why I chose to use Brown's paper as a basis for my own treatment of infants and children's burial. In light of the presentations made in the conference, I am glad that I decided to do so - many of the problematics concerning the correlation of burial and social structure are diminished where infants are concerned. Of course, many other problems are raised.

Treating children, infants and fetuses evokes methodological problematics such as for example:

- differential preservation of the young in the archaeological record;
- demographic aspects masking social influence on children's burial;
- spiritual and socio-political questions concerning society's perception of an infant or a fetus.

Albeit these difficulties, I will try to survey briefly data on burials of the young in the Levant mainly during the Holocene starting with the Natufian culture (10,500 B.C.) and up to the end of the Chalcolithic period (3,300 B.C.).(All dates are uncalibrated B.C. dates).

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The survey is very general and concentrates on a few variables of burial only with emphasis on the differences between adults and the young.

NATUFIAN (10,500-8500 B.C.)

We have many data on burial from Natufian sites. Burial is found in loci separated from the houses at least in some cases (for summaries see Belfer-Cohen 1988; Arensburg et al in press; Henry 1989; Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990). The percentage of children in the buried population is high reaching 25%. A few elaborate-decorated burials, skeletons were found including those of children. Based on the El Wad burials and other considerations, Wright (1978) and Henry (1989) conclude that the Natufian was a "stratified society".

In a recent paper Arensburg, Belfer-Cohen and Shepartz (in press) following a detailed study of Natufian burials are doubtful about this conclusion. They show decoration in Natufian burials to be random in relation to age, sex and location of the buried. They thus see no patterned differentiation in Natufian burial that can be explained in social terms.

I am not prepared to enter into all the details of this debate but while I do not fully agree with Wright and Henry, nor with the way they presented their conclusions, there is still a fact to be explained - that is that a few Natufian adults as well as a few children (6-7% in all) out of hundreds of buried individuals received elaborate treatment (gifts of different kinds). I am precipitous enough to say that it would need a social explanation of some sort especially the elaborate child burials. While adults can achieve status by their specific capabilities and charisma - infants and children cannot. Those few elaborately treated at death may at least hint at the existence of some kind of an ascribed status or even hereditary inequality - at least as one out of a few possible explanations.

Towards the end of the Natufian there is a decrease in elaborate decorated burials but a new phenomenon appears - skull separation in adults (Belfer-Cohen 1988), a phenomenon which was to become very common in later periods

PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC (8100-5600 B.C.)

In the Pre Pottery Neolithic (henceforth PPN) a rise of children's percentage to a third or over a third in the skeletal record is shown which may be a reflection of the economic-demographic change referred to as the Neolithic Revolution. No grave goods appear in PPN burials.

In the PPNA (8100-7500 B.C.) burial is on-site. Adults' skulls are separated and sometimes buried in concentrations in specific contexts. Children are dumped or buried with skulls. Thus a clear age demarcation in burial customs is evident (e.g. Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990).

In the PPNB (7500-6000 B.C.) on-site burial continues. Skull separation for adults continues too but there is a new phenomenon - plastering, or other forms of treatment to adults' skulls (e.g. Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990). Sometimes these treated skulls are buried in special contexts (such as the Nahal Hemar cave), or in concentrations (e.g. Jericho). Ancestor worship was suggested as an explanation for this treatment of adults skulls (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988; Yakar and Hershkovitz 1988). The differentiation by age (and may be sex and status) is very clear in the PPNB. The "non-treatment" of children in many sites supports the idea that the emphasis is on adults. If ancestral worship prevailed in PPN societies as suggested, the placement of individuals within the social order (kinship system) must have had meaning.

Other aspects of PPNB society including long-range trade, some signs of partial specialization and production intensification may point to some kind of a ranked society and although no clear signs for authority are found - the potential for its existence whether ascribed or achieved is plausible.

In the PPNC (ca.6000-5600 B.C.) slight changes in burial customs are discerned in the Southern Levant. Adult skull separation no longer appears and no treatment of skulls is known; group burials feature more commonly in a few sites. Burial, however, continued to be on-site as was generally the case for previous PPN units.

POTTERY NEOLITHIC (5600-4000 B.C.)

The Pottery Neolithic period (henceforth PN) starts only around 5600 B.C. in the southern parts of the Levant with the appearance of pottery. The record on burial is much poorer now. Burial in the Southern Levant is still on-site. Adult skull separation disappears.

A new phenomenon is infant and fetus burials in containers which become common and were very rare in the record of earlier periods.

There must be a preservation factor at work here but the use of containers is new.

In the Northern Levant and especially in Mesopotamia of the 6th and 5th millennia B.C., on-site and off-site cemeteries appear with elaborately decorated burials including rich goods for children, (e.g. Tel e-Sawwan). Jar burials for the young feature there too.

If jar interments are considered an elaborate treatment and are translated into social terms - then 6th-5th millennia B.C. societies can be regarded as ranked but if we consider grave goods as the indication for elaboration then this is valid for the Northern Levant and Mesopotamia only while in the Southern Levant it appears much later.

Is burial in a jar a technical matter ? does it have symbolic portant ? does it have meaning in socio-economic terms ? These questions are hard to answer in light of the available archaeological record, however, being uniquely used for infants must have had meaning.

Emphasis on this treatment of the young may be seen as an encouragement of reproduction by society (e.g. Gopher in press; Gopher and Orrelle in press) for whatever economic or social reasons. I suppose these two aspects are somehow correlative but this needs more care.

CHALCOLITHIC (4000-3300 B.C.)

In the Chalcolithic period covering most of the 4th millennium B.C. in the southern Levant new aspects appear in burial customs. Secondary burial in containers is practiced and ossuaries appear - this time for adults. Separate cemeteries appear in a variety of scales near by the settlements or in isolation (Levy 1986; Gilead 1988). While adults are buried in these cemeteries, children rarely do. They are found buried on-site - sometimes in jars.

Grave goods are common in the Chalcolithic period and in some cases very rich gifts appear also in infant burials.

Chalcolithic societies have been interpreted in the past as organized in chiefdoms, with an elite controlling economy, trade, and metal technology (e.g. Levy 1986). The elaborate cemeteries, burials and grave goods as well as the investment in selected infant burial accords well with this interpretation.

The Ghassulian society of the Chalcolithic period can be viewed as a ranked or stratified society and I would assume that ascribed status is common, thus inherited inequality is operating.

Summing up this brief survey of data we can say that infant burials show variability and change that has a potential to reflect processes of social or socio-economic change. More specifically, infant burial may help in "pushing" complexity back in time which I think should be done. Following are a few concluding remarks :

1. Already in the Natufian, the low percentage of elaborate-decorated infants/children burials can be explained in social terms although other options relating to burial customs may cause similar effects;
2. The PPN populations show no clear sign of social ranking or inherited inequality through infant burial. However, modelled and treated selected adult skulls hint at increased importance of placement in a kin system;
3. In the PN children may better indicate the existence of inherited inequality but there is an additional factor here - related to the "rise of reproduction" so to speak

and its influence on the place of women, fetuses and infants in society. This is part of a wider range restructuring of Neolithic societies that takes place;

4. In the Chalcolithic, chiefly societies are quite clear in many ways and evidence of ranking or stratification is everywhere, including burials of infants - for example - a young child was found in a most richly decorated grave of the Chalcolithic period at Nahal Qanah Cave with over one kilogram of gold (Gopher et al. 1990; Gopher and Tsuk, in press).

This paper being so brief, may give the impression of an over simplification. I am, however, aware that it is not easy to reconstruct what kind of a social system in terms of ranking, power and authority can be derived from data of infants burial alone.

The full picture is more complex and must involve many other aspects of society, economy etc.

I wish here to raise some suggestions about awkward questions which arose while dealing with burials of the young :

- can the Natufian egalitarian model be simply adopted ?
- can we refine on the general PPN ancestor worship issue and find out more specifically what it means in social terms ?
- recognizing the variability of chiefly societies (and realizing that not every differentiation in the record means social stratification) how would we identify such societies in burial data?
- can we differentiate social ranking from chiefly authority, and an ascribed status from an achieved status ?

These all remain open questions for future research.

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