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Dealing with the Dead at Beisamoun During the Middle PPNB: Revisiting Lechevallier's Field Archives

Fanny Bocquentin, Camille Noûs

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Dealing with the Dead

**Studies on Burial Practices
in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Levant**

edited by

Dana Ackerfeld and Avi Gopher

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Table of Contents

List of Contributors	7
Preface	9
Dana Ackerfeld and Avi Gopher	
Chapter 1	
Dealing with the Dead: Burial Practices and the Relationship Between the Living and the Dead During the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period in the Levant	13
Avi Gopher and Dana Ackerfeld	
Chapter 2	
Burning Down the House: Burial Practices with Links to Architecture in Epipalaeolithic Jordan	47
Lisa A. Maher and Danielle A. Macdonald	
Chapter 3	
Moving On: Natufian After-life Phases and Stages. Hilazon Tachtit Cave as a Case Study	65
Leore Grosman and Anna Belfer-Cohen	
Chapter 4	
The Relationship Between Burials and Dwellings at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Boncuklu Tarla, Southeast Turkey	77
Ergül Kodaş, İsmail Özer, Çağdaş Erdem, Charlotte Labedan-Kodaş, Ayşe Acar, Yunus Çiftçi, and İbrahim Sarı	
Chapter 5	
“Somebody is in the Wall”: The Relation of the Dead with Architecture in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Site of Dja’dé el-Mughara (Syria, 9,310–8,290 cal BC)	91
Bérénice Chamel	
Chapter 6	
Grasping Ritual Activities in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B Funerary Spaces Based on Evidence from Tell Qarassa North and Kharaysin (Southern Levant)	109
Jonathan Santana, Juan Muñiz, Eneko Iriarte, Luis C. Teira, and Juan José Ibáñez	
Chapter 7	
An Archaeothanatological Approach to Burials Unearthed in Aşıklı Höyük Between 1989 and 2000	135
Yasemin Yılmaz	
Chapter 8	
Cultural Practices, Epidemics, and Demographic Inference During the Levantine Neolithic	185
Gary Rollefson	
Chapter 9	
Dealing with the Dead at Beisamoun During the Middle PPNB: Revisiting Lechevallier’s Field Archives	197
Fanny Bocquentin and Camille Noûs	
Chapter 10	
Lime Plaster Materiality: Exploring Connections Between the Living, the Dead, and Built Spaces at MPPNB Nahal Yarmuth 38	215
Dana Ackerfeld and Avi Gopher	

Chapter 11

The Relationship Between the Living and the Dead During the PPN: The Case of Cyprus 241
Françoise Le Mort

Chapter 12

Dealing with the Dead in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia 255
Karina Croucher

Chapter 13

The Thanatological Dimensions of the Ba`ja and Basta Burials (Southern Transjordanian LPPNB, 7,500–7,000 cal BC). A Novel Approach to Sepulchral Environments 265
Hans Georg K. Gebel, Marion Benz, and Joachim Bauer

Chapter 14

Freeing the Dead from Their Homes: A New Relationship Between the Living and the Dead in the Kerkh Pottery Neolithic Cemetery 317
Sari Jammo and Akira Tsuneki

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Chapter 9

Dealing with the Dead at Beisamoun During the Middle PPNB: Revisiting Lechevallier's Field Archives

Fanny Bocquentin and Camille Noûs¹

Abstract

In the 1970s, Beisamoun site delivered several burials and two plastered skulls in a Middle PPNB dwelling structure where several levels of exceptionally well-preserved plastered floors were exposed. A return to the field archives of this salvage excavation makes possible to re-examine the spatial and stratigraphic organization of this structure and thus to question the relationship that the living performed with their deceased.

Introduction

The site of Beisamoun is located in the upper Jordan Valley, in the Hula Basin, and extends over about ten hectares. The site was located close to the northwestern shore of Hula Lake, in front of a marshy area which spread eastward to the foot of the Golan Heights. The lake was drained for economic and health reasons (presence of malaria) in the early 1950s. Today, the site is situated in the midst of crops, but in the 1960s, large fishponds were dug out there, bringing to light many archaeological remains.

Settlement at the site covers a long period of time, ranging from the second half of the eighth millennium to the last third of the seventh millennium cal BC, and was explored in stages during several field operations. The site was first discovered during surface prospecting operations by Amnon Assaf, an amateur surveyor and founder of the Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory. He was supported by Jean Perrot's team that was excavating the nearby Natufian site of Eynan-Mallaha. They proceeded to collect surface samples, excavate test pits, and map the many structures revealed by the digging and exploitation of fishponds (Perrot 1966). In 1972, the dredging of one of these ponds brought to light an exceptionally well-preserved plastered floor. A rescue excavation was organized under the direction of Monique Lechevallier, who excavated this structure (locus 150) from July 18 to August 28 (Lechevallier and Perrot 1973). On the basis of all the material collected on the surface and during the rescue operation, Lechevallier interpreted the site as a short-term occupation at the end of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (Lechevallier 1978). However, consultation of the excavation archives enabled us to isolate the material from Structure 150 from what had been found

1. Camille Noûs embodies the contribution to research of the community as a whole, in order to reaffirm the common benefit of scientific research and its collective construction. Adding his/ her name as co-author is part of a symbolic action for supporting public research at risk today facing pressure for highly competitive and short-term research system desired by the French government (for additional information: <https://www.cogitamus.fr>).

on the surface and to reassign this material to the Middle PPNB (Bocquentin *et al.* 2011). The resumption of excavations between 2007 and 2016, under the direction of the present author and Hamoudi Khalaily, in a sector less deeply truncated by fish farming activities, uncovered a dense occupation attributed to the end of the Late PPNB and the PPNC (also known as the final PPNB), dated by ¹⁴C between 7,200 and beyond 6,400 cal BC (Bocquentin *et al.* 2011, 2014, 2020a; Borrell and Khalaily 2016; Borrell *et al.* 2019). Thus, Beisamoun appears to be a Pre-Pottery Neolithic village that was probably continuously occupied and variously extended for more than a millennium.

A Village Shared with the Dead

Many graves were discovered on the site, more or less closely associated with site structures, as well as four plastered skulls. Two of these skulls were unearthed in Middle PPNB levels (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973; Lechevallier 1978) and two others in the levels of the Late PPNB-PPNC transition (Bocquentin *et al.* 2020a). Funerary practices are varied and cremation emerged towards the end of site occupation (Bocquentin *et al.* 2020b). The study of the 30 burials discovered between 2007 and 2016 (MNI: 34 individuals) is the subject of Marie Anton's ongoing PhD (for the inventory *cf.* Bocquentin *et al.* 2014, 2020a). The aim of this paper is to further explore the burials unearthed in 1972 during the rescue excavation of structure 150.

The anthropological material from these burials was published at the time by Denise Ferembach and Odile Solivérès (Ferembach and Solivérès 1978) and has been studied fairly recently (Eshed *et al.* 2004).² However, the material is now nowhere to be found, with the exception of the two plastered skulls, the most complete of which is on display at the Israel Museum and the second at the Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory. It is thus impossible to review bone inventories, biological identities (sex, age at death, possible pathologies, injuries, way of life, biological kinship), taphonomic aspects, or to carry out sampling using the most complete and reliable current methodological approaches. Given the high rate of errors generated by the methods used in the 1970s to estimate sex and age at death for adults (*e.g.*, Milner *et al.* 2000; Schmitt 2004; Murail *et al.* 2005), we will not take the published results into account here. Therefore, a whole area of the relationship between the living and the dead is inaccessible. However, we still have the contextual data and we can thus address the question of the location of human remains in relation to archaeological structures and examine the place of the deceased in the community by means of this spatial relationship. Indeed, the published data are at our disposal, as well as M. Lechevallier's excavation archives deposited in the archive service of the Maison des Sciences de L'Homme at Nanterre, where she was based. Due to a lack of funding, these archives have not yet been digitized, but one of our short-term objectives is making free online access available. These archives include plans, notes, sketches, and inventories, which make it possible to follow the advancement of the excavation and to evaluate the stratigraphic and topographic relationship of the various unearthed objects and structures.

Middle PPNB Structures and Occupation Levels

During the 1972 rescue excavation, a surface area of approximately 70 m² was exposed and excavated to a depth of 50 cm. Excavating focused on structure 150, interpreted as a housing unit, and its adjoining

2. "[T]he establishment of the prehistoric skeletal collection at Tel Aviv University enabled us to study all the skeletal material included in this paper, and to apply new analytical methods ourselves" (Eshed *et al.* 2004: 317).

structures (Figs. 9.1 and 9.2). It is a rectangular area bounded by more or less well preserved 50 cm thick walls. One course was preserved on the south side (locus 151), while two courses are visible in the west walls (loci 184 and 185). All that remains of the north wall is a gravel foundation (locus 152) for a likely composite wall (mud brick, adobe), and no traces of the wall remain on the east side.

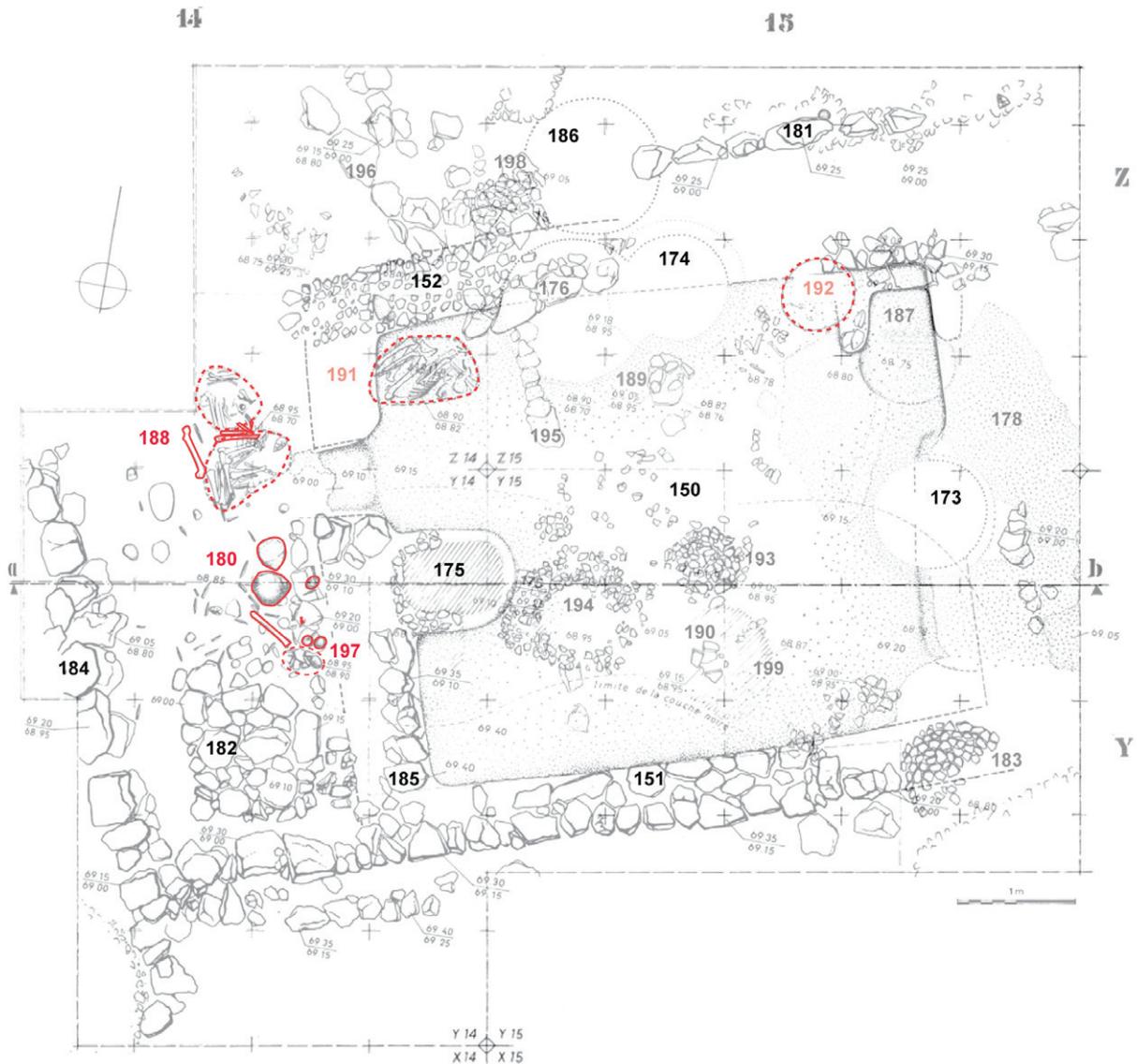


Fig. 9.1: Plan of structure 150 (main plastered room and antechamber that extended it to the west). The number of the loci appears in red for the burial sites, in black for the structures. The shaded areas correspond to the lower levels 2 and 3 (After Lechevallier 1978, Figs. 46 and 47).

A main room with a plastered floor (4 × 5 m) opens to the west onto a smaller room (2.5 × 4 m), described as an antechamber. The plastered floor of the main room underwent complex preparation, consisting of a brown clayey soil (10–15 cm), followed by a yellowish clayey mortar (3–4 cm), topped with a hard white polished plaster (1 cm). Traces of ochre indicate that the plaster was red colored. The mortar and plaster were renewed four times in some places and indicate prolonged settlement (Fig. 9.3). The floor is flat except

on the periphery, where it rises and covers the lower part of the walls and the base of the large central hearth (locus 175). This hearth was present when the structure was built and was raised as the floor was restored. To the east, a slope in this layer is interpreted as the start of an elongated, shallow basin. Towards the west, the plaster becomes thinner and disappears at the delimitation of the antechamber (Fig. 9.4). When the antechamber was discovered, it was 30 cm below the floor of the main room. A narrow sloping and plastered passage connected these two areas. The southern part of the antechamber comprised a pavement (locus 182). In contrast to the main room, this small space yielded very abundant intact material of exceptional quality (raw blades, intact tools, bone spatulas, handstones, axes with polished edges, sickles, arrowheads, *etc.*) (Lechevallier 1978). The chronological reattribution of the structure to the Middle PPNB was proposed on the basis of this material and the faunal assemblage (Bocquentin *et al.* 2011).

Two symmetrical post holes were discovered (loci 189 and 190) under the plastered floor (level 1) (Fig. 9.1). They are part of an earlier phase of occupation during which the floor could have been made of rammed earth (level 2). Two hearths (loci 193, 194) and a stone basin (locus 183) could also belong to this settlement phase. Even lower still (level 3), directly on the virgin ground, remnants of the plastered floor were preserved over 7 m² (locus 178), associated with a large twice-limed basin (locus 187). At the very top of the stratigraphy, four pits were dug out in level 1, attesting to a now completely levelled out later Neolithic period (double pit 174 and pits 173 and 186) (Figs. 9.1 and 9.2). We would need to examine the material filling these pits in order to propose a reliable chronological attribution.



Fig. 9.2: Photograph of structure 150 taken from the west. Level 1 is being excavated, the antechamber is not yet fully exposed. Note, next to the section, the negative square left by the removal block of the two plastered skulls (locus 180) (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).



Fig. 9.3: Two levels of thick and well-preserved plastered floor exposed in the northeast corner of the main room (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).



Fig. 9.4: Detail of the passage between the antechamber and the main room located 30 cm above in its final state. Photographed from the north (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).

Burials from the Middle PPNB and Minimum Number of Individuals

According to the publication, the total number of individuals found in Beisamoun in association with Structures 150 would amount to 16, consisting of 11 adults and five newborns (Lechevallier 1978). However, at the time, the maximum number of individuals was calculated, which is very subjective and therefore of little significance. O. Solivérès considers, for example, each bone cluster at locus 188 as independent, which suggests that she may have counted the same individual several times. Her proposal of nine adults calculated for this locus is most probably an overestimate. According to her anthropological inventory, the right humerus, of which there are five, dominates this assemblage and can therefore be used to estimate *a posteriori* the currently conventional Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI).

If we take the minimum count per locus, according to the available information there are therefore: five newborns (loci 192 and 197), seven adults represented by infracranial remains (loci 188 and 191), and two adults represented by their skull (locus 180), where the last may possibly belong to the former. The absence of intermediate age groups, particularly young children, is remarkable, as child mortality was inevitably high, as in any population with pre-vaccine (pre-Jennerian) demography (*e.g.*, Ledermann 1969; Castex and Kacki 2016). We can therefore legitimately propose that this recruitment is the result of a deliberate selection.

Two graves sealed by the plastered floor were found beneath the main room of the house. Two other graves and a deposit of plastered skulls were discovered in the antechamber. Their stratigraphic position and their relationship with the other structures have not been formally established. The sub-contemporaneity of the skulls with the skeletons of the neighboring burial site (locus 188) was initially suggested, as all of them were found *under* the floor of the antechamber (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973). Later, the burial was considered to have taken place after the house was abandoned, with the skulls exposed *on* the floor during occupation (Lechevallier 1978).

The distinction is significant for understanding the fine temporality defining the boundary of interactions between the inhabitants and their deceased. From this perspective of stratigraphic and contextual rereading, we analyzed the excavation archives of the M. Lechevallier collection. For each funerary deposit (loci 180, 188, 191, 192, 197), we propose to complete or revise the published data from notes and field notes. The discussion focuses on what this implies in terms of the relationship between the living and the dead in this part of the village.

Back to the Archives

We present below an update on the stratigraphic and topographic relationships between burials and dwellings based on the archival field documents.

The oldest burials are unquestionably loci 191 and 192 (Fig. 9.1), which belong to the intermediate occupation phase of the area. They are both sealed by the plastered floor 150 and truncate one of the structures on level 3 (wall 176 and plastered floor 178, respectively).

The elevations noted for grave 192 (from 68.90 to 68.75 m), in which a newborn baby was found, and notes taken in the field suggest that it was dug out from the rammed earth floor (at 68.90 m), associated with the two post holes (level 2).

The boundaries of the grave pits of locus 191 have not been identified. The highest bones (filling from 69.05 to 68.82 m) were uncovered during the dismantling of the second (and last) plastered floor level in this northwestern corner of the house. The absence of any mention of disturbance tends to indicate that this floor was put in place after the burial. The base of the wall of Structure 150, adjacent to the burial (locus 152), is also located above the level of the bones. On the other hand, the grave intersects a circular stone structure (not inventoried) from level 2 (Fig. 9.5).

This grave brought together two adults with neither crania nor mandibles (Fig. 9.5 and Lechevallier 1978: Fig. 52, Plate XXX-2). The first was in anatomical position, bent on the right side, with the upper body towards the northeast. According to the excavators, the atlas and axis are present and in place. Only the left clavicle, which is far from its anatomical position, shows any signs of disturbance. This corresponds to the removal of the skull, which was detached once decomposition was complete. The second adult would represent a subsequent secondary deposition. However, the field archives do not support this hypothesis. According to the latter, the bones of the second individual were discovered beside, above, but mainly below those of the complete skeleton, and this scattering rather suggests an earlier deposit disturbed by the burial of the second individual. Moreover, the osteological inventory (Ferembach and Solivérès 1978: 181) includes small bones from the hands and feet, including phalanges, which raise questions about the secondary nature of the burial. It is possible that these are two successive primary deposits, followed by removals. Thus, while the contemporaneity of part of this long funerary sequence with the occupation of level 2 cannot be totally excluded, it is certain that the last opening of the grave occurred after the abandonment of this level.

Let us now return to the funerary deposits discovered in the antechamber, loci 180, 188, and 197, below the sloping passage from the main room. Special attention needs to be paid to the structuring of this room (Figs. 9.1 and 9.2). The antechamber was delimited by three walls at the time of discovery: wall 151 to the south, wall 184 to the west, and wall 185 to the east. Wall 185 seems to continue across the threshold in the form of a low wall made of a less durable material (the archives refer to “hardened earth”) on which the plastered floor of the main room rests (Fig. 9.4). The area seems to be open on the north side: wall 152 does not continue beyond the main room, but the northwest corner of the antechamber was not excavated, so doubt remains as to whether wall 184 continues under the section. Thus, the entrance to Structure 150 could have been on this side, or, alternatively, on the opposite side towards the eastern hollow in the plaster (initially considered as a threshold by archaeologists before being published as the contour of a ‘basin’).

On closer inspection, this adjoining room is not perfectly rectangular; it widens towards the north, and its walls are not joined. The reading of the notebook confirms the heterogeneity of their construction. Wall 184 is made up of two floating courses, *i.e.*, separated by a level of sediment (of 6 cm), which shows that the upper one was raised at a later stage (Fig. 9.5). The base of the first course is at the same level as the base of the paving (locus 182) and appears to be continued all along wall 151 by a curvilinear extension. Wall 151, which at first glance appears to be in one piece, is in fact the reunification of two walls, the first of which, on the antechamber side, was built at the same level as the base of the paving and only consists of one row of large blocks. Its extension towards the main room lies on a higher level and is made up of two rows of smaller blocks (Fig. 9.2). Wall 185 is also high up in the stratigraphy. Although the last restoration of floor 150 leans against this low wall that serves as a support, its stratigraphic relationship with the previous floors is not clearly explained. However, it can be seen that the base level of this low wall is very high in the stratigraphy (Fig. 9.6). Indeed, its base is much higher than that of the earliest plastered floor,

not mentioned in the publication but clearly identified by the excavators at the junction between the main room and the adjoining room (Fig. 9.5). The 30 cm step separating these two spaces on the upper level did not yet exist at this early occupation level. Instead, the plaster continues with a slight slope towards the adjoining room (at 69.00 m). A floor level is noted, without any further precision, at the same height (68.97 m), immediately below pavement 182. Therefore, we can wonder whether this ‘pavement’ is not rather a raised platform contemporaneous with the earliest floor. Especially considering that abundant grinding equipment was discovered at its base, as well as on its slabs (Figs. 9.6 and 9.7).



Fig. 9.5: Photograph of the ongoing excavation taken from the northeast. The upper levels of plastered floor have been removed. Note the remnant of the earliest plastered floor preserved beyond the passage sloping gently down to the antechamber. The difference in height between the two rooms is minor compared to what was observed at the beginning of the excavation (cf. Fig. 9.4). Note the two grave loci 191 and 188 being exposed. Denise Ferembach (standing) and Geneviève Dollfus are digging locus 197 (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).

The highest bones of locus 188 (from 68.95/69.00 to 68.65 m) were discovered just in front of these remains of the early plastered level. The excavation notebook indicates that the bones were laid out (“disposés”) in front of the entrance, *i.e.*, on the floor, in several organized piles. The plans and photos both confirm this organization in bundles of bones, which leaves little doubt as to the secondary nature of the deposit(s) (Fig. 9.5 and Lechevallier 1978: Fig. 52 and Plate XXX-1). No cranium or mandible elements are present and all the bones belong to adult individuals. As the excavation progressed, archaeologists clearly identified the limits of burial pits. They described two pits about 30 cm deep, very well delimited by their filling. The southernmost is oriented east-west and the northernmost south-north. Both are 10 to 15 cm apart but “the two pits were as if connected by a bundle of bones which seemed to overflow from the pit” (M. Lechevallier, excavation notebook dated 24/8/1972). These overflows are also evident on the plans where the bones extend well beyond the limits of the pits and are placed on a horizontal surface. This implies that,

at the very least, these pits remained open during the period of their use. However, this duration is unknown because the secondary nature of the deposits does not allow us to define whether they were simultaneous or successive. Altimetric data from the upper contour of the pits and the overhanging bones indicate that these actions were carried out from the level of the first plastered floor. As no direct contiguity is preserved between the plaster and the contour of the pits (Figs. 9.1 and 9.7), their exact relative chronology cannot be established, but there is no doubt about their sub-contemporaneity (just before, just after or strictly contemporary).

Locus 197 (from 68.95 to 68.90 m) was found at the same level, between platform 182 and the stone alignment adjoining the two plastered skulls (locus 180). The bones of four newborns were unearthed there (Fig. 9.1 and Lechevallier 1978: Plate XXX-3). One of them was found in perfect anatomical connection in the grave buried on its right side, with the lower limbs bent perpendicularly to the axis of the body and the left upper limb extended. Two other immature skulls can be discerned facing this first skeleton, with a third outlined about 50 cm from there, below the stone against which the plastered skull 1 was found. Given the distance between these four children, it is unlikely that they were in the same grave. The secondary nature of three of these deposits also remains very hypothetical as anthropologists describe infracranial remains for all of these newborns, including long bones, pelvic bones, and “miscellaneous debris” (Ferembach and Solivérès 1978: 182). Moreover, skull bones are not fused at this age and their relocation would necessarily have led to their disruption, but according to plans and photos, this is not the case.

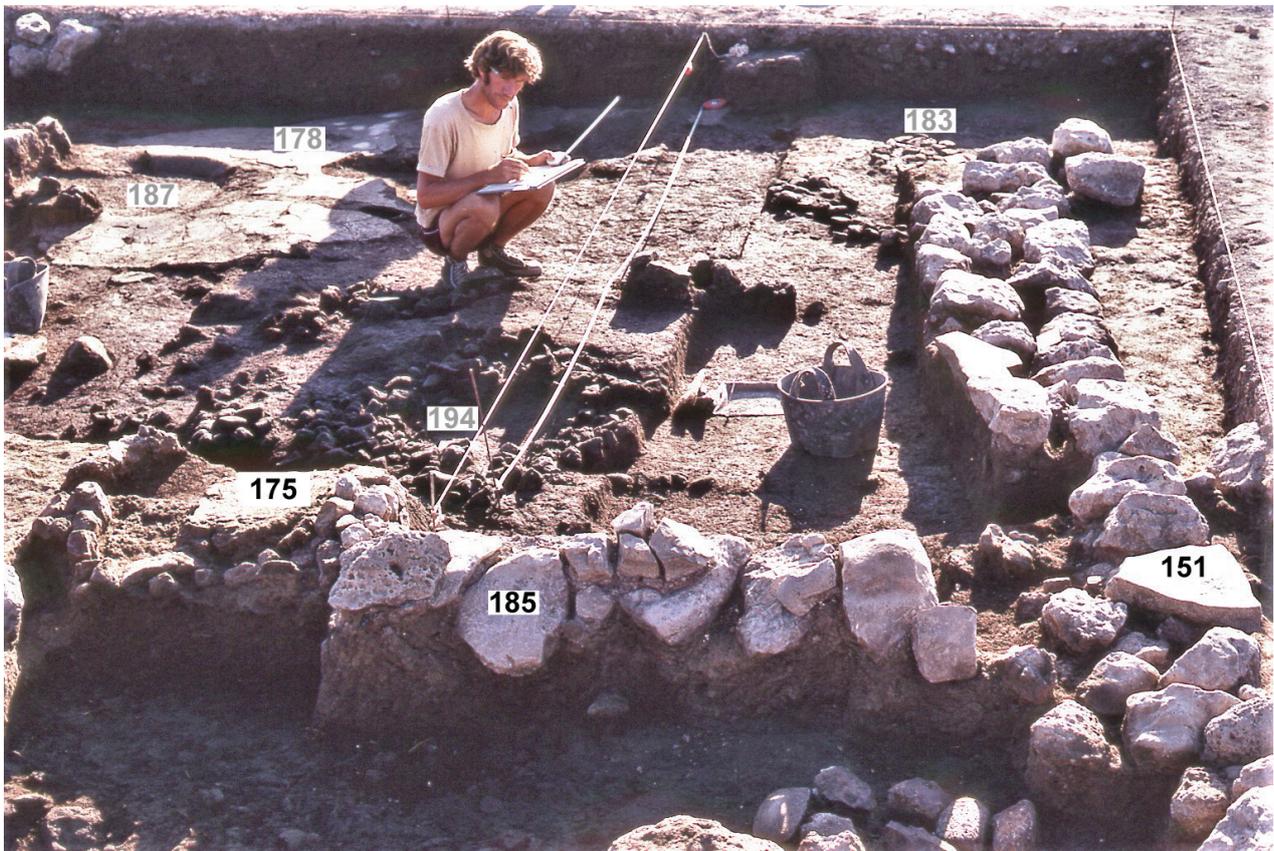


Fig. 9.6: Photograph of the ongoing excavation taken from the west. The base of wall 185 is high in the stratigraphy and reveals that the partitioning of the structure into two distinct spaces, the main room and the annex room, belongs to a late phase of the construction. In the foreground, notice the deposit of axes and grinding material. In the background, Daniel Ladiray is drawing the plan of Structure 194 (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).

Locus 180 designates the deposit of the two plastered skulls. In the field, only one of the two was identified as such, as the second one is very damaged. They were found while the excavation of the antechamber was just beginning and they were removed almost immediately. There are very few field notes to describe them further. The dismantling of the skulls was filmed, but we have not yet been able to view this film, which would have to be digitized beforehand. The skulls were placed one against the other (Figs. 9.7 and 9.8). Skull 1 was looking eastwards, perfectly centered in relation to the axis of the large hearth (locus 175), wedged in this position by a pebble. Skull 2 was positioned perpendicularly, facing south, in the direction of skull 1. Nearby, but a little higher up, a horizontally placed tibia and two adult cervical vertebrae were found immediately under the alignment of stones to the east of the skulls (Figs. 9.1 and 9.7). The two skulls were found lower than the base of this alignment, at a height noted at approximately 69.00 m, which is identical to the floor remnants found later near the threshold and under the platform.



Fig. 9.8: Plastered skulls 1 and 2 *in situ* (Photographic credits: Archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun).

Thus, two main phases of activity were identified in this adjoining room. The earliest was carried out on a living floor in continuity with the main room and shows traces of plaster. This occupation corresponds to the early phases of walls 151 and 184, the digging of pits 188 and 197, deposit 180, the setting up of the platform (locus 182), and probably the installation of the two threshold stone boulders (Fig. 9.4). The large hearth was already in place, surrounded by stone rubble, and its base corresponds to the level of this

first floor. This phase also corresponds to the dispersal of very well-made finished objects over the entire surface (Fig. 9.7). The second phase left no traces of lime, and, in fact, represents a stratigraphic break with the main room which continuously rises up. The installation of the stone alignment adjoining the two skulls corresponds to the beginning of this phase, as does the nearby deposit of isolated bones, and may also be a continuation of bone deposits over the double-grave pit 188. According to the photos, the deposit of objects also continues and a cluster of handstones and axe preforms was unearthed at this level between wall 185 (which may not yet have existed) and the platform (Fig. 9.6). The construction of the lime step between the two rooms may belong to this or a later phase.

Focus on the Plastered Skulls

Only skull 1 has been published (Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973).³ Skull 2 is badly damaged and has only recently been restored. The restorations carried out on these skulls are problematic, particularly in the eye area (Fig. 9.9). The following descriptions are based mainly on photographs taken in the field and shortly afterwards. They are inspired from an article published in French a few years ago (Bocquentin 2009).

As with the skulls discovered at Tell Aswad, the plastering of skull 1 gives the mask a serene appearance: the eyes are closed, the mouth is very slightly ajar, evoking the face of a sleeping person (Fig. 9.9a). The mask is in a poor state of preservation: fragments of plaster are missing, particularly from the chin and the right side of the face. The skull and the modelling are severely deformed by vertical crushing, which induced significant fragmentation. In addition, there are perforations (one on the left cheek and two under the right eye) which could be of taphonomic origin. On each side, we observe grooves considered by D. Ferembach as taphonomic damage (roots?), but which appear quite regular and end in a bevel. This possible preparation has not been observed on other plastered skulls as far as we are aware. The mandible is included in the modelling; the anterior teeth are absent. The mouth is indicated at the junction of the jaw and mandible, which does not appear to be modelled, but is marked by a horizontal incision and deeper vertical incisions, which D. Ferembach interpreted as a representation of the teeth. The nose is finely modelled: it is narrow and slightly snub. The nostrils are well defined. The eyes are covered with a thin layer of plaster, perhaps independently of the rest of the mask. A fine incision halfway up the anatomical eye sockets indicates that the eyelids are closed. Only the left ear is preserved: it is symbolized by a modelled pinch. During restoration, the plaster was partially separated from the skull. The photos available of this stage suggest that the plaster is thick (> 1 cm) and that it continues at the base of the skull to form a base, as observed on the skulls of Tell Aswad for example (Stordeur and Khawam 2007). The plaster therefore masks the mandible, the base of the skull, the temporal bones, a small part of the frontal bone and probably the lower part of the parietals. The style is minimalist: openings symbolized by simple incisions and a minimal representation of the ears. Only the nose was modelled. However, unlike other plastered skulls (*e.g.*, at Kfar HaHoresh, Hershkovitz *et al.* 1995), this one is quite realistic in that the plastering respects the actual anatomical locations.

Skull 2 is partial but its modelled face is less deformed and less crushed than that of skull 1 (Fig. 9.9c). The mouth is marked by a fine, short incision; the left eye, the only one preserved, is represented with the

3. According to those authors, this could be a woman's skull, but today the assessment of sex from the skull (*e.g.*, Ferembach *et al.* 1979) cannot be considered reliable after being tested on populations that were not used to implement the method (*cf.* Bruzek and Murail 2006; Đurić *et al.* 2005). Sex estimation is especially doubtful on a partially plastered skull.

eyelid closed by a half-moon-shaped bulge in the paste. This time, the entire orbit appears to be covered with relatively thick plaster. Both ears are preserved and, as with skull 1, represented by a simple modelled pinch. The corresponding part of the nose is pressed in: we cannot say whether it was modelled or not. From what is preserved, we can assume that the plaster covered a little more of the frontal arch than in the previous case. Once again, a plaster base was placed at the bottom of the skull, but it is not clear whether the mandible is part of the molding or not. It is likely that the skull was already incomplete when it was deposited, as the missing parts (occipital, parietal) are usually well preserved.

These two skulls have many features in common; a serene attitude, closed eyes, simple modelling, a brown-red colored paste, and a supporting base, which brings them together stylistically, but their method of fabrication is nevertheless different. Indeed, chemical analysis (Goren *et al.* 2001) reveals that skull 1 was modelled with a single layer of thick, dense plaster made from pure, homogeneous lime with small straw inclusions. A thin layer of paint was then applied to the mask, consisting of red pigment of ferruginous origin. Skull 2 is also modelled with a single layer of plaster, but this is a heterogeneous and crumbly material made of lime, clay, silt, ash, and crushed calcite that gives it a shiny appearance in the light. The dye (hematite or limonite) was incorporated into the paste and then the surface was polished with ash or sand.

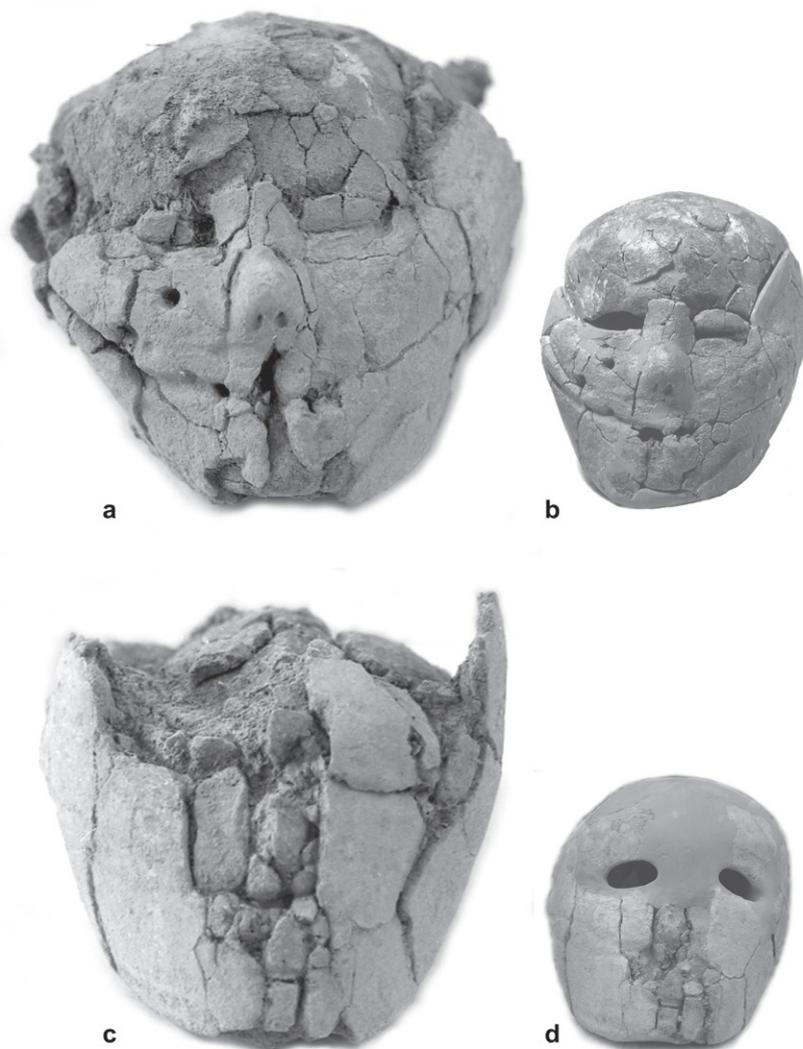


Fig. 9.9: a. Skull 1 before restoration: the eyelids are closed, the mouth is ajar, only the nose is modelled. b. Skull 1 after restoration. c. Skull 2 before restoration. The left eyelid is closed, the mouth, represented by a simple incision, is closed. The nose is not preserved. d. Restored skull (Photographic credits: a-c. archives of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Mondes, mission Beisamoun; d. F. Bocquentin with the permission of A. Assaf).

Discussion

From an architectural point of view, the review of the archives reveals that the final state of house 150 is the result of a dynamic restructuring of the space during its occupation. The partitioning of the house into two separate spaces, the main room and the annex room, in particular, occurred at a relatively late stage. During the first settlement phase, the dividing wall did not yet exist and the plastered floor probably covered the entire occupied space. At that time, ritual activity was very dense in the area to the west of the hearth and was materialized by several funerary deposits and by deposits of high-quality objects and blades (in terms of knapping techniques and raw materials). The dispersal of these objects and altimetric data do not suggest that this was a workshop or a cache, but point rather to successive deposits and thus most probably linked to ceremonial activities. The overflow of bones brought to locus 188 in a dry state also points to deposits spread out over time and the repeated handling of these bones, the highest of which are accumulated at floor level. Following this earliest occupation, the plastered floor was regularly repaired, but only in the eastern part. The westernmost part remained as it was, accentuating the altimetric difference over time so that a step between the two spaces was eventually necessary. The low wall 185 to the south and the earthen bench to the north may have been built to reinforce this increasing difference in height. In any case, this redevelopment led to the compartmentalization of the spaces as they were discovered during the excavation.

All of these observations converge towards one irrefutable conclusion: the wish to durably preserve the initial organization of the western part of the structure. This was barely modified after the last deposits of objects slightly above the burial deposits. The interior space was maintained without any major reorganization. However, this does not mean that this part of the house was abandoned. The reconstruction of wall 184 with an additional stone course, for example, or the construction of the plastered step, which still enables the passage from one room to the next, are examples of this. Thus, this annex room was not abandoned but most likely sanctified. With the threshold, the main hearth is the second point of connection between the two spaces. It was rebuilt identically, in the different levels, and unchangingly faced the plastered skull 1, which was perfectly aligned with it.

The sanctification of this room bears witness to a long memorial sequence, perhaps over several generations. Especially as the funerary treatment of the individuals buried there began well before they were brought there. In fact, apart from the newborns, all the adults in the antechamber were brought there as skeletonized remains, which indicates prior treatment, probably removed from a primary burial (however we cannot definitively rule out active defleshing due to the absence of osteological analysis). The plastering of the two skulls shows a more complex and even longer operational chain. Once the mortal remains were brought to the antechamber, they could still be seen lying on the ground or overflowing from the narrow pits. The few scattered bones near the two skulls indicate the possible secondary dynamic circulation of the remains in this space. Both the location and the plastering of skull 1 make it a central figure in this memorial construction. Its acolyte is in an offset position in relation to the hearth and is turned towards it, which may suggest that it played a peripheral role, perhaps that of a simple assistant or companion.

The organization of the human remains and the scattering of the exceptional goods associated with them show that this space was devoted to the dead. The human remains were not placed beneath the living; they were rather placed beside them, in a dedicated room. However, there is still some doubt about the function

of structure 150 as a whole. Was it really a house? Hardly any material was found on the last plastered floor, so it is difficult to be sure. It could also be a collective and ceremonial building. All that remains today is the certainty that specific technical investment was performed throughout the succession of layers of high-quality plaster painted in red and the large hearth associated with them. The plastered floors found during surveys or test trenches in Beisamoun are in no way comparable in quality. The selective recruitment of adult individuals also points to a place that extends beyond the domestic and family circle in favor of a broader group identity. The presence of newborns alongside these selected deceased is intriguing and intuitively seems to refer to the life cycle, although we cannot prove it. In addition to the difference in age, we also observe very different funerary processing: with brief treatment for newborns and sequenced treatment for adults. For the latter, every effort is made at Beisamoun during the Middle PPNB to ensure that funerary time is expanded as much as possible, far beyond the treatment of corpses and remains. Living spaces are restructured in such a way as to encourage remembrance and maintain access to the mortal remains so that the deceased remain present, for as long as possible, in the memory of the living.

This is particularly salient when compared to the later occupation of the site at the end of the PPN (Bocquentin *et al.* 2020b). In this case, the close link between burial and structure is much less clear: the burials are in the vicinity of the structures but are generally posterior to them. The majority of burial pits are dug at the base of earlier walls, from the level of their partial collapse. This is true with the exception of the infant burials, which could be contemporary with the occupations, and the particular case of the two plastered crania, which were found on the floor of the occupation of the Early phase of the PPNC. Thus, over time, the close spatial relationship with the dead takes on temporal distances. Spaces are still shared between the dead and the living, but successively. At the very end of the site's occupation, in the second half of the 7th millennium, the burials disappear. This heralds the drastic scarcity of burials in the Pottery Neolithic villages of the southern Levant (Gopher and Eshed 2012). It is probably relevant to note that this exclusion of the dead was preceded by the appearance of cremation, which accelerated the funeral time: the multi-stage funerary sequences that used to require several months could now be reduced to a few hours. Have the ancestors become too much to bear at the end of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic? This is what the Beisamoun case would suggest, but this must be compared with data from other contemporary sites that also have an evolution of practices that can be followed over several centuries, which would go beyond the objective of this article. It is obvious that the answer is also to be found in other practices and symbolic productions in order to understand whether the ancestral/ spiritual authority has not been ceded to other spirits (*e.g.*, papers in Becker *et al.* 2019).

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