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Keeping the dead close: A reinterpretation of mortuary remains from the Neolithic of Middle East

Abstract:
Theories of Continuing Bonds, and more recently, the Dual Process of grieving, have provided new ways of understanding the bereavement process, and have influenced current practice for counsellors, end of life carer practitioners and other professionals. This paper uses these theories in a new way, exploring their relevance to archaeological interpretation, with particular reference to the phenomena of the plastering of the skulls of the deceased in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia (the Near East), suggesting that traditional archaeological interpretations, which focus on concepts of status and social organisation, may be missing a more basic reaction to grief and a desire to keep the dead close for longer.

Introduction:

Preserved bodies are present in the archaeology of various time periods in our human past, some intentionally preserved, others a result of natural processes (see Giles. 2013). This paper considers new interpretations of one such phenomena; plastered skulls of the Neolithic Middle East. Following burial and skeletisation, crania would be retrieved, onto which a face would be created over the dry bone, using mud, lime or gypsum plasters. These enigmatic faces from the past have traditionally been interpreted as relating to status, surmising that the skulls belonged to ritual leaders, or that they were used in attempts to unite communities. This paper proposes a new interpretation, suggesting that concepts similar to those of 'continuing bonds' may have motived the plastering and curation of these skulls. The concept of continuing bonds may also be a realistic interpretation for other funerary evidence from across the globe; it is therefore hoped that this paper will inspire a new way of considering interpretations of mortuary data. It furthermore demonstrates the role of the present in informing our understanding of the past.

Theories of grief and mourning:

In archaeological research, contemporary theories of behaviour are rarely consulted when reviewing motivations or experience in the past. However, it is the premise of this article that experiences of grief and mourning may offer more appropriate explanations of past practices around treatment of the dead than traditional archaeological ones which often focus on the relationship between burial practice and concepts such as status and hierarchy. In particular, theories of continuing bonds may offer resonance in interpretations of mortuary archaeology.

Continuing bonds
The theory of Continuing Bonds was proposed by Klass et al (1996) as a means of explaining grieving behaviour. This was in opposition to previous strategies which encouraged the mourner to 'move on', in line with detachment theories proposed by Freud (1917) in his research on 'grief work' (*Trauerarbeit*), and later incorporated by Lindermann (1944), which recommended a process of working through grief to enter a new phase of life following bereavement. Grief work is defined as a ''*cognitive*

process of confronting a loss, of going over the events before and at the time of death, of focusing on memories and working toward detachment from the deceased. It requires an active, ongoing, effortful attempt to come to terms with loss" (Stroebe 1992, p.19-20; Stroebe and Schut 1999: 199). This idea was developed further by Bowlby (1980), who recommended a gradual process of acceptance over time, reorganising the attachment to the deceased to enable detachment and acceptance of physical (Stroebe and Schut 1999, p.198; and see Fraley & Shaver 1999 and Stroebe 2002 for appraisals of Bowlby's theories).

The previous ideals of 'moving on' were recognized by Klass and colleagues (1996) as unrealistic in many cases, and unrepresentative of how the bereaved actually grieve. Rather than moving on, it was recognized that there exists a need to remember the dead, and acknowledge their on-going affect on the living, accepting that death was not always the end of the perceived relationship between the living and the dead. It has also been argued that attachment still plays a role in understanding continuing bonds and grief; Field et al (2005) have analysed different phases of grief with relation to attachment and continuing bonds, from physically, fruitlessly searching for the deceased in the months following a death, to later acceptance, while still maintaining an emotional/psychological attachment to the deceased. The idea of retaining a presence of the dead has been explored in Walter's (1996) 'new model of grief', recognising the incorporation of the deceased into ongoing lives through their memory and biography. Walter writes that 'the purpose of grief is not to move on without those who have died, but to find a secure place for them' (1996, p.20).

Following on from theories of continuing bonds, Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2010) have suggested a Dual Process of Mourning, whereby the grieving process fluctuates between acceptance and loss, with the individual oscillating between loss and restoration, confronting the reality of their bereavement (Stroebe and Schut 1999). However, it is significant that the recognition of continuing bonds is incorporated into the Dual Process Model, and continues to be recognized by healthcare professionals as a relevant and useful means of understanding the grieving process. The role of objects in such relationships is also a means of further investigation, beyond the scope of this present study (though see Gibson 2008; Hallam and Hockey 2001), whether in the past, through the roles of objects recovered in graves, or in the present, through the use of objects owned or gifted by the dead in their remembrance. These theories may seem adequate for exploring contemporary grief (e.g. Valentine 2008), and have been used to explore memorialising behaviour (Woodthorpe 2011), however, they have not been used previously in attempts to interpret and understand the past. This paper proposes a new way forward for analysing funerary evidence, through considering the role of grief and mourning in the use of human remains. While this interpretation may not be applicable to all treatment of human remains, it should be considered in the process of understanding the remains from mortuary archaeology. The next section will review one particular archaeological case study, using evidence from the Neolithic of the Middle East, reconsidering the material in light of the concept of 'continuing bonds'.

The Ancient Near East: region and chronology

In archaeological terms, the Middle East is frequently and historically referred to as the Ancient Near East, and is a region which roughly spans modern-day Southeast

Turkey, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and to some extent, Iran, situated within southwest Asia. The modern country borders, or indeed the notion of the 'Near East', did not exist in ancient times, with the categories being modern concepts and short hand for archaeologists rather than actual entities in the past. Chronologically, the Neolithic spans from roughly 9,500 BC – 5,200 cal. BC. The period is further divided into phases, such as the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA), Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB), and Pottery Neolithic; again, the labels assigned are communication devices for archaeologists (Campbell 2007; Watkins 1992; Peltenburg 2004).

This region and period are regarded as laying the foundations for modern civilisation, originating from the Neolithic in the Middle East, although it was not always a straight-forward linear trajectory (for overviews of the region and period, see Kuijt and Goring-Morris 2002; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003; and relevant chapters in Steadman and McMahon (eds.) 2011; and Steiner and Killebrew (eds.) 2014). The period saw communities settling down into larger, more permanent settlements, often constructing monumental architecture for communal spaces, such as shrine areas at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2012) and Nevali Cori (Hauptmann 1999), and the large enclosures at Jerf el Ahmar (Stordeur 2000) and Wadi Faynan 16 (Finlayson et al 2009). Alongside more permanent settlement of the landscape (a process seen as beginning in the earlier Natuifan period. However, see Boyd (2006) for discussion on the problems of assuming continuity) came the adoption of agriculture, a slow process requiring change through generations, with, in reality, a mixed subsistence approach remaining prevalent, involving planted crops alongside the exploitation of natural resources, hunting and gathering.

People were also dealing with new materials and new technologies. During the PPNB specialised plaster manufacture increased, using lime plasters in architecture as well as in so-called 'ritual contexts', such as above burials or used in wall paintings (Garfinkel 1987; Clarke 2012). The use of pottery for vessels began around 7,000 BC (Nieuwenhuyse et al 2010) becoming more widespread by about 6,000 BC. Alongside pottery, there were changes in stone tool technology to suit the needs of agriculture (Shea 2013) and other demonstrations of highly-skilled crafting, including the creation of objects such as polished stone vessels, mirrors, and items of adornment (Healey et al (eds.) 2011 and chapters within), as well as the manufacture of figurines (Lesure 2012). Figurines demonstrate varying degrees of accuracy in their representation; some are clearly human, while many are more ambiguous in form, suggesting schematic representations rather than accurate portraits (Meskell and Nakamura 2008; Belcher 2014; Belcher and Croucher 2016; Croucher and Belcher in press; Daems 2010; Campbell and Daems in press).

During this period, it is possible to see an elaboration in what is often termed 'ritual behaviour' (Cauvin 2000 [1994]; Stordeur 2010) although the definition is not without its problems (Christensen and Warburton 2002). This often involves treatment of the dead (as will be discussed more fully in the next section), but also includes examples of rare plastered statues (including examples from Nahal Hemar cave, 'Ain Ghazal, and Jericho (see Moorey 2001: 33), and large stone monoliths at Göbekli (Schmidt 2012), Nevali Cori, and in the Urfa region (Hauptmann 1999), the latter often combining broadly anthropomorphised pillars, inscribed with animals, or combining human and animal features.

The mortuary evidence:

The mortuary evidence from the region and period provides a range of burial types and treatment of the dead (see Campbell and Green (eds.) 1995; Balkan et al 2008; Córdoba et al. 2008; Croucher 2012). Funerary practices included single and collective burials in a range of contexts, including: burial within or beneath houses; cemetery areas in abandoned areas of sites; secondary treatment of the body, such as at WF 16, with large fragments of crania stacked above a headless body (Finlayson et al 2009); and burial in or around communal buildings. Given the diversity of burial practices it is difficult to categorise a particular burial type as typical. Furthermore, many sites themselves contained a variety of burial types, such as at Tell Aswad, where there were plastered skulls, primary burials, secondary burials, and multiple interments (Stordeur et al 2006) and Yarim Tepe II where there were primary and secondary burials, as well as cremations (Campbell 2007-8). However, despite the many thousands of burials recovered, the evidence still does not represent entire populations, likely due to a combination of factors including preservation and taphonomic conditions, later disturbance, or alternative treatments of the dead not leaving archaeological traces.

The case study presented next, of plastered skulls, represents one type of burial during the PPNA and PPNB in the southern Levant, and reoccurring in the Pottery Neolithic in Anatolia; the burial of individuals beneath the floor of houses and the later treatment of their skulls. Not all houses contained burials, but where they do occur, they are usually covered over by a plaster floor, a common floor material for the time, though itself requiring skill and investment of labour. For some burials, this was not the final act of intervention, often followed by the retrieval of the skull, or the crania without the mandible (e.g. at Jericho (Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981) and 'Ain Ghazal, (Rollefson 2000)).

[insert figure 1 somewhere close to here]. Figure 1: Burial with cranium removed, 'Ain Ghazal, courtesy of Gary Rollefson

The skulls or crania were often later reburied, sometimes in caches with other skulls, and they evidenced varying treatment beforehand. Some were simply reburied without apparent further treatment (although see Bonogofsky 2001), while others were painted, plastered, or both (e.g. at Jericho, Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981, p.436), usually referred to as 'plastered skulls' (even though many are in fact crania rather than skulls) (see Table 1).

[insert table 1 somewhere close to here]

Plastered skulls are usually found in the Levantine region, dating to the PPNB, with around 90 excavated to date. The first examples were excavated from Jericho in the 1950s by Kathleen Kenyon, with a slow trickle of finds since. Seventy-two of the skulls have been reanalysed recently by Bonogofsky (2002, 2003, 2006a,b), whose work has revised the identification of sex and age-at-death for the skulls. While most examples are from the PPNB of the Levant, recently-excavated examples include some from the Pottery Neolithic around 2,000 years later and many hundreds of

kilometres away, with 13 plastered skulls recovered from Köşk Höyük (Özbek 2009), and a single plastered skull recovered from Çatalhöyük, cradled in the arms of an adult female burial (Hodder and Farid 2004). Further evidence suggests examples too from around 5,000 BC at the site of Arpachiyah. Yet unpublished, examples curated at the Natural History museum suggest the application of clay onto some examples (Molleson, pers comm).

The plaster, of lime, gypsum or mud, would be applied directly to the dry bone, recreating a face (Goren et al 2001). Often, a mandible would be modelled back onto the skull prior to plastering, to enable a more naturalistic facial shape, or where there is just the crania plastered the result is a shortened appearance, but nonetheless clearly recognisable as human. The plastering of the skulls would have been a specialised task, requiring skill in working plaster, as well as artistic abilities.

[insert figure 2 somewhere close to here] Figure 2. Plastered skulls from Tell Aswad, Courtesy of Danielle Stordeur.

Some examples are more naturalistic than others, with the skulls from Tell Aswad representing the most enigmatic and detailed representations excavated to date (figure 2). The latter examples include the details of eyelashes recreated with charcoal, as well as paint over the face to give a more flesh-like colour (Stordeur et al 2006, see Table 1). The painting of skulls often included application of flesh-like colours, in browns and pinks. Some, such as a few examples from Jericho, were also painted with features such as moustaches and tattoos/scarification, and some had stripes painted across their cranial vaults (Kurth and Röhrer-Ertl 1981, p.436). Cranial vaults are consistently clear from plaster, and were probably enhanced by wigs or headdresses of organic materials which do not survive in the archaeological record. Further evidence suggesting the use of wigs or headdresses comes from the cave site of Nahal Hemar, where six crania were recovered with a collagen substance in a net-like pattern adhered to the back of the cranium, indicating the attachment of some kind of hair-replacement material (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988, p. 53).

Most skulls were recovered from caches buried beneath floors or household courtyards, with the exception of Tell Aswad, which marked a burial site, and Kfar HaHoresh, where they were recovered from burial areas with the bones of a variety of animals, including gazelle and foxes, with one example found with the remains of a decapitated and headless, but otherwise complete and articulated gazelle (Horwitz and Goring-Morris 2004). The example from Çatalhöyük is also exceptional in its recovery in the grave of an adult (Hodder and Farid 2004).

It is difficult to conclude whether these skulls all reflect the same practices, beliefs and motivations, however, there were clearly some common underlying principles behind the practice. Some similarities can be observed among many of the skulls. This includes the incorporation of a base modelled onto the skulls, which would have enabled the display of the skulls in an upright position, seen on the examples from Tell Aswad, 'Ain Ghazal and the later site of Köşk Höyük (see Table 1). Many of the skulls evidence repeated replastering, or repeated painting, suggesting a use-life which included phases of use and upkeep, and there is evidence of wear and tear on many skulls, including those from Tell Aswad (one of which had broken and repaired

nose), 'Ain Ghazal, Kfar HaHoresh, and the later example of Çatalhöyük. The evidence suggests that the skulls were not kept pristine, but were used, handled, displayed, subject to handling and breakage, repair and reuse, before they were reburied (Croucher 2012, pp. 145, and see Williams 2009 discussion on displays of the dead). Others did not make it to the reburial stage, recovered from places of abandonment on the floors of disused buildings, such as at 'Ain Ghazal (Rollefson 2000: 171). There is also evidence that some skulls were subject to plaster removal, including the recovery of plastered faces from Ain Ghazal, which had been originally modelled onto skulls and then removed (Bonogofsky 2001). It may also be the case that many of the undecorated skulls had been previously plastered and their plaster removed, or were intended for further treatment before their neglect.

The head is usually the first part of the body to skeletonise (Clarke et al 1997; Janaway et al 2009), meaning the skull can be more easily removed, and often the mandible will have disarticulated and would remain, in most cases, undistributed with the remainder of the body in the grave (see figure 1). Although the exact time frame between burial and retrieval is not known, research conducted in Arizona suggests that this can happen between two and nine months following death for exposed or semi-exposed bodies, and typically occurs around six months, although the process can take many years longer for buried bodies (Galloway et al 1989). The exact time period depends on a number of factors, such as the time of exposure prior to burial and time of year. Rodriquez suggests that in a temperate environment, skeletonisation can easily occur between 1-3 years (1997) and if buried in a warm environment, can occur as rapidly as a body which has been left exposed in warmer conditions (Clarke et al 1997, p. 159; Knight 1991; Janaway et al 2009).

Traditional interpretations:
The first excavated plastered skulls were soon described as ancestors, and the premise arose that these were the skulls of male, elderly individuals venerated as ancestors (Kenyon 1957), leading to interpretations of ancestor cults (e.g. Cauvin 2000 [1994]; Bienert 1991; Wright 1998). The idea of the 'ancestor cult' was a popular one and still remains in currency today; however, the excavation of further skulls has provided new understandings of the phenomena. The idea of ancestor veneration is not necessarily problematic (although see Whitley 2002). However, the assumption was that these represented elder male individuals, with an argument that teeth were extracted post-mortem to facilitate a more aged appearance (Arensburg & Hershkovitz 1989; Strouhal 1973). Following a reassessment of the skulls, Bonogofsky overturned these assumptions, demonstrating a lack of evidence for tooth removal (2002) and recognising that only 36 % (26 of 72) were clearly male, and that the skulls included younger individuals (19%) (2006, table 2), thus problematizing the assumption of elder male ancestors (Bonogofsky 2003). These findings have also been mirrored by Benz's study of skulls from Jericho (with the study of all separated skulls, not just plastered examples), who noted a predominance in the selection and later disposition of the skulls of young women and children (Benz 2010: 254).

Following Bonogofsky's discoveries, new interpretations have been made of the plastered skulls. These have now tended to focus on ideas of societal elites or social cohesion, rather than elder, male ancestors. Rollefson (2000,pp.184) has argued that the skulls, given their limited number, must represent elites in society, those that were carefully selected for this treatment, perhaps with their status deriving from a position

of ritual leader. Other interpretations include Kuijt's (2000, 2008) argument that the plastering and reburial of skulls represents communal acts aimed at social cohesion, masking inequalities through access to communal ritual activities. Kuijt has argued that the skulls would have fallen out of individual memory within a couple of generations, and become ancestors (2008, pp.174). However, this does not account for different understandings of oral generational memory, which often extend much further, even if potentially loosing accuracy through time (and see Walter 2015, p.218). The prospect of head-hunting has been suggested for the skulls (e.g. Adams 2005; Testart 2008). However, this has been broadly rejected, with little evidence for warfare or violent behaviour (Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris 2009; Hodder 2005, 2009; Özdoğan 2009).

More nuanced studies are emerging, which trace the changing patterns of plastered skulls through time (see Benz 2010). It is possible that the skulls were chosen for plastering following selection much earlier, even at birth, suggested through the observation of artificial cranial modification on some skulls. Cranial modification involves the binding of the head during infancy, resulting in a permanently altered cranial shape (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1998; Croucher 2006; Daems and Croucher 2007; Lorentz 2008; Molleson and Campbell 1995). Recent radiography and CT scanning of a plastered skull in the British Museum revealed modification which was not visible with the naked eye (Fletcher et al 2014, 2008), while some other skulls are more noticeably modified, such as an example in the Ashmolean in Oxford (see figure 3). This raises the tempting interpretation that selection during life dictated plastering at death. However, as the general numbers of skulls modified as a percentage of the population is unknown it is currently difficult to understand how representative or unusual the practice of cranial modification was, limiting our interpretation of a direct link between cranial modification and plastering. Nonetheless, the suggestion does represent a possible motivation in the choice of skulls for plastering. Below, I propose a different approach to the evidence, not necessarily excluding the importance of cranial modification on social elites, but suggesting that motivations may have additionally been influenced by individual relationships and circumstances at death, affecting how the dead were treated.

[insert figure 3 somewhere close to here]. Figure 3: Plastered skull from Jericho showing artificial cranial modification. Courtesy of Ashmolean Museum.

Continuing bonds as a new perspective:
As discussed above, plastered skulls are often interpreted as evidence of ancestor veneration, or seen as reflecting social hierarchy (or attempts to mask inequality). However, these interpretations could be missing a basic factor influencing treatment of the dead: loss, bereavement and mourning practices.

Contemporary literature, particularly theories of continuing bonds, offer a different perspective, potentially shedding light on these practices, highlighting potential physical evidence of perceived relationships between the living and the dead, and the continued importance of the dead in the lives of the living.

Aside from the relevance of theories of continuing bonds for modern western societies, evidence of comparable experiences may lie behind many cultures in various times and places through history. Different vocabulary may be used, and

different actions taken, but for many cultures, there is a belief that the dead do not truly leave, but continue to exist in different ways, and have an influence on the lives of their living descendants.

Continuing bonds between the living and the dead are manifested in a variety of ways, by different people in different societies across the world. For some, the link is a spiritual or ideological one, for others, material objects or even parts of the dead are important, and even individuals who state they do not believe in an afterlife will still attest to some kind of perceived presence of the dead in their lives. Some cultures, such as the Karanga, Zimbabwe, believe that death is not the end, but merely a transformation, from one type of existence to another (Aschwanden 1987, p.212), and for many, the dead continue to have agency and affect the living (Straight 2006, and see Walter in press, Howarth 2000), and the living and dead are frequently perceived as coexisting (e.g. Whaley 1981). Some of our earliest literature, from the Epics of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia, describe the dead as needing to be fed and remembered in order for them to have a positive affect on the living (Richardson 2007, p.203). There is archaeological and ethnographic evidence of the importance of the head in various times and places (see, for instance, Armit (2012) for the Iron Age in Britain, Talalay (2004) for the Neolithic Anatolia and Greece, Croucher (2006) for the Neolithic Near East, Rosaldo's research on the importance of the head in Borneo (1980), and Hoskin's (1996) edited volume on headhunting). There are also mythical accounts recalling communication between the living and the dead via the severed head of Bran the Blessed in Celtic Mythology (Thomson de Grummond, p. 337) and Celtic mythology on the head is further discussed in Armit (2012). For others, physical reminders of the dead mediate relationships between the living and the dead, as has been argued for Maori preserved heads (Te Awekotuu 2007), or for bone ossuaries (Koudounaris 2011). Nigel Barley reports a Torajan House where 'Granny' was kept wrapped in a cloth bundle, where she had been 'sleeping' for three years, believed not to die until she left the house (Barley 1995, p.54). In our recent past, photographs of the corpses of the dead, especially children, were kept and displayed in Victorian homes and hair made into jewellery and ornaments. And many today still find comfort in retaining the ashes of loved ones close by, or even made into jewellery or incorporated into tattoo ink (Heessels, Poots and Venbrux 2012; Fowler in prep). For many, the continuing relationship is marked by other physical reminders and actions, whether through objects that were made by or had belonged to the dead, or were gifts from the dead. For others, repeating favourite walks or other activities serves to maintain a bond between the living and the dead (Walter 1996). When viewed in light of theories of continuing bonds, as discussed above, such actions may seem more understandable. Field et al (2005, p.284) recognise continuing bonds often involve the dead becoming important role models, leaving a lasting impact and forming an integral component of the bereaved's autobiography. Cultural and spiritual beliefs may further reinforce continuing bonds, through a belief in the afterlife or existence of the soul beyond death (Field et al 2005, p.293).

The question posed here is whether the plastering of skulls could reflect comparable themes, such as a desire to keep the dead close to the living, for them to remain influential and still play a role in the lives of the living. The evidence suggests that many (although not all) of the skulls were linked to the household (Kuijt 2008; Benz 2012). Most were reburied beneath house floors or courtyards, as well as the close links with the dead evident through the original burial beneath houses. The plastered

skulls were actively used and displayed, not carefully curated so much as handled, suggesting place and use within more everyday, rather than special, contexts (Croucher 2012, pp. 143). The skulls were also built for display, with bases enabling them to 'see' and be seen by the viewer.

The skulls could be evidence of a desire to retain the dead within the realms of the living. However, it is still notable that only a small number of the deceased were treated in this way. The motivation for such treatment may lie in the age and circumstance of death, potentially with those perceived as dying too soon (a topic explored in Croucher in prep, and see Benz 2012). This is a concept seen with roadside memorials today, where it is the tragic and sudden deaths that provoke the most memorialisation (see MacConville 2010 and references within). Rather than marking the deaths of leaders, or the use of mortuary rituals to display or mask inequalities, the plastering of skulls may have been a reaction to particular deaths. While the cause of death cannot be determined, their age and circumstance of death may have been significant contributory factors in the choice for plastering of skulls and their curation and use among the living.

Perhaps there was a desire to retain the dead for longer, providing a tangible and real bond with the dead, in this case, with the actual physical remains of the dead. This may not be so dissimilar to the placement of urns on mantelpieces today, or the cremation jewellery or tattoos described earlier, where the dead continue to have a presence and meaning through their physical remains. Perhaps the plastered skulls were perceived of as continuing their lives beyond death in the locales where they have lived, and may have been particularly important during specific times and events in the lives of the household. They may have been consulted, perceived of as being benevolent or wise through death, or their presence may simply have brought comfort and supported the everyday memorialisation of the deceased. Rather than theories which revolve around status and hierarchy, or masking social inequalities, this could instead be evidence of a form of continuing bonds, and a desire to keep the dead present for longer.

While it is clear that only a proportion of the dead had their skulls retrieved and plastered, the demonstration on a limited number of the population does not invalidate the theory of grief and mourning as playing a role in their selection and treatment. As has already been highlighted, there was not one unifying method of body disposal, and there are likely to be many varying and individual motivations and reasons. Perhaps grief and mourning were not the only requirements for the plastering of skulls, and aspects of importance of status or chosen ancestors were also part of the motivation behind the plastering and curation of skulls. There may have also been other factors, such as their skills and abilities in understanding or communicating with their environments, understanding new technologies in a changing material world, or through their story-telling or narrative abilities, motivations that are sadly lost to us.

In seeking more complicated motivations relating to social hierarchy, archaeologists may have overlooked more simplistic interpretations: that these practices may have been related to particular individuals and may represent grief and mourning practices.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the use of contemporary theories to understand the distant past is controversial. However, there may be particular moments in time when such explanations can aid our understanding of the material. It is proposed here that the phenomena of plastered skulls from the Neolithic of the Middle East is one such time and place where concepts of grief and mourning may have been a prominent contributory factor, enabling the living to keep the dead tangibly close, consult them, and cherish them, beyond death. While this may not have been the single or sole motivation, the role of emotional explanations for archaeological evidence should not be ruled out (see Tarlow 2000; Harris and Sorensen 2010; Williams 2007; Croucher, in prep).

In reality, as with bereavement theories today, individuals deviate and do not follow neat models; even in contemporary society, there are many opposing or conflicting theories of grief, which in themselves drive differing bereavement counselling practices (Bonanno and Kaltman1999; Greenstreet 2004; Middleton-Green, pers. Comm). Rarely do individual cases align neatly with models of progression through grief; rather, models are used to provide a general framework for understanding. Likewise, it is entirely feasible that there were many different motivations behind treatment of the dead in the past, one of which may relate to what we would today describe as continuing bonds, or as fitting in to part of the dual process of grieving, or the 'new model of grief'. It is therefore hoped that this analysis will prompt other interpretations of mortuary archaeology in exploring the role of grief and mourning in their analyses. It also demonstrates the complex and dynamic relationship between our understandings of the contemporary and the past.

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