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2018 *Beyond Death: The Tale of a Neolithic Society and the Study of an Outdoor Communal Cemetery at Tell el-Kerkh, Northwest Syria*. PhD thesis, University of Tsukuba. Supervisors: Akira Tsuneki, Yutaka Miyake, Shigeo Yamada, and Yoko Taniguchi.

Abstract

People in Near Eastern Neolithic societies buried their dead in various locations. Most often the deceased were buried within the settlement boundaries and associated with certain building structures and in courtyards. Through the long process of transition into agricultural societies and settled-farmer villages, major changes related to social structure, funeral practices and the role of the deceased in the life of the living were notable. Various complicated funeral practices including the disposal of the dead and the manipulation of the remains suggests that the inhabitants were involved in spirituality. Further, the relationship between the deceased and living influenced the spiritual dimension of human societies. Thus, the deceased were always buried close to the living or interred in structures that were used in daily life suggesting a spatial tie between the living and space.

Throughout the long period of development in the ancient societies from the hunting- gathering nomadic way of life in the Natufian period to the settled farming way of life in the Neolithic period, the location of graves and the interment pattern varied. In this research, a number of sites were selected from each period in order to ascertain the spatial context of the grave location in the settlement and the role of the dead in the lives of the living. Analyses have shown that the burials in the Natufian period took place in the fill of structures or were associated with dwellings and occasionally in abandoned houses. Further, some sites were used exclusively for burials before the construction of the settlement such as Hilazon Tachtit and Raqefet Cave, which indicate that the grave played a role in the settlement foundation. In contrast, the burials in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period were tied to the settlement's residential areas and took place in some instances in actively used structures. However, non- residential structures bearing religious meaning were also used as the final place for burials. Hence, a spatial relationship between the venue where the communal activities took place and the burials is obvious. Further, the deceased were buried in close vicinity to the residential structures where ritual practices were undertaken. The human remains were ultimately placed in their final deposit and were in general associated with building structures. Thus, the building structure played a role by linking the living to their ancestral lineages indicating a place-based identity.

Excavations in the PN period have revealed a completely altered image of life ways in PPN societies. The northern Levantine sites revealed the existence of cemeteries for the first time during this period, which indicates a major transition in this period. In this context, the excavations at Tell el-Kerkh in north-western Syria revealed a unique outdoor communal Pottery Neolithic cemetery. This cemetery was utilized for inhumation of the deceased regardless of age and sex. A limited number of individuals were buried in the structure after it was abandoned.

The transition in the burial location during the PN period and the major changes related to the funeral practices and the concept of expressing of identity demonstrates a high degree of social complexity. The common custom of interring the deceased in association with buildings, widely prevalent in the PPN, became less obvious. It is strongly argued that the houses in the PN became increasingly related with economic activities rather than ancestor-based rituals. The spatial relationship between the dead and the location of the grave in the PN period is linked to particular places that formed a bridge connecting the generations to each other. These locations were in close vicinity, in active-use or abandoned houses or on the designated land that allowed communal sharing activities and construction of a collective identity.

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