In the Eye of the Beholder: Mousterian and Natufian Burials in the Levant
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to reinvigorate an evaluation of what has been learned ethnographically and theoretically (as in Lévi-Strauss 1949 or Héritier 1976, 1981) about kinship and marriage systems. It reconnects the approaches of two worlds—French and Anglo-Saxon—whose very different perspectives on the study of kinship have to date precluded consensus on theories and on the relation between theoretical models and empirical data.

Tufté (1983, 1990) and others have shown the importance of visualization in communication. The same is true in the development of scientific specialties. Klovda\(h\) 1981 argues that network analysis and its concepts—centrality, reachability, role position, clique, flow, etc.—would not have developed as they did without graph theoretic images and measures. Conceptually, it is no small matter that kinship nets can be represented as graphs. Perhaps we are in a better position than before for a foundational reconceptualization in the analysis of kinship.

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In the Eye of the Beholder: Moustierian and Natufian Burials in the Levant

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The issue of intentional burial in the Middle Palaeolithic is a subject that has lately received much attention in the literature. In considering this question here, it is not our intention to suggest new or better criteria for identifying intentional burials. Rather, we attempt to demonstrate that application of the existing criteria is biased by preconceptions and differential treatment of biological and cultural variables.

The recent controversy regarding behavioural and biological changes in Upper Pleistocene hominids involves a number of distinct issues (summarized by Dibble and Chase 1990), of which the most important for our discussion is the problem of symbolic behaviour in Middle Palaeolithic hominids (Bar-Yosef 1989, Chase 1991, Chase and Dibble 1987, Lindly and Clark 1990) and especially the practice of burial (Binford 1968, Chase and
Dibble 1987, Gargett 1989, Smirnov 1989, to name but a few. Most of the excavators of Levantine Middle Palaeolithic sites have identified intentional burials on the basis of field observations (see Gargett 1989 for references and Bar-Yosef et al. 1986, Rightmire 1984, Vandermeersch 1981). However, later overviews of this issue have stressed the need for more exacting criteria for such identification.

As Binford (1971:16) has noted, mortuary behaviour is both spiritual and material in nature. The ethnographic literature [Binford 1971, Huntington and Metcalf 1979 and references therein] amply demonstrates the existence of nonmaterial mortuary rites (songs, music, dances, etc.) as well as of a class of rituals related to the actual treatment of the body and its immediate surroundings. In most instances the latter culminate in either primary or secondary burials which are potentially visible archaeologically [O'Shea 1984:2]. It is for this reason that we concentrate on the material criteria for the identification of intentional burials.

In order to examine the attitudes of current research to the problem of Middle Palaeolithic burials, we have chosen to compare interpretations of Epi-Palaeolithic Natufian burials with interpretations of the controversial Levantine Mousterian ones. This choice is based on several considerations:

1. The Natufian is chronologically well defined and its core area readily recognized [Belfer-Cohen 1989]. It is a relatively recent phenomenon (12,500—10,200 years B.P.) the cultural complexity of which is easily discerned in the archaeological record. Its population consists of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and the burials attributed to it are unquestionably recognized as intentional. Consequently, treatment of Natufian material is conceptually easier than that of earlier material.

2. The Natufian and the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic are separated by at least 30,000 years [Marks 1983; see Mellars and Tixier 1989 for possible early dates of the Middle-to-Upper-Palaeolithic transition]. The gap, however, is not merely chronological. Only a few burials, besides isolated skeletal fragments, are known from Upper Palaeolithic and Epi-Palaeolithic occupations. These burials include the Atlitian female skeleton from Nahal Ein-Gev I [without radiometric dates and culturally dated to the late Upper Palaeolithic [Arensburg 1977]], the skeleton of a male from the early Kebaran at Ohalo II [19,000 years B.P. [Nadel and Hershkovitz 1991]], the burial of a woman in a Kebaran hut at Ein Gev I [ca. 16,000 years B.P. [Arensburg and Bar-Yosef 1973]], and two fragmentary skeletons from the Geometric Kebaran at Neve David [ca. 15,000 years B.P. [Kaufman 1989]]. Several burnt skeletons were reported from the Kebaran occupation at Kebra Cave, but no further information was provided [Turville-Petre 1932].

Although *H. sapiens sapiens* inhabited the Levant during the Upper Palaeolithic and Epi-Palaeolithic, very few items of a symbolic nature have been discovered from this time-span, none of them associated with burials (Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef 1981, Hovers 1990 and references therein). Thus a comparison of the Middle Palaeolithic and the Natufian is somewhat problematic, as there is little or no inherent chronological or contextual continuity between them.

Most scholars agree that the earliest human remains recovered anywhere in the world do not represent intentional burial. At some point in time, however, intentional burial evidently entered the human behavioural repertoire. Several scholars have attempted to establish criteria for the recognition of this mortuary behaviour.

The original excavators of the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic sites routinely used the skeleton’s *state of articulation* as the criterion for identifying burials [e.g., McCown 1937]. They never elaborated on the point, apparently because it seemed self-evident. Later researchers have carried this attitude even farther, often neglecting the state of articulation. Binford (1968:140—41), for one, proposes the very broad criterion of the presence of an excavated grave and/or an arrangement of the body or body parts which seem to preclude natural agency. Presumably, the last part of this sentence also relates to articulation. Harrold (1980:197), in contrast, regards as intentional burials only those cases furnishing “some strong positive indication to the effect, such as strongly-flexed body position or unequivocal association with a burial trench or grave goods.” It should be stressed that isolated skeletal fragments may represent remains both of disturbed intentional burials and of random, natural deposition. Archaeologically, distinction between the two may be difficult if not impossible. Thus skeletal articulation remains the single unchallenged criterion for intentional burial.

In a recent summary of the subject, Smirnov (1989a:212) proposes “the presence of an artificially created or closed structure [as] . . . a prerequisite of intentional burial.” He maintains that since the use of a burial structure [e.g., pits and hearths or mounds and stoneworks] frequently results in better preservation of the remains, a relatively well-preserved condition may be taken to indicate an intentional burial. Smirnov regards body position—whether a skeleton is found in a flexed, semiflexed, or extended position—as a significant criterion, albeit difficult to apply [Smirnov 1989a,b; see Villa 1989 for an emphasis on the significance of strongly flexed skeletal remains]. He points out that most researchers are skeptical about the possibility of distinguishing intentional grave goods from other objects merely forming part of the assemblage [see Chase and Dibble 1987:272–75; Lindly and Clark 1990:235—37] but nevertheless considers grave goods as an indication of [although not a prerequisite for] intentional burial.

The proponents of these criteria admit to some problems in their application in archaeological fieldwork, to say nothing of the fact that some of the relevant variables may be interpreted in several ways. Thus, Gargett (1989) suggests that the pits in which remains of Middle Palaeolithic European Neanderthals have been found should be interpreted as resulting from natural phenomena. While this view has been widely rejected on several grounds, it serves to illustrate the problematic nature of
the criteria: they appear both too nebulous and too specific and are by no means unequivocal. The various critiques, however, have never offered any alternatives. Because these criteria are claimed to be cross-cultural physical attributes [Smirnov 1989a], they may legitimately be employed to examine both Natufian and Levantine Middle Palaeolithic skeletal remains.

Considered a transitional archaeological entity, the Natufian links Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer groups and Neolithic agricultural societies. Although it existed for only ca. 2,000 years, a short time-span compared with that of the preceding Palaeolithic cultures, the Natufian is characterized by many unique features, prominent among which are communal burial grounds [Bar-Yosef 1983, Henry 1989, Belfer-Cohen 1991]. Natufian human remains have been found almost exclusively in base camps located in the classical core area of the Natufian geographical distribution (fig. 1), i.e., the Galilee–Mt. Carmel–Judean Hills regions and, to a lesser extent, the Jordan Rift Valley [see Belfer-Cohen 1989, Byrd 1989]. Some 417 individuals have been recovered from the various sites (Belfer-Cohen, Shepartz, and Arensburg n.d.), providing a rare opportunity to study a pre-agricultural prehistoric population and investigate the ways in which it dealt with its dead. Most of the data presented below are, unless indicated otherwise, derived from the site reports of a few core-area campsites, including el-Wad [Garrod and Bate 1937], Nahal Oren [Stekelis and Yizraeli 1963], Hayonim Cave [Belfer-Cohen 1988a, b] and Eynan [Perrot, Ladiray, and Solviers-Massei 1988].

In general it is evident that human remains were deposited apart from or adjacent to living areas. Thus at any given point in time the dead and the living did not mingle. The scattered human bones found in occupational deposits probably represent previous, disturbed graves. The graves consisted of pits, either shallow or deep, only rarely revetted with stones or slabs. Occasionally the outline of a burial pit was preserved, but sometimes even that was obscured by on-going digging. Since there was considerable building activity in the Natufian, there has been a natural temptation to assume grave construction. Most of the architecture that at one time was attributed to burials has, however, eventually been shown to have either post- or predated them. For example, most of the Late Natufian burials at Eynan were recovered from pits dug in between the various constructed features. Perrot, Ladiray, and Solviers-Massei [1989] speculate that these pits were originally designated for some domestic purpose and their use as burial places was secondary. The considerable number of similar pits left empty seems to support this view.

Only very rarely were tombs constructed of limestone slabs or such slabs used to cover graves [e.g., Hayonim Cave, graves I, III, V, and IX; el-Wad, H.12 and 21; Erq el-Ahmar [Neuville 1951]]. On rare occasions, the burials themselves were covered [el-Wad, H.63; Eynan, H.15 and 25]. Stones were found placed under the body or head at several sites (el-Wad, Eynan, Nahal Oren, Hayonim Cave, Shukba, and Kebara), but the number of burials in which stones undoubtedly formed part of the burial itself rather than of the grave fill is very small [a dozen or so]. It has been suggested that the Natufians held down their dead by placing stones on top of them; according to Garrod this represented a special ceremony which had not taken place in children’s burials. It seems, however, that at least at el-Wad the stones crushing the skeletons originated in the eventual reopening and refilling of the graves. That children were always found in primary contexts implies that their graves had never been reopened. All other graves were, as a rule, packed with cobbles or simply with earth, to the great detriment of the skeletons.

Rarely, stone circles were erected around the graves to mark and/or to protect them [e.g., graves III and IV, Hayonim Cave]. At Eynan, grave 23 was marked by four big stones found at the bottom of the pit. According to Perrot, one of these stones had been placed vertically in the grave and could be seen above the surface. Sealed

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**Fig. 1.** The Levant, showing sites mentioned in the text. Triangles, Mousterian sites; circles, Natufian sites; W.H. 27, Wadi Hammeh 27. Elevation contours in 300-m intervals.
Graves were marked at Nahal Oren and el-Wad (H.60 and group H.57) by deep "stonepipes," regarded by Garrod (1957) as totem poles and by Stekelis and Yizraeli (1963) as a means of communication with the dead. At Nahal Oren and Hayonim Cave, small cup marks were drilled in one of the stones above or beside the grave. Special installations in cemeteries or burial grounds are scarce. It has been claimed that the large fireplace (1.2 m in diameter) encircled by limestone slabs at Nahal Oren represents the remains of an "eternal flame" associated with the surrounding inhumations [Stekelis and Yizraeli 1963]. Five basins found at el-Wad were, according to Garrod, associated with mortuary practices, and offerings of some kind may have been placed in them. At the same time, in most sites new graves were dug without regard to earlier ones, often disturbing and in some cases totally destroying them.

The burials themselves show considerable diversity, both in burial patterns and in grave goods. Body position varies in primary burials from extended through semi-flexed or loosely flexed to tightly flexed. Skeletons were discovered lying on either side, on the back, in a kneeling position, with heads facing east, west, south, or north, and with hands stretched along the body, folded on the chest, placed in front of the face, resting on the pelvis, etc. No correlations were found between age or gender and time period or burial position other than a constant positive correlation between extended burial position and Early Natufian date [as in el-Wad and Hayonim Cave]. Towards the later stages of the Natufian sequence a novel practice seems to have been introduced, namely, the separation of the skull from the rest of the skeleton—a custom better documented and more common in the succeeding Neolithic cultures. Burials are single as well as multiple, the latter containing from three to seven individuals. The communal burials contained every possible combination of males, females, and children. The skeletons were placed either side by side (grave VII, Hayonim Cave) or one on top of the other (H.25 and 27 in grave IX, Hayonim Cave). Secondary burials were either separated from primary ones or mixed with them. It is practically impossible to characterize the typical Natufian burial. For instance, while it seems that Garrod and Neuville were correct in claiming that single burials were as a rule more numerous during the Late Natufian, the situation at Eynan, where more communal graves were unearthed from the Late Natufian [Perrot, Ladiray, and Solvriers-Massei 1988], is obviously the reverse.

Grave goods are rather rare, the common ones being ornaments (head decorations, necklaces, bracelets, and belts), mostly composed of Dentalium shells and bone pendants and occasionally of partridge tibio-tarsus beads and perforated wolf canines [Hayonim Cave, el-Wad, Erq el-Ahmar]. At el-Wad, where nine decorated burials were recovered [Belfer-Cohen, Shepartz, and Arensburg n.d.], the principal adornments were Dentalium head-dresses and necklaces. The head-dresses were differently styled and obviously individual. In one case, the skeleton had strings of shells on the right upper arm and the right thigh bone which may have formed part of a garment [Garrod and Bate 1937]. Decorated burials were recovered from only three other sites [ten at Eynan, four at Hayonim Cave, and one from Erq el-Ahmar], though ornaments were retrieved also from disturbed graves at Wadi Hammeh 27 [Edwards et al. 1988] and at Hayonim Cave [Belfer-Cohen 1988b]. No correlation between age or gender and presence or type of decoration was found in any of the sites which have yielded decorated burials (see table 1). The only consistent observation concerning the decorated burials is that they all belong to the Early Natufian, even though ornaments were recovered also from Late Natufian sites.

The direct relationships of other items, possibly grave goods, to the burials is rarely clear, but at Hayonim Cave a bone dagger ca. 30 cm long was found under the right arm of a woman lying in a supine position. Other possible grave goods include a limestone human head and a turtle carapace from el-Wad [Garrod and Bate 1937] and some gazelle horn cores from Eynan [Perrot, Ladiray, and Solvriers-Massei 1988]. Ochre lumps were recovered from graves at Eynan and in association with the disturbed skeleton at Wadi Hammeh 27 [Edwards et al. 1988]. Seven horse teeth recovered from the communal grave in Erq el-Ahmar were likewise considered burial offerings [Neuville 1951]. However, less than 10% of all Natufian burials contain any kind of grave offering [Belfer-Cohen, Shepartz, and Arensburg n.d.].

Another outstanding phenomenon observed in the Natufian burials is the joint interment of humans and dogs, though only three such instances have been reported to date—from Eynan [Davis and Valla 1978] and from the Hayonim Terrace (F. Valla, personal communication).

All the Middle Palaeolithic human remains in the Levant were associated with Mousterian lithic assemblages originating in cave sites (table 2). Morphologically, these remains include both an archaic type (bearing a resemblance to the contemporaneous Western European Neanderthal population) and anatomically modern humans [Arensburg and Belfer-Cohen n.d.]. Skeletal of anatomically modern humans are dated at

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Adolescents</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>el-Wad</td>
<td>9(6)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eynan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayonim Cave</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erq el-Ahmar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Garrod (1936–37) describes six decorated individuals; three additional cases were identified in the Harvard Peabody Museum collections.

*Perrot, Ladiray, and Solvriers-Massei (1988) view the H43 foetus decorated with a Dentalium string as a grave offering.
TABLE 2

Distribution of Middle Palaeolithic Human Remains in Levantine Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>N “Burials”</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amud</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suzuki and Takai (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kebara</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bar-Yosef et al. (1986, 1988) Smith and Arensburg (1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skhul</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>McCown (1937), Smirnov (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabun</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tillier et al. (1988), Garrod and Bate (1937)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanidar [late]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Trinkaus (1983), Solecki (1989), Tillier et al. (1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qafzeh Cave [Vandermeersch 1981 and references therein] to ca. 92,000–115,000 years B.P. [Schwarcz et al. 1988, Valladas et al. 1988] and at Skhul Cave [Garrod and Bate 1937] to 81,000 ± 15,000 years B.P. [Stringer et al. 1989]. The morphologically archaic remains from the Levant are dated to 60,000–48,000 years B.P. [Bar-Yosef et al. 1986; Schwarcz et al. 1989; Valladas et al. 1987] or as yet undated [Amud [Suzuki and Takai 1970], Shanidar [Solecki 1971, Trinkaus 1983]]. Recent dates for Tabun Cave [Grün, Stringer, and Schwarcz 1991] suggest an age of 166,000 years B.P. for the earliest Mousterian layer. Accordingly, the Middle Palaeolithic of the Levant may be taken to encompass at least 120,000 years [166,000–45,000 years B.P.] taking into account the dates of the transitional occurrences at Boker Tachtit and at Ksar Akil in Lebanon [Mellars and Tixier 1989].

The number of burials suggested to have occurred at each site was inferred from the original site reports and later syntheses, the principal criterion being the degree of articulation [Tillier et al. 1988, Tillier 1990]. In some cases the remains recovered were too fragmentary to suggest intentional burials. For example, at Skhul [McCown 1937:103–5] ten instances were described as skeletons in various states of preservation, while other bones were simply identified as isolated remains of six individuals. In only seven of the ten skeletons, however, was there any evidence of natural articulation, and McCown suggested that intentional burial could be strongly argued for only in the case of Skhul I, IV, V, and VII. These reservations have not always been heeded in succeeding syntheses. Thus, Harrold [1980:200, table 1] observes only the former reservation and refers to seven burials there, whereas Smirnov [1989a:218] completely disregards McCown’s remarks and considers all ten instances burials.

At Qafzeh, in contrast, only those skeletons mentioned as burials by the excavator [8, 11, 15, 25, and 9 + 10] have been included in later syntheses, but at least one other case should be so considered—Qafzeh 13, a fetus, found unrelated to any other skeletal remains. The number of burials found at this site should therefore be revised to seven.

Several articulated skeletons were reported from Shanidar Cave, but additional evidence suggests that some of them may actually have been covered by rockfall (which was, presumably, also the cause of death). Where this was the case [e.g., Shanidar 1], no claim could be made for intentional burial [Trinkaus 1983:19; Solecki 1989; for a review of the status of the Shanidar remains see Tillier et al. 1988:131].

Mortuary treatment of a sort has been implied in two additional cases: McCown [1937:98] states that the remains of Skhul II “might well be ascribed to their having been dropped in a small heap, to be gradually buried by the accumulating terrace,” implicitly suggesting some deliberate handling of the corpse although not necessarily its interment. Another case in which such treatment may be inferred is Kebara 2 [Bar-Yosef et al. 1986; see also Weiner and Goldberg 1990].

In all but one case single individuals were encountered, the exception being Qafzeh 9 + 10, found in a position suggesting communal interment—possibly of mother and child [Vandermeersch 1969; 1981:32, fig. 8].

 Orientations of the skeletons and their locations within the caves vary considerably and suggest no particular preferred direction (for a summary see Smirnov 1989a, in particular figs. 5 and 6). The same is true of body positions: some of the skeletons were lying on their sides (right or left) while others were positioned on their backs; they were generally either semiflexed or strongly flexed, but extended positions have also been noted [Smirnov 1989a:fig. 7].

Certain spatial arrangements have been taken for many years to be associated with burial rites. Such may be the case with Kebara 1 [Smith and Arensburg 1977], near which were recovered three large stones and a rhinoceros tooth [Schick and Stekelis 1977:103*]. Unfortunately, no detailed sections or plans of the burial were ever presented. Smirnov [1989a:216] suggests that Skhul III and Shanidar 1, 2, and 9 also display burial features, namely, the hearths located beneath them.

Clearly recognizable burial pits have rarely been reported from Levantine Middle Palaeolithic sites, Kebara 2 being an exception [Bar-Yosef et al. 1988: fig. 1]. However, the mere absence of stratigraphic evidence for pits does not necessarily denote their nonexistence [see Villa 1989]. Thus, McCown [1937] suggested that Skhul IV and V had been interred in shallow pits the contours of which were difficult to follow during excavation. The burial of Shanidar 4 may also be an example of a pit occurrence [Solecki 1989]. The brecciated nature of the Qafzeh sediments would render impossible the recognition of pits even if any existed [Tillier 1990:23], while the description of Amud I is confined to the skeleton itself [Sakura 1970].

Grave goods are proposed to have occurred in two cases: Skhul V, which had the mandible of a wild boar in its hands [McCown 1937:104], and Qafzeh 11, with
which fallow deer antlers were associated [Vandemeersch 1970]. Accepting Leroi-Gourhan’s [1975] pollen analysis for Shanidar 4, the flowers assumed to accompany it should also be considered as a grave offering. While Chase and Dibble [1987:275] have accepted the former two instances as genuine offerings, Lindly and Clark [1990:235] have argued for intrusion by post-depositional processes in the first case and claimed that in both caves the faunal remains may well have formed part of the occupants’ dietary residue rather than actual grave offerings. The latter two arguments have been rejected by Bar-Yosef, Lieberman, and Shea [1990; see also Stringer 1990]. Stone tools placed in the grave with the deceased [e.g., Skhul IV] may be another type of offering. This phenomenon, however, has not been reported from anywhere else in the Levant. In the cases of Amud I [Sakura 1970:118–22, fig. VII-2] and Kebara 1 and 2 [Smith and Arensburg 1977, Bar-Yosef et al. 1986] it is evident that whatever flint tools were retrieved near the skeleton were indeed merely incidental finds rather than genuine grave goods.

The data presented above demonstrate the differential approach in the current literature to the issue of intentional burials in the Natufian and the Mousterian. While Natufian interments are unquestionably referred to as burials, indicative of complex symbolic behaviour, the notion of intentional burials in the Middle Palaeolithic continues to be controversial. Admittedly, most of the arguments for natural as opposed to intentional inhumation rest on the geomorphological data presented in the various site reports. It seems to us, however, that the rejection of the notion of Mousterian burials is symptomatic of a more general tendency towards “dehumanization” of the Middle Palaeolithic hominids. This attitude reflects a refusal to accept the possibility that hominids other than H. sapiens sapiens reached the level of symbolic sophistication expressed, among other things, in intentional burials. We believe that what amounts to an unconscious bias against Middle Palaeolithic hominids in general and morphologically archaic humans in particular is a “prime mover” in the debate over the validity of Middle Palaeolithic burials. This is clearly manifested when both Natufian and Mousterian data sets are examined with the same criteria.

The Natufian data demonstrate a surprising absence of patterning with regard to burial practices—a lack of correlation between relevant variables [e.g., gender, age, number of individuals per grave, body position, or presence of grave goods] and only a few time-correlated trends. Decorated burials are found only in the Early Natufian, and skull separation is clearly a Late Natufian phenomenon, but these phenomena appear only sporadically and are therefore less significant for cross-cultural comparison.

In summary, the most that can be said about the common Natufian burial is that it consists of a flexed skeleton lying in a shallow pit, without grave goods or decorations. Such a description perfectly fits many of the Mousterian inhumations that inspire such intense debate. For example, Amud I is the skeleton of an adult male lying on its left side in a flexed position, with no accompanying objects except for a few flint artefacts probably unrelated to the burial [Sakura 1970]. This description fits almost exactly that of the burial of an adolescent female from the Natufian site of Hatulat [Ronen and Lechevallier 1985], but while the latter is unhappily considered an intentional burial, not all scholars view Amud I as such.

Natufian skeletal remains seem to be considered a priori as intentional burials, often despite the caution of the excavators themselves. Thus, Garrard, Betts, and Byrd [1987:21] note that the human skeletons discovered at Azraq 18 “were not contained in any obvious burial pit, and if such had existed, it was disrupted by later occupation.” However, Byrd [1989], citing these authors, refers to these remains as “burials in the desert oasis”—in fact the only ones reported outside the Natufian core area.

Given the evidence for complexity in other facets of the Natufian [e.g., settlement patterns, art], it is highly plausible that human remains from this period do indeed represent intentional burials. Above all, the notion of Natufian intentional burials draws on the sheer force of numbers: 417 skeletons originating from a time-span of at least 60,000 years form an impressive data base. Admittedly, a very different situation is seen in the Mousterian, where 59 cases of “would-be burials” are distributed across a relatively large geographical area (table 3) and a time-span of at least some 60,000 years.

We are of the opinion that new behavioural patterns cannot be expected necessarily to occur in great numbers. The development of burial practices might have followed a pattern analogous to that of mosaic evolution: some traits evolved and changed over time because of certain “selective” forces [e.g., intergroup competition] while others persisted in their archaic form. Thus, the impressive Natufian cemeteries are claimed to have evolved gradually [Perrot, Ladiray, and Svoliers-Massei 1988], burials in large numbers being quite a late phenomenon reflecting the specific social needs of the population at particular sites. The fact that Middle Palaeolithic “burials” appear in small numbers is insufficient to disqualify them as intentional burials [contra Gargett 1989].

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>N of Sites</th>
<th>N of Burials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southwest France</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Smirnov [1989a], Lindly and Clark [1990], and references therein.*
We have no doubt that the human remains of Natufian times are indeed intentional burials. Nevertheless, it seems that their recognition as such seldom depends on the analysis of the specific above-mentioned criteria. Rather, it appears to rely on the physical-anthropological and cultural context. The same is true for the Mousterian human remains, but in this case the material culture is found wanting in complexity and sophistication. Intentional burials are recognized only when Middle Palaeolithic human remains are of anatomically modern individuals, since on the basis of their biological resemblance to modern humans they are granted the capacity for complex behaviour such as mortuary practices and intentional burials. A case in point is the paper by Chase and Dibble (1987), written at a time when the morphologically modern humans from Qafzeh and Skhul were still believed to be later than the morphologically archaic hominids of Kebara, Amud, Tabun, and Shanidar. According to these authors, “deliberate burials are clearly present [at the two former sites], but there are no other obvious signs of ritual.” Nevertheless, they conclude that “the evidence from Middle Palaeolithic burials—except those of anatomically modern H. sapiens—does not demonstrate the presence of symbolism or of culturally defined values during that time” (Chase and Dibble 1987:276, our emphasis). Their conclusion, then, implicitly suggests that the Qafzeh/Skhul hominids may be accredited with some symbolic behaviour [e.g., intentional burial] simply because of their allegedly later age and their classification as H. sapiens sapiens.

However, a distinction with respect to mortuary behaviour between morphologically archaic and morphologically modern humans of the same period is unwarranted when the individual burials are considered. This is amply demonstrated in Harrold’s (1980) and Smirnov’s (1989) reviews of the human interments from the Middle Palaeolithic as well as in our treatment of the data. Moreover, no other cultural differences can be detected between the two groups [Lindly and Clark 1990, Bar-Yosef et al. 1990]. Klein (1990) too has recently claimed that the morphological differences between the European Neanderthals and the contemporaneous H. sapiens sapiens were of little significance, the two types supposedly had very much the same cultural capacities until H. sapiens sapiens developed new neurological structures which were to support more complex cultural abilities. Indeed, recent finds and renewed analyses of Mousterian occupations support the view that Neanderthals were capable of symbolic expression [e.g., Marshall 1989, 1990], although the rarity of such occurrences suggests that symbolic behaviour was uncommon among Middle Palaeolithic groups [Chase and Dibble 1987, Bar-Yosef 1988].

It is difficult to accept the skeletal finds from the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic as accidental, “natural” burial by accumulating sediments. All of these remains were found in caves, in which human occupation during the Middle Palaeolithic was intermittent. When not inhabited by humans, the caves were at times left open to animal activities, those of hyenas in particular [e.g., Kebara [J. Speth, personal communication]]. There is also evidence for other, severe post-depositional disturbances [P. Goldberg and H. Laville, personal communication]. [Indeed, many of the human bone fragments found in these sites [Arensburg et al. 1990] may represent disturbed intentional burials. However, as we have said, such fragments are not here considered burials.] Had human remains not been intentionally buried, their chances of being found in skeletal articulation would have been very small. The preservation of the fragile remains of neonates and infants [e.g., Qafzeh 13, Kebara 1] is difficult to explain in such depositional contexts unless they are perceived as intentional burials.

Interpreting intentional burial as hygienic—as opposed to symbolic—behaviour [e.g., Kooijmans 1989] is not a satisfactory explanation for such a time- and energy-consuming activity, because mere disposal of the dead could have been achieved simply by dumping corpses some distance away from the living areas. The unlikelihood of such a claim is amplified in light of the discard of dietary remains [i.e., animal bones] in habitation areas, which shows no concern for hygiene. Therefore, once Middle Palaeolithic burials are accepted as intentional, it is difficult to deny their symbolic significance.

Following Flannery [1973] and Hodder [1986:118–46, 1987], “contextual archaeology” advocates a flexible approach in which particular relationships can be taken into account, among them the “historical content of the changing ideas and associations of the object” (Hodder 1987:1). We believe that Natufian burials [a cultural “artefact”] are indeed understood within their proper context, namely, that of a society undergoing major social change. It is this consideration of the entire data complex that permits acceptance of those burials as intentional even when the relevant characteristics are rather ambiguous. For example, the burials in Natufian cemeteries have been interpreted as indicating population growth [Perrot, Ladiray, and Solviers-Massei 1988:97] and as possible expressions of group cohesion and land-ownership [Gilead 1989, resulting in continuous use of the same burial grounds and reopening of the graves. Similarly, the single burials which seem to have been the rule in the Mousterian should perhaps be viewed as indicating a similar group-land relationship within smaller social reference units. The rarity of burials in the intervening time-span has been interpreted as stemming from differences in mortuary practices, for example, burial outside the habitation area and/or cremation of the dead, as seen in the Epi-Palaeolithic at Kebara Cave [Turville-Petre 1932].

In the same vein, ethnographic evidence suggests that the presence of special grave goods may vary among societies with similar levels of social complexity. Hence, their absence does not necessarily reflect a lower level of material or social organization. However, special grave goods, when present, reflect a relatively high degree of social complexity [O’Shea 1984:255; see also Binford 1971 on mortuary practices as reflecting social features.
of a given society). In their synthesis, Chase and Dibble (1987:274) reject the idea that the objects found in association with Middle Palaeolithic human remains (except at Qafzeh and Skhül) are grave goods on the grounds that such items should be clearly distinguishable from other objects found in the surrounding sediments. It is our claim that the lack of special items neither reflects by definition a lower level of complexity nor proves the absence of intentional burial. Alternatively, the mundane objects associated with Middle Palaeolithic skeletal remains may reflect the relative simplicity of the material culture. When viewed against the contextual background, the unspectacular nature of Mousterian burials is better understood.

It seems that many scholars still possess “mental templates” as to what a burial should look like. These templates, based on ethnographic models of recent complex societies (in the sense of Price and Brown 1985), are projected onto the past and influence attitudes with regard to intentional burial in the Mousterian. Incorporated in these attitudes is a bias against Middle Palaeolithic hominids other than <i>H. sapiens sapiens</i> as “poor relations who did not make it” evolutionarily and must therefore have been inferior to their <i>H. sapiens sapiens</i> contemporaries. Obviously, when their cultural remains are examined by “objective” criteria (stemming from behavioural models based on complex societies), they do not stand up to them, ergo these hominids were really inferior. As is the case with other objectives of scientific inquiry, the status of Middle Palaeolithic mortuary behaviour seems to be affected by “values . . . read into the record and then read right back out again, as though they existed objectively” (Ruse 1988:66).

References Cited


HODDER, I. 1986. <i>Reading the past: Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology</i>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


