Why keep the old dead around?
Bringing together theory and method in the study of human remains from Balkan (E)Neolithic settlements

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ABSTRACT – *The aim of this article is to focus on the ways in which communities imagined their relationship with the dead throughout the Balkan area during the Neolithic and Eneolithic (6200–3800 cal BC). My claim is that we should go beyond seeing the human remains discovered in settlements as unusual/atypical/non-funerary discoveries. Instead, they can be read as traces of complex funerary practices, which contributed to the creation and manipulation of collective identities. The dead became part of a place-making strategy, they fixed time and become central to certain kinds of assemblages, which in turn were meant to create more powerful ancestors who could intervene in the present.*

KEY WORDS – *Neolithic; human remains; funerary; assemblage; settlement*

Zakaj (so)bivati z mrtvimi? Združevanje teorije in metode pri preučevanju človeških ostankov v (e)neolitskih naselbinah na Balkanu

IZVLEČEK – *V članku se osredotočam na načine, kako so si skupnosti predstavljale svoj odnos do mrtvih na območju Balkana v času neolitika in eneolitika (6200–3800 pr. n. št.). Trdim, da bi morali človeške ostanke, odkrite v naseljih, obravnavati izven običajnega stališča o nenavadnih/netipičnih/ ne-pogrebnih odkritjih. Namesto tega jih lahko razlagamo kot sledi zapletenih pogrebnih navad, ki so pripevale k ustvarjanju in manipulaciji kolektivnih identitet. Mrtvi so tako postali del strategije o oblikovanju prostora, določali so čas in postali osrednji del nekaterih zbirov, ti pa naj bi ustvarili močnejše prednike, ki bi lahko posegali v sedanjost.*

KLJUČNE BESEDE – *neolitik; človeški ostanki; pogrebni običaj; zbir; naselbina*

> *"The corpse: terrible presence, inconceivable absence"*
> (*Kerner 2018.325*).

In a settlement in the Danube plains, at Vidra (Gumelniţa culture), 6500 years ago someone carefully placed an adult individual in a crouched position in a pit. On their shoulder they placed another skull and a few ribs, "*some displaying cutmarks, and near their left knee, three vertebrae; in their right palm and on all the limbs were small red pebbles, while near the legs were two silex blades*" (*Rosetti 1934.20,21,38; Comşa 1960.11*). Afterwards, life continued in the community. This extraordinary discovery gives us an insight into the relationship the community from Vidra had with death and the dead. It is a telling example of the complexity of Neolithic and Eneolithic funerary rituals in the Balkan area, which were intertwined with place-making strategies, memory, and expressions of individual and communal identities. At the same time, it brings into view the challenges in interpreting such multi-layered dis-

coveries in the absence of careful taphonomic observations[1] or well-considered theoretical frameworks.

The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it is an exploration of the strategies for being together with the dead in the space of settlements throughout the Balkan area during the Neolithic and Eneolithic (6200–3800 cal BC). Secondly, it explores the methodological and theoretical toolkit necessary for the interpretation of such discoveries.

Certain individuals' whole or fragmentary bodies seem to have been selected and interred beneath or between dwellings, in 'rubbish areas' or settlement ditches. They account for the only human remains discovered from the early Neolithic, and were therefore clearly specifically selected individuals. Based on the evidence presented in this text, my claim is that we should go beyond seeing the human remains discovered in settlements as unusual/atypical/non-funerary discoveries. Instead, they should be read as traces of complex multi-stage funerary practices, which contributed to the creation and manipulation of collective identities. As anthropological literature points out, the period between an individual's death and the ending of the funerary ritual is a liminal time, in which the individuals have lost their pre-ritual status, but not yet gained their final status. In the case of these Neolithic and Eneolithic human remains we can infer that this liminal period was quite long, at least for some individuals. During this time, they were seen as potent, valuable ancestors for the community at hand, or, on the contrary, as deserving punishment and thus denied the proper rituals. The dead became part of a place-making strategy, in which the temporal distances between the living and dead gained a new significance through the presence of the latter in the midst of daily life. In effect, they fixed time and made the past manifest in the present.

The study of these human remains falls within three current debates of prime importance for understanding the changes which took place in the Balkan area during this timeframe: (1) the advent of the so called 'Neolithic revolution', and whether the 'Neolithic' people where locals or foreigners; (2) memory-building strategies and the citation of the past among settled-agricultural communities; and (3) the creation of social identities during the Neolithic, at

the cross-roads of expressions of individuality versus collective identities. Here, I will mostly focus on the second and third questions, which are interlinked. My claim is that communal identities are expressed and reinforced through the manipulation of the dead, both through the sharing of the space within the settlements, but also the creation of a relationship between selected dead, some of whom are the 'old dead' in what archaeologists identified as ossuaries, collective depositions or multiple graves. Thus, we can see the Neolithic-Eneolithic period as one in which new worldviews emerge, which are marked by a fluidity of boundaries between categories: between both the living and dead, between the mundane and sacred, animals and humans, between what is visible and unseen. Through the manipulation of the dead and their integration in specific assemblages meant to create more powerful ancestors, collective identities were created, maintained and manipulated.

Ultimately, what this enquiry will bring forth is what it meant to be dead for these Neolithic societies. Once we take death out of the modern clinical realm and into its cultural dimension, then the answer is certainly not a straightforward one. In his study of Oceanic practices Roger Ivar Lohmann (*2005.190*) points out that: "*It is anthropologically useful to also define death in social terms as a point at which social interaction with the deceased becomes impossible, given prevailing cultural models of reality.*"

Following this framing, one could say that in the case of the Neolithic dead found in settlements, the dead are never fully dead, as social interactions with the living seem to continue over significant periods of time (along the same lines see *Rebay-Salisbury* et al. *2010; Croucher 2012; Robb* et al. *2015; Katsarou 2017; Kerner 2018*). Underlying this is the fact that through a whole field of cultural beliefs and practices the dead are separated from the living, their bodies undergo modifications (dressing, washing, exposure or excarnation, inhumation and so on), and rituals are enacted to enforce the break between the two worlds. In the process, the dead can gain new identities, those of body-objects, ancestors, sacred relics, or they can be relegated to oblivion.

The exploration will start from an evaluation of available materials, followed by a critical reflection

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[1] In the absence of more information, we cannot discard the alternative interpretation that the skull, the vertebrae and the ribs came from an individual whose resting place had been disturbed – either the initial occupant of that grave pit, or from another grave pit.

on the limitations of the terminology we use when interpreting human remains inside settlements, especially the 'atypical'/'non-funerary' labels. Then it continues with an overview of key practices that seem to mark specific periods: 'collective deposits' as settlement markers in the Early Neolithic, liminal depositions during the Middle and Late Neolithic, and ritual assemblages during the Eneolithic.

The corpus of data

Starting with the second half of the 7th millennium, we see elements associated with the Neolithic 'package' appearing throughout the Balkans: domesticates, agriculture, long-term settlements, textiles, polished stone tools and so on. By the middle of the 4th millennium, major transformations are taking place in the region, with new waves of peoples, new funerary practices and material culture. Between these two chronological markers, worldviews emerge and express themselves through a limited number of materials and resources – seeds, animals, plants, clay, obsidian, wood, shells and ochre. Throughout, the dead seem to play a central role in communal lifeways.

In summary there are to date a minimum of 800 individuals from burials and scattered bone discoveries reported throughout the Balkans, from at least 127 archaeological sites/cultural levels[2]: 43 from Romania (155 MNI), 36 from Bulgaria (167 MNI), 28 from Greece (395 MNI), 13 from Serbia (35 MNI), Kosovo (2 MNI), Croatia (3 MNI), and five from Macedonia (36 MNI)[3]. This list is a significant under-representation of the real numbers for several reasons: (1) unpublished data, as many discoveries are lost in grey literature reports; (2) under-reporting, as many human remains come from old excavations were there was selection of material, or the researchers missed them altogether; and (3) insufficient data, either due to lack of anthropological analyse – many human remains have not been analysed – post-excavation loss, or they lack the archaeological context (Fig. 1). However, this study does not aim to provide an exhaustive list, but to offer a possible guiding thread towards their interpretation (see some previous attempts at cataloguing them by *Lichter 2001; Băčvarov 2003; Tryantipoulou 2008; Kogălniceanu 2012*).

This paper offers a re-evaluation of the role of these discoveries by placing the remains in their wider archaeological context, and in a comparative perspective throughout time and place. On the one hand, the analysis moves from large-scale patterns to individual remains discovered over an area spanning *c.* 350 000km[2] from six modern countries, and over two and a half millennia (6200–3800 cal BC), to see the ways in which one data set can inform the other. On the other hand, along the interpretative path, I mostly rely on legacy data, by evaluating both osteological and archaeological reports and publications. This route has a number of limitations (see also the summary by *Bradbury* et al. *2016*), but at the same time finding strategies for working with legacy data can bring some interesting insights – where data is absent from one site, information from elsewhere can shed light on patterns or practices through analogies.

At the same time, this study will move beyond the divide present in contemporary research between different kinds of data and scales of analysis, by bringing together archaeological, osteological, and taphonomic data. Along the way, I also draw inspiration from a number of impressive and well-researched studies on remarkable discoveries of human re-

Fig. 1. A mandible from Glina site.

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2 Several sites have multiple chronological levels, a fact which places them in several categories.

3 Data was collected from archaeological reports and summaries, among which: *Whittle 1996; Băčvarov 2000; 2006; 2013; Kogălniceanu 2001; 2008; 2012; Perles 2001; Lichter 2001; 2017; Borić, Stefanović 2004; Wahl 2006; 2007; 2008; Naumov 2007; Ion 2008; Ion* et al. *2009; Souvatzi 2008; Triantaphyllou 2008; Papathanasiou 2009; Boroneanţ 2010; Chapman 2010; Stratouli* et al. *2011; Lazăr 2012; 2013; Roodenberg* et al. *2013; Chapman* et al. *2014; Kogălniceanu* et al. *2016; Stratton 2016; Băčvarov* et al. *2016.*

mains (*e.g., Băčvarov 2002; Chapman 2000; 2010; Lichter 2001; Naumov 2007; Trianta-phyllou 2008; Borić 2010; 2016*).

Drawing chronological and geographical boundaries around this topic is to some extent an arbitrary measure, to ease the analysis of a large dataset. The geographical area included has as a western boundary the range of the Dinaric Alps mountains, the Hungarian plain and the Carpathian basin, to the north stops at the Carpathian Mountains and the Sava river, in the south at the Greek islands, South Ionian and Mediterranean Seas, and to the east at the Black and Aegean Seas. If one takes as comparison the synthetic volume by Agathe Reingruber and colleagues (*2017.124*), this area is equivalent to their 1–3 and 5–7 zones (Figs. 2–4).

A fine-scale analysis reveals differences even between settlements attributed to the same cultural complex, but broadly speaking the communities throughout the Balkan area show enough similarities and geographical links along the water routes for a starting point which can be refined in the future[4].

Given that there are also differences in cultural classification in the area of interest, in general I follow the periodization shared by several seminal works (*Whittle 1996; Perles 2001; Reingruber* et al. *2017*), and group the sites into:

(a) A transition period and Early Neolithic, roughly between 6500–5800 cal BC;
(b) Middle and Late Neolithic dated between 5800–4700/4500 cal BC;
(c) Final Neolithic/Eneolithic, 4500–3800 cal BC (see Tab. 1).

This also solves the problem of different timeframes in various regions: for example, the Early Neolithic in Greece starts hundreds of years earlier than north of the Danube[5].

Periodisation	Time frame	No. of sites	Archaeological cultures
Transition period & Early Neolithic	6500–5800 cal BC	54	Early Starčevo-Cris, Karanovo I-II, Early Sesklo, Kremikovci, Gradešnica-Carcea, Anzabegovo-Vršnik I, Veluši-na-Porodin, West Bulgarian painted pottery group
Middle and Late Neolithic	5800–4700/4500 cal BC	35	Hamangia, Vadastra, Boian, Maritsa, Dimini, Vinča A-C, Sesklo, Usoe
Final Neolithic/Chalcolithic	4700–4500/3800 cal BC	38	Gumelnita-Kodzadermen-Karanovo VI, Vinča D, Sitagroi III

Tab. 1. Periodisation of the settlements included in the analysis.

To establish the minimum number of individuals (MNI) I have followed the guidelines in Christopher Knüsel and John Robb (*2016*), and excluded those sites where the data was incomplete, or lacked secure chronology. As such, the numbers under-represent the reality in the field.

Are these 'non-funerary' discoveries? Bringing together archaeological method and theory

Before proceeding to the analysis of discoveries, it is worth discussing the methodological guidelines that shape our field of study. The importance of this step will soon become apparent: on the one hand, the study of these human remains is divided among several disciplines, and on the other hand the study of these bodies mostly focuses on describing their post-mortem trajectory, and less so on an 'archaeology of death'.

To start with, research into Neolithic settlements and their deposits is divided between archaeologists and osteoarchaeologists, each bringing their own set of questions. Most often in the dedicated literature, archaeologists relegate the human remains discovered inside the settlement area to the status of 'non-funerary' discoveries or from 'non-funerary contexts' (*e.g., Andreescu* et al. *2004; Lazăr 2010; Lazăr* et al. *2013; Vintila 2013*), sometimes even 'deviant'. The fact that the number of dead individuals is small has made archaeologists qualify their occurrence inside settlements as exceptions (both *Perles 2001. 274*, and *Kotsakis 2014*).

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4 Starčevo–Körös–Criş Early Neolithic culture covered an area that included most of present-day Serbia and Montenegro, parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Republic of Macedonia and Romania. Separately, similarities have been noted among the Boian-Marica-Karanovo V culture that covered areas from southern Romania to Thrace, while the Eneolithic Gumel-niţa-Kodjadermen-Karanovo VI culture extended from southern Romania to northern Greece.

5 Ideally, I would have preferred to be able to disregard artificial chronologic categories and instead see if any classifications emerge based on the discoveries themselves. However, this is difficult to achieve when data is incomplete, incongruent and the discoveries seem to be at the same time diverse inside the same timeframe and similar across long stretches of time.

Some researchers saw these discoveries as disturbed monuments (*Comşa 1960*). The more fragmented and 'out of place' they were, the more exotic the reasons for their existence, such as cannibalism (drawing on research from the American South-West, *e.g., Villa* et al. *1986; White 1992*), sacrifice (*Popovici, Rialland 1996; Kogălniceanu 2001; Voinea 2001*), and even rubbish disposal (see a critique in *Dragoman, Oanţă-Marghitu 2007*). They have been subjected to analysis by means of drawing ethnographic parallels, *e.g.,* the so-called 'skull cult' that would have dominated the region (*Marinescu-Bîlcu 2001*). In recent years the paradigm is slowly starting to change – from wonderful texts on regional bodies which link them to memory strategies (*Croucher 2012; Borić, Griffiths 2015*) to new perspectives focused on the fragmentary bodies, and the division of parts-whole of the body as a social cohesion strategy (*Chapman 2000; Fowler 2001*), or to issues of body representation (*Bailey 2005; 2018*). For other researchers the disposal of the dead within the settlement area was either connected to 'communal social relationships' (*Nanoglou 2008a; Tryantypolou 2008*) or with the emergence of expressions of individuality, but without exploring this thesis further. While each of these interpretations has shed light on a piece of the story, some topics still need to be discussed, while others, such as the 'non-funerary' label, can be safely challenged.

On the other hand, osteoarchaeologists and taphonomy specialists have focused on the *chaîne opératoire* of the cadaver, and its spatial deposition. In order to understand these discoveries, osteologists have devised a specialized language to describe and explain why the deposits look as they do: primary/secondary/tertiary burials, deviant/non-funerary (see Tab. 2). Some even went further and combined taphonomic insights with ethnographic parallels in order to understand the treatment of the corpse in both its social and biological components, by employing archaeothanatology/anthropologie de terrain methods (*Boulestin, Duday 2006; Duday 2009; Kerner 2018*). While these concepts are very helpful towards understanding the multi-stage processes we see, the interpretation of the deposits needs to further explain the results in the wider archaeological context.

Beside the fact that terms are not always consistent, what this terminology does is to break down and label the post-mortem process of decomposition and disarticulation of a body. Therefore, simply labelling the discoveries as 'primary', 'secondary' or 'tertiary', based on the stage of the manipulation of the body, while an indispensable step, does not take us too far in terms of understanding these discoveries (see also *Ion forthcoming*). Therefore, the analysis of human remains inside settlements needs to develop in two dimensions: (1) one focused on the human remains per se, namely dealing with the transformation of a fleshed body into a skeleton (and then a fragmentary one), part of a specific process of separation, and breaking down of the body; and (2) a historical and cultural dimension – managing to capture the role of these bodies as part of their cultural context, bodies which can have in turn the status of body-objects, ancestors, relics or 'debris'.

The first step is to embrace an anthropological view which adapts the definition of funerary discoveries to the conceptual universe of the population we study: what do we consider an intentional deposition of human remains? Christopher Knüsel and John Robb (*2016.1*) rightly point out that for a long time archaeologists have lacked specific historical answers to this question, as they "*responded unimaginatively and ethnocentrically by forcing our*

primary deposition	"*the original placement of the corpse, often inferred when bones are in anatomical articulation, modified only by the processes of decomposition in situ*" (Knüsel, Robb 2016.658, Tab. 1)
secondary deposition	"*A subsequent placement of human remains, following movement from their primary location; often inferred when persistent articulations are disarticulated, particularly when they are placed or re-deposited in a patterned way*" (Knüsel, Robb 2016.658, Tab. 1) "*secondary mortuary rites, [...] those instances when remains have been moved from the place of primary deposition but replaced in the same feature* (cf. Haddow et al. 2015)." (Knüsel, Robb 2016.659)
tertiary deposition	"*i.e., non-burial) contexts can be divided into three main categories: those found in (1) middens, (2) post-abandonment building infill, and (3) building construction layers. (Haddow, 62)*". (Haddow, Knüsel 2017.61) "*Joachim Wahl (2008, cited on p.53) uses it when it is impossible to 'demonstrate the intentional character of a deposit in secondary position' or the final stage in the deposition*" (Kerner 2018.58).
commingled remains	"*are those in which remains from multiple individuals are mixed together, and often with other remains such as animal bones or artefacts.*" (Knüsel, Robb 2016.659)

Tab. 2. Terminological classifications of human remains depositions.

interpretations into a few simple, familiar categories such as 'burial' and 'cremation'". There are numerous documented cases from around the world of multi-stage burial processes or alternative manipulations, such as exposure on platforms, water burials, smoking, mummification, and keeping the dead in the house. Here I share Jennifer Kerner's conclusion that to limit the definition of a grave to a material trace, to one funerary gesture – the primary deposition in a grave – is limiting:

"*... to consider a deposit containing human remains as a 'burial': 'it is to consider the thought that underlies the gesture' (*Boulestine, Duday 2005. 33*) and to recognise this thought as being 'funerary' in nature. ... And by doing this to accept all the nuances implied by the term*" (*Kerner 2018. 44*).

This does not advocate for a relativism of definitions with no clear set boundaries. Instead, by 'funerary' it simply designates a deposition meant to honour the dead, an act structured by 'a positive intention' (*Kerner 2018.45*). This is opposed to those acts that reflect a negative intention, such as refusing funerals, or neutral intentions, like rejecting ordinary corpses (see also *Kerner 2018*). While identifying a positive intention might not be that straightforward, finding a body in an especially dug pit, identifying an intentional post-mortem treatment of the corpse (*e.g.*, wrapping, mummification), the position of the body in the pit, or the integration in a specific assemblage in the case of fragmentary remains, can all constitute signs of intention. In our aid can also come analogies between sites – repeated occurrences of the same kind of discovery – or between archaeological traces and ethnographic examples.

Once we have set ourselves some minimal criteria for the identification of a funerary context, we should then dismiss another modern preconception – that death is an event. Rather, as both Liv Nilsson Stutz (*2016*) and John Robb (*2013*) rightly point out, death is a process which calls for the need of an 'archaeology of death'. Consequently, we can view the study of human remains at the cross-roads of archaeological, taphonomic and osteological data. By taking this route, when confronted with human remains in settlements we can ask: when was an individual dead for this society? (see also *Kerner 2018. 18*). And in what way? In this way, we can start deciphering the multi-stage processing of bodies within a cultural framework. For example, John Robb and colleagues convincingly put forward a case for

the multi-stage processing of bodies at the Italian Neolithic Grota Scalloria, through which the dead gradually became 'completely dead'. The processing of the dead body started with a cadaver and ended with defleshed and bare white bones, which were then tossed away among everyday debris:

"*Careful taphonomic analysis has demonstrated the practice of carefully defleshing and casually discarding the remains of the dead, and contextual discussion has outlined a possible framework for this practice in the final termination of a prolonged, intimate interaction between living and dead: the end to mourning. [..] Remains brought to the site from further away may have arrived as selected elements rather than complete bodies. They were then defleshed [...] The completely disarticulated, cleaned bones were then strewn upon the cave floor, mixed casually with faunal remains, broken pots and stone tools.*" (*Robb* et al. *2015.49*)

Another example is given by Ioanna Moutafi and Sofia Voutsaki (*2016.782*), who proposed in the case of Mycenaean Greek commingled remains that they should be seen as part of a process of: "*... gradual transformation from dead body to ancestor in which they are both 'subjects of their own identities and lived experiences (cf. 'osteobiographies':* Robb, 2002; Boutin, 2012*), and objects to be manipulated by the living, who are interacting with them.*"

Dušan Borić (*2010.64*) interprets the integration of the old dead in new burials at Vlasac as anchoring 'ancestral powers' and citing of the past. What all these examples are meant to do is highlight the need for taking the terminology we have a step further, towards an anthropological understanding. They can only gain meaning when placed in the context of wider social practices and as part of a cultural framing of the role of the dead in the lives of communities.

As we delve into our interpretation further, we should bring together archaeological method and theory. As already mentioned, discoveries of primary, secondary and tertiary human remains are all traces of multi-stage rites of passage, and it is our task to explore the various ways in which these past communities dealt with and imagined the liminal period of funerary rituals and its various stages. The challenging aspect is identifying and documenting the traces of these past engagements. It is important in this context to ask:

(a) What performances might have been built around/from these human remains?

(b) Do all the human remains represent deliberate depositions?

(c) If the deposits do indeed represent the deliberate selection of individuals or body parts, then how might such practices relate to the deposition of other categories of archaeological materials, such as anthropomorphic representations, waste deposits and so on? Objects and dead people alike had complex biographies: they were curated, broken up, and reinterred/spread within the settlement area (see also *Perles 2001.263*).

In this respect, there are several studies which can offer some valuable guidelines.

Concerning the taphonomic study and ritual transformations of cadavers from a cultural perspective, there are the studies by Liv Nilsson Stutz on Mesolithic bodies (*1998; 2006; 2008*), those by Scott Haddow, Christopher Knüsel and their colleagues for the Neolithic Çatalhöyük depositions (*Haddow, Knusel 2017; Haddow* et al. *2020*), by Rita Peyroteo Stjerna (*2016*) and Jennifer Kerner (*2018*), texts by Martin Smith and Megan Brickley on the people of the British Neolithic barrows (*2009*), and by Rebecca Crozier (*2018*) on Neolithic Orkney remains. The detailed observations in these studies offer guidelines for reconstructions: whether the bodies have been cut, defleshed, exposed, wrapped, or moved around. Then there are histological studies which have been able to prove the mummification of bodies in prehistory (*Booth* et al. *2015; Booth 2016; Smith* et al. *2016*). Furthermore, there have been numerous studies regarding the remains from the Levant and Near East, on the secondary treatment of bodies, heads, plastered skulls, coping with death, or curation strategies (*e.g., Croucher 2012; 2018*).

The liminal nature of some of the depositions can also extend to topography: the placement of the dead in the wider landscape matters. In the Balkan Neolithic we find a diverse landscape of death, with human remains in settlements near waters, marshes, or remains on tells, inside burnt down dwellings, or within the foundations of new living spaces. This is a topic which can be explored in more detail by future research.

Lastly, we should think about the sensory and emotional aspects of coping with death and manipulating cadavers and remains – the cultural significance of flesh (see *Pearson* et al. *2015*), decaying bodies, mourning and memorialisation. What would it have entailed to live among the dead? Karina Croucher (*2010*) writes about the sensory experiences that probably accompanied engaging with the dead in these Neolithic communities. We need to imagine that some bodies were partly defleshed, others were intentionally broken down and fragmented, some were decapitated, while others were curated as skeletal fragments. When we encounter whole bodies deposited under the floors of dwellings, how did the household members feel about a rotting corpse just a dozen centimetres under their feet? Did they have to leave the house for a while, and then reoccupy it? How would it have been for someone to gaze towards their hearth and see two skulls there, gazing back at them from the past, as is the case of an encounter at the Căscioarele-Ostrovel site in Romania (*Ion forthcoming*)? At Pietrele-Gorgana (Romania), a head placed on a large deposit of shells still had the first vertebrae attached (*Cronica 2010*), which points to it having been decapitated first and thrown there while still fleshed. The remains from Cârcea-La Viaduct (*Ion* et al. *2009*) had their flesh, muscles and some bones removed, before people threw them into a ditch. In multiple cases, skulls are found without their mandibles (*e.g.*, at Prodromos in Greece), or mandibles are found deposited on their own (14 sites with such finds) near pots, hearths or in other contexts. Bodies are also bent and bound, or covered in various substances, such as ochre (*e.g.*, at Bălănești, Ostrovul Corbului, Cavdar or Rakitovo sites) or ash. All of these actions required an intimate engagement with the decaying body, its fluids and materiality. It is possible that the substance of the decayed body, in terms of its white colour, also played a role in these instances, alongside the colours red or yellow of ochre and the black of the ash. This took place in a world that valued the potency of colour, brilliance and design, as shown by John Chapman (*2015.160*) in relation to pottery and figurines.

Moreover, this is only the beginning of a story in which the dead become part of strategies of negotiating identity – the ways in which communities interacted with their kin, with the Same (members of the same group, but from other communities in the landscape), and with the Other ('foreigners').

Early Neolithic: collective discoveries

Let us start from the beginning, with the earliest presence of the dead amongst the 'Neolithic' communities. The period between roughly 6500–5800 is a one of change throughout the Balkans: a cooling cli-

matic event and flooding of river valleys around 6340–6100 (8200 BP) (*Weninger* et al. *2006*) overlaps with the introduction of new ways of life and death, traditionally associated with the Neolithic.[6] New architectural, subsistence and ritual practices appear in Macedonia and Crete after 7000 cal BC, in Thessaly around 6500 cal BC, in Bulgaria around 6000 cal BC, and north of the Danube around the mid-6th millennium cal BC (*Whittle 1996; Reingruber* et al. *2017*). There is a variety in ways of organizing the lived space, from low density settlements with poorly defined pit-dwellings, such as the Starčevo-Çris ones, to larger tells revisited for longer periods in central and south Bulgaria and Thessaly, like Karanovo or Sesklo (*Whittle 1996.99; Perles 2001.40*); the latter are also areas which have a high concentration of settlements.

Researchers have long debated the potential causes which lead to the dispersal of these new cultural and social phenomena, with recent aDNA narratives (*Hervella* et al. *2015*) weighing in on the debate and arguing for the incoming of new populations as explanations for the Neolithic archaeological record. However, a high-resolution analysis of the material record throughout south-east Europe highlights both the complexities of this transition period (see *Thissen 2005*), and the variability in traits associated with Neolithic ways of life. The second half of the 7th millennium is a dynamic period in which communities referencing or linking in some way to past Mesolithic lifeways or deathways (*Borić, Price 2013; Borić, Griffiths 2015*) co-exist with communities which settle for the first time.

In his latest paper, John Barrett (*2019.46*) proposes an explanation of how we might imagine differences between communities, especially between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists:

"Different kinds of people might therefore have been represented by the land over which they held rights, the work that they did, the food and the drink that they were served and that they consumed, and the places that they could occupy." (*Barrett 2019.46*)

In this model, the funerary record can be seen as part of a particular worldview and way of becoming a member of a community – it spoke about who you were and what your place in the world was. It is quite possible that for some communities the depositions of the dead held the memory of practices from their places of origin in faraway lands, bringing with them a sense of place and group identity. For other communities, the manipulation of the dead could disrupt the practices they encountered in the places where they settled, or it could construct a continuity by citing them (see Vlasac and Lepenski Vir). Most of the dead of this period remain unknown to us – their funerary practices left no archaeological trace. However, some of the dead are present inside settlements, and they become important markers of a community's identity in the landscape. Their treatment takes several forms, which will continue throughout the Neolithic:

(1) 'ossuaries' or collective deposits of bodies and body parts (pointing to their retrieval and retention);
(2) whole bodies deposited in reused pits or especially dug pits;
(3) regional patterns, *e.g.*, cremation in Greece, or children in jars in Bulgaria and Macedonia.

Discoveries of human remains come from at least 54 sites (Fig. 2)[7]. A very conservative count places the minimum number of individuals at 283, out of which at least 77 are children (excluding from this count a couple of hundred individuals from several sites, such as those from the Danube Gorges, Franchti, Paralia, Cuina Turcului, for which either the precise dating or anthropological analysis is lacking). Scattered bones in the hundreds are also reported. The burials are usually under floors, in pits, or in the occupation levels of settlements between houses, and less frequently in abandoned buildings. Some are associated with material culture, but this is quite rare.

What is noticeable is that a significant number of sites throughout the area have multiple individuals discovered inside the settlement area: in almost half of the sites there are more than five deposits or individuals, while in some cases the numbers go beyond 30. It is also not uncommon to discover several kinds of deposits, both primary and secondary, at the same site, an occurrence in at least 24 of the sites. Thus, we can see that the first 'agricultural' set-

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6 In cultural-historical terminology, these communities belonged to the Proto Sesklo complex (Greece), Anzabegovo-Vršnik and Velušina Porodin (Macedonia), Starčevo culture (Serbia), West Bulgarian painted pottery group and Karanovo I-II (Bulgaria), Criş (Romania) and others.

7 There are three different points at the site of Gornea.

tlements are marked by the presence of the dead and the multi-stage curation of bodies in death – indicative of a long-term perspective on death.

One of the most well-studied Early Neolithic (EN) sites is Nea Nikomedeia (6400–6000 cal BC; *Thissen, Reingruber 2017.134*) in Greece. In prehistory the site found itself near a shallow lake or inlet, in a landscape of Mediterranean maquis (*Rodden* et al. *1962*) where agriculture was practiced. The community cultivated wheat, barley and lentils, and had sheep and goats, but also cattle and pigs (*Rodden 1965*). The landscape was occupied for a limited period, maybe a couple of decades (*Weninger* et al. *2006*), with a break between. The excavations uncovered only a small part of the settlement, which had been affected by modern agricultural works. In the first layer, there were seven individual rectangular houses with mud walls. A seventh building suggests it might have been a communal ritual place (*Rodden 1965.85*). Throughout the settlement the prehistoric communities interred 35 individuals in pits associated with dwellings (near or inside abandoned ones). Both sexes were present, and all ages, with 22 infants and juveniles. In two instances there were multiple individuals: an adult female and two children deposited in a former storage pit, and three children in a separate context (*Rodden 1965.90*). There were no grave offerings. One interesting discovery is a skeleton on its back with bent legs and with "*a large pebble thrust between its jaws*" (*idem*). Spread

throughout the settlement were also "*pelvic fragments, sacral elements, vertebrae and metatarsals*" (*idem*).

There seems to be an array of practices documented in the same place: an individual who probably went through a burial meant to prevent him from coming back (the position on his back with bent knees, the rock in his mouth), then collective deposits pointing to the expression of kinship relationships in death, and also small bone fragments whose presence is usually interpreted from taphonomic studies as leftovers, representing the cleaning of graves. This suggests that either some of the bodies were interred in a primary position in the settlement, and after decay they were moved elsewhere and these small elements were left behind, or that the bodies were interred somewhere else, then their graves opened and reinterred and the bones which were left behind for some reason where brought into the settlement space. However, this latter interpretation makes less sense, based on ethnographic parallels, current cemetery practices and also the rest of the Neolithic contexts; the hand/foot bones and axial fragments are not usually kept/selected as important anatomical elements.

A similar context is at Amzabegovo, one of the earliest Neolithic sites in Macedonia, where more than 30 individuals found themselves interred throughout the settlement, some only represented by frag-

Fig. 2. Early Neolithic sites included in the analysis: 1 Ajmana; 2 Amzabegovo; 3 Argissa; 4 Azmak; 5 Balgarčevo; 6 Blagotin; 7 Bukovačka Cesta; 8 Cavdar; 9 Cuina Turcului; 10 Devetaki; 11 Divostin; 12 Donja Branjevina; 13 Dzuljunica-Smărdeš; 14 Franchthi; 15 Golokut; 16 Gornea; 17 Gradesnica-Malo Pole; 18 Grivac; 19 Grnčarica; 20 Karanovo; 21 Kazanlak; 22 Kefalovryso; 23 Kovačevo; 24 Kremikovci; 25 Lepenski Vir; 26 Lerna; 27 Măgura; 28 Malak Preslavets; 29 Mavropigi Kozanis; 30 Nea Nikomedeia; 31 Ostrovul Corbului; 32 Padina; 33 Paralia; 34 Pecinci-Bara Alicija; 35 Pontokomi; 36 Rakitovo; 37 Revenia Korinou; 38 Rudnik Kosovski; 39 Saraorci; 40 Schela Cladovei; 41 Sesklo; 42 Slatina-Sofia; 43 Soufli Magoula; 44 Tečić; 45 Tsiganova-Dositeevo; 46 Tumba Madžari; 47 Vaksevo; 48 Velesnica; 49 Vlasac; 50 Xirolimni; 51 Yabalkovo. Base Map Google Earth.
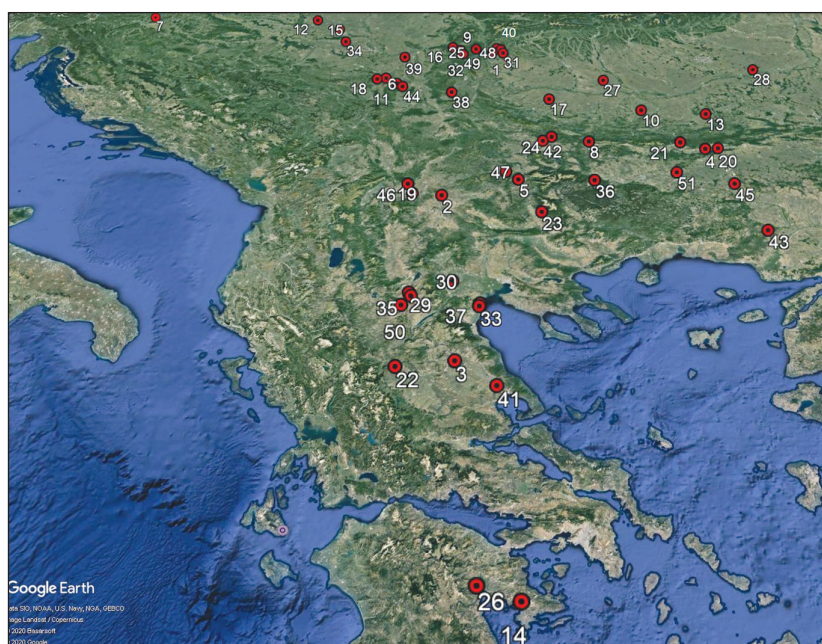
mentary bodies and body parts. In particular, a newborn buried in a jar and two female individuals (*Nemeskéri, Lengyel 1976*) stand out. The liminal position of the site itself is also interesting, near a marshy area (*Naumov 2018.52*). In this respect, the observation by Goce Naumov (*2018.49*) that "*the tell societies should be observed also as wetland societies as majority of their resources was associated with marshes from flooding rivers and lakes*" is useful. But this is a topic for a future study which can look at the placement of these dead in a wider ecological and cultural landscape.

Thus, a preliminary observation is that the transformation of the living person into a dead body involved a multi-stage process, with bodies interred and then retrieved to be re-interred within the settlement space, or alongside whole bodies. A second observation is that within these early, more permanent settlements, it seems to be important to mark a community's presence through interring the dead in that space over a longer time span – we can assume that the 35 individuals at Nea Nikomedeia did not all die at the same time. So, either after the abandonment of the settlement this becomes a cemetery, or even during its occupation. Like the communal building at Nea Nikomedeia, was it possible that these dead were kept as markers of community identity?

On the other hand, the double/triple burials might also point to individual voices and sub-group identities: they might have been part of a larger communal effort to honour the dead, but the internment of a woman with children, or children together, point in both the case of Nea Nikomedeia and Amzabegovo to kinship relations (which need not be biological).

Along the same lines, and challenging our definitions, are the collective burials, commingled deposits, and ossuaries. In one third of Early Neolithic sites, skeletal remains of multiple individuals have been found in pits, some between dwellings, or dug under dwellings. In these deposits it is not uncommon to have adults alongside infants and juveniles, of both sexes, or whole bodies alongside secondary burials. For example, at Ajmana a pit 2.5x1.8m in diameter contained at different depths:

"... *five adults (three males and two females) and twelve children, some of them in a crouched position; other individuals were represented by heaps of human bones or single human bones.*" (*Lichter 2017.117*)

Prodromos is an exceptional site both due to its long-term year-round occupation (*Halstead 1984 apud Perles 2001.153*), with 10 successive Early Neolithic layers (*Hourmouziadis 1971 apud Perles 2001. 175*), but also its rich body imagery – more than 200 figurines (*Hourmouziadis 1973* in *Nanoglou 2006. 160*). Here, under the floor of a large dwelling excavators found "*eleven skulls and other human bones in three successive deposits, but had not been arranged in an orderly fashion*". They were alongside coloured sherds and silica tools (*Lichter 2017.116; Perles 2001.279*). No further information is available, but it is clear that this ossuary was revisited over a longer period of time.

At Velesnica in Serbia were found three graves, one of which:

"*Grave 2 was a pit containing five complete skeletons and parts of perhaps two other skeletons. All were in the flexed position, placed one above the other, so that the bones were mixed [..] The pit was more or less circular in shape, with a diameter of c. 1.20 metres. [..] In the burial pit, especially its upper part, were found fragments of several Starčevo vessels (Fig. 15), lumps of red fired clay, shells and some animal bones, which may indicate certain burial rituals.*" (*Vasić 2008.232–33*)

Based on the material culture, the position of the skeletons, and "*the fact that there are no finds underneath skeleton 2G*", the archaeologist concluded that "*this was a grave pit, and not a pit for waste that was used secondarily for interment*" (*Vasić 2008.232–33*). Furthermore, even though it was hard to apply a proper archaeothanatological analysis as these were old materials, the anthropologist Mirjana Roksandić (*2008*) estimates that "*it seems that decomposition of 2G had already taken place before individual 2D was placed in the grave, and therefore a diachronous burial with subsequent interments is most likely.*"

Lastly, at the Karanovo site (Bulgaria), one of the most important Neolithic sites in the region, in its earliest layers one pit under a dwelling contained "*skulls and long bones of a large number of children not in anatomical order*" (*Bǎčvarov 2000. 137*).

How can we interpret these collective deposits? Where the individuals brought together in one single episode or close in time? Did they die close in time? Why did the community single these individu-

als out? Their interpretation relies on several factors which are sometimes hard to infer based on fragmented documentation, but several things point to the fact that these are intentional deposits. Firstly, the care taken when depositing the bodies – they are not simply thrown in a pit, but the bodies are placed seemingly neatly, with care given to the individual, suggesting deliberate action. They are laid on their right/left, usually in a crouched position, sometimes in a 'Turkish' position. There also seems to be a pattern regarding the position of the whole skeletons-crouched and, in some cases, extremely flexed (hocker). In these later instances, where the degree of the flexion of articulations could not have been achieved on fleshed bodies, we can postulate a treatment of the body such as mummification, bounding, or smoking. However, detailed histological analyses need to be performed in order to have a secure interpretation. While based on old materials it is difficult (and usually impossible) to reconstitute sequences of deposition or identify the presence of additional materials, such as body wrapping or containers, this is something that future excavations should bear in mind (to observe the position of skeleton's articulations, the position of bones, the distance between them, depth, *etc.*).

Secondly, the secondary depositions are mostly comprised of skulls and long bones. This suggests an intentional selection and retention of body parts. In the particular case of 'ossuaries', such as the skull pit at Prodromos, such pits were revisited over time and new individuals added.

The post-mortem biography of these individuals is a most intriguing aspect, as there seems to be a different temporal dimension depending on each individual. Some individuals' bodies are placed in a pit, and alongside them, at the same time or later, are added other human remains. These come from other individuals who were interred or left to decompose, the community then collected some of their bones, such as skulls and sometimes long bones. Thus, in the mixed deposits we might infer that the secondary body parts pre-date the whole individuals – they are the old dead[8]. Therefore, these funerary sites were active over longer time intervals. These

cases show that as much care is given to such deposits as to single deposits, and I would suggest that they all represent mortuary deposits.

But were the pits dug especially for these bodies? Krum Băčvarov (*2006*) discusses re-used pits at Ajmana and Nea Nikomedeia (possible silos). In other cases, the pits are interpreted as dwellings, or archaeologists conclude that they were especially dug for the dead – see Velesnica. In reference to this question, in his latest book, Douglas Bailey (*2018*) picks up an older debate in archaeology about the purpose of pits in these early settlements, aiming to show that understanding these contexts is interlinked with deciphering the relationship between the living and some of the dead. He cites John Chapman, who chose to focus on the materials found in these pits, and talked about their "*life cycle, ancestors and deposition*" (*Bailey 2018.25*), or Julian Thomas who focused on an orderly structuring of the materials they contain, which is part of a wider 'economy of substances' (*Thomas 2013*). Thus, their ambiguous meaning can tell us something about place-making strategies, memory, ancestors and communities.

With the dead (literally) laying the foundations of lived space, or marking its ending, what does this tell us about the beginning of the Neolithic? What is the purpose of these pits, and why deposit individuals together? On the one hand, the expression of collective identities in death seems to be an important aspect of these first settlements. Some of the isolated skeletons found beneath dwellings might function as foundation deposits, while others were interred after the settlement was abandoned – see the ones in disused buildings (Nea Nikomedeia). But the collective depositions, and the mix of types of deposits – bodies and body parts – point to complex multi-stage post-mortem manipulations which can be imagined as community graves (or special ancestors), having a similar function to passage tombs in British Neolithic. Or maybe they even gathered the remains from several communities in the territory?[9] There is no geographic pattern, as these are found in Northern Greece, central Bulgaria right south of Balkan Mountains, Central Serbia and Danube Gorges alike.

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8 It is also possible that they were the first occupants in the pits, after which at a later date, new individuals were added.

9 Further analysis needs to be done to prove/disprove this point. However, we should bear in mind that year-round occupation of a site has been proven in few places, like in Prodromos (see discussion in *Perles 2001.153*), and it is likely that the same community moved in a wider area and occupied several points in time. We should also think of ways in which we can apply the concept of kinship to the Neolithic realities – who was deemed a foreigner and who was a local, both in cultural terms, but also in terms of pragmatic distances. From a study by Borić and Price (*2013.3301–3302*), out of the 12 tested EN individuals from Ajmana, three had nonlocal values. Similar discoveries come from Lepenski Vir (*idem*).

Other elements which support the idea of the importance of collective identity at this point in time is the discovery of the 'communal 'shrine' at Nea Nikomedeia (*Perles 2001.271–72*). A similar space was at Blagotin, where:

"*In the center of the Early Neolithic settlement, a large pit feature (ZM7) was excavated [..] The southern zone was where the entrance of the feature was found. It featured a thick daub platform, with two large (30 cm high) female figurines and small altars were found (fig. 11–13). […] Beneath the daub floor in the southern zone of ZM 7, there was a thick ash deposit which contained the remains of a human infant, only a few weeks old (fig. 14). A small pit was found beneath the thick ash deposit. The remains from the pit included a thick deposit of animal bones that were probably deposited in a single episode.*" (*Greenfield, Greenfield 2014.8–10*)

But ultimately one must ask why these individuals? And why keep the old dead? For a select number of sites, like Lepenski Vir and Vlasac, Dušan Borić and colleagues (*Borić 2003; Borić, Stefanović 2004*) have proposed that the use of cremated bones or secondary burials within new graves is a form of 'bricolage' in which the past is cited, and thus a memory strategy. In this context, it is not only that the dead help create and maintain community ties, but there is also a link between generations. The arguments in support of this are the reuse of old funerary spots, and that the "*exact reference to specific individuals might not have been of paramount importance. The use of the same location and the repetition of identical burial rites might have been attempts to reference the potency of the past as such*" (*Borić 2010; Borić, Griffiths 2015.361*).

Also pointing to a focus on collective-abstract identities are anthropomorphic figurines of the period. In the Early Neolithic we find abstract figures which also speak of "*an ontological principle of generic identity*" (*Nanoglou 2008b.1*; see also *Naumov 2010*).

Middle and Late Neolithic: the dead as boundary markers

Between 5800–4900/4700 cal BC, we see a spread of Neolithic settlements and a diversity in cultural expressions (Fig. 3). What is interesting for the focus of this article is the evidence of a different kind of communal effort: collective depositions of the

dead are marking boundaries. During the Middle Neolithic, the largest deposits show an interesting association between ditches (boundaries), human remains and animal remains (feasts). We see such deposits at sites in Greece – at Makrygialos, Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas, Profitis-Ilias-Mandras and Paliambela-Kolindrou – and in Bulgaria at Nova Nadezhda, Yabalkovo and Mandra, and at Cârcea in South-East Romania. These discoveries offer us a glimpse into the ways in which communities might have negotiated relations of inclusion, or, on the contrary, the banishment and punishment of kin or strangers.

Makrygialos (or Makriyalos) is a flat settlement covering an area over 60 hectares, with dwellings which do not seem to have been lived in for long: "*most of the time, they are nothing more than simple pits dug in the natural bedrock, occasionally groups of interconnected pits*" (*Kotsakis 2014.57*). However, a number of discoveries link the presence of the dead in these contexts to expressions of collective identities. Among these are the deposition of the dead in a number of ditches and large pits whose construction required communal effort, alongside deposits which point to collective feasts. The excavations in the layers of the first phase (5500/5400–5000 cal BC) of Makriyalos revealed the remains of more than 70 individuals, whole and fragmentary bodies. Most of these remains came from three ditches, two of which (Ditches A and B) enclosed "*clusters of habitation pits what may tentatively be labelled 'households'*" (*Pappa* et al. *2013*), while the third probably subdivided the settlement. The deposition of human remains, alongside a significant number of animal bones and ecofacts in pits inside the enclosed area, point to an interesting communal practice.

Most of the human remains were found in Ditch A – 12 articulated bodies, seven partially articulated bodies, and secondary depositions from another 38 individuals – while the rest of the remains were in the other ditches and also in a large pit in the settlement area (*Tryantipoulou 2008.142–146*). All ages (except neonates) and sexes were present. At the same time, taphonomic analysis did not reveal any indication that the bones were at any time exposed to natural elements or trampled. Thus, the osteologist inferred that they were part of a multi-stage process which might have taken up to three to four years (*Rodriguez, Bass 1985 apud Tryantipoulou 2008. 146*). The post-mortem biography of these individuals, as recreated by the specialists, tells a story of bodies first deposited elsewhere and then moved into

ditches, or deposited here from the start. Other individuals from the ditch were dug up, and some bones collected and deposited elsewhere, such as in the settlement pit which had a higher number of long bones, pointing to the intentional selection and retrieval of anatomical elements. To support this is the fact that all anatomical parts were present in ditch A, but there is an under-representation of long bones. This also led the specialists to conclude that there seemed to be a continuous digging and re-digging of Ditch A, pointing to an ongoing practice which required a communal effort, while at the same placing the dead on the settlement's boundary (see *Tryantipoulou 2008*). Kostas Kotsakis also writes that the ditches were maintained for a long time, calling them "*monuments of communality*" (*Kotsakis 2014.57*).

In pit 212, found within the settlement, there was a large number of pottery sherds and animal bones originating from a few tons of meat having been consumed, not deposited elsewhere first (*Pappa* et al. *2004.34*). This was interpreted by the archaeologists as the remains of a feast involving the whole community, with "*conspicuous consumption of meat involving commensality on a community and probably region wide scale*" (*Kotsakis 2014.57*; see also *Halstead 2012.29–30*).

The remains also point to the expression of individual identity versus collective identity, which is mirrored by the relationship between a material culture designed for communal consumption, versus the ex-

pression of individual identities: the standardized serving vessels (*Kotsakis 2014.57*) versus the cups which were mostly found only in the pit and which "*were highly individualized both technologically and stylistically, exhibiting an endless variability in form, decoration and technology*" (*Kotsakis 2014.58*).

In northern Greece, we see similar occurrences at other open-air sites, at Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas and Paliambela-Kolindrou. At Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas (*Triantaphyllou 2008.144*) there are 400 pits with mixed assemblages, among which are human remains. There seems to be a preference for the retention of particular anatomical elements, especially long bones. In the ditches of the settlement were found several individuals, among whom were two neonates and two children.

Paliambela-Kolindrou (*Triantaphyllou 2008.144–6*), a Middle Neolithic site of 2.4ha close to Makriyalos, was surrounded by a system of ditches and it slowly evolved into a tell (*Kotsakis 2014.58*). In these ditches were found both skulls which "*seem to be gathered in groups, and deposited*" (*idem*), but also postcranial remains of a neonate and an adult and three bodies (infant, juvenile, adult).

Lastly, and towards the final part of this interval, at Late Neolithic Alepotrypa, we find human remains deposited in a context which marks a different kind of boundary, a cave. Among these, in ossuary II (*Papathanasiou 2009*), were 14 skulls and numerous

Fig. 3. Middle and Late Neolithic sites included in the analysis: 1 Alepotrypa; 2 Almaaajelu; 3 Basarabi; 4 Cârcea (la Hanuri & la Viaduct); 5 Ceamurlia de Jos; 6 Cernavodă (Columbia & Coada Zăvoiului); 7 Chaironeia; 8 Coţatcu; 9 Cruşovu; 10 Dimini; 11 Ezero; 12 Glina; 13 Govrlevo; 14 Grădinile; 15 Izvoarele; 16 Karanovo; 17 Kazanlak; 18 Lerna; 19 Makriyalos; 20 Malak Preslavets; 21 Obre; 22 Ovčarovo-Gorata; 23 Paliambela-Kolindrou; 24 Plovdiv; 25 Profîtis Ilias; 26 Prosymna; 27 Rachmani; 28 Samovodene; 29 Skoteini; 30 Stara Zagora; 31 Stavrapouli; 32 Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas; 33 Tsangli. Base Map Google Earth.
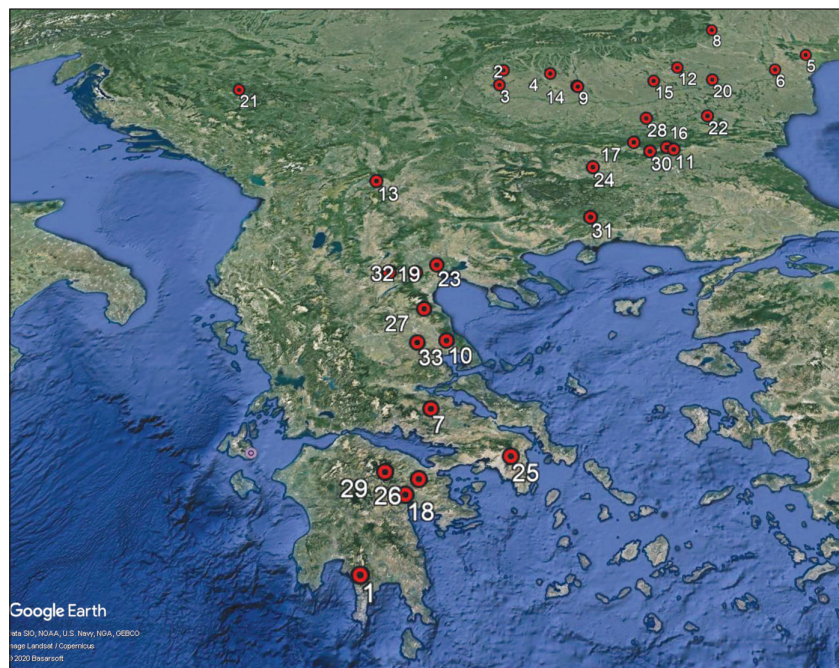
other cranial and post-cranial bones of both adults and children from a total of 19 individuals. According to the specialists:

"All skulls appeared to lack mandibles and many were carefully and deliberately placed. Almost all were upright, positioned next to one another and occasionally encircled by stones. One skull was purposely set in the bottom of a broken pithos. Cavanagh and Mee (1998.120) further observe that, in general, the 'awe-inspiring setting, the large number of humans suggest ritual which reached beyond the local community'." (Talalay 2004.148)

Going north, we also find human remains in ditches, but this time they speak of different treatments of the cadaver. These are found at the sites Nova Nadezhda, Yabalkovo, Mandra and Cârcea. All of these are dated between 5900–4900/4700 cal BC.

At Cârcea-La Viaduct, the archaeologist identified a Starčevo-Criş III ditch which *"after a short existence it was filled with yellow compact soil, with ceramic fragments and human skulls"* (*Nica 1976; 1977*). It should be noted that the stratigraphic context is insecure, as in the same area later complexes have been identified and it is difficult to make a secure attribution to a specific context. What is interesting about these human remains is that they display perimortem interventions, which include a cut-out 'face', the back of a skull, and a skull broken in half (*Ion* et al. *2009*). A young woman's skull had a trephination with signs of healing (*Ion* et al. *2009.55*), while several other individuals bore signs of perimortem violence – these combined can point to the fact that the individuals in the ditch might have been seen as "*others*", deserving punishment, or had an illness that killed them. As such, it is possible that by being placed in the liminal space they could be seen by those coming from the outside, while also being removed from those inside the boundary.

A post-mortem biography suggests that three of the individuals discovered at Carcea:

"... have lesions that are very likely to be linked to a violent death, namely two cases of blunt force trauma to the parietal and one case in which several lesions were caused by a blow to the face that broke the nose and cracked the teeth. Apart from these lesions, a large number of bones have been

broken while still fresh. Through anthropomorphic actions. [...] For individuals 1, 2a, 3a, 3b, 5d, 6, 7, 9 the skull was separated from the body, the mandible was removed and probably the face was also separated from the rest (completely or just partially) through several blows. The morphology of the breaks suggest that they were made while the bones were still fresh, a fact that involves the removal of the covering soft tissue. For this, either the body was left to skeletonise or the overlying skin and muscles were removed by humans. The human skeletal representation bias (crania and long bones) is more consistent with a deliberate selection, than as a consequence of animal scavenging and random preservation [..] bones were processed just after death – decapitated at least, if not also skinned and defleshed (brain removed) (the broken masseteric region of the zygomatic bone can support the hypothesis of muscle removal) and then "cut" in some desired shapes – a face (6), a cup-like [piece] (5d), pieces of skull cut out (3a). Either way, the process happened soon after death, a couple of months the latest." (Ion et al. *2009.57–58*)

Here we witness a transformation of personhood, from complete bodies to dismemberment and fragmentation, followed by deposition among commingled animal bones and ceramic fragments, in a ditch or pits. Whatever the reason for their retention, after the manipulation of bodies they were placed on the boundary of the community space. Is it possible that they were 'thrown' or placed – on a platform, or on poles[10] – as punishment or precaution in a liminal space?

At Yabalkovo, we find a similar situation: three adult bodies were found in the ditches, in the later parts of their backfill, two of these looking as if they had been thrown in – the individuals were on their backs with the legs bent in a 90 degree angle, or on their fronts (*Roodenberg* et al. *2013*). Two of these were females, and one male. Interestingly, the skull of the male, along with another cranial fragment from a different individual which was found close-by, showed marks of perimortem interventions with a sharp instrument, maybe an axe. This skeleton also had his legs bound. This made the researchers infer a possible execution. Another of the bodies had *"a large part of the skull missing post mortem"* (*Roodenberg* et al. *2013*).

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10 A 10–14 year-old individual's cranium displays lateral gaps which could have allowed for its display (though without further analysis this is simply a speculation).

Thus, during the Middle and Late Neolithic, human remains seem to be a recurrent discovery in contexts which can be interpreted as liminal, as marking a boundary. Interestingly, they seem to be caught in a duality of practices: some of inclusion, and others of exclusion. At Paliambela, Makryalos and Alepotrypa, we see deposits which were probably the result of communal rituals – maybe those expressing kinship ties – and their deposition in ditches or caves marks the creation of 'communal monuments'. In the case of Yabalkovo and Cârcea, the individuals in the ditch seemed to have been outcasts, thrown away and punished in some way, excluded from the settlement.

Final Neolithic and Eneolithic: powerful ancestors and a cycle of renewal

As time went by, new technologies emerged, like the processing of copper, economic networks spread over wide areas, new pottery styles appeared and changes in social organization and ways of inhabiting the landscape. Tells appear in southern Romania and provide rich deposits and elaborate material culture. Life in tells continues south of the Danube, while in Greece discoveries are scarcer for this time period, with very little funerary evidence. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on two important aspects for this time interval which overlaps with the end of the Boian-Marica culture and the Gumelnița-Kodzadermen-Karanovo VI complex and Vinča D:

(1) the appearance of a new way of marking death in the landscape – extra-mural cemeteries – and how this changes the relationships of communities with their dead;

(2) documenting beliefs in a cycle of renewal which linked burnt dwellings, tells and human remains.

After 5500 cal BC, cemeteries separated from settlements slowly start to emerge (see *Stratton* et al. *2018*). Some of the best known and largest cemeteries, like Durankulak, Varna, Cernica, Vărăşti, or Cernavodă, included hundreds of buried individuals, were in use for decades and their inventory points to a display of wealth in death (interpreted as social inequality) – as seen with the presence of gold in graves, marble or bone figurines, and pots. But the presence of the dead among the living continues: bodies are still interred inside the settlement space (Fig. 4), and traces of the living (building structures) are found inside some cemeteries. Furthermore, inside cemeteries, archaeologists have found fragmentary human remains, usually interpreted as

reinhumations, grave openings or tertiary deposits ('cleaning' depositions) (*Lazăr 2012.114–115; Constantinescu, Culea 2014; Kogălniceanu* et al. *2016*).

Who then is kept inside settlements, who is reburied in cemeteries, and what roles do they play in the life of communities? We can propose the existence of a link maintained between cemeteries and settlements through the circulation of dead bodies between the two. On the one hand, archaeologists have documented that at some point after the decomposition of bodies, a group/the community opened some graves in the cemeteries and selected the cranium/skull, and sometimes other anatomical elements (see *Chapman 2010; Kogălniceanu* et al. *2016; Kogălniceanu, Simalcsik 2018*). There is also evidence of redepositions of such fragments in the cemetery area, in new deposits either as careful 'packages', or in groups of individuals. This raises the question as to whether some of the retrieved body parts were taken to the settlement and deposited there, or after a time they were reburied in the cemetery. It also possible that the dead from the settlements and the ones in the cemeteries did not cross paths. What is certain is that research so far has not found all the missing body parts, or links between the redeposits and the reopened graves. But to document these one needs careful stratigraphic observations (retrieval pits), taphonomic analysis – so that the missing elements are not due to preservation issues or post-depositional natural disturbances – and also studies to establish if the redeposited bones had been kept out into the open, or immediately buried.

At the same time, the FN and Eneolithic are times when the dead are part of a wider worldview which sees the manipulation of materialities – human bones, clay, animal bones – in a cycle of destruction and renewal: from the breaking down of bodies, to the intentional burning down of houses and fragmentation of material culture (see *Stevanović 1997; Chapman 2000; Dragoman, Oanţă-Marghitu 2007*). In a preliminary study on the human remains discovered in settlements in southern Romania, it became apparent that half were associated with a dwelling, a quarter with 'waste areas', and the rest were scattered throughout or in pits (*Ion 2008*).

As an example, we can look at the discoveries in tells from southern Romania, in the wider area of the late Boian-Gumelnița tells. Tells are artificial mounds, the result of successive layers of occupation, inten-

tional discard, and accumulation, which are as much a monument of the dead and of death as they are of the living, comprised of dead bodies, intentionally killed houses (see Ruth Tringham's seminal work), and hearths, as well as a specially deposited material culture, thus collapsing the distinction between the archaeology of settlements and funerary archaeology, between sacred and mundane. We find some of the dead under dwellings or in pits, but also some unusual cases, deposited either in buildings before they were burnt down, or in what has been interpreted as rubbish areas (*Ion 2008*).

In a previous study (*Ion forthcoming*) on three skulls found at the Eneolithic tell at Căscioarele-Ostrovel, I have proposed that through their integration in specific assemblages they became containers (*Warnier 2006; Dragoman 2016*). The human remains were buried next to hearths and placed alongside horned figurines and deer antlers, gathering the wild resources which were surrounding the tell. Based on ethnographic parallels, we might infer that the community turned the dead into powerful ancestors who could act either as protection or mediums that could harness specific vital substances.

The site of Pietrele-Gorgana offers another interesting case study. This is a site in the Lower Danube plains, a tell mound within a wider flat settlement, with multiple levels of occupation spanning 5200–4250 cal BC (*Hansen 2015*) (the Boian and Gumelnița cultures, in terms of traditional chronology). The mound itself revealed rich material both in terms of quantity and quality, such as burnt and unburnt houses – what Ian Hodder (*2010*) has called 'history houses' – a rich inventory of pottery, fishing and hunting tools, gold and hundreds of copper objects, 12 000 silex artefacts, "*535 anthropomorphic and 109 zoomorphic statuettes*", "*100 architectural and 80 furniture models*" (*Hansen 2015.277–278*).
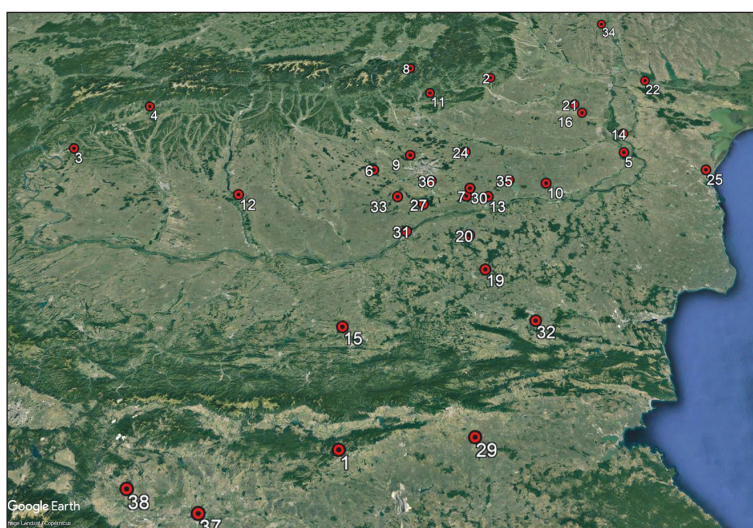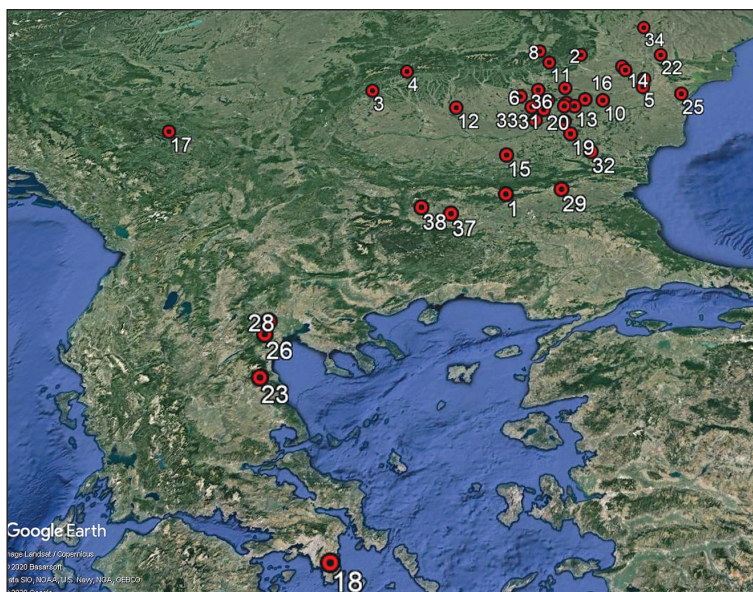

Fig. 4a-b. Final Neolithic and Eneolithic sites included in the analysis: 1 Aibunar; 2 Aldeni; 3 Alunişu; 4 Bălăneşti; 5 Borduşani; 6 Bucşani; 7 Căscioarele; 8 Cheia; 9 Chitila; 10 Cuneşti; 11 Curmătura; 12 Drăganeşti-Olt; 13 Gumelniţa; 14 Hârşova; 15 Hotnitsa; 16 Însurăţei; 17 Kamenički Potok; 18 Kitsos; 19 Kodjadermen; 20 Kubrat; 21 Lişcoteanca; 22 Luncaviţa; 23 Makrychori; 24 Măriuţa; 25 Năvodari; 26 Palioskala; 27 Pietrele Gorgana; 28. Prodromos; 29 Racheva Mogila-Yambol; 30 Radovanu; 31 Ruse; 32 Salmanovo-Deneva Mogila; 33 Stoeneşti-Tangîru; 34 Suceveni; 35 Sultana; 36 Vidra; 37 Yasatepe; 38 Yunatsite. Base Map Google Earth.

In the northern part of the tell two main dwellings (B-West and B-East) were uncovered, between which was an area 2m wide with deposits of ash, green soil, shells, and animal bones. In the SW area of the tell archaeologists found other dwellings in the F area, separated by similar "*waste areas*". Human remains were found in all of these contexts: on surface F were nine individuals in a burnt dwelling with the remains from 10 other individuals outside it; and on surface B, remains from 23 individuals were outside

dwellings, with one individual in each dwelling (*Wahl 2006; 2007; 2008*). All anatomical elements were present, but the high percentage of coxal bones, axial skeleton, and hand and foot bones, as well as a few cranial fragments, point to interesting taphonomic observations.

Firstly, the human remains were not deposited together, as Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu were the first to notice (*2007.117*): in the case of a young individual (possibly female) represented by fragments of a femur and humerus, some of the remains were in the debris of the dwelling B-West, while the other fragments were outside it, in the 'waste area'; the fragments match each other. A similar situation is the case of a silex blade deposited with other blades in a pot in a dwelling in the B-East section, which refits with a blade fragment found under another pot found in the B-west dwelling, and "*there are 12m between the two contexts*" (*Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2007.118*). This links to Chapman's (*2000*) thesis about fragmentation practices as enchainment practices during the Neolithic, in which broken bodies, pots and blades are shared and circulated for the maintenance of social relations.

Another observation which points to intentional manipulation and deposition of human remains between the debris of burnt dwellings is that not all human remains found among the debris of burnt buildings show signs of contact with fire (*Wahl 2006; 2007; 2008; Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2007*). A similar situation is encountered for the archaeological material (*idem*): for the B-West construction "*only 12% of the 1618 pottery fragments are secondarily burnt* (S. Hansen *et al.* 2004.16/Abb. 13*)*" (*Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2007.117*). This suggests that after the houses were intentionally destroyed, care was taken and human remains, pots and other materials were deposited among the debris, possibly creating a ritual assemblage which closed off an episode in the life of the community. In the words of Maxime Brami (*2014.161*): "*a 'closure' at the end of their use-lives*".

Another interesting situation is the case of nine individuals found in the central dwelling of the surface, dated 4450–4330 cal BC. The osteological analysis identified 200 human remains belonging to nine individuals (*Wahl 2008; 2010*). The bones went through DNA testing, which revealed that they were related. The archaeologist interpreted the context "*as people who met their death in the conflagra-*

tion of the house" (*Hansen, Toderaș 2007.13*). What is particularly interesting is the relationship of the bodies to the construction they were part of. In this case, there are several remarkable aspects: a striking lack of cranial and leg bones, not all human remains display heat marks from the presumed fire, some bones were found outside the dwelling with gnawing marks, and a chisel made of a human bone was found among the remains (*Wahl 2010*). The lack of the long bones of the legs, which are some of the most robust elements, might point to the intentional selection of body parts post fire.

Thus, what slowly emerges is a picture where a functionalist description of the context – nine individuals caught by fire – might actually be a more complex form of funerary deposition. An alternative scenario would be that in the case of the F-dwelling, the nine individuals died together and at around the same time (maybe even under a house collapse), and their bodies were placed in a house which was intentionally burnt down – it was symbolically killed. Then, some of the body parts were selected and circulated in other areas of the tell, and one even went through a complete transformation into an artifact (*Wahl 2007*). Thus, we witness acts of 'de-personalization' (unmaking of personhood), with these individuals becoming generic ancestors – embedded in the makeup of the tell. Their treatment also mirrors the treatment of certain categories of material culture. Together they become part of mixed assemblages, active places in which substances were contained, and as such made potent, which in turn lead to a fluid boundary between settlement, funerary, and 'sacred' spaces. Other discoveries of multiple individuals' bodies among the debris of dwellings were made at Yunatsite, Hotnitsa and Ruse tell in Bulgaria (*Chernakov 2010*). However, in those cases there might be different explanations. The large number of skeletons discovered at Yunatsite and Ruse, and the position in which some were found, might suggest that the sites were abandoned as living spaces and left to the dead after a possibly violent episode(s). Other sites with skeletons reported with blunt force trauma are at Kodjadermen, Salmanovo-Denev and Kubrat (*Bobov 2003; Georgieva, Russeva 2016*).

Besides these ritual assemblages, most of the discoveries during this time are nondescript primary burials or secondary depositions spread throughout the settlements. But there are also a number of cases of skulls/long bones which display trauma marks, and perimortem processing. In some cases, these

were interpreted as cannibalism – a number of femurs from Căscioarele-Ostrovel (*Lazăr, Soficaru 2005*), and others from Kodjadermen. In other cases, researchers found bones turned into artefacts: a humerus and a femur turned into chisels at Pietrele-Gorgana (*Wahl 2007; 2008*) and skull roundels (interpreted as amulets) and a skull turned into a bowl at Kozareva Mogila (*Georgieva, Russeva 2016*). These situations remind us of the Grota Scalloria case: on the one hand, we witness a stripping away of individuality until an individual becomes a body-artefact. On the other hand, after it is processed as such, the bone seems to become potent – either it now represents 'the ancestor', a fact which confers the roundels with some magical qualities, or the bone substance can be used to achieve protection/another desired outcome.

Death, liminality and collective identities in the Balkan (E)Neolithic

Based on the evidence presented in this text, my claim is that we should go beyond seeing the human remains discovered in settlements as unusual/atypical/non-funerary discoveries. Instead, they can be read as traces of complex multi-stage funerary practices, which contributed to the creation and manipulation of collective identities. When it comes to the interpretation of the findings there is always a challenge. What is clear is that for this time interval most of the dead remain hidden from our view. But if we were to follow the argument that their low number and presence in settlements places them outside the normal funerary customs it would be a mistake. If we enter an Orthodox church, most of the representations we see would be of angels and saints – and yet they are not the most important ones. Similarly, most of our material possession, 'the stuff' that surrounds us, gets thrown away, discarded. However, the few treasured heirlooms that we have from our ancestors usually escape the passage of time, and are kept and passed on.

For several reasons, some of the dead were selected, curated, and then kept around. In some cases, we can document the care given to their internment, with the addition of grave offerings or grouping of individuals. In other cases, we might imagine that what we find are outcasts, interred in the boundary of the settlements as a social act of exclusion, or victims of violent acts who are left abandoned in the houses.

During the Early Neolithic we see examples where multiple individuals come together in death, maybe in a form of collective tombs of community/kin which mark their presence in the landscape, but devoid of the elaborate architectural expressions as we see for Western Europe. Between 5800–4700 cal BC we see several depositions of bodies in settlements' ditches, playing with the duality of exclusion-inclusion. Some of these ditches probably became communal monuments, while others were places for the symbolic banishment of individuals. Lastly, for the Eneolithic period, the dead seem to be integrated in mixed and potent assemblages which comprised architecture, figurines, and animal bones, in a cycle of life, destruction, and renewal.

Even so, throughout the millennia we find both adults and children, young and old individuals, nondescript primary burials or secondary and tertiary discoveries. Some sites have a few human remains, while others have dozens of individuals. Some types of discoveries occur throughout the focal time period, while others are only present at some sites. Upon reviewing the hundreds of entries in the database it has been a challenge to sort through them in order to find a connecting thread. This was partly due to the wealth of contextual data available, and also due to the lack of vital information pertaining to most of these discoveries – anthropological and taphonomic analyses, absolute dating or anthropologie de terrain observations. In their absence it is difficult to draw a finer grained picture. Therefore, with this text I aimed to bring into view the available data, alongside methodological and theoretical considerations. This might help us better navigate future research projects, and open us towards more refined and wider questions regarding the remains found inside settlements.

The Neolithic and Eneolithic periods were times of mobility of plants and people, of local and long-distance networks to supply the raw materials needed, to obtain marriage partners and to sustain transhumance. It was also a period in which the relationships between individuals and communities took specific forms, in a continuous negotiation. It would be interesting to explore in the future how (and if) we can adapt anthropological terminology to a more refined interpretation of the past: Who was kin? Who was local/foreigner? If we look at the material culture, the design of pots and figurines changes throughout the period, from "*an ontological principle of generic identity*" in the Early Neolithic (*Nanoglou 2008b.1*) to individualized figurines; the remains of the feasts at Makryalos suggest the expression of individual voices in the collectivity, as do the

365

graves from the Varna cemetery. Thus, what is the role of the dead in these tensions among individuals, groups and communities? This is an issue to be further explored.

Even so, and as a preliminary conclusion, from the earliest Neolithic contexts to the advent of new traditions starting with the early centuries of the 4th millennium BC, the presence of the dead within the living spaces of communities seems to remain constant. Moreover, these dead had dynamic afterlives in which their bodies underwent transformations and moved through space. As Fredrik Fahlander writes:

"The decaying body is in a constant state of change, from corpse to bones to ultimately disappearance of any visual traces. [..] Is there a boundary when a corpse no longer represents the buried person? [..] is there a stage when a grave is no longer seen as a proper human burial (Kümmel 2005)?" (Fahlander 2018.59)

It is thus important to move beyond simply labelling the remains inside settlements as non-funerary or deviant discoveries, and to attempt to interpret them in the context of the wider social practices which contributed to the creation and maintenance of identities. The manipulation of the dead cannot be fully understood without linking them to practices of material culture depositions, and the imagining of place, while the concept of settlements cannot be understood without including the presence of the dead. Dwellings and settlements had dynamic biographies, and so did the bodies and body parts which circulated, were deposited or curated, even discarded, and in the process, they linked generations and places, in a cycle of birth-death-renewal. Throughout the Neolithic and Eneolithic we witness a fluidity between categories that is also expressed through material culture: miniature clay objects could represent altars-ovens-female bodies (see *Naumov 2010*), an ambiguity between animal and human forms – *e.g.*, the case of 'frog' figurines which could also represent women giving birth in other contexts (*Perles 2001.267*) or mixed animal/human figurines and pots. In this universe, the boundary between life and death was also a fluid one, and some of the dead made it manifest in the space of the settlements.

In essence, based on a general review of the evidence, one could say that what happened with these dead individuals fulfilled a number of roles in the continued life of the communities and groups – it was necessary to keep some of the dead around. Central to these beliefs was probably the manipulation and memorialization of powerful ancestors in the space of the living. While it is difficult to escape modern ways of thinking when writing about these remains, we should try and escape the need for clear cut definitions, as it is possible that we deal with opposing motivations: it is quite possible that while some of the individuals were selected and retained inside settlements as a sign of appreciation, others were discarded and denied proper burial (see the discussion on some of the bodies found in ditches, some of the examples of remains in 'rubbish areas', or bodies-artefacts). Of course, it is also possible that some individuals/remains were useful for some time, after which they were 'discarded'/deposited in waste areas, ditches, *etc.* On a case by case basis we can try and narrow our interpretation. Even so, I think we should be open to speculation and to proposing alternative scenarios – a way in which we can take the study of these remains further.

Regardless of the reasons for keeping the dead close, each time the living passed by them they might have thought of the words of Mary Elizabeth Frye: *"Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die."*

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