UDK 903.5.23(495)"634":2-5
Documenta Praehistorica XXXVII (2010)

The manipulation of death: a burial area at the Neolithic Settlement of Avgi, NW Greece

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ABSTRACT – *In the Neolithic of Northern Greece the disposal of the deceased is strongly related to the community of the living, and in most cases to the built environment. Burials often occur in close proximity to, or underneath 'domestic' structures. The constant association of dead ancestors with the living social environment may indicate a particular desire by Neolithic people to negotiate their past by incorporating it into their own present. This paper addresses such issues, based on new evidence from the Neolithic settlement of Avgi, NW Greece. A group of cremations were recently located inside ten small pots buried in an open space in the Neolithic village. The burials consisted of tiny amounts of heavily burnt human bones and, in two cases, were accompanied by carbonized seeds. This paper will discuss the occurrence of the burial pots and the associated cremations as tokens of memory and of special links to the past represented by the dead ancestors.*

IZVLEČEK – *V zgodnjem neolitiku severne Grčije so umrli še vedno močno povezani s skupnostjo živih, v mnogih primerih z gradnjo naselji. Grobovi so pogosto blizu hiš ali pod njimi. Stalna povezava mrtvih prednikov in živega socialnega okolja lahko nakazuje željo neolitskih ljudi povezovati preteklost in sedanjost. V članku predstavljamo nove dokaze z neolitskega najdišča Avgi v severozahodni Grčiji. Upepeljeni ostanki so bili najdeni v desetih majhnih posodah, pokopanih v neolitski vasi. Drobni ostanki človeških kosti so močno ožgani; v dveh so našli karbonizirana semena. Analiziramo pojav grobnih posod in upepelitev, simbolov spomina in posebnih vezi s preteklostjo, ki jo predstavljajo mrtvi predniki.*

KEY WORDS – *Neolithic; Northern Greece; cremations; burial pots; mortuary practices*

Introduction

The disposal of the deceased in Northern Greece during the Neolithic period was closely related to the community of the living. In particular, burials in many Neolithic sites occur in shallow pits which are located in open spaces among houses or underneath their floors, while grave goods are few and simple (*Hourmouziadis 1973; Demoule and Perlès 1993*). Moreover, much of the evidence is consistent with a remarkable diversity in mortuary practices. Individual and group burials often disposed in a primary or secondary way were located either within the settlements or in separate cemeteries. In particular, articulated inhumations, disarticulated scattered bones and a few cremations (*Triantaphyllou 2008*) have been found at Early Neolithic sites such as Nea Nikomedeia (*Rodden 1962; 1964; 1965; Angel 1973*) in Macedonia, Prodromos (*Hourmouziadis 1971*) and Soufli Magoula in Thessaly (*Gallis 1975; 1982*), as well as at many Late Neolithic sites, such as Makri (*Agelarakis and Efstratiou 1996*) in Aegean Thrace, Makriyalos (*Pappa and Bessios 1999; Triantaphyllou 1999*), Paliambela (*Kotsakis and Halstead 2004*),

DOI: 10.4312/dp.37.9

Mandalo (*Pilali-Papasteriou and Papaefthimiou-Papanthimou 1989*), Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas (*Hondrogianni-Metoki 2001*) and Dispilio in Central and Western Macedonia (*Petroutsa 2009*), and Platia Magoula Zarkou (*Gallis 1982*), Ayia Sofia Magoula (*Milojčić 1976*), Dimini (*Hourmouziadis 1978*) and Pefkakia Magoula (*Weisshaar 1989*) in Thessaly.

For instance, at Early Neolithic Prodromos, in western Thessaly, successive layers of disarticulated skulls and long bones were found under a house floor (*Hourmouziadis 1971; Perlès 2001*), while at Late Neolithic Dimini, in south-eastern Thessaly, a series of cremations were found both underneath house floors, and inside clay pots placed next to hearths within the houses (*Hourmouziadis 1978*). On the other hand, at Late Neolithic Makriyalos, in central Macedonia, one of the two concentric ditches was used for primary and secondary burials (*Triantaphyllou 1999*). Cemeteries at some distance from the settlement also occur, such as the Early Neolithic cemetery at Soufli Magoula (*Gallis 1975; 1982*) and the Late Neolithic cemetery at Platia Magoula Zarkou (*Gallis 1982*) in eastern Thessaly, where cremation burials were placed inside pots and deposited then in shallow pits. Despite the great variety of burial customs, a common feature in the mortuary treatment of the deceased during the Neolithic period in Northern Greece is the domestic character of the burials, which is expressed through the incorporation of some of the deceased into the built environment of the living community.

Nevertheless, altogether these burials comprise a rather small number compared to the number of people considered to have lived in Neolithic villages. The scarcity of Neolithic burials cannot be attributed only to deficiencies in archaeological research (*Triantaphyllou 1999.128*). It is possible that a number of Neolithic burials have gone unrecognized, while other ways of manipulating the deceased, which left scarce, if any, traces in the archaeological record, should also be considered.

Recent excavations at the Neolithic settlement of Avgi, in Kastoria (*Stratouli in press*) (Fig. 1) shed light on aspects of mortuary treatment in the Neolithic of Northern Greece. A group of cremations was found inside ten small pots, buried at an open area of the Neolithic village (Fig. 7). Archaeological work at the site of Avgi provides enough evidence to support an interesting discussion with regard to Neolithic funerary behavior, and the association of the burial area with the built environment of the living community.

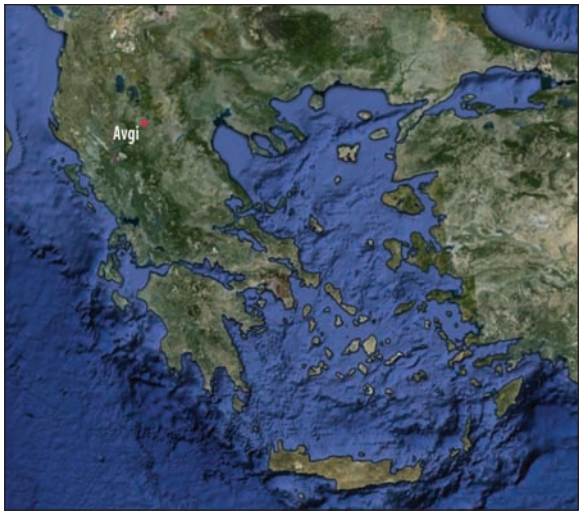

Fig. 1. Map indicating the location of the site.

The site

The Neolithic site of Avgi[1] (*Stratouli 2004; 2005; in press*) is located in hilly terrain, rich in clay deposits, in the Kastoria region, NW Greece (Figs. 1 and 2). The site forms an 'extended' settlement (Fig. 3), a well-known type in the Balkan Neolithic and now widely recognized in the Neolithic of Northern Greece. The known size of the site is about 5ha of which some 2000m^2 were investigated during excavations (Fig. 4) carried out from 2002 to 2008 by the 17th

Fig. 2. The site at Neolithic Avgi.

1 For further information, visit the web site http://www.neolithicavgi.gr/

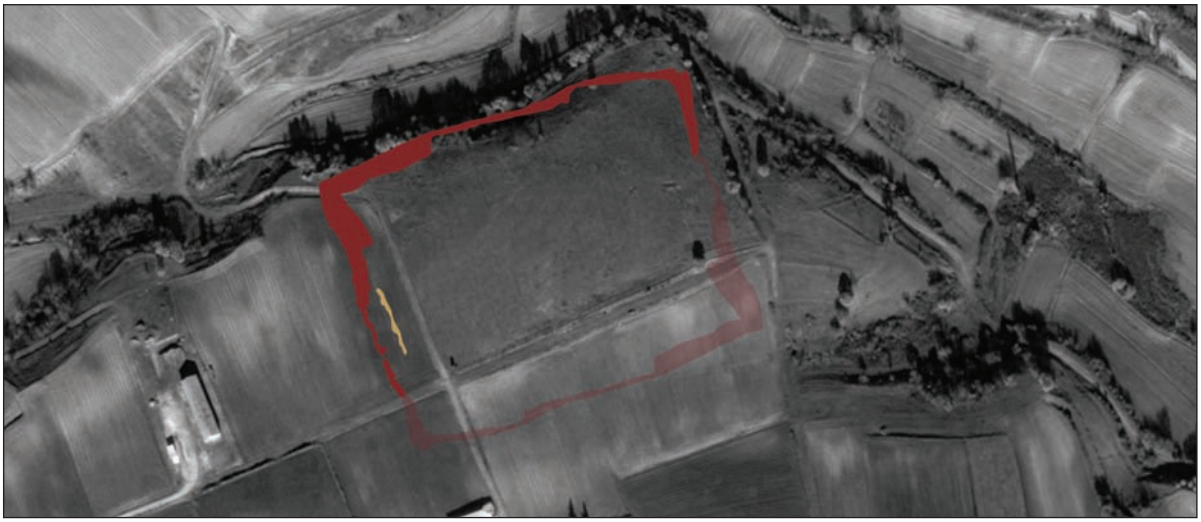

Fig. 3. Reconstruction of peripheral ditches.

Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism under the direction of Georgia Stratouli and the collaboration of an interdisciplinary team of researchers. Based on radiocarbon dating, the Neolithic settlement dates to the Middle Neolithic (*c.* 5700–5300) and the Late Neolithic I and II (*c.* 5300–4500, most probably later on, too), with the earliest use of the site dating to *c.* 5650 calBC. Two distinct phases of occupation are evident: AVGI I, dating mostly to the second half of the 6th millennium (Middle Neolithic and Late Neolithic I), and AVGI II, dating to the 5th millennium (Late Neolithic II).

The earliest phase of occupation (AVGI I) is represented by the structural remains of at least six free-standing rectangular buildings, which were burnt and collapsed *in situ*, leaving intact remnants of clay and wood construction materials, mud bricks, wall plasters and post holes (Fig. 5). The building components comprise large open areas, facilities for the storage of agricultural and other products, thermal structures, including hearths and ovens for heating and cooking, and numerous implements used in a variety of daily tasks, such as food preparation, consumption and tool-making.

The settlement layout and construction techniques appear to have changed radically at AVGI II. The remains of at least five rectangular buildings, ranging in size between 70 to 85m^2, and one of elliptical shape belong to that phase. Some of the buildings are separated by narrow trenches. The clay walls of the buildings located at the western and, to date, the better excavated part of the settlement, were firmly placed inside foundation trenches, a building technique well documented at many Neolithic settlements across the Balkans (Fig. 6). Several storage, refuse and borrow pits also belong to the same phase.

The burial area

The burial area at the Neolithic settlement at Avgi is located at the center of the site, covering a rather small area of about 3.0m^2 (Fig. 7). Based on stratigra-

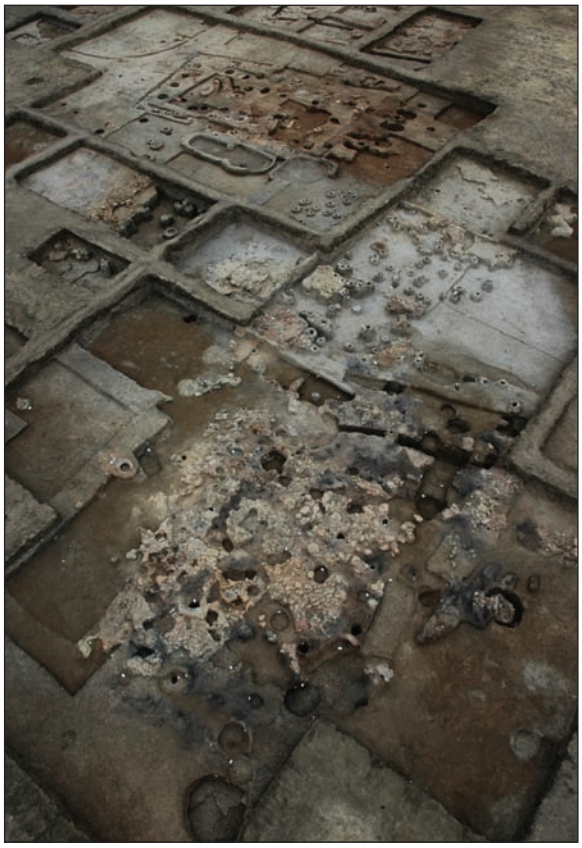

Fig. 4. Western part of the excavations.

phic observations – while radiocarbon dating is still pending – the burial area dates to the fifth millennium, probably an early phase of AVGI II. We should note here that little is known about this phase regarding the settlement layout and building construction. However, much of the evidence indicates a variety of everyday activities occurring at the site at this period – for instance, the presence of thermal structures, such as hearths and ovens, as well as a large amount of tools and other artifacts.

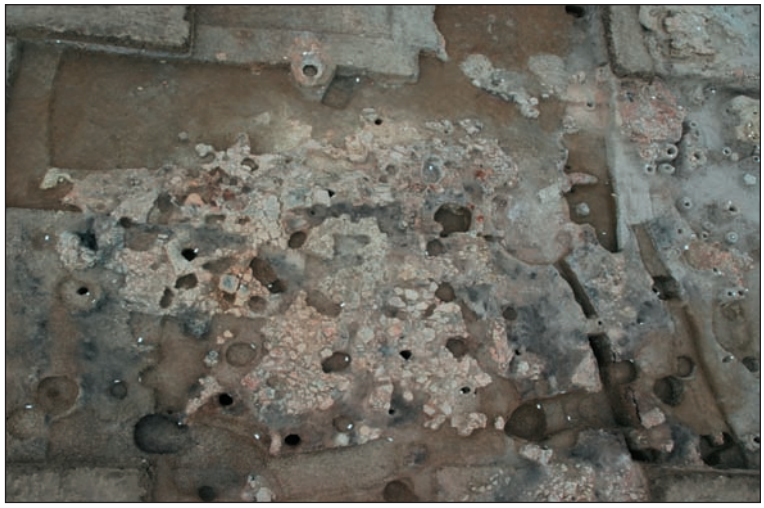

Fig. 5. Architectural remains dated to the second half of the 6th millennium (AVGI I).

Ten small pots containing tiny amounts of burnt human remains were excavated at this area (Fig. 8–14). The burial ritual involved cremation of the dead, which probably occurred at another place, away from the domestic environment. In two cases, burnt seeds were also placed in the burial pots (Fig. 14). At a later stage, the pots were disposed in this specific area, and each was covered with two or three layers of large pottery fragments (Fig. 9–11); the larger of these sherds were smashed intentionally at some stage during the burial ritual. The small burial pots were most probably buried in pairs (Fig. 10), while stratigraphic evidence would reflect more than one episode of depositions to have taken place, indicating that this particular ritual continued for a rather long period.

The upper layers of the burial area were significantly disturbed by the later Neolithic occupation and modern ploughing, so both its original form and contents may have been affected. It is a matter of further research to explore whether the small pots were buried within a pit or placed in an open or an encircled area of the settlement, or whether the area was covered and marked by a *tumulus* or any other construction. The good preservation of both the pots and their covering sherds indicates that they were not exposed for a long period after their disposal, but again there are no indications in the excavated part to suggest the opening of a large burial pit in order to include the small group of urns. These issues are unresolved to some extent by the fact that the excavation in that particular area of the settlement is still in progress, and therefore the limits of the burial area remain under investigation.

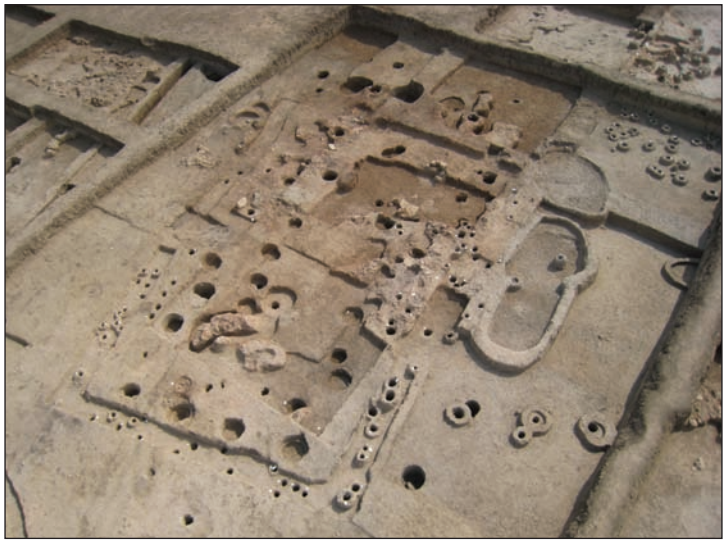

Fig. 6. Foundation ditches, post holes and pits dated to the 5th millennium (AVGI II).

The burial pots

The ten small burial pots are characterized by a remarkable variability, particularly with regard to their height, which ranges from 3.0cm (*i.e.* a miniature hole-mouth jar, Fig. 12) to 13.0cm (*i.e.* a small necked jar).

Furthermore, differences in both the shape and surface treatment of the pots can be observed. They seem to imitate closed vessels, such as hole-mouth and necked jars, which are well known forms among the pottery inventory of the site. Also, the color of the exterior surfaces of the vessels range from light brown (four pots) and reddish brown (four pots) to red (one pot), while in one case

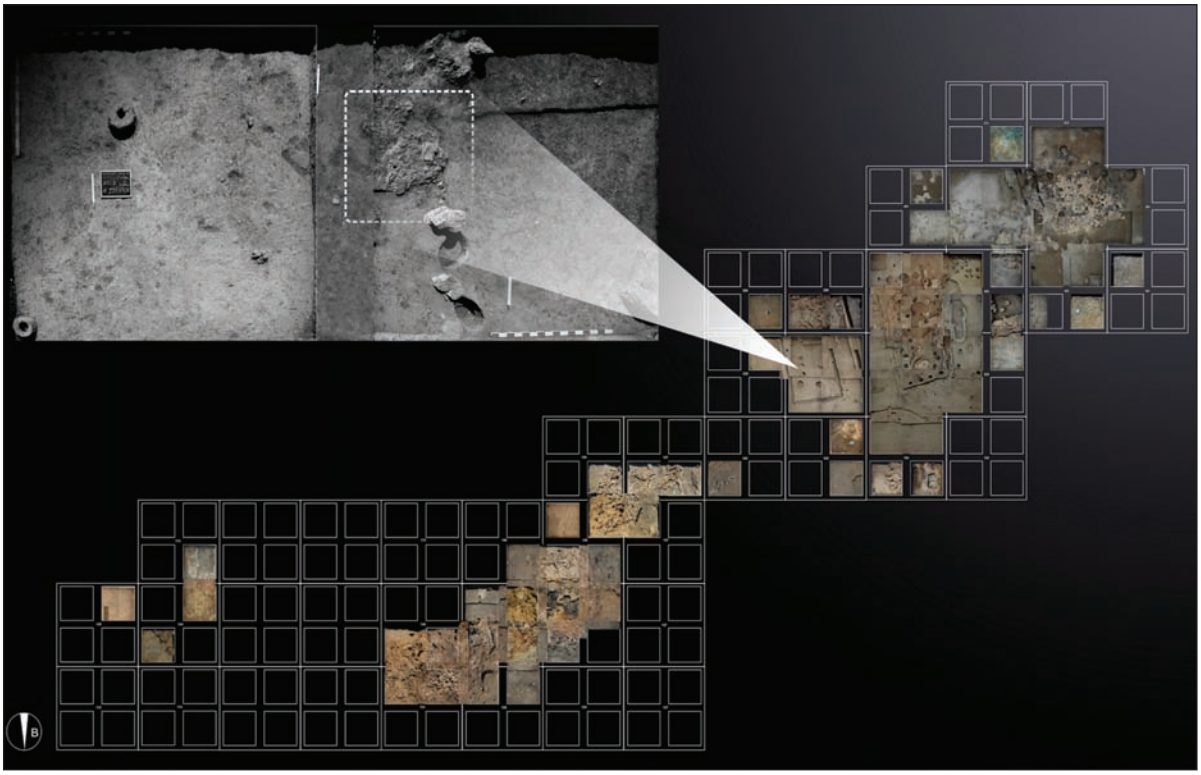

Fig. 7. Location of the burial area within the settlement.

a small 'black-topped' spherical necked jar, possibly missing a handle, is present. The surface treatment of the burial pots also varies: four pots show smoothed exterior surfaces, while six are burnished. Moreover, two distinct techniques can be detected in the manufacturing process of the burial pots: most were manufactured with the 'coiling' technique, in which coils of clay are used to build up the pot (*Shepard 1968.75*). The remainder and the smaller pots were crafted using the 'pinching' technique, in which a single lump of clay is transformed into a pot by pressure of the potter's hands (*Rice 1987.125*).

Also, some pots show wear marks on the exterior surface of their base. This feature would suggest that these particular pots prior to their deposition in the burial ground were used in some other activity in the context of Neolithic daily life, and therefore the 'circle of their life' ended along with the life of an individual. In sharp contrast, there are pots that exhibit more 'hasty' manufacture characteristics (Fig. 13), in terms of shaping, forming and even firing, indicating that they were made for use only as funerary urns.

To sum up, no single burial pot is identical to any other. On the contrary, all urns from the small burial assemblage of Neolithic Avgi were placed at the same central area of the settlement and were covered with large sherds from large vessels, creating possibly a small tumulus (Fig. 10), although it is impossible to know whether or not this feature was visible to the living community after the burial rituals took place. It is also probable that these larger vessels were deliberately destroyed during the funer-

Fig. 8. Burial pot with associated skeletal remains.

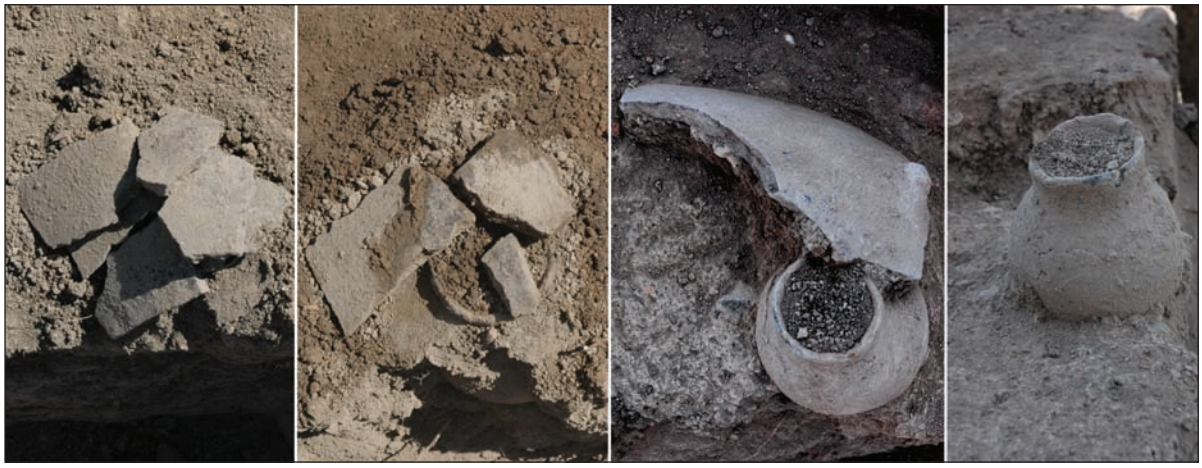

Fig. 9. The stages of excavating and 'revealing' a burial pot.

ary rituals, once their 'cultural biography', carrying a number of meanings through their use in different social and cultural contexts, was completed.

The overall similarity of the funerary rituals at Neolithic Avgi contributes towards an emphasis to communal versus individual identity, although the unique manufacture characteristics of each burial pot mark at the same time the particular identity of the deceased. It is worth mentioning that the shapes of the burial pots were inspired by vessels usually associated by archaeologists with storage and/or collective consumption of food.

The skeletal remains

The study of cremated bone material involves, aside from the thorough recording of biological parameters (*e.g.* age, sex, pathological conditions), the careful examination of variables related to the process of cremation, such as the color, fragmentation and several modifications, like fracturing and warpage, which can be observed on the bone due to its exposure to burning conditions. Moreover, fragmentation and the representation of skeletal elements can be related to a series of acts taking place through human interference, such as the deliberate *mixing of bones* during the process of firing in order to provide more oxygen and, therefore, adequate cremation of the cadaver, and the *mode of collecting* the cremated remains – either complete or selective after the extinction of the pyre (*McKinley 1994; 2000; Ubelaker and Rife 2007; Schmidt and Symes 2008*).

At Neolithic Avgi, the small quantity of bone found in pot burials limits the analysis with regard to information which can be provided from cremated bones. The majority of the cremated fragments recovered from the site exhibit patterns of calcination, coloring, fragmentation, fissures, transverse and longitudinal fracturing and warping to be consistent with burning as fresh bone with the flesh still attached, as opposed to burning dry bone, without flesh. With regard to burning temperature and duration, the evidence from calcined bones shows that pyre temperatures reached at least 700°C at the level of the body, while exposure to high temperatures was probably a lengthy procedure. High fragmentation may have been caused due to the continuous addition of fuel during the burning process and the consequent mixing of pyre debris with long sticks. The morphology, size and structure of the bone indicate that six out of ten burials belong to adults, and only one to an infant, but there were no features preser-

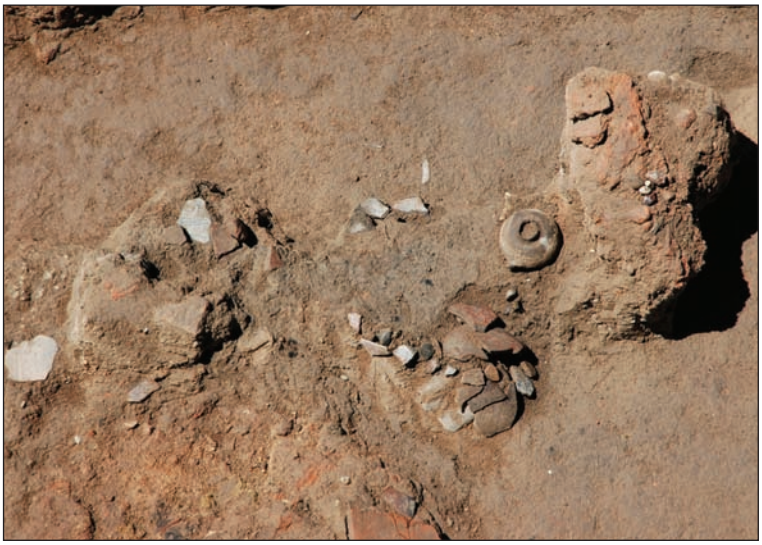

Fig. 10. A pair of burial pots: in one case, the pot is still covered with sherd fragments.

Fig. 11. Large sherd fragments covering a burial pot.

ved allowing sex determination and an accurate estimate of age at death. All the bones were in tiny fragments (Fig. 13), and only in two out of ten cremation burials were some bone fragments identifiable. In general, there is no preferential selection between cranial and post-cranial skeletal elements.

The weight, however, of the cremated material is worth discussing here. It is generally accepted in the related bibliography that the weight of bone recovered from an adult cremation varies between about 1000 to 3600grms (*McKinley 2000.404*). At Neolithic Avgi, the tiny quantity of the cremated bone material, less than 10grms in each case in the majority of burials, may be consistent with secondary treatment of the deceased. It is worth noting the presence of three out of the six adult burials which show larger quantities of bone material, ranging from 90 to 165grms, which again, however, are not consistent with what would be expected in a careful and thorough collection of all cremated bone remains. It is therefore possible that after the pyre was completed, the cremated remnants of the deceased were collected in a very selective way.

Discussion

The cremations at Neolithic Avgi are not unique in Neolithic Northern Greece. Similar burial evidence was recently discovered at the nearby lake settlement of Dispilio, approx. 10km north-east of Avgi (*Petroutsa 2009*), and Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas in Kozani, approx. 65km to the south-east of Avgi (*Hondrogianni-Metoki 2001*). At Toumba Kremastis-Koiladas, however, the burial ground was not associated with a particular settlement, but was part of a separate cemetery (*Hondrogianni-Metoki 2001*), similar to cemeteries such as Early Neolithic Soufli Magoula and Late Neolithic Platia Magoula Zarkou in Thessaly (*Gallis 1975; 1982*). At Avgi, the grouping of cremations at an area inside the domestic environment together with the complexity of the funerary ritual, as has been suggested by the burial pots and the covering sherds and the results of the osteological analysis, raise a number of issues which require further interpretation.

Firstly, only a small group of people was chosen to be buried in this particular part of the settlement. There is no doubt that these individuals were buried in this specific area of the settlement in an exceptional way, while most members of the community were probably treated differently. What were the criteria which determined this selection? Were the individuals buried in that area selected randomly, or were they related by some close ties, which were distinct to the Neolithic community, but totally inaccessible to us? Ethnographic studies would suggest that such ties could be related to lineage, social identity and age, or even to a violent and abrupt cause of death (*Parker Pearson 1999*). Whether or not other members of the Neolithic community of Avgi received a similar or different type of manipulation after their death remains unknown, since there is no other related evidence in the excavated area. The occurrence of another burial area within the settlement or in close proximity to it may be possible. In any case, it is remarkable that a group of people was disposed at a distinct area within the domestic environment, which was visible and accessible to the members of the living community only. Moreover, the complex funerary ritual, which was probably a lengthy and

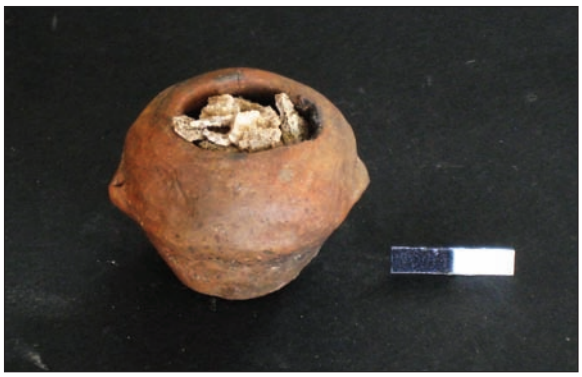

Fig. 12. A miniature hole-mouth jar with associated skeletal remains.

public event, created an opportunity for the villagers to establish new relations in the living community through their participation in the same ceremony.

Death was probably an event which affected and concerned the Neolithic community as a whole, and the funerary ceremonies could be interpreted as a field for the negotiation of the new social roles which were emerging for the living, kinsfolk or otherwise, of the deceased (*Whittle 2003.126*). Through the *manipulation of death* the community of the ancestors affected the community of the living (for an ethnographic example, see *Kopytoff 1971*) by reproducing and establishing new relations and social identities among the living, or by reaffirming and reforming the given ones (*Parker Pearson 1999*). Thus, it was of the utmost importance that the memory of the ancestors would survive for future generations; that ancestry and the past would take a *material form* in order to be preserved, not only as an abstract event, but as a tangible memory, a *token* of the memorable individuals. The case study of Neolithic Avgi would suggest that the burial pots and the associated cremations could be interpreted as *tokens of memory*. Together with their use in funerary practices, these tokens may have also participated in other acts of commemoration. For instance, they may have been held and displayed during special gatherings, such as feasts or other ceremonies of social or symbolic character (see *Edmonds 1999.59*), long before their final disposal in the burial ground. The lack of grave goods or other finds related to the burial pots is also of interest. Only two pots had small quantities of carbonized seeds inside them, probably emphasising the link between the memorable ancestors and fertility, or even farming activities, which had an important role in the daily round of the Neolithic community. From another point of view, the seeds can be viewed as representing the agricultural cycle (*Bradley 2005*). In contrast with most things that have a finite life – including people, animals, houses, villages and objects – a seed is part of an unending cycle, since it produces more seeds if planted again. Putting together humans and seeds may be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the effects of life and death and embrace permanence (*Williams 2003*). Besides, the disposal of these tokens of memory in the domestic environment of a living community had a special meaning. Incorporation of the ancestors into the living world would reflect a strong desire by the community not only to the preceding generation, but also to the particular central area of the settlement. Although building remains from the early phase of AVGI II to which the burials are probably contemporary are scarce, there is enough evidence of a variety of everyday tasks occurring in the proximity to the burial area, indicating that this was unquestionably part of a domestic environment.

Fig. 13. Burial pot containing tiny amounts of skeletal remains.

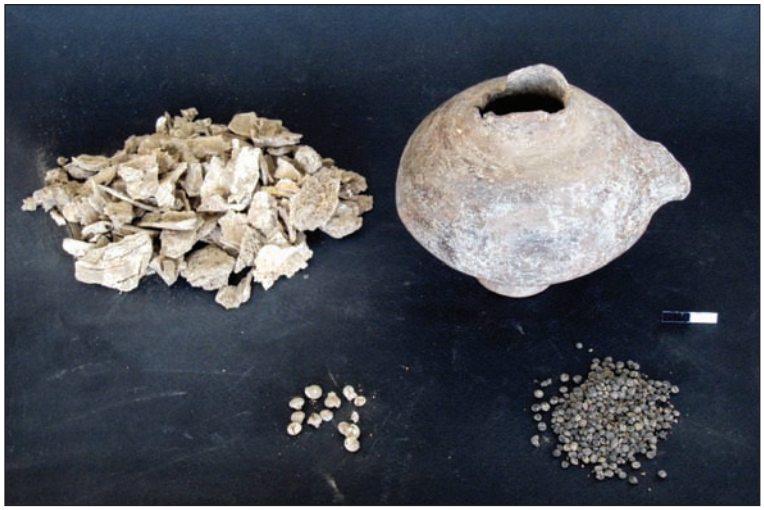

Fig. 14. Burial pot containing skeletal remains and carbonized seeds.

The close association of a group of deceased (ancestors) with the living social environment may indicate the desire of Neolithic people to negotiate their own past by weaving it into their own present. Such practices of materializing and managing the past could be considered as *acts of remembering* and, according to archaeological and anthropological theory, constitute important components in the formation of social identities and the construction of social relations (*van Dyke and Alcock 2003*).

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