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BEHEADED ANCESTORS.
OF SKULLS AND STATUES IN PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC JERICHO

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking features of prehistoric Jericho (Tell es-Sultan, Palestine) are 45 human skulls retrieved in Pre-Pottery¹ Neolithic layers by Kathleen M. Kenyon during the second British Expedition at the site, between 1952 and 1958². Pre-Pottery Neolithic human remains had already been discovered by John Garstang³ during the first British Expedition of 1930-36⁴. Garstang also retrieved two caches of plaster statues, which, with a bust found by Kenyon in the same area⁵, represent the last development of the same process of images making started with skulls separated burials. Both phenomena can be fruitfully set into the long duration panorama of the transition from foraging to farming in Southern Levant⁶.

Since their discovery, the attention of scholars and public was focused on the most striking plastered skulls/crania (twelve specimens + two only painted) found in Middle PPNB layers, although the practice of skulls separation started earlier⁷, and Kenyon had also found 26 separated skulls/crania in previous PPNA and Early PPNB strata (§ 2.)⁸. Jericho skulls (§ 3.) still represent almost half of all known plain and modeled skulls found in the Levant (*Fig. 1*)⁹.

Hereby, a synthesis of finds is presented showing the development of this custom between PPNA and PPNB at Jericho¹⁰, and focusing on the finding contexts of these separated skulls/cra-

¹ At Jericho, I would prefer to label this period “Aceramic” as it does not represent a premise of the following “Pottery Neolithic”, which, from many respects, marks a regression in cultural and technological achievements, except for the introduction of pottery. The two periods are, moreover, separated by a hiatus in several areas of the site, and also flint industry is markedly different. “Aceramic” would also better accomplish the goal of demising an evolutionary interpretation of Levantine prehistory.

² KENYON 1981.

³ Garstang found two curious burials: one with twisted neck and body held down, and one with separated skulls (by accident, due to an earthquake), as well as a child burial (GARSTANG - GARSTANG 1948, pp. 60-61, pl. IX) when the distinguished archaeologist of the University of Liverpool for the first time identified a prominent Neolithic stratification underneath almost 5 m of Early Bronze Age layers in his North-East Trench. Garstang reached Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (Sultan Ic of the Italian-Palestinian Expedition periodization), which he labeled “Early Neolithic” and attributed levels XVII-X, and “Late Neolithic”, levels IX-VIII, characterized by the appearance of pottery (SALA 2006, pp. 271-275).

⁴ One more skull was excavated by the joint Italian-Palestinian Expedition of Sapienza University of Rome and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities - Dept. of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (1997-2017). It was found during the fifth seasons at Tell es-Sultan in 2009 (NIGRO 2009, pp. 34-35).

⁵ KENYON 1981, p. 290, pl. 72 (nowadays in the National Archaeological Museum on the Amman Citadel).

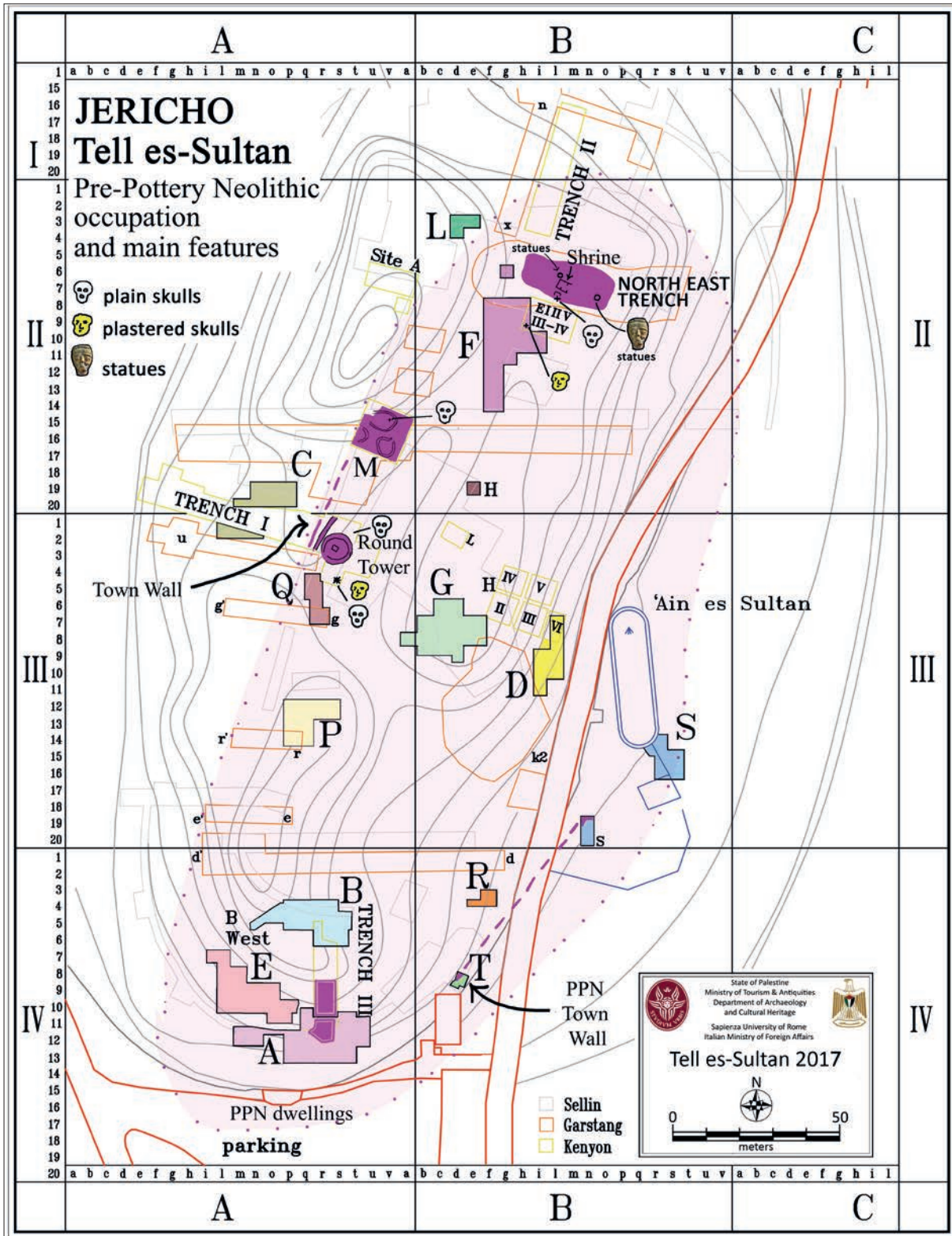
⁶ BENZ 2010, pp. 249-251.

⁷ SCHULTING 2015, p. 22; BOCQUENTIN *et al.* 2016, pp. 39-41.

⁸ Some of these separated and buried plain skulls were deemed demonstrating the performance of human sacrifices (KENYON 1981, p. 50).

⁹ One thus would expect that overall synthesis across the ancient Near East reflected such quantitative disparity (CROUCHER 2012, *passim*).

¹⁰ A recent synthesis by Marion Benz (BENZ 2010) has tried to translate Kenyon's data (and datings) into an updated periodization, with however several aporias between stratigraphy and absolute datings. The Italian-Palestinian



Tav. I – Map of Tell es-Sultan with excavated areas and the finding spot of plain skulls, plastered skulls and statues.



Fig. 1 – Map of Pre-Pottery Neolithic Southern Levant with sites where plain skulls, plastered skulls and plaster statues were found.

nia in order to gain some insight into their “use” and possibly ideological meaning (*Tav. I*). Finally, they are compared with the plaster statues (§ 4.) which from many respect seem the last developments of the custom of modeling with plaster human-like images arisen in Pre-Pottery Neolithic (10,500-6000 BC).

Expedition has re-examined the stratigraphy in Squares DI-II, FI, M, EI, EIII and sampled for new radiocarbon datings. This work has confirmed the following stratigraphic re-calibrated periodization/chronology: Epipaleolithic/Mesolithic/Natufian: 10,500-9000 BC; PPNA: 9000-8000; PPNB: 8000-6000 BC (further subdivisions: Early PPNB 8000-7400 BC; Middle PPNB: 7400-6500 BC; Late PPNB, also called PPNC: 6500-6100 BC); PNA: 6100/5800-5200; PNB: 5200-4800 BC. An occupation hiatus possibly occurred at the end of Pre-Pottery Neolithic (c. 6100-5800 BC), as well as another at the end of Pottery Neolithic (c. 4800-4400 BC).

1. PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC AT JERICHO, AN EPITOME



Fig. 2 – The Round Tower of Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (10,500-8000 BC) at Tell es-Sultan.

Pre-Pottery Neolithic Jericho was a strongly innovative community, which introduced agriculture and animal breeding after plants and animals domestication, developed monumental and modular architecture¹¹ (with the invention of the mud-brick and of fine lime plaster), as well as implemented pyrotechnology and a distinguished flint industry¹², transforming life-style and environment¹³, with an amazing growth during more than four millennia (10,500-6000 BC)¹⁴. It overcame several crisis, even bringing about occupational hiatuses, demonstrating an essential skill for resilience. Its achievements are epitomized by the Round Tower (*Fig. 2*) and the attached superimposed Town Walls excavated by Kenyon, as well as by many other monuments and finds.

Immaterial accomplishments of this community are equally or even more important. The agriculturalists seem to have inaugurated a social organization based upon a locally-adapted subsistence system integrating cultivation, animal taming and hunting, as well as a set of ideological tools: communitarian rites, differentiated burial customs, and individuals vs. community deals¹⁵.

Almost a century of archaeology has illustrated the flourishing PPN “town” at wide extent thanks to the work of three successive archaeological expeditions from 1930 to 2017, so that Jericho can be hold as key-site for this period in Southern Levant.

1.1. *Jericho and the ideological palimpsest of Pre-Pottery Neolithic.*

Although the ideological palimpsest of the Near East during the Neolithic has been the field of exercise for many smart minds¹⁶, it seems still unveiled, especially as regards the relationships between humans and nature, life and death, i.e. the essence and role of religion¹⁷. The peculiarities of the archaeological evidence – even though wealthy –, and the multiplication of approaches and models, whether allow to carry ahead the investigation along a multiplicity of research paths,

¹¹ BEN-SHLOMO - GARFINKEL 2009, pp. 191-192, tab. 1.

¹² CROWFOOT PAYNE 1983, pp. 639-706.

¹³ NAVEH 2003; SIMMONS 2007; NIGRO *et al.* 2011, pp. 577-578; NIGRO 2013, p. 3.

¹⁴ Two major occupational hiatuses (or periods with reduced building activities) have been identified at the end of PPNA and of PPNB, while a flourish seems to characterized central PPNA (Stages V-VIII in Trench I), and mature PPNB (Stages XIII-XVII in Trench I, Squares DI-II, FI).

¹⁵ KUIJT 2001, p. 86; BENZ 2010, p. 251, pp. 269-270; ROLLEFSON 1983, p. 30; ROLLEFSON 2004.

¹⁶ Many skilled scholars have thoroughly analysed the ideological foundations of the Neolithic society, enlightening it with their interpretations focusing on the “agricultural revolution” and its economic, social, and even cognitive implications (CAUVIN 2000; HODDER 2001).

¹⁷ e.g. SEALE 1998; CROUCHER 2012.

result basically in a series of warnings about what we surely cannot state about it¹⁸. Moreover, new discoveries, such as Khraysan, Wadi Feinan 16, and Qasr Meshash in Jordan or Göbleki Tepe in Anatolia¹⁹, continue to widen the spectrum of ideologically influenced behaviors during PPN.

The 45 skulls from PPN Jericho epitomize this situation. Simplistically interpreted as the relics of a somewhat uncontextualized “cult of ancestors” just after their discovery²⁰, they have been pushed back to mere detached skulls at the beginning of the last decade²¹. What seemed the most relevant questions (to whom did the skulls belong? What was the meaning of modeling and which was the use of plastered skulls?) were thoroughly debated²², and sometimes overcome or subsumed in wider interpretive scenarios²³. However, the outcome of such deeper study is a drastic increase of uncertainties, which can surely be regarded as a major step up of science, but leaves a bit dissatisfied. I would try to focus again on Jericho, and to put forward a new synthesis – hoping that it also could be of some utility. A renewed and contextual examination of the Jericho skulls, in connection with the often neglected statues may produce some hints at their use and significance²⁴.

1.2. *Materials, techniques and shapes: from skulls to statues.*

Jericho's skulls are framed within a long-lasting and quite variegated phenomenon, that of skulls separation, manipulation, possible ostentation and re-burying, which is spread all over the Near East towards the end of Epipaleolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic²⁵, and is accompanied by the emergence of plaster statuary in the very last stage of its development in Late PPNB, limitedly to Southern Levant. At Jericho, skulls separation started in PPNA²⁶, when ordinary burials under the floors were dug-back to resume skulls or crania (without the mandible) in order to “use” them after manipulation (de-fleshing, smoothing, plastering, painting with collagen or blood), possibly to display or to worship (?), and then rebury them (individually or, more frequently, in groups). This custom evolved from PPNA to PPNB, and from simple skulls and crania recovering, possibly display, and reburying, it became skulls/crania transformation into modeled images. Whether these served as fetishes or idols is uncertain, as they have been found buried (§ 4.). After a careful removal of flesh and tissues, the facial section of skulls was plastered with clayish lime or gypsum as to create a stylized and sometimes abstract (and hence symbolic?) facial figure²⁷, often

¹⁸ CROUCHER 2012; KUIJT 2001; KUIJT 2008; BENZ 2010, pp. 250-251.

¹⁹ SCHMIDT 2010 with previous bibliography.

²⁰ KENYON 1957, p. 84.

²¹ BONOGOFSKY 2001; BONOGOFSKY 2003; BONOGOFSKY 2004.

²² BIENERT 1991; GOREN *et al.* 2001, pp. 671-672.

²³ CROUCHER 2012.

²⁴ Periodization and chronology of PPN at Jericho would deserve a dedicated article. Some attempts were made of reassessing them basing upon radiocarbon datings provided by Kenyon and successively re-calibrated (Benz 2010), does not fully fit stratigraphy (see note 26 below). Also terminological issues affected the subdivision of the period, more than stratigraphy, which was clear already in Garstang's deep North-East trench. Periodization and chronology followed by the Italian-Palestian Expedition and in this article are summarized in note 10.

²⁵ ARENSBURG - HERSHKOVITZ 1989; SIMMONS *et al.* 1990; BONOGOFSKY 2004; STORDEUR - KHAWAM 2007; FLETCHER *et al.* 2008; MILEVSKI *et al.* 2008; CROUCHER 2012; FLETCHER *et al.* 2014.

²⁶ BENZ (BENZ 2010, pp. 253-254) has recently proposed a different periodization basing the attribution to cultural periods (e.g. PPNA/EPPNB vs. Middle or Late PPNB) to their absolute dates. I think that the distinction between PPNA and PPNB made by Kenyon is reliable, no matter of the radiocarbon dates (which by instance have been raised and lowered again in the meanwhile), as it is based upon an overall consideration of the material culture of each period.

²⁷ Aesthetic features are noteworthy: eyes are often emphasized by shells or painting, cheekbones are marked, and the face is shallow, with thin straight nose and lips. These morphological traits occur also in contemporary statues at Jericho itself and 'Ain Ghazal (ROLLEFSON 1983, pp. 32-35), as well as on masks found at Jericho, 'Ain Ghazal and Nahal Hemar (BAR-YOSEF 1995, pp. 203-204), recalling an “extra-terrestrial style” with big eyes. A coloured wash, imitating skin or aiming at letting the skin shine, has been also recognised on their surfaces, such as painted bands or stripes, similar to those known for statues and possibly imitating tattooing – i.e. signifying existed individuals – or known symbols.

embellished by shell inlays in the eyes sockets and painted details (tattoos? One specimen exhibits moustaches)²⁸. Such a careful modeling, seeking at keeping memory of individual identity, thus, appears as one of the goals of skulls plastering.

Plastered skulls, very popular at Jericho, and their possible ostentation and burying exemplify a custom especially qualifying Southern Levant during Middle PPNB (7500-6500 BC). Manipulation provided a new life to skulls and made them live beyond the death as memory or symbols of identity in the living community²⁹. This may suggest that they were put on display in houses or in dedicated spaces. The practice of skulls resuming, plastering and display, as well as their grouping and re-burying, emerges, thus, a major ideological feature of Middle PPNB and may provide a deep insight into religious thoughts of the earliest Neolithic community engaged in the thriving socio-economic and cultural transformation which has been labeled the “Neolithic revolution” (§ 5)³⁰.

This practice, at Jericho and ‘Ain Ghazal, can be further on connected with the development of a plaster statuary, which characterizes Late PPNB/PPNC³¹. Plaster statues may represent an expansion of the custom exhibited by plastered skulls, as they are created with similar materials and techniques, they portray human-like individuals (and couples), with a major accent on heads and eyes, possibly signifying deified ancestors or even gods³². They show the same painted details and signs attested on skulls. They, thus, seem to accomplish the same goal of skulls: preserving, making visible and personify identities in the community.

Skulls transformation by modeling, plastering, and painting, as well as statues making were very industrious and demanding skills, as semi-precious stuff (ochre, cinnabar), implying extraction and importation, and specialized labour (producing lime was a quite intensive activity) were needed³³. For this reason, the Jerichoan pristine works of art can be considered real hallmarks of the technological achievements of the PPN society³⁴, and represent a major step ahead of figurative art from stone carving to plastic polymateric modeling. Moreover, the most precious material needed to produce such figures were skulls themselves, as resuming and manipulating human remains surely had deep religious implications. It possibly was conducted in ritual ways, and art was the medium of the creative performance giving them a further life and the role of hypostatize their identities.

2. PPNA SKULLS AND CRANIA SEPARATION AND BURYING

The earliest PPN detached skulls are 26 and were found in groups (except a single cranium) in four different spots of the site: respectively in Trench I/Squares DI and FI³⁵, Square MI, and Squares EI-II (tab. 1). One more skull was found by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition in a stone cist in the eroded north section of Kenyon’s Square FI³⁶. Their finding contexts are deemed par-

²⁸ In the same case, an overall pinkish wash is attested, always made with an iron oxide paint. The use of blood, suggested by traces of iron oxide, might be hypothesized (and could have a noteworthy interpretive relevance), but cannot be fully proved.

²⁹ CROUCHER 2006, p. 33; BENZ 2010.

³⁰ KENYON 1952, p. 73; CAUVINE 2000, pp. 67-72.

³¹ ROLLEFSON 1984; ROLLEFSON 1989. Late PPNB can be identified at Tell es-Sultan in Garstang’s North East Trench, stratum IX.

³² GRISSOM 2000, p. 25; ROLLEFSON 1983, p. 32.

³³ KINGERY *et al.* 1988; NILHAMN *et al.* 2009.

³⁴ GOURDIN - KINGERY 1975.

³⁵ On both the eastern and western sides of the Round Tower, some meters a part.

³⁶ The skull of a male sub-adult was uncovered due to a collapse of the northern section of Kenyon’s square FI in Trench I, within a cist included into the foundation of a structure. It can be ascribed to the same stratigraphic phases of the second group of skulls (NIGRO 2009, pp. 34-35).

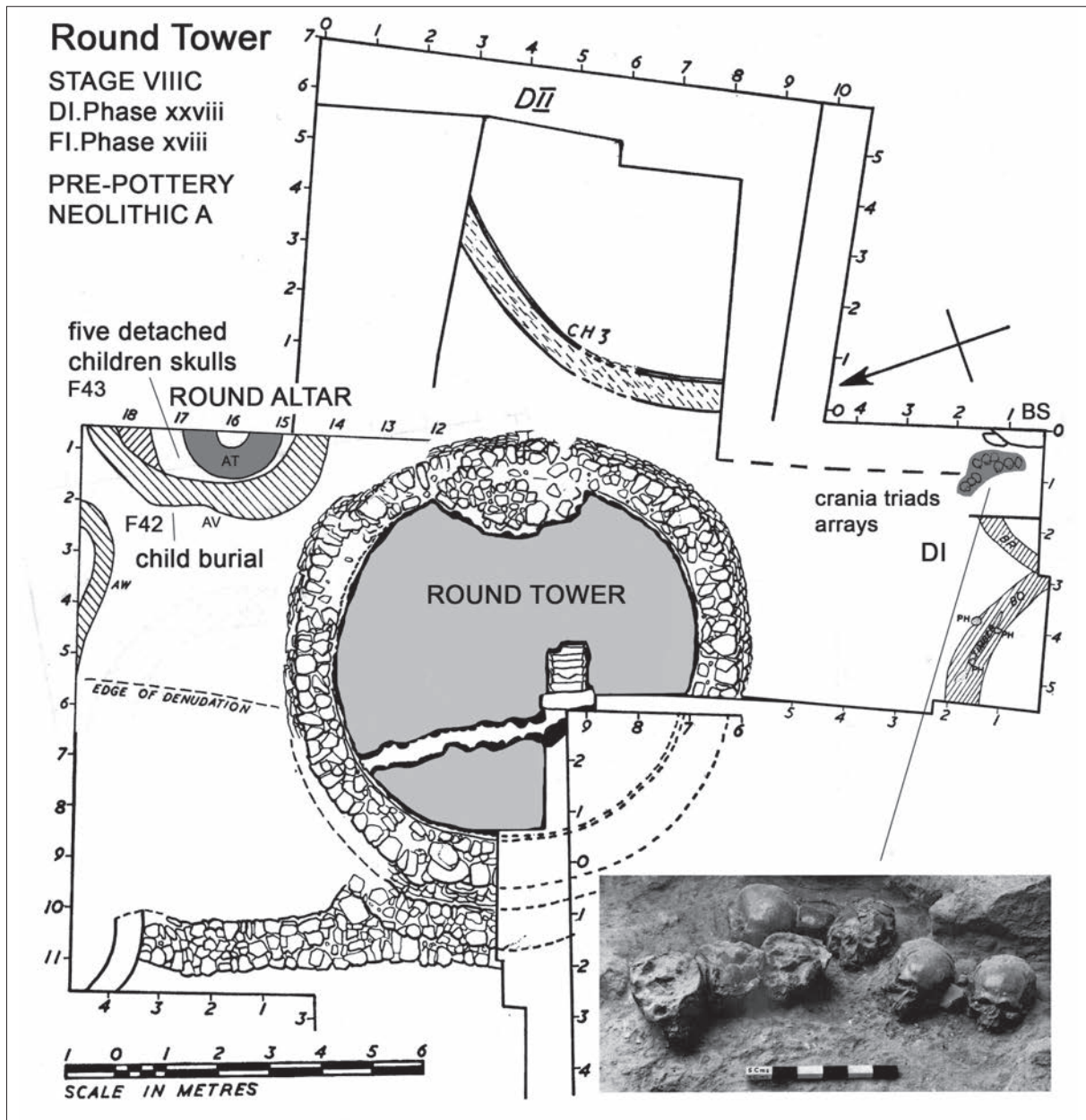


Fig. 3 – Plan showing the location of the round installation (“altar”) with five infant skulls (sacrificed children?) inside in Square FI, and three arrays of skulls triads in Square DI, respectively north-east and south-west of the Round Tower in Stage VIIIIC [late PPNA, c. 8300 BC] (after KENYON 1981, pls. 36b, 213).

particularly relevant, because they represent the first appearance at Jericho of the custom of skulls/crania separation³⁷.

The largest first group of 9 crania (D35-D44)³⁸ was buried underneath the floor of a courtyard³⁹. They belonged to three children, three young women and three adult individuals, were tidily displaced in three closely set arrays of three, all looking towards west (Fig. 3). Their number

³⁷ As pointed out by Kenyon who labelled this phenomenon the emergence of “skulls cult” (KENYON 1981, p. 53).

³⁸ Kenyon discovered 9 crania, ns. D35-D44 (KENYON 1956, pl. XIII:b; KENYON 1981, p. 53, pls. VII:c; 36:a-b); they were enlisted in KURTH - RÖHRER-ERTL 1981, p. 436 with the Jericho registry numbers: D200.6c(1) - D200.6c(10).

³⁹ The nine PPNA skulls were found under a floor made of beaten earth, partly eroded, not far away, though about 2 m underneath, from where the plastered skulls of PPNB - Stage XV-XVIIA were found.

and arrangement in triads may hint at a relationships existing between alive or have a symbolic meaning⁴⁰. The 9 crania were found about 5 m south of the Round Tower, displaced and buried in a fill aside wall BS, a structure covering walls BQ+BR⁴¹ in Stage VIIIIC, that is either the last Stage of PPNA, as Kenyon suggested, or the very beginning of PPNB (Early PPNB).

A second group of 6 skulls (E11-E16)⁴² was found in Square EI-II, on the northern fringes of the PPN town, just aside the wall of a house, again beneath the floor of an open space. Six skulls, five children (three females and three undetermined) and a sub-adult, were closely grouped in a circle, all facing towards the centre (Fig. 4)⁴³. Kenyon suggested that they might have belonged to some burials found in the nearby, which included skeletons without skulls⁴⁴. Subsequent analyses,

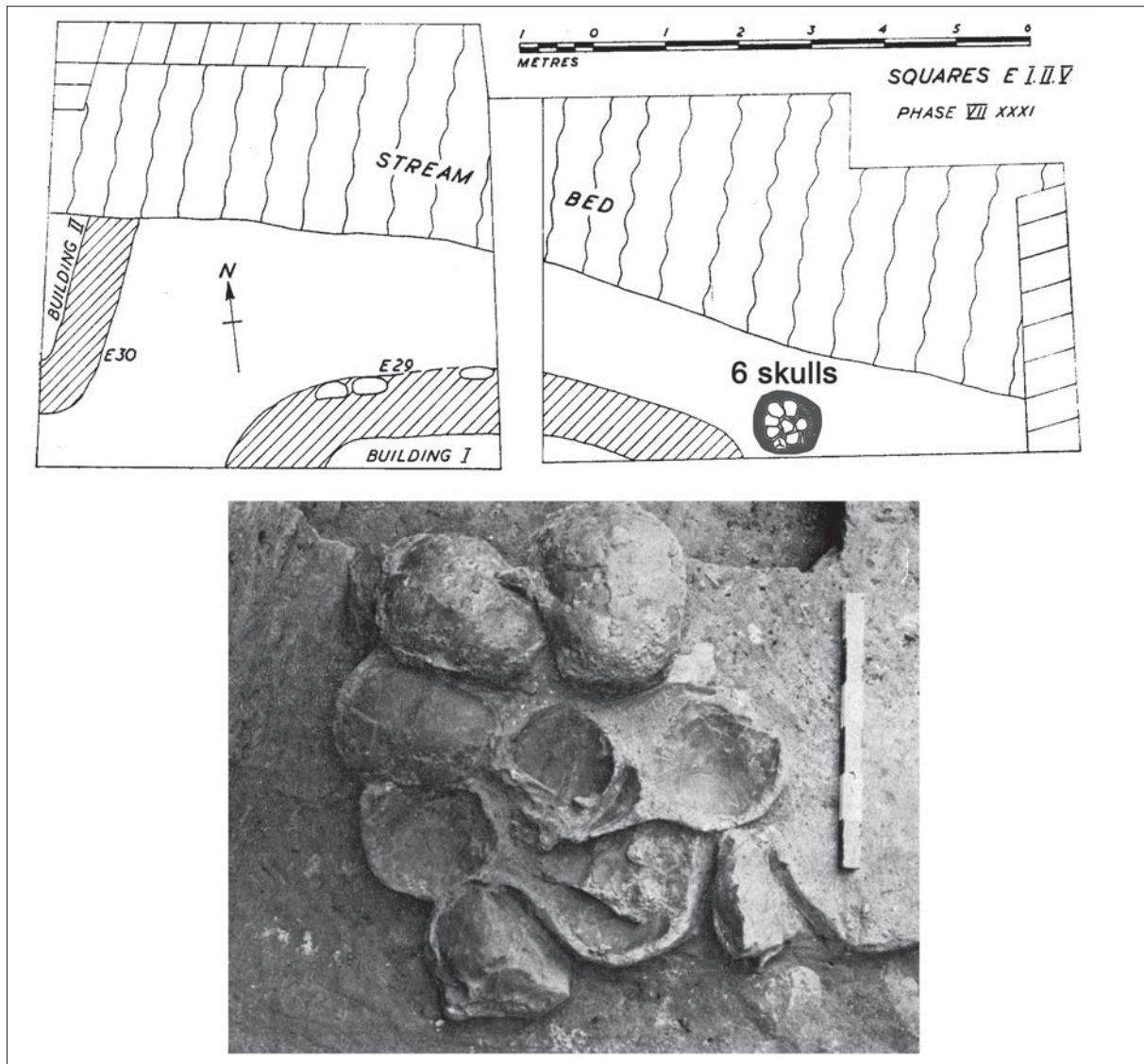


Fig. 4 – Circle of skulls (E11-E16) within a pit just east of Building I in Square EI-II (Stage VIII, phases xxxi-xxxii [Late PPNA/Early PPNB]; after KENYON 1981, pls. 155a, 302c).

⁴⁰ KUIJT 2001, p. 92, p. 94.

⁴¹ KENYON 1981, p. 53, pl. 213c, Stage VIIIIC.xxxix-xxx.

⁴² KENYON 1956, pl. XIII:a; 1981, p. 287, pls. VIII:a; 155:a; KURTH - RÖHRER-ERTL 1981, p. 436. Jericho registry numbers: E12.3(A)-E.12.3(F).

⁴³ KENYON 1981, pl. 302c, Stage VIII.xxxia-xxxii.

⁴⁴ Cf. KENYON 1981, pls. 155, 302c, 303a.

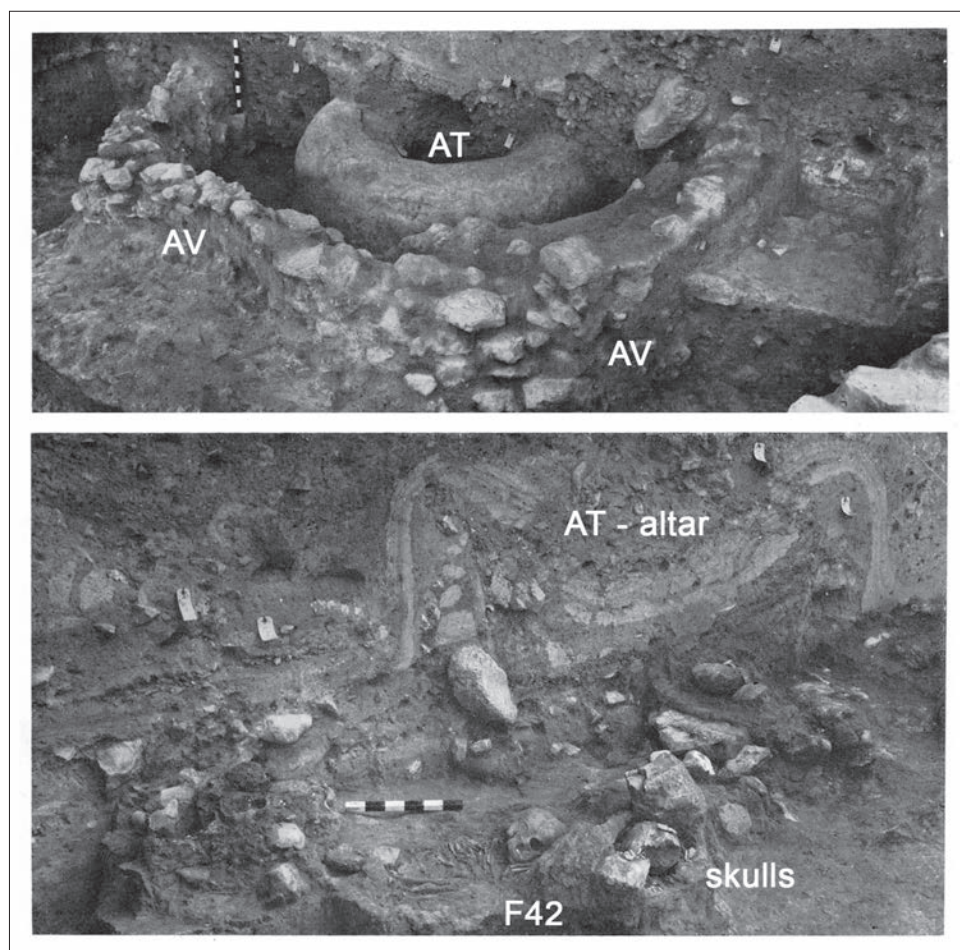


Fig. 5 – Plastered bin/altar AT surrounded by wall AV in square FI, the north-east of the Round Tower in FI [late PPNA] (after KENYON 1981, pl. 31b+32a);

however, did not confirm such a hypothesis. This group of skulls was found only some meter apart from the small rectangular room, which in following Middle PPNB stages hosted other plastered skulls and crania, and which was connected to the so-called “shrine” uncovered by Garstang (§ 3.1.).

The third group of skulls is possibly the most remarkable one as concerns its finding spot and conditions. Five infant skulls (F43-F47)⁴⁵ were found, together with a child burial (F42), incorporated inside the stone foundation of a circular round basin (AT), carefully plastered (*Fig. 5*)⁴⁶. Since the five skulls had still attached the cervical vertebrae, it was certain that they had been cut from intact bodies. Kenyon considered them victims of a sacrifice⁴⁷. Moreover, she was able to distinguish in between the round wall of the basin and its plaster a layer of burnt remains including charcoals and grains. For this evidence she interpreted the basin as an altar, erected after performing a foundation sacrifice involving five – if not six, including the child burial to the north – infants as early as a late stage of PPNA (about 8300 BC)⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ KENYON 1981, p. 49, pl. 33:b. Jericho registry numbers: F201.23(2), F201.23(7).

⁴⁶ These structures were bisected by the eastern section of Square FI: KENYON 1981, pp. 49-50, pls. 32a, 33b, 213, 238: elev. 6.5-7.5 north of Tower.

⁴⁷ KENYON 1957, p. 75.

⁴⁸ KENYON 1981, p. 50; BENZ 2010, tab. 2 (BM 1789: 8480-8300 BC); see also note 10.

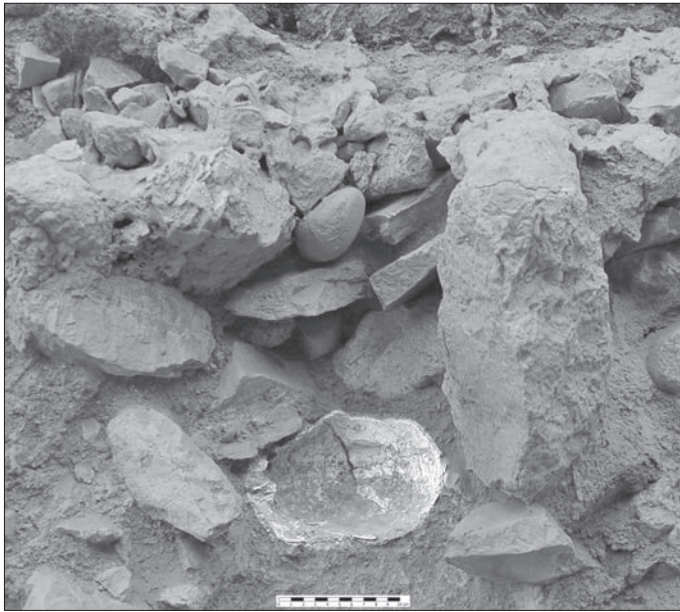


Fig. 6 – Cist burial of a skull uncovered by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition in 2009 at the top of PPNA strata in the north section of Square FI.

Furthermore, in layers sealing the basin (dating from EPPNB), a single child cranium was found on a floor (F38)⁴⁹. In the overlying bricky fill, moreover, some other burials were found (A-C), all of them devoid of skulls: a male adult (A) whose cranium was possibly that found in the cist in the northern section of FI excavated by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition (*Fig. 6*); an adult female (B) with also legs missing; a “very small adult female tightly crouched” with cranium missing (C)⁵⁰. One cannot exclude that some of these dead were victims of sacrifices, all of them connected to what Kenyon interpreted as a cult area or a sanctuary. This extended north-east of the Round Tower, which possibly had dismissed its original function (defensive watch-

ing tower), becoming a religious symbol of the community.

The fourth group⁵¹ was uncovered in Square MI, within the 10 x 10 m large sounding north of Trench I, excavated by Kenyon widening and deepening a previous cut by the Austro-German Expedition, re-appraised also by Garstang. The retrieval is very shortly described: 4 adult crania (M31-M34)⁵² were found grouped in “a nest” underneath the floor of house MO⁵³ (*Fig. 7*). They again belonged mostly to young women. The crania displacement recalls very nearly that of the second group, with the frontal side juxtaposed. In the same layer (MI. Stage VIII. Phase xlv b), several burials were also found (a female in crouched deposition – Kenyon suggested she had been bound –, and four new-born and one under-six months babies). This suggests that grouped crania belonged to special individuals. Nonetheless, all these inhumations seem related to the occupants of the house.

2.1. *Young women and children.*

It is difficult to draw any interpretation from these PPNA finds. They clearly show the first appearance and gradual affirmation of skulls separation, with special reference to children and young female individuals⁵⁴. This might reflect the will of overcoming untimely deaths, preserving individual identities. It has been already noticed that the practice of resuming and preserving skulls engages personal identities⁵⁵. Recent technological developments have shown how facial recognition is a major issue for establishing any kind of personal and social relation. Preserving the

⁴⁹ FI.xx, KENYON 1981, p. 50.

⁵⁰ KENYON 1981, p. 50, pl. 237.

⁵¹ KENYON 1981, p. 233, pl. 134:a.

⁵² Jericho registry numbers: M11.4bA (1)-M11.4bA(4).

⁵³ KENYON 1981, pl. 279a.

⁵⁴ In PPNA the majority of separated skulls belong to children or young women, however, also three male adults were found in group one. Benz attributed our group one to Middle PPNB (BENZ 2010, pp. 256-257), an attribution difficult to be confirmed by stratigraphy.

⁵⁵ BIENERT 1991.

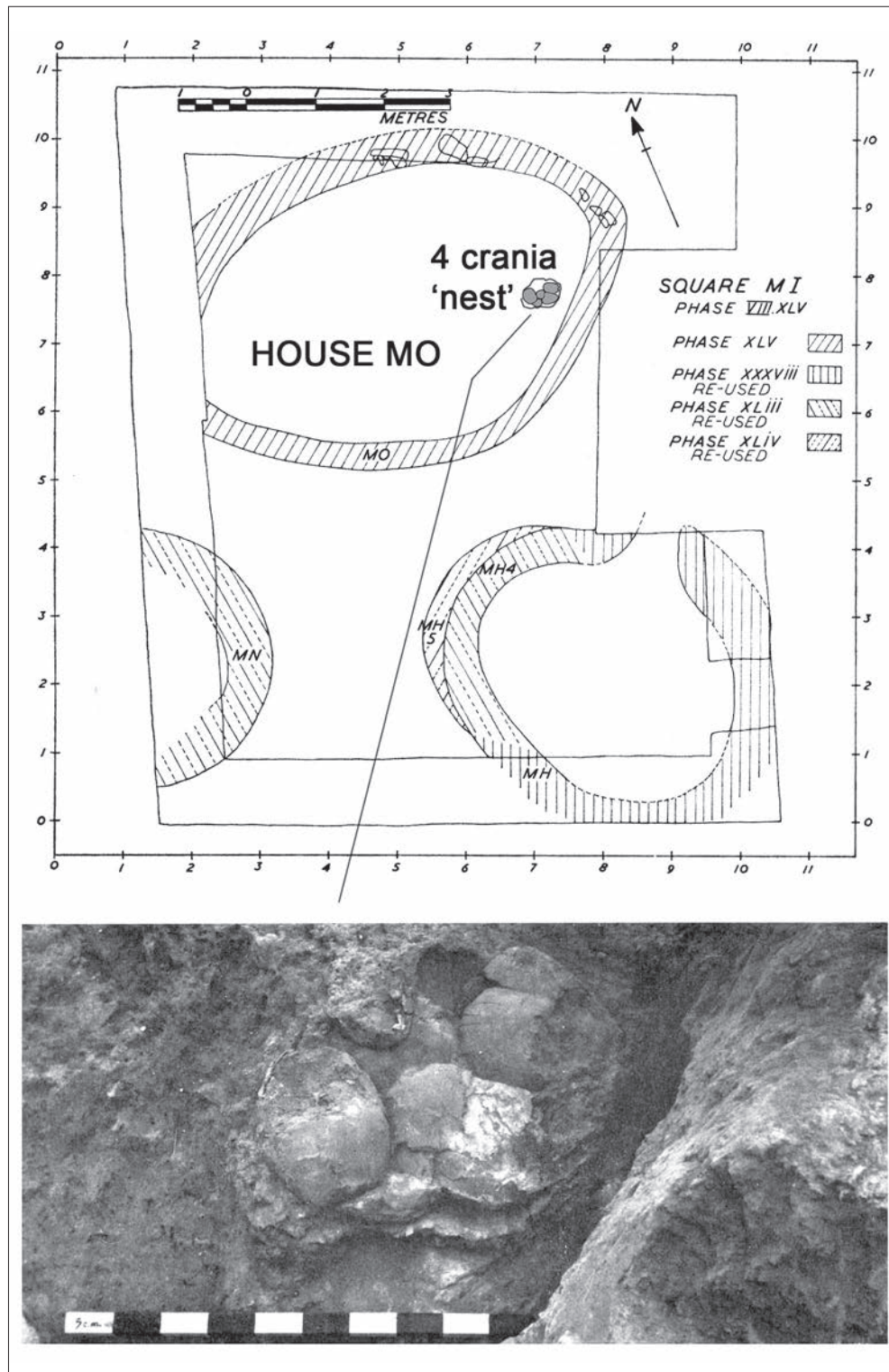


Fig. 7 – “Nest” with four crania found by Kenyon under the floor of House MO in Square MI [PPNA] (after KENYON 1981, pl. 279a).

memory of dead persons and, furthermore, materializing their identities by means of their skulls or crania was the first step to give them a post-mortem life to be oriented towards the ideological needs of the new agricultural society⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ CAUVIN 2000.

As regards the burial of skulls, they were clustered either in circles (or “nests”) or in arrays, often in triads. If the first disposition hints at a familiar bound, the second may be connected to a more symbolic meaning (a family watching towards the same direction/entities?).

PERIOD	MÜNICH REG.NO.	JERICO REG. NO.	REFERENCE <i>Jericho III</i>	SQUARE	STAGE/ PHASE	DESCRIPTION	SEX	AGE	MUSEUM/ COLLECTION
PPNA	F43-F47	F 201.23 (2) F201.23(7)	Kenyon 1981, 49, pls. 33b, 213, 238.	Trench I FI	VIII. FI, xviii	Third Group (fig. 6) 5 plain infant skulls set into the foundation of an altar with a burial (F42).	F ?	0-7	Anthropological State Collection in Munich
PPNA/ EPPNB	F38	F 201.13 (c)	Kenyon 1981, 50, pls. 237, 34a	Trench I FI	VIII.C. xix	Single skull	-	0-7	Anthropological State Collection in Munich
PPNA	M31 M32 M33 M34	M 11.4bA (1) M 11.4bA (2) M 11.4bA (3) M 11.4bA (4)	Kenyon 1981, 233, pls. 134a, 279a	MI	VIII	Fourth Group (fig. 8) “Nest” of 4 plain crania under the floor of House MO.	F	20-40	Anthropological State Collection in Munich
PPNA/ Early PPNB	D35 D36 D37 D38 D39 D40 D41 D42 D43 D44	D 200.6c (1) D 200.6c (2) D 200.6c (3) D 200.6c (4) D 200.6c (5) D 200.6c (6) D 200.6c (7) D 200.6c (8) D 200.6c (9) D 200.6c (10)	Kenyon 1981, 53, pls. VII:c, 36a-b. Kurth - Röhler-Ertl 1981, 436, 444-445	Trench I DI	VIII.C. xxix-xxx	First Group (fig. 4) 10 plain crania set up in three rows near the Wall BS built in the fill that cover building BQ-BR.	- M F - - F M - M F	0-7 20-40 40-60 7-12 7-12 20-40 20-40 0-7 40-60 13-19	Anthropological State Collection in Munich
PPNA/- Early PPNB	E11 E12 E13 E14 E15 E16	E 12.3 (A) E 12.3 (B) E 12.3 (C) E 12.3 (D) E 12.3 (E) E 12.3 (F)	Kenyon 1981, 287, pls. VIIIa, 155a, 302b, 303 Kurth - Röhler-Ertl 1981, 436	Garst. NE Trench EI-II	VIII. xxxii-xxxia	Second Group (fig. 5) 6 plain skulls. Skulls were put into the pit in a circle. East of Building I, probably incorporated in phase xxxii layout.	F F F - F ? -	13-19 7-12 7-12 0-7 0-7 7-12	Anthropological State Collection in Munich

Tab. 1 – Chart of Jericho PPNA plain crania and skulls.

3. PPNB SKULLS MANIPULATION, POSSIBLE OSTENTATION AND BURYING

The evolution of the practice of skulls and crania separation in the following PPNB is represented by another series of distinguished finds at Tell es-Sultan. Eighteen skulls were collected by Kenyon in PPNB layers (tab. 2). Four were plain and belong to the earliest stages of PPNB. Fourteen, instead, were plastered and decorated⁵⁷; at least five out of them were also painted (it can be surmised that some paint vanished or was obliterated by restorations in the ‘50ies). The paint used included iron oxide, possibly derived from red ochre or blood⁵⁸.

3.1. PPNB installations and connected plain skulls.

Four plain crania found in PPNB layers show the continuation of the tradition of skulls separation documented from PPNA/EPPNB just before or contemporarily with the rise of skulls manipulation, plastering and painting typical of Middle PPNB.

⁵⁷ BONOGOFKY 1999. CT-scanning recently conducted by the British Museum on the cranium there displayed, revealed some information about the post-mortem treatment: a round piece of bone was cut out of the back of the skull which was filled with soil, based on concentric rings of grit within the soil; the hole was sealed with a lump of fine clay and the round piece of bone might have been put back. Probably soil was placed inside to support the weight of the plaster on the surface of the bone (FLETCHER *et al.* 2014, pp. 94-95; HIRST 2017, p. 4).

⁵⁸ GOREN *et al.* 2001, p. 673.

The earliest find is a couple of juxtaposed juvenile skulls (B1)⁵⁹ deposited on one side within a rectangular pit⁶⁰. Their displacement was done carefully by aligning them with the two necks facing each other (*Fig. 8*)⁶¹. The pit was located aside the eastern wall (64) of a house uncovered in Trench I on the westernmost fringe of the preserved Middle PPNB village⁶². As it is parallel to the wall, and due to its stratigraphic location, the burial was connected with the wall itself. Kenyon was inclined to consider victims of sacrifices children buried in association with built up structures (see above altar AT in Square FI). In this case, the disposition of the two skulls, as well as their similar age, sex (female), and physiognomic point to a symbolic meaning. This, however, is not enough evidence for a sacrifice, as no cervical vertebrae were found.

Other two not-plastered crania have been found in connection with architectural structures in Square EI, an extension towards the south of Garstang's deep sounding in his North-East Trench, where Kenyon excavated a major Middle PPNB house⁶³ nearby a building that Garstang had dubbed "Stone Age Shrine" or "megaron" due to its plan⁶⁴. Here, in Kenyon's Stage XIII, a cranium⁶⁵ was found incorporated into wall E169 (*Fig. 9*), a pisé structure delimitating a small room (2 x 1.4 m)⁶⁶. The insertion was possibly connected with the cult function of this space (in the overlying strata of Stage XIV some burials were found over it, § 3.2.).

A second cranium⁶⁷ was found in subsequent stage XIV in the same south-western quadrant of square EI, in the rectangular room which superseded the earlier one (*Fig. 10*)⁶⁸. Here, a brickly filling underneath the floor incorporated the burials of two children⁶⁹ and that of a disarticulated adult. Kenyon suggested that the two children in the foundation layer of the building might be interpreted as sacrifices also because of their hemi-prone position⁷⁰. In the corner of the rectangular room, just aside the entrance, the cranium of an elderly man was carefully set upright beneath the floor (*Fig. 11*)⁷¹. This recalls that found in wall E169 and again points to a somewhat symbolic function for this structure, associated to Garstang's "Neolithic Shrine" (*Fig. 12*). A flat stone, on the opposite side of the room, possibly served as basis for an upright vertical flint stone (0.4 x 0.2 m), interpreted as a kind of "baetyl" or religious symbol⁷². The stone basis might equally have supported a wooden pole. Both crania embedded into the construction of the rectangular rooms in Square EI might be connected to a religious or cultic function, like the numerous burials found in the area by Kenyon (at least six), and Garstang (three), an interpretation possibly corroborated by the fact that in the following stratum, a group of three plastered skulls was found further south (see below).

⁵⁹ KENYON 1981, p. 74, pl. 48:b. Jericho registry numbers: B4.45(2)-B4.45(3).

⁶⁰ According to Kenyon the anthropological features of the two skulls (including one unerupted molar) point to a young age and possibly to female sex (KENYON 1981, p. 78).

⁶¹ This layout may recall the double headed statues of coeval 'Ain Ghazal (SCHMANDT-BESSERAT 1998, p. 6, p. 11, figs. 6, 11).

⁶² KENYON 1981, pls. 48b, 221.

⁶³ KENYON 1981, pl. 169b.

⁶⁴ GARSTANG - GARSTANG 1948, pp. 59-60, fig. 5.

⁶⁵ KENYON 1981, p. 298, pl. 163b.

⁶⁶ KENYON 1981, p. 298, pl. 306b.

⁶⁷ KENYON 1981, p. 305, pl. 171.

⁶⁸ KENYON 1981, pl. 308b.

⁶⁹ Kenyon suggested that the two children in the foundation layer of the building might be interpreted as sacrifices also because of their position (KENYON 1981, p. 305, pl. 170b).

⁷⁰ KENYON 1981, p. 305, pl. 170b.

⁷¹ KENYON 1981, pls. 171a-b, 308b.

⁷² KENYON 1981, pls. 172a-b, 173.

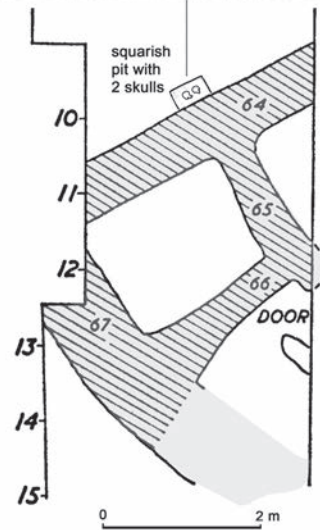
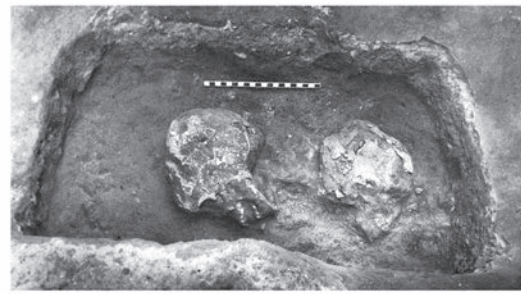
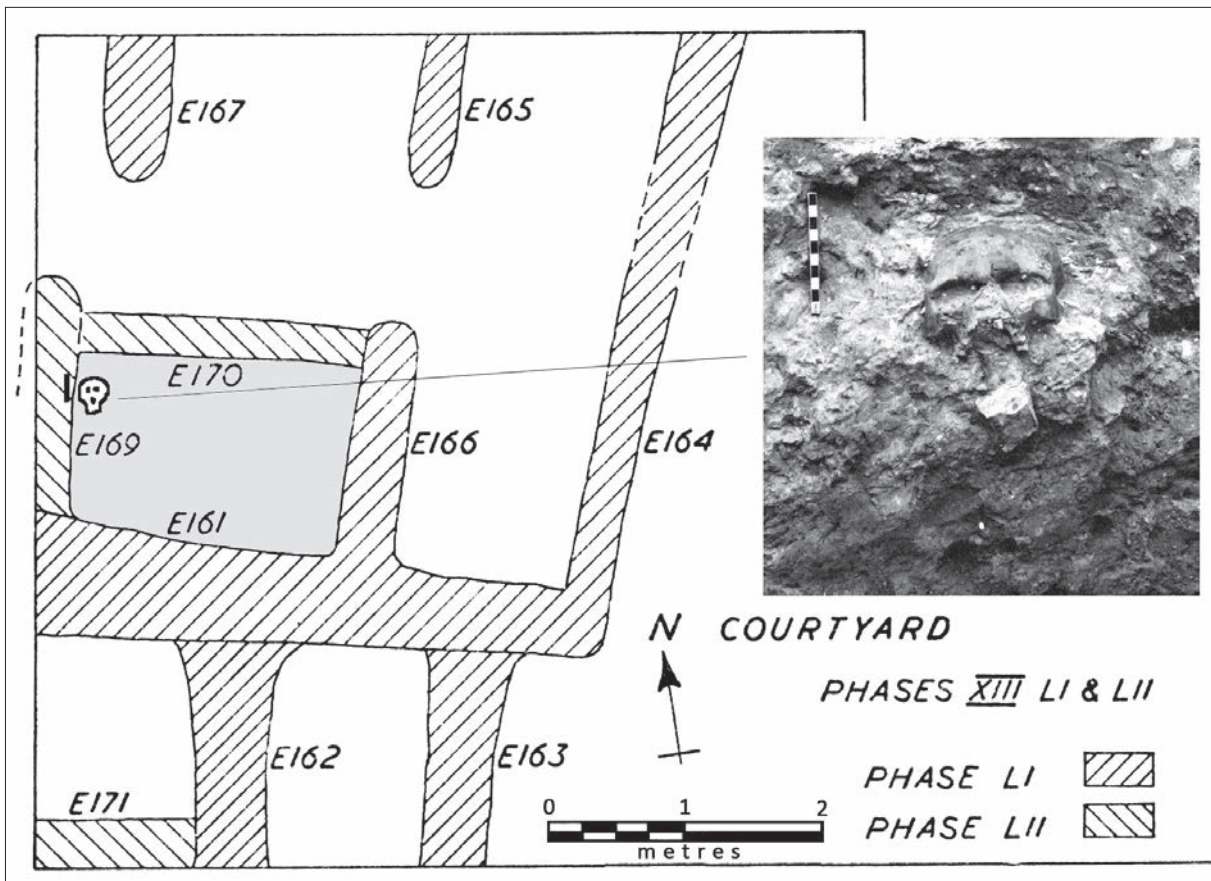


Fig. 8 – Foundation pit of wall 64 with two juxtaposed juvenile female skulls, possibly after a sacrifice, in Kenyon’s Trench I [Middle PPNB] (after KENYON 1981, pls. 48b and 221).

Fig. 9 – Small cult chamber in Square EI with a skull inserted into the bricks of Wall 169 [PPNB] (after KENYON 1981, 298, pls. 163b, 306b).



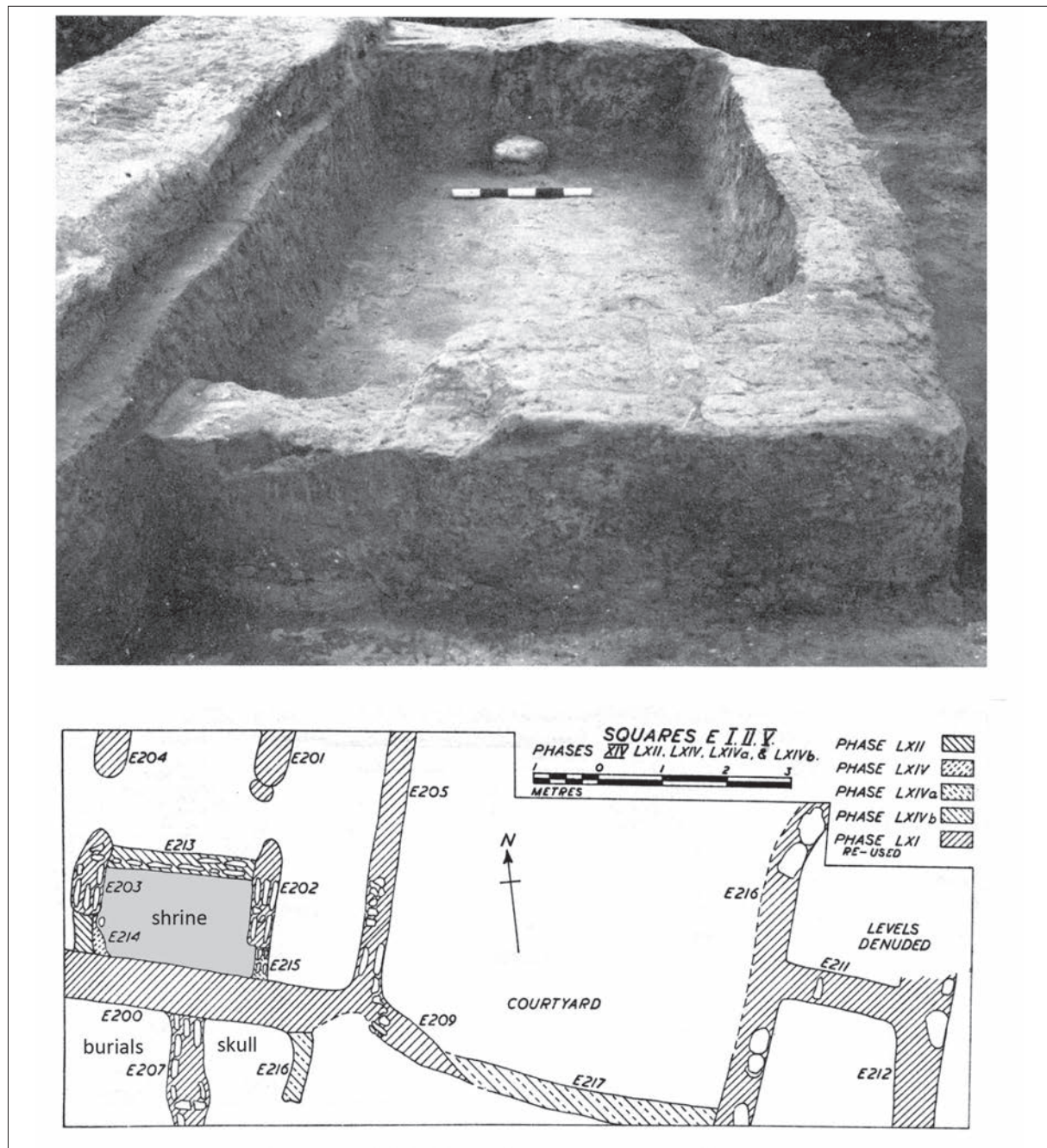


Fig. 10 – Small shrine in Square EI, possibly connected with Garstang’s “Neolithic Shrine” [Middle PPNB] (after KENYON 1981, pls. 172a, 308c).

3.2. PPNB plastered skulls.

Fourteen plastered skulls were found by Kenyon grouped in two different locations of the PPNB village: a group was found in Square DI, within a house occupying the south-eastern corner of the sounding, the other in Square EIII on the southern side of Garstang’s North-East Trench (*Tav.* 1).

The first group of seven plastered skulls was discovered into the fill of hard bricky material in between walls 56 and 72⁷³, two almost parallel (but stratigraphically successive) structures of

⁷³ The heap of tumbled skulls included a united group of 7 (KENYON 1981, pl. 50b) and a separated couple (KENYON 1981, pl. 59a) all thrown within the space in between the two walls. The main heap extended partly into the southern

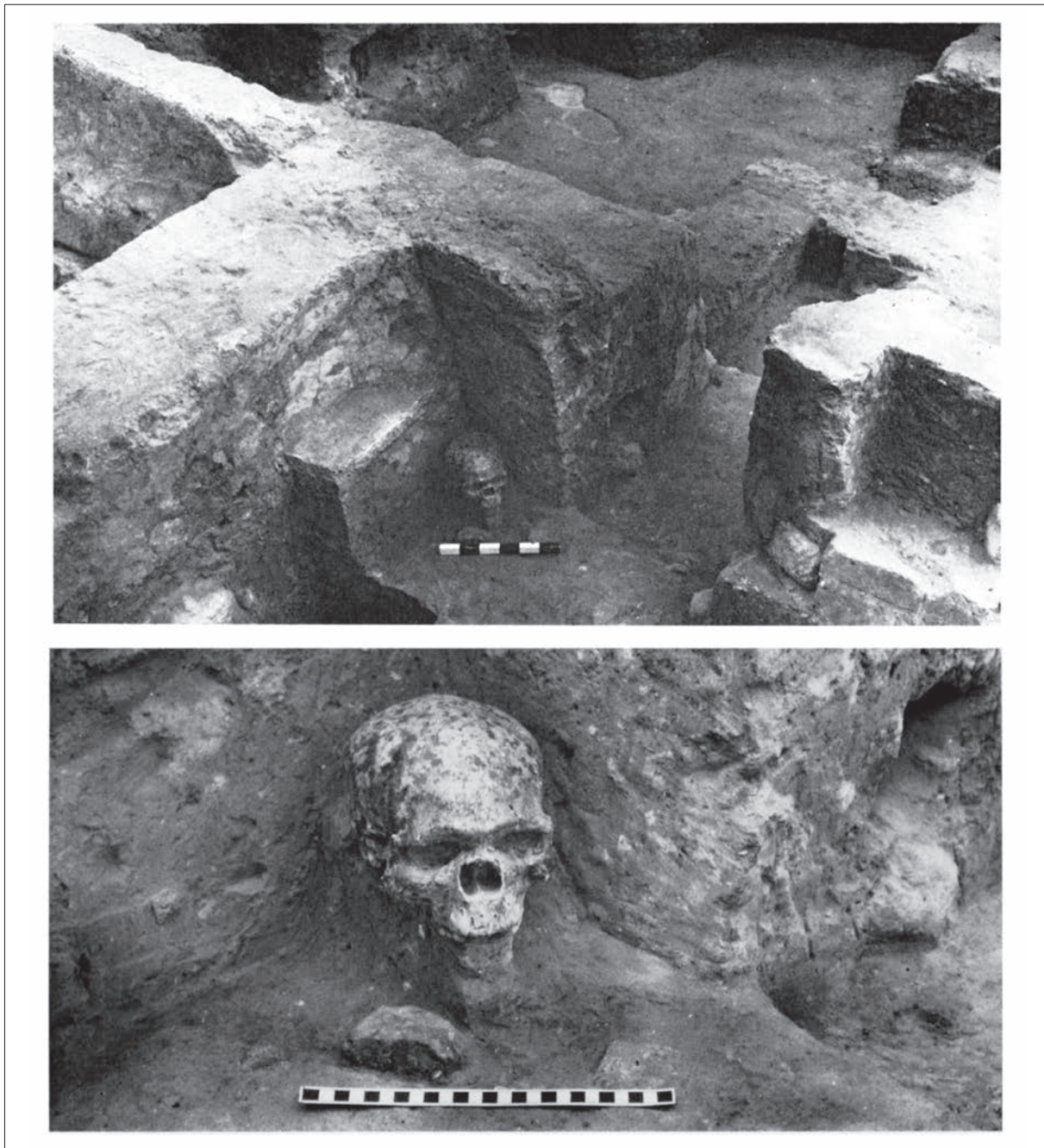


Fig. 11 – Skull buried underneath the floor in a corner by the doorway leading to the nearby small shrine in Square EI [PPNB] (after KENYON 1981, 305, pl. 171).

a house crossing the southern section of Square DI⁷⁴. According to Kenyon, the skulls had been discarded intentionally into the fill in Stage XVIIIA⁷⁵ (the one which the walls belong), when they had no longer a function. She consequently suggested that they originated in Stage XVI⁷⁶. A close

section of that a hole was excavated in it to extract them (KENYON 1981, p. 77, pls. 50b). This, of course, does not allow to be sure about the final number of plastered skulls discarded.

⁷⁴ KENYON 1981, p. 77, pls. 221-223, 239 at elevation 10 m.

⁷⁵ KENYON 1981, p. 77, pl. 220.

⁷⁶ KENYON 1981, p. 77, pl. 221.

examination of the plans of earlier Stage XV, however, shows in the same spot the presence of a small squarish chamber (*Fig. 13*)⁷⁷, which I think might be identified as the original repository for the plastered skulls. As wall 72 was built in Stage XVIIIA, this structure was filled up and the skulls removed to an upper layer, being put into the remaining gap between it and wall 56. Furthermore, the disposal of the skulls might actually be interpreted as a way of continuing to keep them in a protected and delimited space, buried beneath the floor of the house⁷⁸, even though they were thrown into it in a somewhat disrespectful way.

To the original group of seven skulls uncovered in 1953⁷⁹, two more were added in 1956⁸⁰, retrieved 6.75 m far away from the first group, according to Kenyon, in the same stratigraphic situation⁸¹.

The nine plastered and decorated skulls (D110-D118)⁸² collected from Square DI thus represent the most numerous concentration of such items in a Jerichoan Middle PPNB context. They have been thoroughly studied in the last sixty-four years both from an anthropological⁸³ and archaeological point of view⁸⁴. They have been carefully described many times, and have undergone several archaeometric analyses⁸⁵, identifying the kind of unbaked clayish marl and lime plaster used to transform the de-fleshed skulls (sometimes devoid of mandible = crania) into plastically decorated model-heads.

A second group of five skulls (E20-E22, E25-E26)⁸⁶ was uncovered in the south-western corner of Square EIII (*Fig. 14*), where the latest PPNB layers (Phase NNi) were reached in 1956⁸⁷. This concentration of skulls may be related with those skulls and crania found in connection with the cult installations of late PPNA and earlier PPNB Stages discovered by Kenyon in Square EI just aside and underneath the Late PPNB cult area excavated by Garstang in 1935 (§ 3.1.). In the same

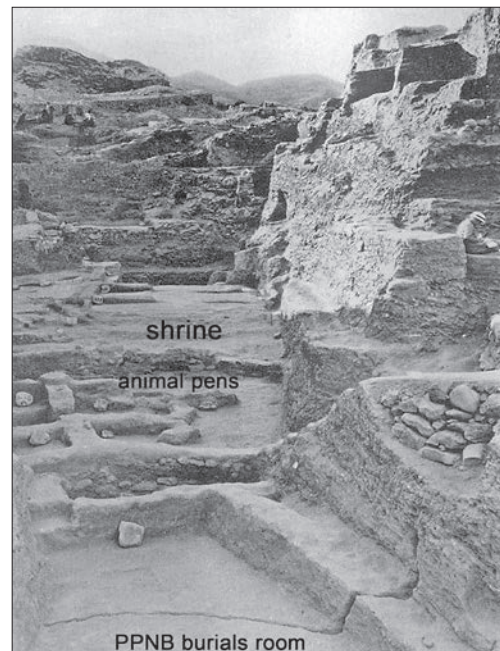


Fig. 12 – View of Garstang’s North-East Trench with Layers XI-X (Middle PPNB to Late PPNB) structures visible from the east, including the possibly cult buildings where skulls, burials, and successively statues were found (after GARSTANG 1935a, pl. XLa).

⁷⁷ KENYON 1981, p. 70, pls. 218-219a-b, walls 32-33-34-35.

⁷⁸ This house then lasted in use until Stage XXII as a further demonstration of what has been called multiplication of layers with regards to the extremely accurate stratigraphic method adopted by Kenyon.

⁷⁹ KENYON 1954, p. 107.

⁸⁰ KENYON 1957, pp. 74-75, pl. XII.

⁸¹ They were extracted from the southern section of DI (KENYON 1981, pl. 50a).

⁸² KENYON 1981, p. 77, pls. VIII:b-d; IX; 50:b; 51-56; 57:c-d; 58-59; KURTH - RÖHRER-ERTL 1981, pp. 436-437. Jericho registry numbers: D6.12(529)-D6.12(535), D10.6k(2000)-D10.6k(2001).

⁸³ KURTH - RÖHRER-ERTL 1981, pp. 436-437; STROUHAL 1973; BONOGOFKY 2002. The most relevant information concerns the gender of the skulls: 7 were females, and 2 males, and the fact the at least three or four (D110, D111, D114, D116) underwent intravital intentional deformations (a practice also known at PPN Tell es-Sultan from other finds) and head binding (HIRST 2017, p. 4).

⁸⁴ KUIJT 2001, pp. 91-93; BENZ 2010, pp. 259-261.

⁸⁵ GOREN - SEGAL 1995; GOREN *et al.* 2001.

⁸⁶ KENYON 1981, p. 310, pl. 57:a-b; KURTH - RÖHRER-ERTL 1981, pp. 436-437. Jericho registry numbers: E121.31, E121.32, E121.32(B) (3657), E121.32(D1), E121.32(D2). These five skulls included one complete plastered and painted specimen, E22, two plastered fragments, named E20 and E21, and two only painted skulls (E25-E26) – perhaps preserved from an earlier PPNA stage.

⁸⁷ KENYON 1981, p. 310, pl. 322b, south of wall ZZA.

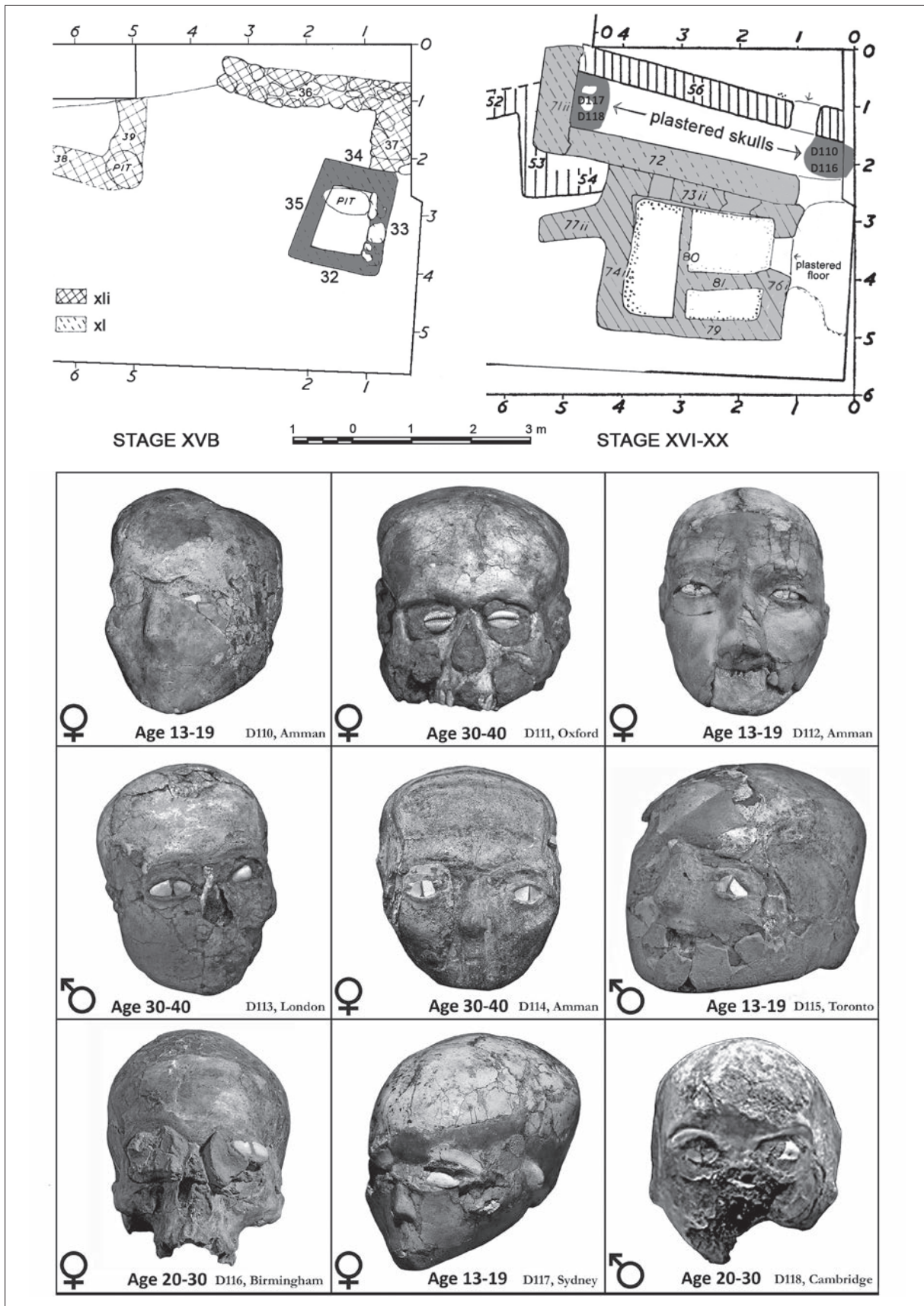


Fig. 13 – a) Plan of the finding spot of plastered skulls D110-D118 in Square DI [Middle PPNB] (after KENYON 1981, pls. 219-222); b) plastered skulls D110-D118 with presumed sex and age.

vicinity, moreover, two caches of broken statues were found by Garstang (§ 4.). The cult area in the North-East Trench has shown a strong continuity of skulls and burials: from the earliest group of six clustered plain skulls in PPNA to the skulls embedded into structures, to the plastered ones, ending with the two groups of plaster statues found north-west and south-east of the cult buildings.

4. LATE PPNB: PLASTER STATUES

Some statues (six according to Garstang) and a “bust” made of plaster are reported to be found at Tell es-Sultan in Late PPNB strata (stratum IX). All of them were retrieved in Garstang’s North East Trench in three different spots. The statues were found in two caches, while the “bust” on the floor of a house in Kenyon’s Square EII⁸⁸.

4.1. The “Neolithic Shrine”.

In 1935 John Garstang uncovered – for the first time at Tell es-Sultan – Neolithic strata in his huge North-East Trench⁸⁹. These layers (Levels XVII-VIII) were extensively excavated at the bottom of the Trench: the uppermost Pottery Neolithic (Levels IX-VIII) and the latest Pre-Pottery Neolithic B layers (Levels XI-X) were uncovered in an area extended up to 40 m on the east-west axis and 15 m on the north-south one. Deeper PPN layers (Levels XVII-XII) were excavated in a sounding progressively restricted – from 7.5 x 7 m on top to 1.5 x 1 m at the bottom – which reached the bedrock (*Fig. 15*).

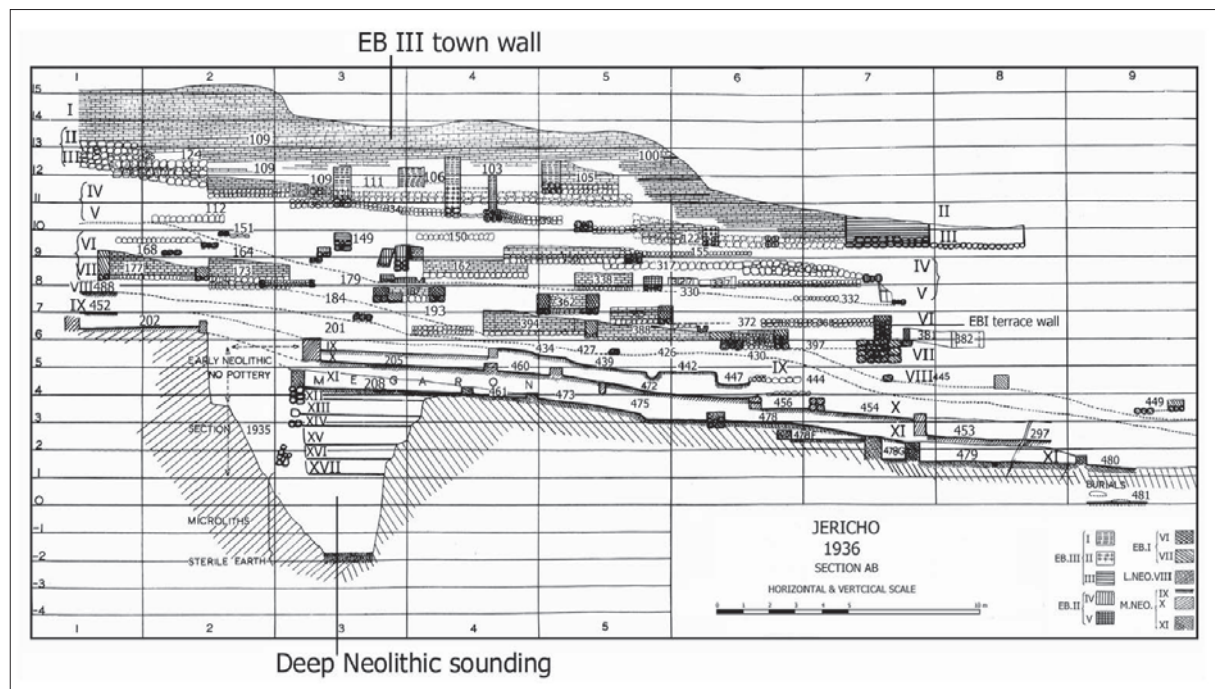


Fig. 15 – West-East Section of Garstang’s North-East Trench with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic layers and deep sounding (after GARSTANG *et al.* 1936, pl. XXVIII).

⁸⁸ The “bust” is a very abstracted human image, with tapering body and rectangular head (KENYON 1981, p. 290, pl. 57). It was found by Kenyon in a Late PPNB house in Square EII (KENYON 1981, p. 290, pls. 303b, 311), not far from a finely plastered circular bin. This spot lays about 2 m far from the spot where, in the underlying latest PPNA/EPPNB layers a group of six skulls (E11-16) was found on the southern banks of the dismissed stream, which was used to bury several individuals (KENYON 1981, pl. 303a; § 2).

⁸⁹ Finds by the first British Expedition at Tell es-Sultan/ancient Jericho (The Wellcome Marston Expedition, 1930-1936) were published incompletely in several articles and in a popular book (GARSTANG - GARSTANG 1948).

One of Garstang's major discoveries was a building that he named "Stone Age Shrine" or "megaron" (Fig. 12), a big house with an almost symmetrical plan and a finely plastered lime floor⁹⁰. It was first built in Middle PPNB Level XI and continued in use with several transformations until Level IX⁹¹. Just east of the shrine, some juxtaposed cells were interpreted by Garstang as pens for sheep and goats⁹². These rooms more likely, represent some sort of subsidiary annexes with the typical Neolithic multicellular plan. In the space further east, there was another large house with a finely plastered floor found cracked by an earthquake struck occurred during the following periods. Here, some burials were also uncovered: one is a prone male individual, with a large slab above him, possibly sacrificed by twisting his neck⁹³.

The area south of Garstang's North-East Trench was successively investigated by Kenyon (Square EI), and, later on, by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition (Area F). Garstang's unpublished plan of the area at the end of 1936 season matched with Kenyon's plan of Square EI (Fig. 16) shows that the small chamber found by Kenyon including PPNA skulls, later transformed in a cult room (§ 3.1), actually was a side room of Garstang's shrine. A series of finds in the nearby of such an installation made by Garstang and Kenyon point to a cult purpose for it. They include burials (children and adults with differentiated treatments), animal clay figurines⁹⁴, a bone worked in the shape of a mask, an almost unique clay model 1.02 m high of a beehive or a shrine, and two caches (190,

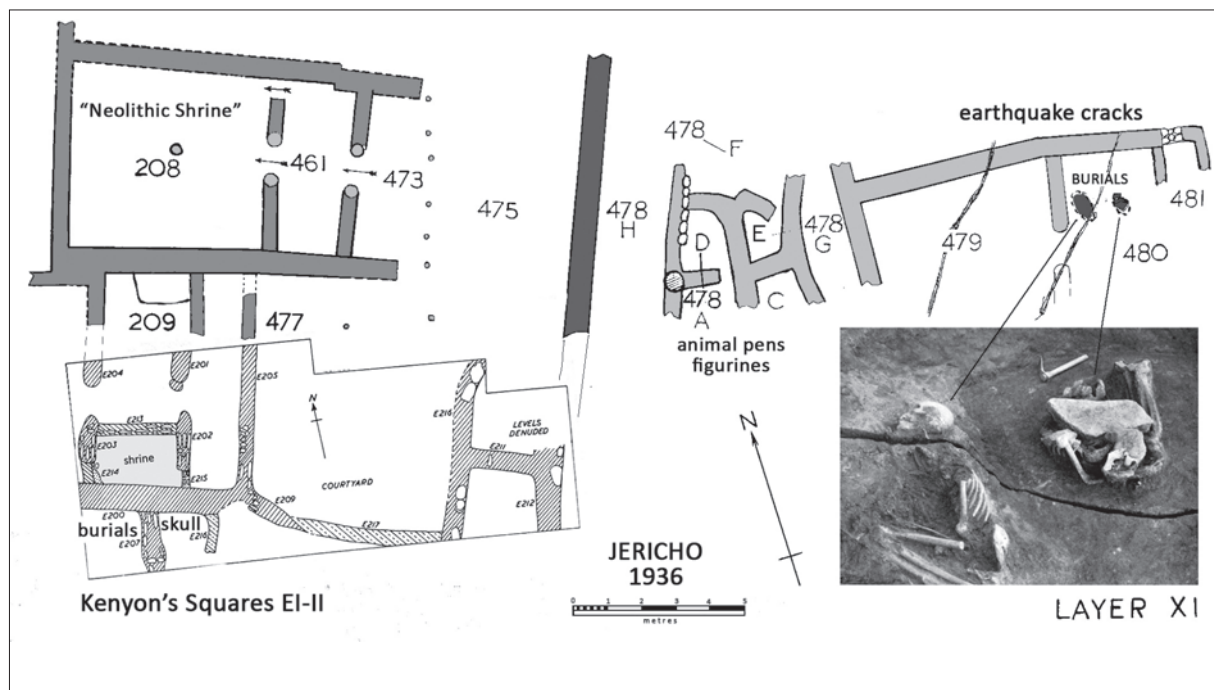


Fig. 16 – Composite plan of Layer XI (Middle PPNB) in Garstang's North-East Trench and Kenyon Squares EI-II with cult installations and main finds, including the two burials (one of which a possible sacrifice) found in the courtyard of the easternmost building.

⁹⁰ Garstang identified this building in levels XI-X and named it "megaron" because of its plan; it included loci 208+462+463 (GARSTANG *et al.* 1936, pl. XLa). Actually, Kenyon's excavations clarified that the plan of the building is a common layout of PPNB houses at Jericho. However, one may notice that its dimensions are somewhat larger than the others.

⁹¹ The attribution of the western portion of stratum IX to Pottery Neolithic is questionable, as the same structures are kept in use between Level X (floor 208) and IX (floors 203, 202): GARSTANG 1935a, p. 167, pl. XXV.

⁹² Here, some clay figurines were found depicting domestic animals: cows/bulls, sheep and goats/ram, pigs and dogs (GARSTANG - GARSTANG 1948, p. 60, pl. VIIIa).

⁹³ GARSTANG - GARSTANG 1948, p. 62, pl. IXb.

⁹⁴ GARSTANG *et al.* 1936, p. 69-70.

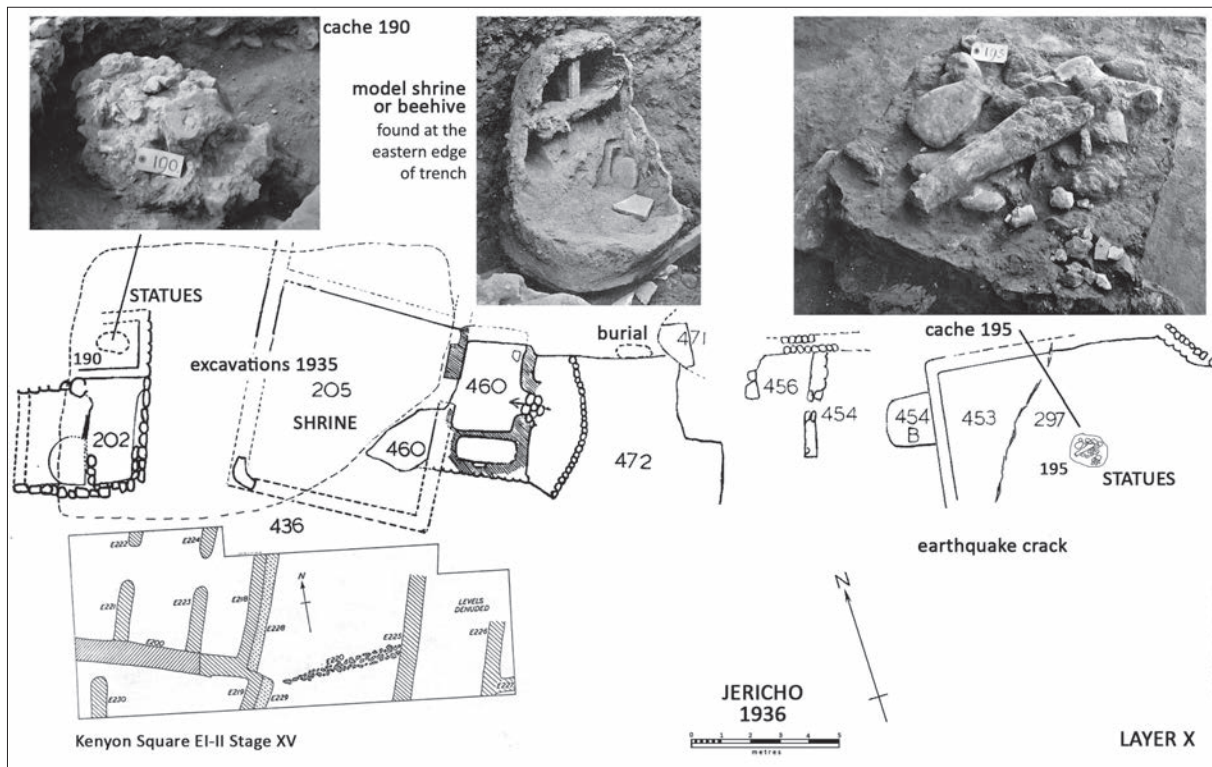


Fig. 17 – Composite plan of Layer X (Late PPNB) in Garstang's North-East Trench and Kenyon Squares EI-II with cult installations and main finds, including the finding spot of the two caches (190, 195) containing the broken plaster statues.

195) of fragmentary plaster statues, which were reconstructed by Garstang as two groups each of three personages, a male, a female and a child⁹⁵. Actually, the exact location of the two caches as visible in section and plans is in Level IX (*Fig. 17*), that is the latest PPNB stratum (see note 91), as also suggested by Kenyon⁹⁶. Nonetheless, it seems highly probable that the statues originated and were in use also in previous Middle PPNB stages (Levels XI and X) of the underlying shrine.

Cache 190 was badly preserved, and its content was unfortunately lost. It was dug just north-west of the shrine, and was filled up with fragments of three crumbled statues. The other cache (195), instead, clearly showed the fragments of the statues (*Fig. 18*), one of which is the renowned painted and inlaid head deposited up-side down over the other pieces in the pit. This image, devoid of the rest of the body, used to be on display in the Palestine Archaeological Museum (Rockefeller Museum) in Jerusalem (*Fig. 19*), and it is almost the only specimen of the Jericho statues so far known. The legs and foot of the same personage, as well as many other fragments, are kept in the Réserve of the Musée du Louvre⁹⁷. Its fine decoration with painted strokes and inlaid sea-shells in the eyes sockets, as well as the pinkish wash and the plastic modeling of nose and chicks

⁹⁵ GARSTANG 1935a, pp. 166-167; GARSTANG 1935b, pp. 355-356.

⁹⁶ KENYON 1957, pp. 84-85.

⁹⁷ Fragments from pit 195 were gifted to the École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem by Garstang and from there were shipped to the Musée du Louvre in Paris, where they are presently kept in the Réserve of the Département des Antiquités Orientales (AO 18880, AO 18881, AO 18856). These finds remained inexplicably neglected until the discovery of two other pits full of plaster statues at PPNB 'Ain Ghazal on the outskirts of Jordan in 1983 and 1985 raised the attention of the public on them. In Autumn 2014 I had the opportunity of examining the legs and other fragments of the statues from pit 195 in the Musée du Louvre, thanks to the kind concern of Dr Beatrice André Salvini, who I deeply thank. I am altogether indebted to Dr Sophie Cluzan, who has renovated the permission to study and publish these finds.

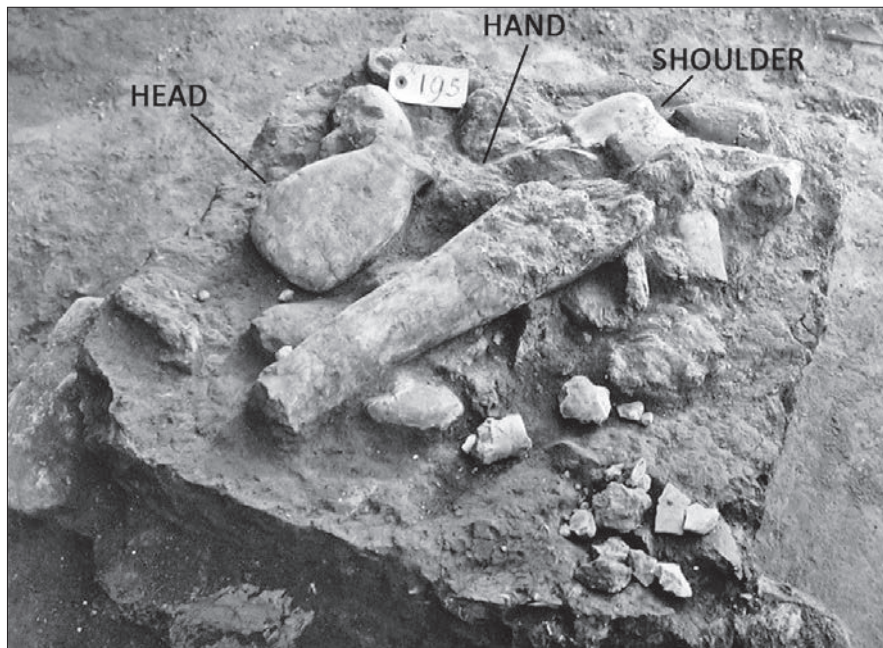


Fig. 18 – Cache 195 in Garstang’s North East Trench with fragments of three broken statues.

strongly resembles those of best preserved skulls. The Louvre fragments and the comparison with the well-known specimens from ‘Ain Ghazal allowed to put forward a reconstruction of one of the Jericho statues (Fig. 20)⁹⁸.

4.2. Caches for venerated images.

The legs re-discovered in the Musée du Louvre 80 years after their excavation, after a careful restoration, revealed several details of the Jericho statues. They were made of the same material used to model the skulls (clayish-marl fine lime plaster carefully molded, coated, smoothed and painted), their eyes are inlaid with sea-shells, and thus seem to belong to the same realm of symbolic images of plastered skulls⁹⁹. The legs modeled with the help of ropes¹⁰⁰ are coated with a pinkish wash, and painted with dark red bands and lines, possibly recalling tattoos. The left foot, which is noticeably well preserved, shows six toes like one statue of ‘Ain Ghazal¹⁰¹. This would suggest the status of *monstrum*, i.e. a prodigy or wonder which in many cultures is typical of divine beings. Dimensions are almost two thirds of life-size, a measure which may hint at a function of idols too. The fragmentary state of preservation and the fact that they were carefully buried, suggest that they were deemed sacred and could not be simply discarded. This seems to be the

⁹⁸ The restoration in the Louvre of the legs (Fig. 20) of one of the Jericho statues has revealed a different style in respect of those of ‘Ain Ghazal (TUBB - GRISSOM 1995; GRISSOM 2000), but also several recurring details as the painted stripes on them (recalling tattoos). One foot shows six toes.

⁹⁹ It has already been suggested that manipulating skulls with clay and lime as to transform them into human fashioned (or abstracted) images strongly reminds the Humans Creation as described in Near Eastern and Egyptian most ancient and renowned myths (AMIRAN 1962). On the other hand, studies in the 3rd millennium AD have disregarded these comparisons focusing on the presence of animals in the imagery of Neolithic religion (CROUCHER 2012). Bonogofsky (BONOGOFSKY 2003, p. 3) namely criticized the link suggested by GOOD 1958 between a sentence of the Ugaritic Poem of Aqahat and the practice of skulls plastering. However, we know from ancient Near Eastern sources (including administrative and not religious or mythological texts) that plastering, refurbishing and coating (sometimes with gold or silver foil) was a typical treatment reserved to gods, that it is to their statues.

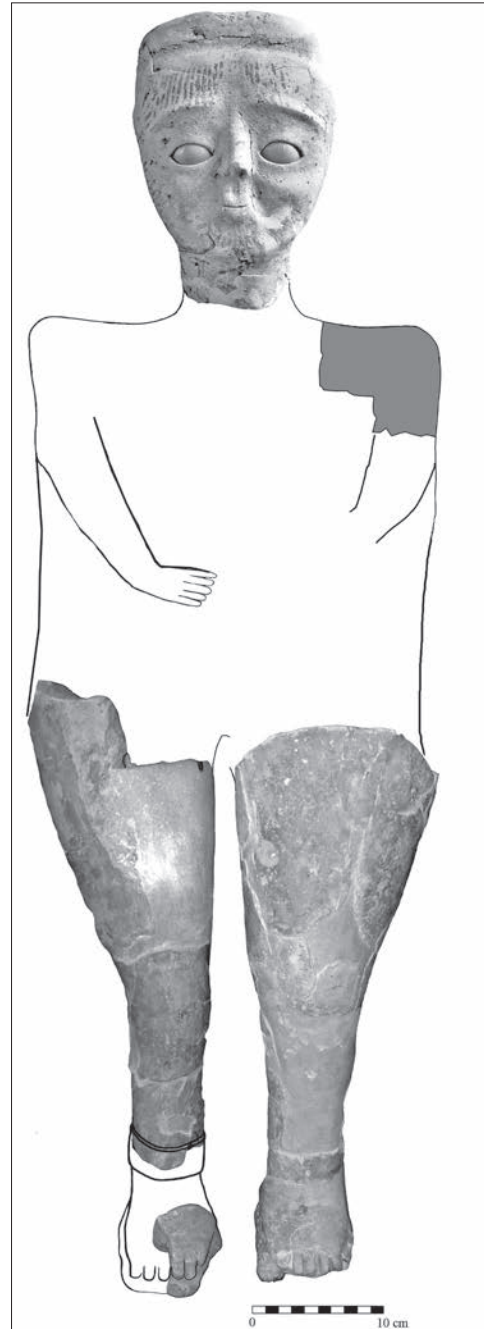
¹⁰⁰ The careful analyses of ‘Ain Ghazal statues fits also for the Jericho ones (GRISSOM 2000).

¹⁰¹ BARNETT 1986-87, p. 5.



Fig. 19 – Head of statue A from cache 195 (after GARSTANG 1935a, pl. LIII).

Fig. 20 – Reconstruction of statue A from cache 195 with legs and feet now in the Musée du Louvre – Dept. Antiquités Orientales.



same property of the main groups of plastered skulls found by Kenyon, which were apparently concealed in protected spaces or repositories (§ 3.2).

The finding conditions of the statues thus suggests some questions and observations. Did such images have achieved a divine status? Is the fact that statues were intentionally broken, beheaded and buried in pieces a replica of what happened to humans? Finds from several PPNB sites like ‘Ain Ghazal and Khraysan show the appearance of disarticulated burials underneath some somewhat special houses. This rite may resemble sowing humans like seeds to overcome death, a behavior in some ways connected to the practice of agriculture, or is it the final act of a cruel sacrifice?

5. CONCLUSION - LIVING MEMORIES OF A FAMILIAR IDENTITY

Do finds described above provide any insight into the religious thoughts and behaviors of the earliest Jericho community? It is difficult to say. It seems possible to follow a thin red thread connecting the earliest separated skulls of PPNA with the plastered ones of Middle PPNB found by Kenyon, and the slightly later plaster statues retrieved by Garstang, as well as to detect a special concern to re-bury skulls and crania after their symbolic transformation and “religious” display or ostentation in their “second life”.

5.1. *Preserving the identity of family (and its cultivable land and livestock?).*

As suggested above, skulls/heads are linked to personal identities. Resuming skulls from burials, modeling and displaying them aimed at giving the identity (personal or better familiar) a long-lasting memory. The finding spots of groups of skulls are impressively recurring across strata as noticed in Kenyon's Squares DI and EI/EIII (*Tav. I*), suggesting that repository areas existed as places of community memory. Can this be genuinely regarded as the rise of an "ancestors' cult"? An ancestor is not necessary a male elder (so the fact that skulls belong to different individuals should not be surprising), as what was to be preserved was the familiar identity often better represented by young women or too early died children. When agriculture and taming started, the link with a specific land and its resources became essential. Land ownership was bound to familiar identity and the latter had to be transmitted unequivocally, protected by a strong ideological apparatus. Skulls are the physical representation of familiar kinship. Plastered skulls possibly show the ambition to project the ancestors and the family into a religious realm. Later on, the triads of venerated plaster statues may also be part of this process, as they visualize what might be dubbed the rise of a "cult of the family". It seems in fact noteworthy that statues and skulls have been often found grouped in triads. This number is the original nucleus of the family, the social cell whose role was emerging with the Neolithic revolution¹⁰².

5.2. *Sacrifice to establish an exchange with the divine: life for life.*

How this cult of familiar identity was, henceforth, connected with the rise of agriculture and animal taming might be suggested by the appearance of the sacrifice in the same Pre-Pottery Neolithic contexts yielding the skulls. Evidence of such a specific religious performance (offering something to supernatural or divine entities by means of a rite implying its consumption/slaughtering/burning = passage through death to make sacred or to produce some events deemed divine) was without any doubt identified by Kathleen Kenyon in some exceptionally well preserved contexts of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement of Jericho involving children. They were buried in an "altar" with cultivated grains (altar AT in Square DI). The association with seeds from the one hand shows that the most valuable belongings of the community had been offered to make sacred the installation, on the other seems to symbolize overpassing death through the cyclical rebirth of nature so fundamental for the new born agricultural and pastoralist society.

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¹⁰² KUIJT 2002, pp. 151-154.

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ABSTRACT

Più di cento anni di scavi a Tell es-Sultan, l'antica Gerico in Palestina, oltre a portare alla luce le vestigia di una delle più antiche città del Levante nell'età del Bronzo e del Ferro, hanno contribuito in modo straordinariamente importante alla conoscenza del periodo Neolitico, quando le comunità umane nella Mezzaluna Fertile svilupparono un nuovo modello sociale ed economico con l'introduzione dell'agricoltura e dell'allevamento. Gerico fu, in particolare nel Neolitico Aceramico (10.500-6000 a.C.), un sito guida non solo per la crescita culturale, ma anche per la concezione ideologica che sostenne le conquiste della "rivoluzione agricola". Tra le testimonianze più rappresentative di questo periodo sono 45 crani, quattordici dei quali modellati in gesso, e alcune statue antropomorfe trovate dalle due missioni britanniche che si succedettero nel Novecento e dalla missione italo-palestinese della Sapienza che da venti anni (1997-2017) opera nel sito. L'articolo si concentra sui contesti di rinvenimento di queste prime immagini, nonché sui rituali collegati alla loro produzione, utilizzazione e sui loro possibili significati, anche in relazione alla pratica del sacrificio.

More than a hundred years of excavations at Tell es-Sultan, the ancient Jericho in Palestine, in addition to bringing to light the remains of one of the most ancient cities of the Levant in the Bronze and Iron Ages, contributed in an extraordinary way to the knowledge of the Neolithic period, when the human communities in the Fertile Crescent developed a new social and economic model with the introduction of agriculture and animal breeding. Jericho was, in particular in Pre-Pottery Neolithic (10.500-6000 BC), a guiding site not only for cultural growth, but also for the ideological conception that supported the achievements of the "agricultural revolution". Among the most representative testimonies of this period are 45 skulls, fourteen of them modeled in plaster, and some anthropomorphic statues found by the two British expeditions that succeeded one another in the twentieth century and by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition of Sapienza University and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for twenty years (1997-2017). The article focuses on the contexts of discovery of these first images, as well as on the rituals related to their production, use and their possible meanings.

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