

ANCIENT DEATH WAYS

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MESOLITHIC SKULL CULTS?

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Abstract

While long known as a feature of the Near Eastern Neolithic, there is growing evidence for the special treatment of the human head in Mesolithic Europe. This takes the form of secondary deposition of crania and mandibles, often in unusual contexts, including as ‘grave goods’ with other burials; cutmarks suggesting decapitation, scalping and defleshing; and the deposition of fleshed heads in pits, as well as, most recently, on stakes in shallow pools. After reviewing this evidence, discussion turns to its interpretation. Possible links with the ‘ancestors’ are explored, and ethnographic support for their importance among hunter-gatherers is reviewed. If accepted, there may be implications for the expression of territoriality in the Mesolithic. The blurring of the lines between revered ancestor and enemy when interpreting the treatment of human heads is emphasised.

Keywords: Near East; Palaeolithic; ‘skull cups’; Ofnet; violence; ancestors

Introduction

The human head holds four of the body’s five main senses – sight, hearing, smell and taste – and shares the fifth, touch. Taken together with the uniqueness of facial features and their expressive capacity for communicating emotional states, it is not surprising that cultures around the world evince a strong interest in the head, in its embellishment with cosmetics and

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with adornments, in the elaboration of hair styles, and the wearing of head gear, as well as its prominent iconographic presence in what can be broadly termed ‘art’. And in death, if the corporeal remains are manipulated at all, it is the head that is often singled out for special treatment. There is a rich ethnographic record documenting such practices, and for many periods of the historic and prehistoric past there is abundant archaeological evidence for the importance attached to the head, although specific meanings may be debated (Armit 2012; Bonogofsky 2006a, 2011; Hoskins 1996a). But the archaeological record becomes progressively more difficult to read the further back in time one moves, if only because it tends to be far more fragmentary and incomplete. Nevertheless, a number of both old and recent finds combine to suggest a special interest in the human head in Mesolithic communities in various parts of Europe and adjacent regions of Southwest Asia and North Africa. But aside from being of some intrinsic interest, what does this behaviour tell us about people’s views of themselves and their world? This contribution presents a survey of some of the evidence for practices involving the human skull in Mesolithic Europe, with brief forays into the aforementioned adjacent regions, touching upon both earlier and later periods before returning to the paper’s central theme: Is there evidence for a Mesolithic ‘skull cult’, and, if so, how might it be understood?

Plastered ‘skulls’ and ancestors in the Near East

With the dramatic evidence provided by cached human crania overmodelled with pigmented clay and inset shells for eyes, a ‘skull cult’ has long been seen as an aspect of the early Neolithic cultures of the Near East (Figure 2.1). The best-known examples are those from first John Garstang’s and then Kathleen Kenyon’s excavations at the PPNB (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B) settlement at Jericho (Kenyon 1956). Others have been found at ‘Ain Ghazal, Beisamoun, Kfar HaHoresh, Nahal Hemar, Yiftahel, Tell Aswad and Tell Ramad (Arensburg & Hershkovitz 1989; Ferembach 1970; Ferembach & Lechevallier 1973; Goring-Morris 2000; Milevski *et al.* 2008; Rollefson 1985; Stordeur & Khawan 2007). The practice continued into the later Neolithic, as seen at Çatalhöyük and Köşk Höyük (Bonogofsky 2005; Croucher 2012). While they are often referred to as plastered ‘skulls’, many known examples are crania, i.e. lacking the mandible (Bienert 1991;

Bonogofsky 2001; Goring-Morris 2000; Strouhal 1973). This is an important but oft-overlooked terminological distinction².

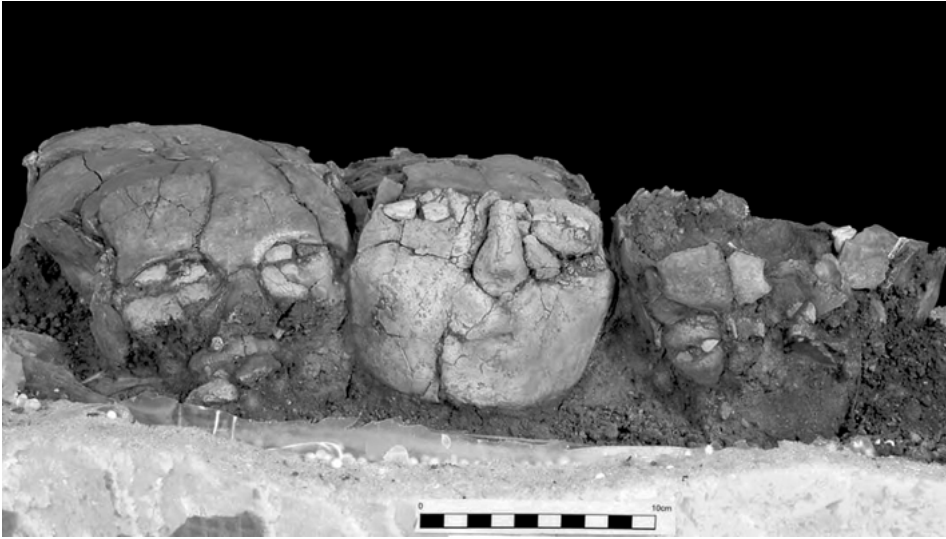


Figure 2.1. Modelled human ‘skulls’ from PPNB context at Yiftabel, Israel (photo courtesy of Ianir Milevki, Hamoudy Khalaily, Nimrod Getzov and Israel Hershkowitz and the Israel Antiquities Authority).

The source of the modelled crania (or less frequently skulls) is reasonably clear, as a number of intra-mural burials at the same sites lack their crania, which had been carefully removed, often leaving behind the mandible with the rest of the skeleton (Kuijt 1996). It is partly this that has led to their wide acceptance as indicating ancestor veneration; if they were, on the other hand, the decapitated heads of enemies, as recently argued by Alain Testart (2008), we would expect to find the mandible and uppermost cervical vertebrae, as well as evidence of peri-mortem trauma (see ensuing debate in *Paléorient* vol. 35.1). In fact the mandible is present in many cases, for example, the plastered skull of an adult male from Jericho (Strouhal 1973, Plate 3,

² The skull consists of the cranium and the mandible, whereas the cranium lacks the mandible. Since the mandible easily becomes detached from the cranium as the corpse decays, its presence indicates an intact head. One or more upper cervical vertebrae would also be expected to be present in this case. A cranium, conversely, may have been collected at any time (e.g. by digging into a grave and removing it) and so does not have the same connotations.

J 5758); an adult female from Beisamoun (Ferembach & Lechevallier 1973, Plate II), as well as a number of the spectacular examples from Tell-Aswad (Stordeur & Khawan 2007). However, the presence of vertebrae, while not unknown, is rare, and no evidence of peri-mortem injury has been reported. Arguing more strongly against their interpretation as trophy heads is the ubiquity of the practice of removing skulls or crania from burials in the region at this time, suggesting it was the normative mortuary practice, and the general absence of evidence for the cutmarks that would be required for decapitation (cf. Kuijt 2009).

The skulls or crania of only a few individuals were selected for modelling, on criteria that are unknown. A widespread interpretation, beginning with Kenyon's publication of the Jericho finds, is that they are the remains of venerated elderly male ancestors. Ancestor veneration in turn is often seen as going hand-in-hand with farming societies (Bar-Yosef 1992; Cauvin 1994; Garfinkel 1993) – hunter-gatherers, in contrast, are seen as having little interest in 'ancestors', and hence, in head cults (cf. Meillassoux 1972). We return to this point below. The suggestion that 'skulls' are exclusively those of men, and particularly older adult men, while fitting with the 'venerated ancestor' hypothesis (e.g. Bienert 1991; Strouhal 1973), is problematic given that examples involving the crania of young men, women and indeed children have long been known (Bonogofsky 2001, 2004, 2006b; Ferembach 1970; Ferembach & Lechevallier 1973; Kurth & Röhrer-Ertl 1981). However, sexing plastered crania is difficult, so that for some researchers the jury is still out as to whether females are represented (Goring-Morris 2000: 124). What can be said is that, although a small number of juveniles may be represented, the overwhelming majority are adult.

While the plastered 'skulls' have understandably received the most attention, the removal and secondary deposition of crania was common in both the PPNB and preceding PPNA, especially for adults (both male and female) but also occasionally for children and infants (Kuijt 1996). This practice is known from at least the Late Natufian (Bar-Yosef 1998; Belfer-Cohen 1988), with a number of examples extending it into the Early Natufian (Goring-Morris 2000; Kuijt 1996; Neuville 1951). Thus, if there is a relationship with 'ancestors', it is not one that emerges only with early farming societies in the Neolithic. On the other hand, it could be argued that the appearance of a cult of the ancestors was one aspect of the wider changes taking place within the Natufian, ultimately leading to domestication and farming in the PPNA (Cauvin 1994). As noted by Michelle Bonogofsky

(2004), the presence of women and perhaps children in the corpus of modelled crania and skulls has arguably received insufficient attention in terms of the prevailing interpretation (which emphasises male ancestors), but is not necessarily a problem, since the ‘ancestors’ are not an essentialist category in any case, but are actively created from a complex set of beliefs. Ian Kuijt (2008) has discussed some of the dual processes of remembering and forgetting in relation to the modelled skulls in their transition from specific persons to undifferentiated ‘ancestors’. For our purposes here, the important point is that the elaborate treatment of the skulls/crania of a small number of select individuals in the PPNB had earlier antecedents in the removal of crania as part of a secondary mortuary rite extending back through the PPNA and into the Early and Late Natufian.

That the special treatment of the head need not have anything to do with the development of farming, even in incipient form, is seen in the existence of a range of practices involving the cranium and/or skull across Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Europe, to which we now turn.

Palaeolithic antecedents

As with later periods, there is the need for an element of caution in recognising evidence for special treatment of the human skull in the Palaeolithic. To a large extent this relates to the circumstances and early date of recovery, often in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. The elements of the human skull are both relatively robust and easily recognised, as well as having been highly sought after by the fledgling science of physical anthropology. One might argue that in the prehistoric past as well as when recovered archaeologically, human skulls embody identity in a particularly powerful and compelling form. For the living individual, of course, facial features provide the most immediately accessible means of inter-personal recognition (Bruce & Young 1986; Young & Bruce 2011). When combined with skin, hair and eye colour, hair styles and the use of ornamentation the head can become a marker of group affiliation (artificial cranial modification and dental ablation might also be mentioned in this context). Ironically, when recovered archaeologically, the main concern of physical anthropologists was (and to an extent remains) similarly the identification of different racial groups and populations through craniometrics. Cranial remains in particular were thus more likely to be recovered, retained and described in publications. In the case of disturbed skeletal remains – which feature strongly in the archaeo-

logical record of the Palaeolithic – it is not always clear whether or not postcranial remains were present.

With this caveat in mind, there is still clear evidence for a special interest in heads in the Upper Palaeolithic, particularly in the Magdalenian. Jörg Orschiedt (2013) has provided a recent survey of the evidence, noting a dominance of cranial and mandibular remains, many exhibiting cutmarks, that can only be explained by deliberate selection. At Brillenhöhle (Baden-Württemberg, Germany), for example, there is evidence for careful defleshing of crania as well as postcrania, including cutmarks in positions indicating decapitation and scalping. This is interpreted by Orschiedt as occurring in the context of a complex mortuary treatment rather than as evidence of violence or anthropophagy (cannibalism). Secondary burial is indicated for the well-preserved cranium (*sans* mandible) of an adult male at Rond-du-Barry (Auvergne, France), reportedly found within a setting of stones (de Baye des Hermens & Heim 1989). No cutmarks are reported, so this might have involved the intentional retrieval of the cranium from a burial, with concomitant implications for marking or remembering grave locations. A striking but unfortunately poorly documented example of post-mortem modification involves the isolated cranium of a young female from Mas d’Azil (Ariège, France), into the orbits of which had been placed bone discs carved from deer vertebrae (Leroi-Gourhan 1964). These have unfortunately been lost.

A well-known aspect of manipulation of the dead in the Magdalenian involves the preparation of so-called ‘skull cups’. These are modified human crania, exhibiting cutmarks indicative of defleshing, and the removal of the facial area and basicranium through repeated blows, leaving a crudely shaped ‘cup’, though there is no evidence for their use in this capacity. Orschiedt (2002a) does suggest, however, that the example from Brillenhöhle was used to carry the small number of postcranial remains – many also bearing cutmarks – found at the site, as they all fit into the modified calotte. There are multiple examples from the sites of La Placard (Charente, France), Isturitz (Gironde, France) and Gough’s Cave (Somerset, England) (Bello *et al.* 2011; Breuil & Obermaier 1909; Buisson & Gambier 1991; Le Mort & Gambier 1991).

A series of broadly comparable practices was carried out on human remains in the Epipalaeolithic Iberomaurusian and early Holocene Capsian cultures of North Africa. Both cranial and postcranial remains show evidence of

post-mortem treatment, including defleshing and the use of red ochre. Occasionally, the head appears to have been the subject of more elaborate treatment than the rest of the body (Belcastro *et al.* 2010; Humphrey *et al.* 2012; Mariotti *et al.* 2009). One suggestion for the evidence of cutmarks, defleshing and dismemberment is that it relates to preparation of the body for transport to an appropriate burial location by mobile hunter-gatherers (Haverkort & Lubell 1999), an argument that has also been made in relation to secondary burial and ‘skull’ removal in the Natufian (Hershkovitz & Gopher 1990).

An intriguing discovery from the Capsian site of Faïd Souar II (Algeria) consists of the front half of an adult skull, sectioned part-way through the parietals, with two drilled perforations, one on either side of the cranial vault (Vallois 1971). Originally discussed as a mask or a trophy, a recent re-analysis notes the lack of use-wear within the perforations, suggesting that, whatever its use, it was either very short-lived or infrequent (Adoudia-Chouakri & Bocquentin 2009, Fig. 1a–c). This specimen is also remarkable for a carved bone ‘tooth’ inserted into the abscessed socket of the right maxillary second premolar (*ibid.*, Fig. 1d). Whether this was done while the individual was living, or after death is uncertain. Ironically, dental ablation of the upper central incisors was a common practice in the Iberomaurusian, becoming less frequent and more variable in terms of the teeth removed in the Capsian (Humphrey & Bocaage 2008). Perhaps initially an initiation rite, its meaning may have changed through time. Given its high visibility, dental ablation would have certainly acted as a marker of identity at some level, though this likely would have varied geographically and chronologically. In the Capsian, more females than male are affected, suggesting that the practice was at least partly gendered at this time (*ibid.*).

Mesolithic

While ‘skull cups’ do not appear to feature in the Mesolithic, other practices involving crania are reminiscent of those seen in the Late Upper Palaeolithic (this need not imply any direct continuity of the tradition, nor uniformity of meaning). The clearest example is perhaps that at Grotte Margaux (Dinant, Belgium), where an adult female cranium dating to the Preboreal exhibits numerous cutmarks on its zygomatic processes and on various parts of the cranial vault, the former suggesting cutting of the muscle attachment sites to facilitate removal of the mandible, and the latter scalping (Toussaint 2011).

Cutmarks consistent with scalping have also been noted on Late Mesolithic remains, including a child's cranium from Dyrholmen (Jutland, Denmark) as well as examples from Ålekistebro (Sjælland, Denmark) and Drigge (Rügen, Germany) (Brinch Petersen 2006; Degerbøl 1942; Terberger 1998). Probable cases of scalping that have survived have been found at Skateholm in southern Sweden (Ahlström 2008) and Zvejnieki in Latvia (Jankauskas 2012). Presumably most or all of these examples relate to trophy taking, as the hair is widely believed cross-culturally to be a powerful bodily substance. Cutmarked and fractured postcranial remains too were present at Dyrholmen, so treatment there was not restricted to the skull, and indeed the possibility of cannibalism has been raised (Degerbøl 1942). The same applies to the large human bone assemblage from La Grotte des Perrats, where there is abundant evidence for reduction of the body, including cutmarks and peri-mortem fracturing, again interpreted in a context of anthropophagy (Boulestin 1999).

In other cases there is more subtle evidence for special treatment of the skull. The presence of the small bones of the hands and feet of some 12 individuals at the Early Mesolithic site of l'Abri des Autours, Belgium, in conjunction with a dearth of cranial remains, suggests that at least some complete bodies were originally interred, with the skulls subsequently taken away for deposition elsewhere (Cauwe 1998: 84). Erik Brinch Petersen (2006: 46) draws attention to a headless Mesolithic skeleton found at Vænge Sø, eastern Jutland, but, recalling the discussion above, it is unclear whether this was intentional removal or due to disturbance.

There is abundant evidence for the special treatment of the human cranium and mandible in the Mesolithic sites of the Iron Gates, including Lepenski Vir. Here, for example, an extended adult skeleton was placed in a pit (Grave 7) dug through the plastered floor of one of the site's trapezoidal houses (Srejović 1972: 120, Fig. 61). As with other intramural burials at Lepenski Vir, this occurred in a structured space west of the hearth interpreted as a household 'sanctuary' by the excavator, Dragoslav Srejović. The pit was later enlarged and an additional human cranium (7/II), an auroch skull and a red deer skull with attached antlers were deposited (Bonsall *et al.* 2008). The human cranium was placed at the left shoulder of the extended skeleton; intriguingly, another cranium was found in this same position in Burial 54e (*ibid.*: 186 and Fig. 8). Conversely, other extended burials, otherwise largely intact, lacked the skull (e.g. Burial 54c, *ibid.*, Fig. 7). As with examples in the Near East (no direct connection is being implied), the lack

of cutmarks indicates that the skull/cranium was removed only after the flesh, muscles and ligaments had decayed, a period requiring some years. New excavations at Vlasac document an example in Burial H63, a fully articulated adult female lacking the cranium and mandible, but with the uppermost cervical vertebrae *in situ* (Borić *et al.* 2014: 23); the atlas has been slightly displaced, perhaps when the cranium was removed (Figure 2.2). Human crania are also found in isolation, as in the case of ‘Burial’ 122, a cranium found above the hearth of building 47 (Bonsall *et al.* 2008, Fig. 13; Borić & Dimitrijević 2007). Some of the partially articulated and disarticulated remains have been suggested to represent secondary burial in conjunction with excarnation (Bonsall *et al.* 2008; Srejović 1972).



Figure 2.2. Burial H63 at Vlasac, an otherwise complete, articulated adult female skeleton missing the cranium and mandible (photo courtesy of Dušan Borić).

Given that skulls were often removed, but crania alone found in secondary deposits, it remains to account for the mandibles. Some at least were found set around large stone-lined hearths, as for example in building No. 40 at Lepenski Vir, together with a series of vertically set stone slabs mimicking the mandible's triangular shape (Srejović 1972: 119, Fig. 64). It is tempting to suggest that the symbolism here revolves around either feeding the an-

cestors, or having the ancestors 'bless' the food cooked on the hearth. The mandible in question is that of an adult female, perhaps linking women with the hearth and provision of the family and community (Radovanović 1996). While this relationship is commonly assumed ethnographically, it is rarely demonstrable archaeologically. Even in this case, the situation is likely to be more complex than indicated in such a straightforward reading. And given the difficulty of reliably sexing isolated mandibles on morphological criteria alone, the connection itself is tenuous.

Interpretation of the practices surrounding the human skull at Lepenski Vir and other Iron Gates sites are complicated by the intensity of activity taking place over a number of centuries, concentrated amongst closely associated structures and graves. There is a significant amount of disarticulated human bone – cranial and postcranial – across Lepenski Vir, some of which presumably represents disturbed earlier burials. The cranium may simply have received more careful treatment if disturbed than other elements. However, this is unlikely to be the full explanation. As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, in some cases intentional removal of the skull from a burial can be inferred, the lack of cut-marks on the vertebrae and their continued presence in the grave indicating that the flesh had fully decayed when this was done. In a recent overview of Iron Gate Mesolithic burial practices, Boroneanţ and Bonsall (2012: 49) note examples from Lepenski Vir, Vlasac and Schela Cladovei. Detached crania (mandibles are also removed but are not typically recovered with the crania) occur as isolated finds, in small groups, and as inclusions in other graves. With the evidence from these and other sites, it appears that skull removal was common in the Iron Gates Mesolithic (Bonsall *et al.* 2008; Borić *et al.* 2014; Boroneanţ & Bonsall 2012; Radovanović 1996). Srejović (1972: 123) interprets the treatment of human remains, and especially skulls, at Lepenski Vir as part of a cult of the ancestors.

Without doubt the most spectacular finding in recent years in European Mesolithic studies is the site of Kanaljorden (Östergötland, Sweden). Here was found a number of human crania set on stakes on a submerged stone platform within a small, shallow lake adjacent to the river Motala Ström (Hallgren 2011). Again, an important detail is that few mandibles were present, indicating that rather than heads, these were at least partially decomposed crania. Complicating this picture, however, is the fact that one of the crania was found to contain brain matter, indicating that either it derived from a relatively recently deceased individual, or that it was retrieved from a location with excellent preservational properties – such as would be supplied by the anaerobic conditions of small

lakes and bogs. As with most discussions concerning the special treatment of human heads, the question arises as to whether this is a complex mortuary treatment carried out by one's own group, or related to the taking of enemy heads as trophies. These alternatives, rather than being mutually exclusive, can be seen as opposite sides of the same coin: if the power to act or to intercede on behalf of the living is imputed to the dead, and in particular to the distillation encapsulated by the head, then taking that power away from an enemy forms part of the same logic.

Kanaljorden aside, some of the most compelling evidence for practices involving human heads in the European Mesolithic comes from the sites of Ofnet, Kaufertsberg (Bayern) and Hohlenstein-Stadel (Baden-Württemberg) in south-west Germany and Mannlefelden (Alsace) in north-east France (Birkner 1914; Ehrhardt 1936; Schmidt 1908; Thévenin & Sainty 1980). These sites are of particular interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, and unlike the examples discussed up to this point, the presence of the mandible and one or more upper cervical vertebrae (Figure 2.3) unequivocally indicates that these were fleshed heads when deposited, presumably not long after removal from the body, though this last aspect is open to further discussion: Ian Armit (2006) has suggested that the heads may have been dried and curated. The presence of soft tissue is further confirmed by the presence of cutmarks on the vertebrae (Fraye 1997; Orschiedt 1998, 2002b, 2005; Wahl & Haidle 2003). Secondly, there is considerable evidence for trauma on the crania. All three individuals at Hohlenstein-Stadel – an adult male and female, and a young child – show peri-mortem blows (occurring at or around the time of death) (Orschiedt 1998; Wahl & Haidle 2003). The child's cranial vault is enlarged and distorted, a condition consistent with hydrocephaly (Czarnetzki 1983, cited in Orschiedt 1998: 156) (Figure 2.4). Untreated, the condition is invariably fatal. It may arise in infancy, leading not only to obvious shape changes in the child's head, but also to behavioural changes (Bannister & Tew 1991). The rapid onset and highly visible nature of the condition may have been seen as inauspicious, and may have led to the killing of the child together with its parents (although the genetic link has not been confirmed) (Gronenborn 1999: 135; Schulting 2006).



Figure 2.3. Atlas and third cervical vertebra with cutmarks, adult male (no. 15) from Ofnet (photo courtesy of Jörg Orschiedt).

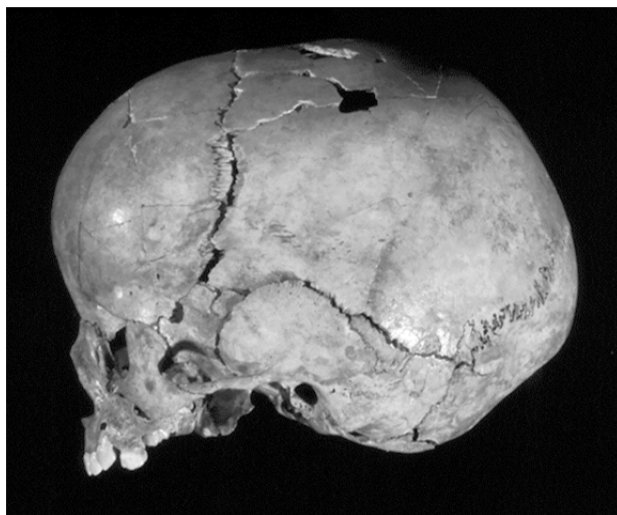


Figure 2.4. Hydrocephalic cranium of young child from Hoblenstein-Stadel, with a peri-mortem injury to the upper left parietal (photo courtesy of Jörg Orschiedt).

The single adult male skull at Mannlefelsen exhibits both cutmarks and peri-mortem injuries according to a recent re-analysis (Boulestin & Henri-Gambier 2012). No injuries have been reported for the young adult male skull from Kaufertsberg (Orschiedt 2005), though of course this need not mean that this individual did not also die violently.

In terms of the number of individuals involved, Ofnet clearly stands out from the other sites. In 1908 two ‘skull nests’ were found within Ofnet cave, Bavaria, comprising a smaller group of six skulls in one pit, and a larger group of 28 in another (Schmidt 1908). The exact number is unclear, which is not surprising given the fragmentary nature of the remains, the presence of many younger children with more fragile and unfused crania, and the early nineteenth century date of recovery. All of the skulls – or rather heads at the time they were deposited – were oriented facing west, while the cave itself opens to the south-west, leaving it uncertain whether they faced the entrance or the cave wall adjacent to it (Burkitt 1921: 188–189; Hofmann 2005); the importance of direction is suggested by the Kaufertsberg skull, which Judith Grünberg (2000: 80) has suggested was positioned to look out across the valley. A number of the Ofnet skulls were covered with red ochre and abundant red deer and shell bead ornamentation. Many have commented on the site’s unusual demography (Orschiedt 2002b, 2005; Peter-Röcher 2002), which seems to indicate an overrepresentation of children and a paucity of adult males relative to a living community: of the 14 or 15 adults in the two pits, nine or ten are female and five are male (Frayer 1997; Orschiedt 2002b, 2005). Both points are debatable. Firstly, subadult presence and mortality would be expected to be high at this time (it is the underrepresentation of young children that is the anomalous feature of many archaeological cemeteries) (Bocquet-Appel 2002; Weiss 1973). And secondly, given the relatively small number of individuals involved, the female–male ratio (10:5) in fact does not depart significantly from 50:50 (one-tailed binomial $p = 0.151$).

While the exact number is uncertain, many of the Ofnet crania show evidence of peri-mortem trauma in the form of stone axe blows (Frayer 1997; Gieseler 1951; Mollison 1936; Orschiedt 1998, 2002b, 2005). With the claimed percentage affected varying between ca. 20% and 60%, this in itself strongly suggests that burial assemblage is far from reflecting a normative mortuary rite (though see Orschiedt 1998, 2002b, 2005). This is further supported by the injuries found on the skulls from Hohlenstein-Stadel and Mannlefelsen. This may be a mortuary rite specifically for those dying violently (cf. Hofmann

2005: 207), though this raises the question of why so many children are represented at Ofnet, unless this is indeed a massacre site (and not all the crania need necessarily provide evidence of injury, as some individuals may have been killed in other ways). One problem is that so little is known of other contemporary burial practices in the region. In any case, the ritual importance of the head is indicated. Their careful placement within pits, together with red ochre and, at Ofnet, abundant bead ornamentation, together with their shared orientation, all speak of these heads being perceived as having special power. Thus, the evidence from SW Germany and NE France suggests that the term ‘skull cult’ might not be inappropriate (Jochim 2008), though this depends on exactly what the term is taken to mean. Certainly an interest in the head can be seen, but whether their careful treatment qualifies as veneration – a central feature of the definition – is unclear.

The main point of controversy regarding Ofnet has from the beginning revolved around its chronology. The initial debate focused on whether the ‘skull nests’ should be attributed to the Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic or Neolithic (Glowatzki & Protsch 1973; Mollison 1936). As Naber (1974) points out, even before any direct dating was carried out, the recorded stratigraphy and closely associated microliths supported a Mesolithic date. A series of radiocarbon dates confirmed this attribution (Hedges *et al.* 1989). The next issue, still unresolved, relates to whether deposition of the skulls occurred over some centuries, or over a much shorter period, perhaps even as a single event. If the latter, and given the evidence for peri-mortem trauma, the possibility of a massacre presents itself, a position taken by David Frayer (1997). If the two pits are contemporary, the 34 men, women and children could well represent an entire hunter-gatherer band – an extraordinary level of violence for this period. Jörg Orscheidt (1998, 2002b, 2005), on the other hand, has argued that the range of radiocarbon dates obtained on the remains is more consistent with repeated deposition spanning some centuries. The available dating is simply not good enough to decide between these two alternatives (Brinch Petersen 2006; Jeunesse 2012; Jochim 2011). A new dating programme is currently underway, with the specific aim of assessing the duration of use of the two pits at Ofnet. While it will not be possible to positively identify a single event, higher precision dates combined with Bayesian modelling should be able to distinguish between deposition occurring over more or less than a generation (Figure 2.5). If the dates are consistent with a generation or less (i.e. approximately 20 years), it would strongly support the massacre hypothesis.

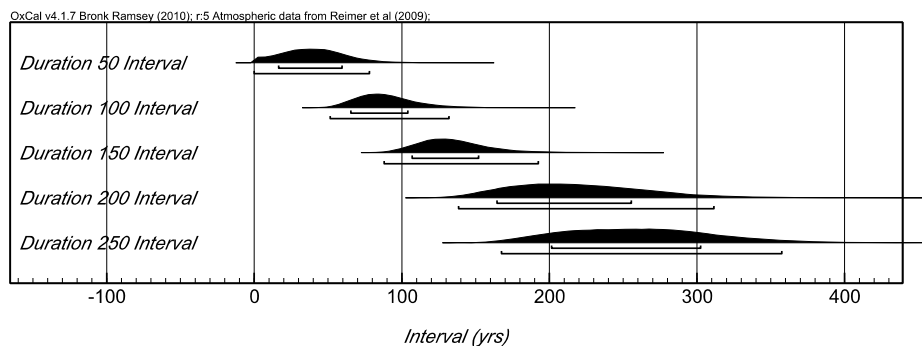


Figure 2.5. Graph showing modelled simulations of 23 radiocarbon determinations centring on ca. 7500 BP with errors of ± 30 years, assuming true periods of deposition of 50, 100, 150, 200 and 250 years. While simultaneous deposition as a single event cannot be definitely proved, the models demonstrate that it should be possible to distinguish deposition over a generation or so (i.e. less than 50 years) from that occurring over a longer period.

A different practice again is seen at the large Mesolithic and ‘Neolithic’³ cemetery of Zvejnieki, Latvia. Special treatment of the head here did not involve its removal, but rather the coating of the face with a layer of coloured clay and the laying of perforated amber disks on the eyes (Larsson & Zagorska 2006). Only a small number of individuals were treated in this way, comprising three or four out of the more than 300 present (Zagorskis 2004). As Nilsson Stutz *et al.* (2013: 1026) note, this would have transformed the face of the deceased prior to burial, but it then would no longer have been visible. This transformation was thus intended for the world of the dead, not to be seen by the living, other than for a brief period – and possibly by a limited number of people – before burial. In this sense the practice differs markedly from the plastered ‘skulls’ of the Neolithic Near East, which it otherwise brings to mind (cf. Edgren 2006: 333). The documentation of the use of amber disks in burials at Zvejnieki has facilitated wider recognition of the practice in other parts of the Baltic where bone does not survive. Thus, paired amber rings with clay plugs found at the Corded Ware Culture sites of Kokemäki Pispä and Laukaa Hartikka in Finland can now be interpreted as having lain on the eyes of the deceased: rings and lens-shaped discs of slate may have served the same function (Edgren 2006).

³ In the eastern Baltic the term ‘Neolithic’ simply denotes the presence of pottery. The ‘Early Neolithic’ here is the equivalent of the Ertebølle of southern Scandinavia.

An ethnographic aside: ancestor veneration, trophy skulls and angry spirits

No formal definition of ‘head cult’ or ‘skull cult’ has been provided here, beyond noting that it typically entails an element of veneration of the human head. The evidence for formal deposition in the Mesolithic is sufficient to posit a ritual context, though whether and to what extent this equates to veneration is open to debate. But assuming it does, what follows? In the introduction to this paper, the putative links between ancestor veneration and farming were noted (in the form of the extended Near Eastern tradition, dating back to the Early Natufian, of cranium/skull removal and the subsequent PPNB tradition of plastered ‘skulls’). Can such links be supported for hunter-gatherers, and, if so, what do they tell us? Using a sample of over 100 societies from the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), Dean Sheils (1975) investigated the structural correlates of ancestor worship. His findings clearly linked ancestor worship with unilineal descent, and with the presence of polygyny. While a statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.01$) between ancestor worship and agricultural level was also identified, Sheils felt this to be spurious, an outcome of the fact that farming societies were more likely to exhibit the other traits, and that these were the more important causal factors. Regardless, what is important to note here is that, using the data provided (Sheils 1975), eight of 23 hunter-gatherer societies (ca. 35%) exhibit some form of ancestor worship. While this is significantly less than seen in horticulturalists (49 of 62 societies, or 79%), it does show that ancestor worship is far from uncommon in hunter-gatherers. Nor, it might be remarked, did Sheil’s study include any of the complex fisher-hunter-gatherers of the Northwest Coast of North America, where ancestry certainly featured strongly, to the extent that heraldic art, hereditary leadership and institutionalised slavery existed (Donald 1997).

If some form of ancestor worship did feature in the Mesolithic, it might imply a stronger sense and expression of territoriality, as is often proposed in relation to the presence of formal cemeteries, usually in the context of farming societies (Goldstein 1981; Saxe 1970). But it is clear that hunter-gatherers can also act territorially (Elder 2010), indeed in some cases extremely so (i.e. the use of lethal violence in response to boundary transgression). It is in such contexts that the distinction between the ancestor veneration and the taking of trophy heads can become blurred. There is sufficient ethnographic and archaeological evidence for the practice of head taking among hunter-gatherers that this – like expressions of territoriality and a

marked interest in ancestors – should come as no surprise. The cultures of the Northwest Coast clearly demonstrate all of these features. A mid-nineteenth century painting by the artist and traveller Paul Kane (1859) documents the return of a Songhees (Central Coast Salish) war party to their village near what was then Fort Victoria (now Victoria, British Columbia). A standing figure in the prow of the first of two canoes is shown holding up a head, while a corresponding figure in the second canoe is depicted holding a head in each outstretched arm. An additional head appears to be stuck on a pole in each vessel's stern. Though this image may be a composite of a number of scenes witnessed by Kane, there is more than enough corroborative evidence for events precisely of this type that there is no question of its veracity (Boas 1916; Drucker 1951; see recent review in Lovisek 2007). And, lest this behaviour be seen as brought about by the undoubted disruptions caused by Euroamerican contact (Ferguson & Whitehead 1992), the archaeological record supports the considerable time-depth of the taking of trophy skulls. Dating from around 200 BC to AD 400, skeletons at the Boardwalk site, Prince Rupert Harbour (British Columbia) show considerable evidence for interpersonal violence, with some graves including elaborate weapons (e.g. carved whalebone clubs). Trophy skulls were found in at least one burial and in one cache at Boardwalk, and have been recovered from other sites in the area (Cybulski 1978, 2014).

The issue of differentiating between a 'venerated ancestor' and a trophy head is not seen as problematic in itself (though identifying which is in play in any particular instance of course remains difficult), since they can be interpreted as two sides of the same coin, an outcome of the belief that the head holds or concentrates the life force (Hoskins 1989, 1996a, 1996b). The ways in which this is harnessed are diverse, but often involve corporeal remains. In some ethnographically known instances, however, heads were simply discarded in the bush after being taken on raids, it being the act of taking the head that was of paramount importance – it is unlikely that evidence of such practices would be forthcoming archaeologically. But in many other cases, heads, whether of ancestors (however defined) or enemies, were retained, sometimes only for a short period, and sometimes for many decades. Here again, the division between the two can be blurred, as among the Naga hill tribes of north-east India, who took the heads of enemies but converted them into their own 'ancestors' who were meant to sustain fertility of both people and crops (Hoskins 1996b).

Moreover, while often presented and discussed as two extremes – ancestor veneration or enemy trophies – the skull may be interpreted in other ways when found separated from the postcranial skeleton. The heads of the deceased may have been treated in certain ways depending on the circumstances surrounding death, and have had more to do with appeasing angry spirits than with either veneration or trophy-taking (cf. Whitley 2002). The distinction may blur when the angry spirits belong to those who died violently; indeed, this recalls the careful treatment of the buried skulls at Ofnet and Hohlenstein-Stadel. Seen in this context, the mortuary rites carried out by the survivors or by perpetrators (whether or not seen as a massacre, the evidence for lethal violence remains) may not differ substantially. The dangerous power of the dead can also be harnessed by shamans and sorcerers. This could potentially involve very elaborate ritual treatment that would nevertheless again have nothing to do with either veneration or trophy-taking. Sorcerers among the Kwakwaka'wak (Kwakwaka'wak) and Nuxalk (Bella Coola) of the central coast of British Columbia used human skulls robbed from graves to curse people, inserting into them pieces of clothing or other personal items of the intended victim (Boas 1891: 612–613; McIlwraith 1948: 741–742). Among the Nuuchah-nulth (Nootka) of western Vancouver Island, the voices of the dead were believed to have the power to call whales, and so chiefs used the corpses of the recently deceased to entice them towards their villages where they could be hunted more easily (Drucker 1951: 170–171). While the entire corpse featured, the focus was on the head, a tube being inserted through a hole made in the back of the neck into the mouth through which to call the whale. Numerous additional examples from the ethnographic literature and indeed more recent contexts could be cited, but these serve to make the point. On the other hand, it is likely that societies attributing such powers to the deceased also practised some form of ancestor veneration and trophy-taking: both certainly featured among the Nuxalk and Nuuchah-nulth. The 'coin' in this case simply has more than two sides.

Mesolithic 'skull cults'?

While the available evidence is patchy and open to various readings, the overview presented here suggests the likelihood of widespread beliefs and practices involving the human head in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Europe. This is not to imply uniformity, as there are indications of marked regional variability. The best example of this is the carefully placed detached heads

from a number of sites in south-west Germany, most notably Ofnet, and north-east France. And while only a small proportion of individuals may be involved, the application of clay 'masks' and amber or slate discs on the eyes of the deceased seems to be a distinctive feature of the eastern Baltic. Given the millennia separating Zvejnieki and the Finnish Corded Ware sites, this tradition may be a longstanding one. This need not be surprising, as there are other elements of northern Eurasian hunter-gatherer societies that seem to be widespread and persistent, for example, the use of elk-head imagery; this is found in the Baltic area, including Zvejnieki, and at sites in western Russia, most notably Oleni ostrov (Karelia, Russia) but also others (Kozłowski 1989; Larsson & Zagorska 2006). Marek Zvelebil (2008) discusses this and other shared motifs and symbolism in the region. The Mesolithic sites of the Iron Gates provide evidence of a different practice, involving the retrieval of the cranium, and sometimes also the mandible, from burials wherein the flesh had already decayed. While crania were redeposited in various ways, the mandibles were occasionally incorporated into elaborate hearth structures, with rich symbolic potential. Kanaljorden is different again, with partially decomposed heads set on wooden stakes in a shallow pool of water adjacent to a large settlement. Whether this practice will turn out to be more widespread remains to be seen, but it is unlikely to be unique.

As well as differences, there are tentative suggestions of commonalities, though these need involve nothing more than ways of thinking about the human head shared across many cultures. For example, a number of the cases discussed in this paper imply, to varying extents, an emphasis on the eyes and on the act of watching. This is seen most incontrovertibly, of course, in the addition of shell eyes on the modelled crania and skulls of the PPNB. The isolated cranium of a young female with deer vertebrae discs inserted into the orbits at Mas d'Azil provides an intriguing, if currently unique, example from the Magdalenian. For the Mesolithic, there is use of amber discs for eyes at Zvejnieki, though here the dead did not gaze upon the living, but upon an underworld. Given their early date of excavation, the situation at Ofnet and Kaufertsberg is not clear, but the skulls at both may have been placed to look out of their respective caves, albeit from underground. In any case, it may be significant that all reportedly faced the same direction, perhaps hinting at the importance of a particular view, though its specific meaning escapes us. Views to an underwater otherworld may have played a role for the heads on stakes at Kanaljorden, which may never have risen above the water.

What the examples discussed above all share is the recognition that the human skull is a rich and varied source of powerful symbolism. Indeed, this belief is shared much more widely through time and space, and is arguably a defining human characteristic, associated as it is with both personal and group identity. To partially answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper, there is plausible evidence for ‘skull cults’ in the Mesolithic (as indeed there is for the Upper Palaeolithic and for the Neolithic), as evidenced by varied practices involving the head in both its fleshed and bony forms.

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