

MANIPULATION OF DEATH:  
A BURIAL AREA AT THE NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT OF AVGI, NW  
GREECE

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**Introduction [Sl. 1]**

In the Neolithic of Northern Greece the deposition of the deceased is strongly related to the built environment. Burials occur in shallow pits in open spaces between buildings, or under house floors, whilst grave goods, when present, are few and simple. Individual and group burials, primary and secondary burials, including inhumations, cremations, and scattered bones, have been found so far in Early Neolithic sites in Macedonia and Thessaly (including *Nea Nikomedeia*, *Argissa Magoula*, *Soufli Magoula* and *Prodromos*) and in Late Neolithic I and Late Neolithic II (or Chalcolithic) sites in Aegean Thrace (e.g. *Makri*), Central Macedonia (e.g. *Makriyalos*), Western Macedonia (e.g. *Agios Panteleimonas*, *Mandalo*, *Kitrini Limni*, *Dispilio*) and Thessaly (e.g. *Platia Magoula Zarkou*, *Ayia Sofia Magoula*, *Dimini*, *Pefkakia Magoula*). Nevertheless, all these burials are considered to be rather infrequent, compared to the number of people lived in the neolithic villages. The scarcity of neolithic burials can not be attributed only to inadequacies in the archaeological research. It is plausible that many extramural neolithic cemeteries may have gone unrecognized, while other patterns of mortuary treatment, which have left scarce -if any- traces in the archaeological record, should also be considered.

Despite the limitations in the data available, it is evident that mortuary treatment in the Neolithic of Northern Greece is characterized by *diversity* in burial practices. For instance, in the Early Neolithic village of Prodromos at the region of Karditsa in western Thessaly, successive layers of disarticulated skulls and long bones were found under a house floor, while in Late Neolithic

Dimini in south-eastern Thessaly, a series of cremations were found both beneath house floors and inside clay pots, placed near hearths in the interior of buildings. On the other hand, in Late Neolithic Makriyalos in central Macedonia, one of the two concentric ditches was used for primary and secondary burials. Some cases of extra-mural cemeteries also exist, such as the Early Neolithic and the Late Neolithic cemetery at Soufli Magoula in the eastern part of Thessaly and the Late Neolithic cemetery at Platia Magoula Zarkou in eastern Thessaly, in which a series of cremation burials were disposed inside pots and shallow pits. Again, regardless the great variety of burial customs, what is striking about the mortuary treatment in the Neolithic of Northern Greece, is its *domestic* character, expressed through the incorporation of some of the deceased into the built environments.

Recent excavations at the Neolithic Settlement of Avgi in Kastoria [SI. 2] have shed additional light to mortuary treatment in the Neolithic of Northern Greece, filling in the picture known from other sites. A group of cremations was found inside 10 small pots, buried in an open area of the neolithic village. The archaeological research conducted at the site of Avgi provides us with enough evidence to communicate an interesting discussion regarding both neolithic funerary behavior, as well as the correlation of the burial area with the built environment.

### **The site**

The neolithic site of Avgi is located in a hilly terrain, rich in clay deposits, in the Kastoria region, NW Greece [SI. 3]. The site is an 'extended' settlement, a settlement type well-known in Balkan Neolithic, and now widely-recognized also in the Neolithic of Northern Greece [SI. 4]. The known extent of the site is about 5 ha, of which ca. 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> were investigated during the excavations carried out from 2002 to 2008 by the 17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture [SI. 5] under the field directorship of Dr. Georgia Stratouli in collaboration with an interdisciplinary research team. Based on radiocarbon dating, the neolithic settlement dates to

Middle Neolithic (c. 5700-5300) and the Late Neolithic I and II (c. 5300-4500, and probably later) [SI. 6], with the earliest use of the site dating back to c. 5650 cal BC. Two distinct phases of occupation are evident [SI. 7]: AVGI I, dating mostly to the second half of the 6th millennium (Middle Neolithic and Late Neolithic I) and AVGI II, dating to 5th millennium (Late Neolithic II). [SI. 8]

The earliest phase of occupation (AVGI I) is characterized by the structural remains of at least five free-standing rectangular buildings, which were burnt and collapsed *in situ* [SI. 9] leaving intact remnants of clay and wood construction materials, mudbricks, wall plasters, and post holes. The building components [SI. 10] comprise large open areas, facilities for the storage of agricultural and other products, fire installations, i.e. hearths and ovens for heating and cooking, and numerous implements participating in a variety of daily tasks, such as food preparation and consumption and tool making.

The settlement layout and building construction techniques change radically in AVGI II [SI. 11]. The remains of at least five rectangular buildings, sized from 70 to 85 m<sup>2</sup>, and one of an ellipse shape belong to this phase. Some of the buildings are separated by narrow trenches. The walls of the buildings [SI. 12] located in the western and best excavated part of the settlement, were firmly placed inside foundation trenches, a building technique well-documented in many neolithic settlements across Balkans [SI. 13]. Several storage, refuse and ???borrow pits also belong to the same phase.

### **The burial area [SI. 14]**

The burial area at the Neolithic settlement of Avgi is located in the center of the site, covering a rather small area of about 3 m<sup>2</sup>. Based on relative dating and stratigraphic observations, since radiocarbon dating is still pending, the burial belongs to fifth millennium, probably to an intermediate phase between AVGI I and AVGI II. We should note here that little is known about this intermediate phase regarding the settlement layout and the building

constructions. On the contrary, there is a plethora of archaeological evidence, such as, for instance, the presence of thermal structures, such as hearths and ovens, as well as a large amount of tools and other artifacts, indicating a variety of daily task activities occurring at the site in this period.

Ten small pots containing tiny amounts of burnt human remains were excavated in this area [SI. 15]. The burial ritual included the cremation of the deceased, which probably occurred in another place, a *crematorium* within or beyond the domestic environment. Furthermore, the ritual involved the placement of part of the bones of the deceased in burial pots [SI. 16]. In two cases, burnt seeds were also placed inside the burial pots. At a later stage, the pots were disposed in this specific area and each was covered [SI. 17] with 2 or 3 layers of large pottery fragments. The larger covering vessels were evidently smashed intentionally at some point during the burial ritual [SI. 18]. The small pots seem to have been buried in pairs and we think that they reflect more than one episode of deposition, indicating that this particular ritual continued for a rather long period of time [SI. 19].

The uppermost part of the burial area is/are disturbed by later neolithic occupation and modern plough activity. Therefore, its original form, as well as its content, may have been affected. We do not know *whether* the small pots were buried within a pit, *whether* they were placed in an open, or even an encircled area of the settlement, or *whether* the whole area was covered and marked by a tumulus or some other construction. The good preservation of both the pots and their covering sherds indicates that they were not exposed for a long period after their disposal, but again there are no indications of a pit in the excavated part. These issues are hindered to some extent by the fact that the excavation in that particular area of the settlement (Area 6) is still in progress and therefore the exact limits of the burial place remain under investigation. Indeed, there is evidence that the burial area extends further East, exceeding the area of 3 m<sup>2</sup>, which has been excavated, but this point awaits future archaeological research to be attested [SI. 20]. Therefore, it is likely that the small burial pots were buried within a distinct area, perhaps a pit, whose limits exceed the excavated part and are yet to be found.

## The burial pots [SI. 21]

Concerning the size of the ten small burial pots, their height ranges from 3 cm (i.e. a miniature hole-mouthed jar) to 13 cm (i.e. a small necked jar), while most of them vary between 7,5 to 10,0 cm in height.

Some differences are also observed regarding the shape and the surface treatment of the burial pots. They seem to imitate jars, hole-mouthed jars and necked jars, all of which are known shapes of pottery wares of Neolithic Avgi. Also the colors of the pots' exterior surfaces range from light brown (4 pots) and reddish brown (4 pots) to red (1 pot), while in one case a 'black-topped' small spherical necked jar is present, which is possibly missing a handle. The surface treatment of the burial pots varies as well, with 4 pots having smoothed exterior surfaces and 6 having burnished exterior surfaces. Moreover, two distinct techniques can be traced in the manufacturing process of the burial pots: most of the pots were manufactured with the 'coiling' technique, in which coils of clay are used to form the shape of the pot. The rest and smaller pots are crafted using the 'pinching' technique, in which one lump of clay is formed by pressure having been applied by the potter's hands to create the final form of the pot.

One more striking difference noticed regarding the use of the burial pots is that in some cases there are wear marks on the exterior base, indicating that these particular pots had been used in some other activity in the context of neolithic daily life before they participated in the funeral ceremony; perhaps their 'circle of life' ended along with the life of an individual. In sharp contrast, there are pots that exhibit a more 'hasty' craftsmanship [SI. 22], in terms of shaping, forming and even firing, indicating possibly that they were made to be used only as funerary urns.

What can be inferred from the statements above is that not a single burial pot is identical to any other. In contrast, all known urns from Neolithic Avgi were located at the same central place of the village. Furthermore, all were covered with large sherds from rather big vessels, possibly creating a form of a small *tumulus*, although it is impossible to know whether this may have been visible

by the people after the burial rituals were concluded. It is also probable that these larger vessels were deliberately destroyed there during the funerary rituals, once their 'cultural biography', which was imbued with particular meaning through the use of the vessels in different social and cultural contexts, was completed.

The similarity of the funerary rituals at Avgi seems to accentuate the collective identity, in contrast to self-identity. In accordance to that, it is worth mentioning that the shapes of the burial pots are inspired by vessels usually associated by archaeologists with storage and/or collective consumption of food.

### **The skeletal remains**

The study of cremated bone material involves, except for the thorough recording of biological parameters (e.g. age, sex, pathological conditions), the careful examination of variables related to the process of cremation, such as the colour, fragmentation, and several modifications such as fracturing and warpage, which can be observed on the bone due to its exposure to burning conditions. Besides, fragmentation and representation of skeletal elements can be related to a series of acts taking place through human interference, such as the deliberate *mixing of the bones* during the process of firing in order to provide more oxygen and therefore succeed sufficient cremation of the cadaver and the *mode of collecting* the cremated remains either thorough or selected after the extinction of the pyre.

At Neolithic Avgi, the small quantity of bone found in pot burials limits the analysis as to the information that can be provided from cremated bones. The majority of the cremated fragments recovered from the Neolithic Avgi burials **[SI. 23]** exhibit the patterns of calcination, colouring, fragmentation, fractures, fissures, transverse and longitudinal fracturing and warping consistent with having been burned as fresh bone with the flesh still being attached, as opposed to having been burned dry, without flesh. With regard to burning temperature and duration, the evidence of calcined bones shows that pyre temperatures reached at least 700°C at the level of the body, while

exposure to high temperatures was probably a lengthy procedure. High fragmentation may have been caused due to continuous addition of fuel during the burning process and therefore the mixing of the pyre debris with long sticks. The morphology, size and structure of the bone indicate that six out of ten burials belong to adults and one only to an infant, but there were no features preserved that would allow recognition of sex and an accurate estimation of age at death. All bones were in tiny fragments and only in two out of ten cremation burials, some bone fragments were identifiable. In general, there is no preferential selection between cranial and postcranial skeletal elements.

The weight, however, of the cremated material is worth discussing here. It is generally accepted in the related bibliography that the weight of bone recovered from an adult cremation varies between about 1,000 to 3,600 gr. At Neolithic Avgi, the tiny quantity of the cremated bone material [SI. 24], less than 10 gr in each case in the majority of burials, may be consistent with a secondary treatment of the deceased. It is worth noting the presence of three out of ten burials belonging to adult individuals, which show larger quantities of bone material ranging between 90 to 165 gr, which however again are not consistent with what would be expected in a careful and thorough collection of all remains of cremated bones. It is therefore possible that there was an overall selective collection of the cremated remnants of the deceased after the pyre was completed.

## **Discussion**

The case of the burial ground [SI. 25] located at the neolithic settlement of Avgi, as well as its cremations, are not unique in the neolithic of Northern Greece. Similar burial evidence was recently discovered in the nearby lake settlement of Dispilio (c. 10 km northeast of Avgi), while at Kremasti Koiladha? in Kozani (c. 65 km southwest of Avgi), a series of burial pots have also been excavated over the last years. However, at Kremasti Koiladha? the burial ground could not be linked to a particular settlement, but probably an extra mural cemetery, such as those at Platia Magoula Zarkou and Soufli Magoula in Thessaly. At Avgi, the concentration of cremations in a burial

ground located inside the domestic environment and the complexity of the funerary ritual, as suggested by the pottery and the osteological analysis, raises a series of issues that require further interpretation.

First of all, only a small part of the long lasted neolithic community was chosen to be buried in this particular part of the settlement [SI. 26]. There is no doubt that these individuals were buried at this specific ground of the settlement *exceptionally*, while most members of the community were probably treated differently. But what about the criteria through which this selection was made? Were these individuals buried in that area at Avgi randomly selected, or were there any firm ties between them, distinct for the neolithic community but totally inaccessible to us? Ethnographic studies suggest that such ties could be related to lineage, social identity, and age, or even to a violent and abrupt cause of death. Whether other members of the neolithic community of Avgi received similar [SI. 27] or differentiated manipulation after their death remains unknown, since there is no other evidence for burials across the 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> that have already been excavated. [SI. 28] There could be other burial grounds inside the village, or a burial area in the vicinity of the settlement. Whichever the case was, it is rather intriguing that a group of individuals was disposed in a distinct area within the domestic environment, which could be visible or known just to the members of the living community. In addition to this, the complex funerary ritual could be a long lasting and public event that incorporated many groups of the villagers, through their participation in the same ceremony.

Death [SI. 29] was probably an event that had affected and concerned the neolithic community as a whole and the funerary ceremonies could be interpreted as the fields of negotiating the new social roles emerging for the living, kinsfolk or not, of the deceased. Through the *manipulation of death* the community of the ancestors affects the living world by reproducing and establishing new relations and social identities amongst the living or by reaffirming and reforming the given ones. Thus, it was of an utmost importance that the memory of the ancestors would survive for future generations; that ancestry and the past would take a *material form* in order to

be preserved, not only as an abstract event but as a tangible memory, a *token* of the memorable individuals. We suggest that the burial pots found at the neolithic settlement of Avgi and their included cremations could be interpreted as *tokens of memory*. These tokens could have also participated in other acts of remembering except funerary practice. For instance, they could have been held and displayed during special gatherings, such as feasting or other ceremonies of social or symbolic character, long before their final disposal at the burial ground. The lack of grave goods or other finds related to the burial pots is also interesting. Only two pots had small quantities of carbonized seeds inside them, probably emphasizing the link between the memorable ancestors and fertility or the farming activities, which held an important role in their daily round. From another point of view, the seeds are thought to represent the agricultural circle. In contrast with most things that have a finite life, including people, animals, houses, villages and objects, the seed has an unending cyclicity, since it produces more seeds if planted again. Putting together human and seeds may be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the effects of life and death and embrace permanence. The disposal of these tokens of memory in the domestic environment of a living settlement held also special meaning. Through the incorporation of the ancestors in/into the living world the community bounds itself not only to an earlier generation but also to a particular place or the settlement. Although building remains from the intermediate phase between AVGI I & II, to which the burials probably belong, are scarce, there is enough evidence of a variety of daily tasks occurring to the proximity of the burial area, indicating that it was unquestionably part of a domestic environment.

The intent correlation of a part of the deceased ancestors with the living social environments may be indicating the will of the neolithic people to negotiate their own past by weaving it into their own present. Such practices of materializing and managing the past could be considered as *acts of remembering* and according to archaeological and anthropological theory constitute important components for the formation of social identities and the construction of social relations.