
The places for the dead in the Mesolithic

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Abstract

Human attitudes towards death are never random. Regardless of beliefs and symbolic associations to death, dead bodies require a physical action from the living, which is defined within a worldview in the way we see the world and express our emotions.

Archaeological remains of past mortuary practices become more common in postglacial sites in Europe and in the Near East. Archaeologists are well-aware of the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, but despite preservation and research biases, it is accepted that the absence of human remains in earlier chronologies also relates to ways of handling the dead that do not leave traces in the archaeological record.

It has been argued that the burial of the dead becomes a more common practice in the Mesolithic, however, other ways of handling the dead have been documented, indicating that the adoption of one or another practice varies regionally and according to specific social dynamics. It is important to emphasize that the presence of human remains in a site is not necessarily correlated with funerary practices, and there are a variety of contexts where human remains can be found. Human remains can be involved in an array of ancestral and religious rituals, as well as in demonstrations of power; can be found in scenarios of violence and conflict, as well as in contexts of accidental death; can be worn as ornaments, as well as amulets and relics. The funerary context is just one of the many contexts where human remains can be present.

In this study I examine the places for the dead in Mesolithic Europe by reviewing the archaeological evidence for sites with radiocarbon dated human bones. This review focuses on the locations where Mesolithic human bone has been found, aiming at identifying regional patterns and local choices, and I argue that like the attitudes towards death, the places for the dead are never random.

Keywords: Mortuary practices, Place, Hunter, gatherers, Mesolithic, Europe

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