



Human-Animal Coexistence in Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic Burials in the Fertile Crescent

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ABSTRACT

Burials are among the most significant findings in archaeological excavations. Unlike many archaeological artifacts whose placements are often incidental, the deliberate positioning of items within burials reflects the underlying intentions that can shed light on the beliefs and living conditions of past human societies. The inclusion of animals in human burials has been a prevalent funerary practice since the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic periods in the Fertile Crescent, carrying profound implications for ancient worldviews. This study aims to examine and introduce this burial practice, its inception, its relationship with animal domestication, and the hidden meanings behind its prevalence, such as connections to shamanism or ritual symbolism. This research was conducted through a comprehensive literature review. The findings indicate that the methods and traditions of animal burial, as well as the types of animals chosen to accompany humans in burials, varied across different regions and periods, influenced by diverse perspectives. These included both carnivorous and herbivorous animals. Additionally, the presence of animals capable of domestication in burials signifies a strong bond between humans and animals, likely associated with the onset of domestication processes. Beyond the discovery of complete animal remains in some graves, parts of animals were buried alongside humans as offerings to the deceased. In some instances, there are also indications of symbolic connections between humans, animals, and shamanism in both human and animal burials.

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Introduction

The primary objective of archaeology is to reconstruct the past by analyzing material remains. Archaeologists achieve this goal by studying excavation findings, piecing them together, and interpreting them to understand various aspects of past societies. This approach aligns closely with anthropology, as both disciplines seek to understand human culture; however, while anthropologists study the beliefs and behaviors of living groups, archaeologists work with the physical remnants of past civilizations (Grindell, 1998: 56). Among archaeological finds, burial remains hold particular significance. Unlike other artifacts whose placement may be accidental, burial positioning and grave goods are deliberately arranged, reflecting specific cultural, social, and ritualistic intentions. The analysis of these remains offers valuable insights into both the material and immaterial aspects of past societies (Tarlow and Stutz, 2013: 5).

The transition from the Epipaleolithic to the Neolithic, often described as a "revolution" in archaeology, marked a profound shift in human history. Gordon Childe argued that the primary catalyst for this transformation was the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture (Hole, 1984: 40). This shift fundamentally altered human economies, and its impact has been compared to that of the Industrial Revolution (Ashraf & Michalopoulos, 2010: 1). The term "Neolithic," initially used to describe a tool-making technology, has evolved to encompass broader technological, economic, social, and ideological changes. Today, it represents an entire way of life, incorporating plant and animal domestication, permanent settlements, and new cultural practices (Cilingiroglu, 2005: 1). While extensive research has been conducted on the origins of agriculture and environmental changes during the Neolithic, relatively fewer studies have explored the social and religious dimensions of this era (Kujit, 2002: 3). Given the transformative nature of the period and the significance of burial data in archaeology, the study of Neolithic burials is crucial for understanding various aspects of life during this time.

When examining burial traditions in the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic Near East, one distinctive funerary practice emerges: the inclusion of animal remains alongside human

burials. While standard burial customs often involved interments beneath residential structures—either as primary or secondary burials—several sites across the Levant, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and southwestern Iran have revealed cases of human-animal burials. This phenomenon raises several questions: Could these burials reflect an intimate human-animal relationship and the early stages of domestication? Do they provide evidence of social differentiation? Were they part of ritualistic or religious traditions?

To address these questions, this study first presents archaeological evidence of human-animal burials across various sites. Subsequently, a comparative analysis of associated data is conducted to explore the underlying reasons and hidden meanings behind this unique funerary practice.

Research Methodology

Alongside conventional burial practices of the Neolithic and Epipaleolithic periods, several archaeological sites in the Near East have revealed instances of burials where animals were interred alongside humans. Given the initiation of the animal domestication process during this period, examining these burials in conjunction with other findings from these sites can provide valuable insights into the nature and reasons behind human-animal relationships.

This study aims to explore and analyze human-animal joint burials, their chronological emergence, their potential connection to domestication processes, and the hidden symbolic meanings behind this funerary practice, such as its association with shamanism or ritual symbolism. The research follows a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing data collected from archaeological reports and publications related to Near Eastern sites. By systematically analyzing the available evidence, this study seeks to address key questions and uncertainties regarding this unique burial tradition.

Discussion

The burial of animals alongside humans is a significant archaeological phenomenon observed in prehistoric societies, particularly in the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic periods. This practice, documented in sites across the Levant, suggests profound symbolic, economic, and ritual implications. The association of specific

animal species with human burials highlights early conceptions of human-animal relationships, belief systems, and possible shamanistic or totemic practices. This paper examines the evidence from two key sites, Uyun al-Hammam in Jordan and Hilazon Cave in Israel, to explore the symbolic and ritual significance of animal burials in the transition from foraging to early agricultural societies.

Uyun al-Hammam: Early Evidence of Animal-Human Burials

One of the earliest documented instances of animal burial alongside humans originates from Uyun al-Hammam in northern Jordan, dated to the Early and Middle Epipaleolithic period (ca. 14,200–17,250 BP) (Maher *et al.*, 2012). The site contained skeletal remains of nine individuals, with most burials exhibiting primary interments, while two (Burials 2 and 4) were secondary. Though the exact contours of the burial pits are unclear, the associated grave goods and spatial arrangement delineate burial areas (Maher *et al.*, 2011).

Among the most remarkable findings at Uyun al-Hammam was the discovery of a fox skull buried alongside an individual in Grave 1. Positioned under the ribs of Burial B, the fox skull was found within a layer of red ochre, suggesting a ritualistic element to the interment. The close association of the fox remains with human burials, along with red ochre—a substance frequently linked to funerary rites—implies a symbolic relationship between humans and foxes during this period. Additionally, the partial disarticulation of fox remains between two burial pits parallels human secondary burial practices, reinforcing the notion that these animals were ascribed similar funerary treatment as humans (Maher *et al.*, 2011).

Symbolism of the Fox in Pre-Pottery Neolithic Cultures

The role of the fox in early Levantine symbolic systems is further substantiated by rock engravings and figurative art in contemporaneous Neolithic sites. Notably, depictions of foxes appear alongside vultures and snakes in Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) contexts at Jerf el-Ahmar, Syria, and Göbekli Tepe, Turkey (Willcox, 2002; Watkins, 2012). These representations suggest that the fox played a significant role in the cosmological and ritual

framework of early Neolithic communities. The presence of fox remains in human burials at Uyun al-Hammam may therefore reflect an early form of totemic or shamanistic belief, where certain animals held spiritual or protective significance.

The Natufian Culture and the Expansion of Animal-Human Burials

The Late Epipaleolithic period witnessed significant changes in burial practices, particularly within the Natufian culture (ca. 13,000–14,500 BP) (Bocquentin & Bar-Yosef, 2004). The Natufians, considered proto-agriculturalists, exhibited early signs of sedentism and systematic plant and animal exploitation. Their funerary traditions, including communal cemeteries and secondary burials, set the stage for later Neolithic mortuary customs (Belfer-Cohen, 1998).

A critical example of human-animal interments from this period is found at Hilazon Cave, located in the Galilee region of modern-day Israel. This site contained multiple burials, with some graves displaying evidence of secondary burial rites. One of the most striking findings was the interment of an elderly female shaman, whose grave contained numerous animal remains, including tortoise shells and the skeleton of a wild boar (Grosman & Munro, 2016). The deliberate placement of these animal remains within the burial suggests a ritual function, possibly indicative of shamanistic practices.

Rituals, Economic Utility, and the Transition to Domestication

Beyond symbolic and ritual significance, evidence from various Epipaleolithic and Neolithic sites suggests that some of these animals also had economic roles. Zooarchaeological analysis of fox remains from Levantine Epipaleolithic and Neolithic sites reveals cut marks and thermal alterations, indicating butchery and cooking (Yeshurun *et al.*, 2009). This suggests a dual role for certain animals in early societies—both as symbolic figures in mortuary practices and as economic resources.

The increasing presence of domesticated animals in burials from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period onward indicates a shift in the role of animals from purely symbolic entities to integral

parts of human societies. This transition aligns with broader economic and social transformations associated with early agricultural developments. The practice of burying animals alongside humans in the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic Levant underscores the complex interplay between ritual, symbolism, and early domestication processes. The presence of fox remains in human burials at Uyun al-Hammam and the elaborate funerary assemblages in Hilazon Cave highlight evolving human-animal relationships during this period.

These burials suggest that animals held spiritual, social, and potentially shamanistic significance in early mortuary practices. Furthermore, the gradual transition from symbolic burial practices to the inclusion of domesticated species in funerary contexts reflects broader socio-economic transformations that laid the groundwork for fully agrarian societies. Future research integrating zooarchaeological, isotopic, and genetic studies will further illuminate the multifaceted roles of animals in prehistoric human societies.

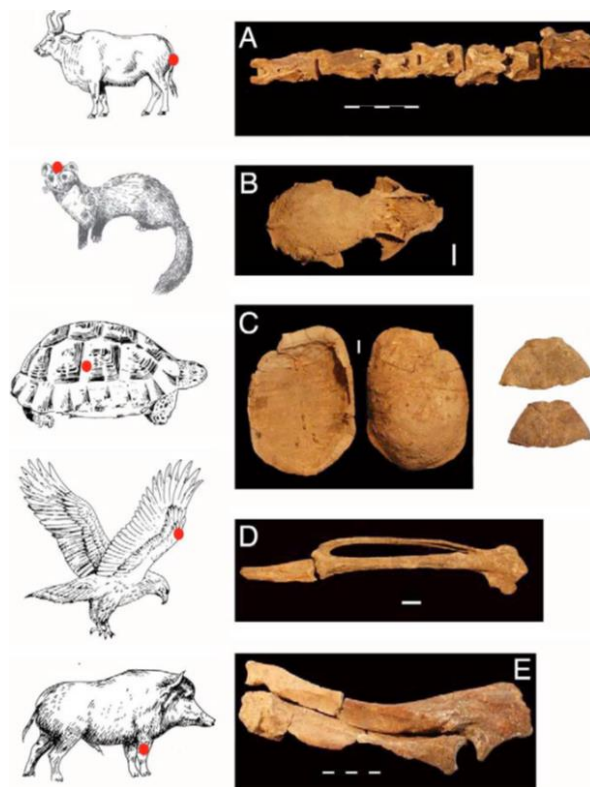


Figure 1: Animal bone remains associated with human burials, Hylazon Cave (Grosman *et al.*, 2008: 1768).

Conclusion

Examining the relationship between humans and animals during the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic periods requires consideration of multiple factors. However, burial evidence from these periods reflects a shift in human attitudes toward animals across different regions and timeframes. These changes are also evident in funerary practices, where animals sometimes held symbolic roles. Their presence in graves, alongside artifacts such as stone beads and figurines, suggests their significance in the belief systems of the time. In certain burials, remains from multiple animal species have been found

together, potentially indicating that the deceased utilized the symbolic or spiritual power of various animals within their society. This phenomenon may be associated with shamanistic practices, where the individual plays an intermediary role between humans and animals. In some cases, the human-animal relationship appears so closely intertwined that animals were granted equal status to humans, with their burials mirroring human funerary practices and being placed among human graves. Furthermore, changes in subsistence strategies and the transition from selective hunting to animal domestication are also reflected in burial

practices. The choice of specific species, as well as the correlation between the number, gender, and age of buried animals accompanying humans, provides evidence of early domestication processes and the evolving human-animal relationship.

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