



The Neolithization of Human Burials in the Levant

Dana Allan

Department of Archaeology, Durham University



Introduction

The 'Neolithic Revolution' is the idea that neolithic life came about rapidly, and completely replaced that of the paleolithic^[1]. However, many features of the neolithic thought to be unique actually have their roots in much earlier periods^[2]. The preceding periods, the earlier epipalaeolithic and the Natufian, may provide the key to understanding the process of becoming neolithic, called neolithization.



Figure 1: Natufian skeleton embedded in wall of a structure from Nahal Ein Gev II, Israel. Note the deliberate placement within the structure's foundation. ^[4]

Neolithic burials are commonly associated with structures, often in a flexed position under the floors or within the walls^[5]. They are frequently disturbed primary burials, where the skull is removed after decomposition^[5]. Recently, these features have been suggested in Natufian and early epipalaeolithic burials as well, suggesting that they may not be unique neolithic features^[2,3,4].

How do these time periods actually compare to each other? Here, I present a preliminary analysis of burials from the early epipalaeolithic, natufian, and pre-pottery neolithic A (PPNA) periods, to identify trends through time.

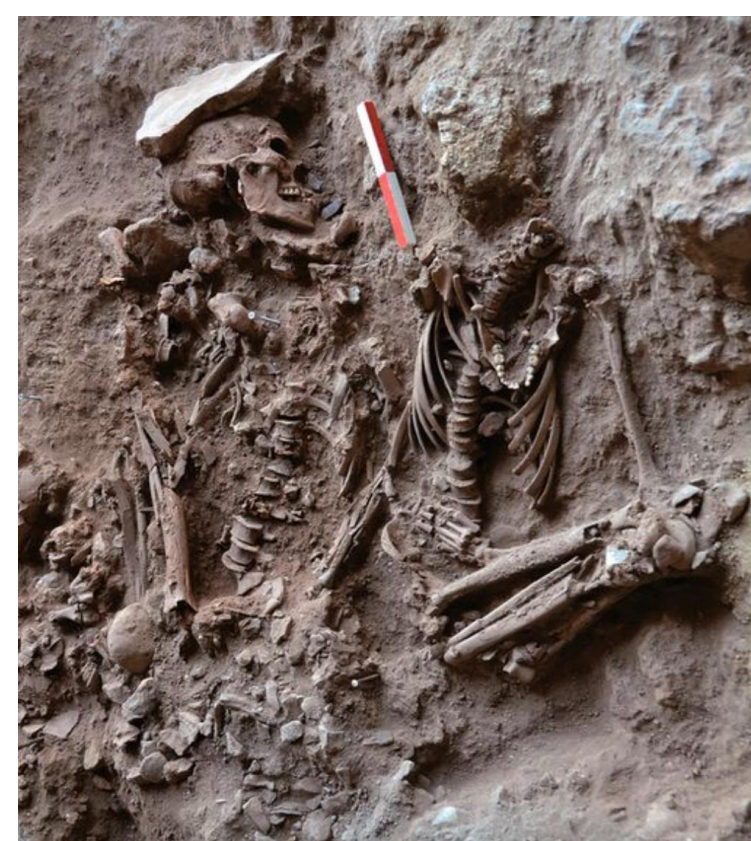
Literature Cited

1. Mithen, S (2019) Becoming Neolithic in words, thoughts and deeds. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 19(1)
2. Belfer-Cohen, A. and Goring-Morris, N. (2020) From the Epipalaeolithic into the earliest Neolithic (PPNA) in the South Levant. *Documenta Praehistorica*, 47
3. Nadel, D. *et al* (2013) Earliest floral grave lining from 13,700-11,700-y-old Natufian burials at Raqefet Cave, Mt. Carmel, Israel. *PNAS*, 110(29)
4. Grosman, L. *et al* (2016) Nahal Ein Gev II, a Late Natufian Community at the Sea of Galilee. *PLoS One*, 11(1)
5. Croucher, K. (2012) Death and Dying in the Neolithic Near East (Oxford; pubd online Mar. 2015). Oxford Scholarship Online

The Project

The burials were individually scored according to the features they displayed. These features included the location of the burial within the site, the position of the body within the grave, whether the burial was primary or not, and the demographics of the individuals within the grave. The proportions of these scores within each time period were compared, to accommodate for the different sample sizes in each period.

Figure 2: A Natufian primary (left) and disturbed primary (right) burial from Raqefet Cave, Israel. Note the missing skull (right). ^[3]



Burials do not differ dramatically between periods.

However, there are some observable trends. Burials become more frequently associated with structures through time (fig. 3). There is also a gradual shift from more extended burials to more flexed burials (fig. 4). Disturbed primary burials also increase through time, taking the place of undisturbed primary burials (fig. 5).

Some features, like age at death or sex do not show linear change through time, and instead fluctuate by site.

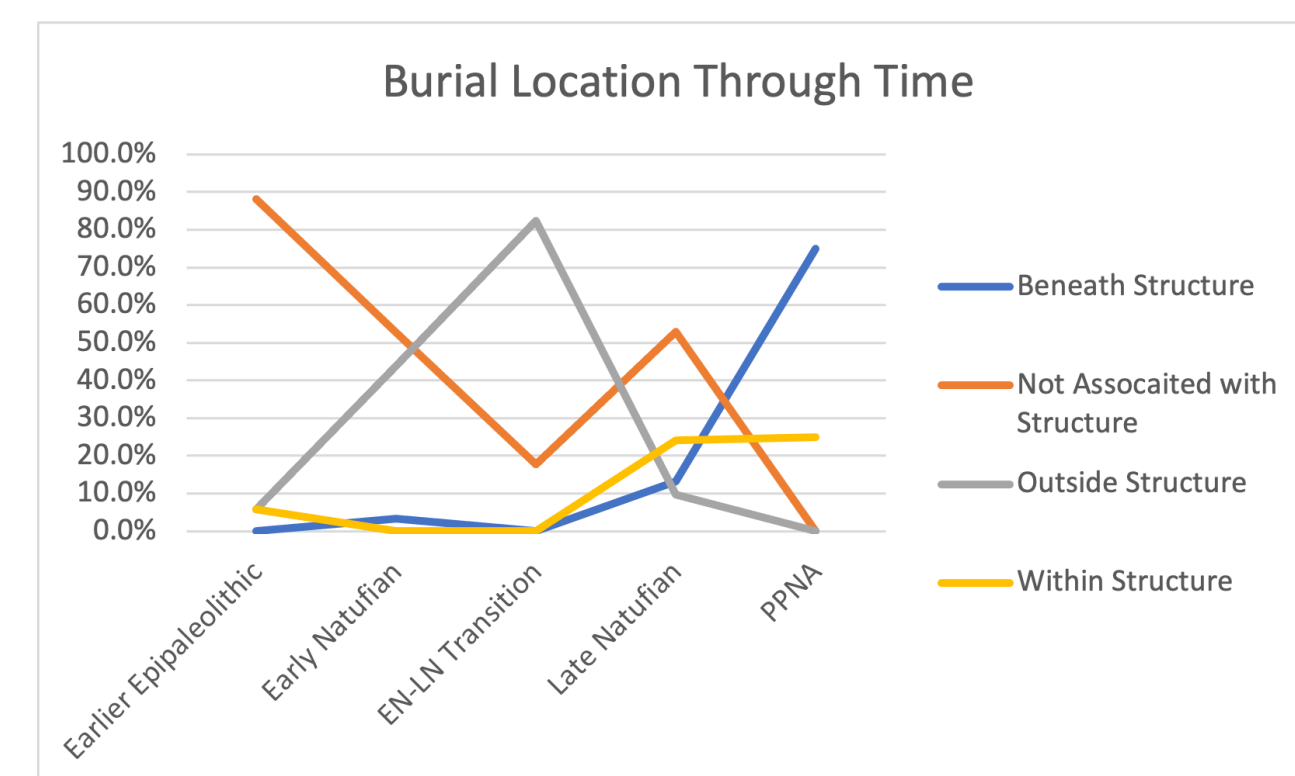


Figure 3: The location of graves within a site, across time periods studied

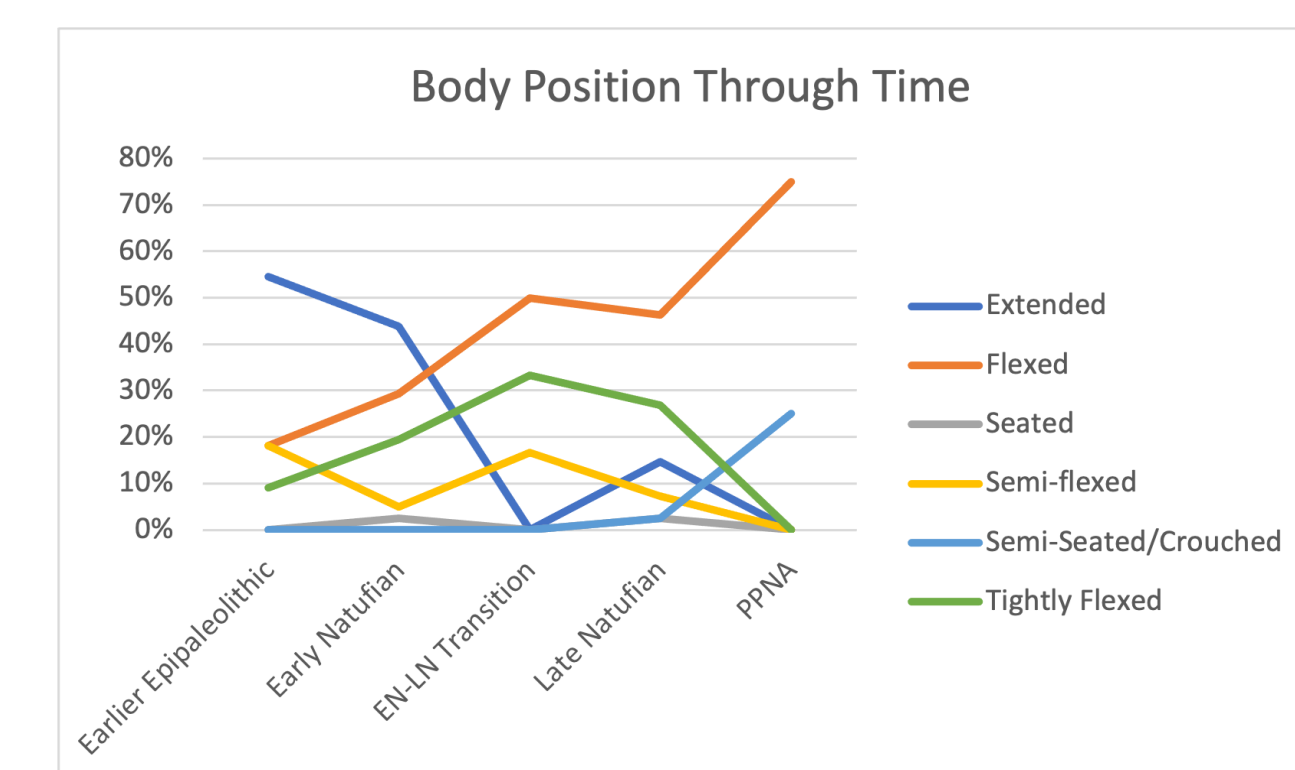


Figure 4: Body position within the grave for each period

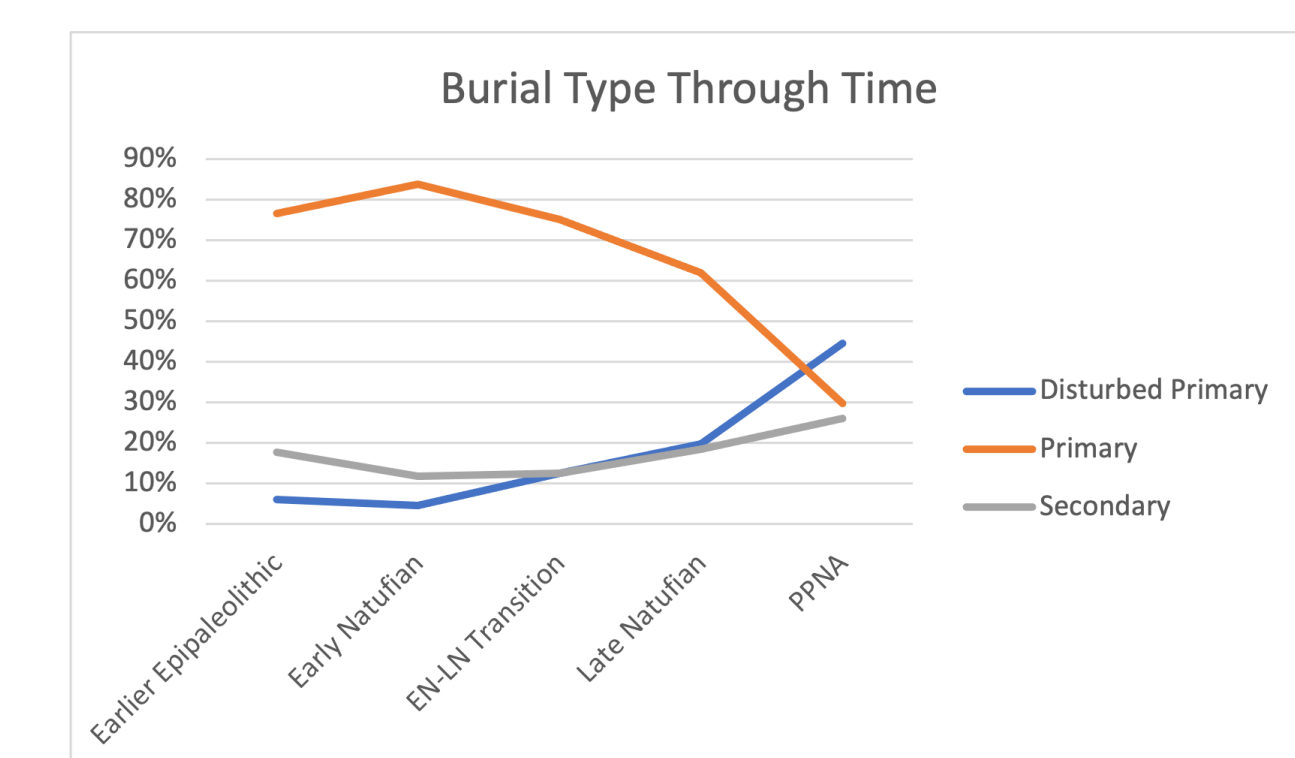


Figure 5: Burial type for each time period studied.

Conclusions

This shows that features of neolithic burials are seen in earlier time periods as well, and the process of neolithization is slow and steady rather than revolutionary. Natufian burials often look very much like neolithic burials (fig. 1; fig. 2). This suggests we should look to the epipalaeolithic to better understand the neolithic.

Future work will involve expanding the burial database to include final natufian and later neolithic burials, and a statistical analysis when sample size allows.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors Paul Pettitt and Graham Philip for their continued support.