

MOUSTERIAN BURIALS IN EURASIA

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Over the recent years, a lively debate has been going on around the Mousterian burials, and traditional views on this issue have been revalued. The new round of controversy has been prompted by a theory emphasizing cultural and biological differences between the Mousterian and the Upper Paleolithic (Mellars, 1973; Otte and Keeley, 1990). In the opinion of those archaeologists who support this theory, the discontinuity in traditions has caused dramatic changes in all aspects of life of the earliest Eurasian population. Only one step remains to be made hence to arrive at the suggestion that burial rite was a novel element of the Upper Paleolithic culture and had had no predecessor in the Mousterian. The existence of Neandertal burials has been flatly rejected in a paper by Gargett (1989), whose ideas have been largely supported by several American archaeologists (Clark *et al.*, 1989).

Gargett has pointed towards the mistakes made by those scholars who, like Smirnov (1989), believe the Mousterian and the Upper Paleolithic burial practices to be identical and regard any piece of bone or flint or a hearth associated with Mousterian human skeletal remains as a manifestation of a funerary cult. Yet Gargett himself, focusing on geological processes which had taken place in caves and rock shelters, has totally excluded human activities as a primary reason behind the presence of complete human skeletons in the cultural deposits of the Middle Paleolithic sites. In doing so he has ignored a number of archaeological facts, like the presence of burial pits (La Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie, Skhul, Qafzeh, Kebara), or the evidently ritual positions of the dead persons (La Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie, La Quina, Roc de Marsal, Kebara, Skhul, Qafzeh, Tabun, Amud, Shanidar). This is hardly accidental. The American archaeological tradition proceeds from the assumption that archaeological data by themselves do not suffice to resolve complex issues of cultural origins. When this view is brought to the extreme, the idea that archaeological complexes as such do matter is regarded basically as a heritage of the discredited empiricism. This approach, which is subjected to modification according to the authors personal scholarly preferences, may significantly affect the results of the study (Clark, 1991).

I believe the adherents of the new trend to be right in reproaching their predecessors of largely basing their views of the Mousterian burial rite on post-Mousterian burials. However it was precisely thanks to the new archaeological facts that these traditional views had changed over the last years. Physical anthropologists have found evidence of postmortem manipulations with corpses, such as dismembering and defleshing (Le Mort, 1988; Russell, 1987; Ullrich, 1986). It has become evident that a considerable number of early Middle Paleolithic burials, namely Régourdou, La Quina, Roc de Marsal, Kiik-Koba VI, Zaskal'naya

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VI, Qafzeh 7, 8, 10 and 15, Skhul III, VI, VIII and IX, Shanidar 2 and 8, Amud, Kebara and Teshik-Tash, contained dismembered bodies or their parts (Ullrich, 1986; Smirnov, 1989; Alekshin, 1993a). The Mousterian burial rite evolved from dismembered bodies of the early Mousterian to articulated ones (Le Moustier 1 and 2, La Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie 1 and 2, Spy 1, Kiik-Koba IV, Starosel'e, Skhul I, IV, and V, Tabun, Shanidar 1) which first appear in late Middle Paleolithic (Ullrich, 1986). Neither artefacts nor red ochre nor burial food have been found in Mousterian burials (Alekshin, 1993a). It has been recently established that the pieces of red paint found in the graves of Qafzeh 8 and 11 had got there from the cultural layer where they were met in abundance (Tillier *et al.*, 1988). The only exception is the grave in La Chapelle-aux-Saints, in which fragments of red ochre have been found (Boyssonie, Bardon, 1908). The presence of ritual goods (Tillier *et al.*, 1988) in the burials of Skhul V (mandible of a wild pig) and Qafzeh 11 (skull of a fallow-deer) does not significantly affect the overall pattern, since the parts of animals which were put in these burials could hardly provide funerary food. Thus recent findings have shed new light on the specific nature of the mousterian burial practices.

The conclusive evidence in favour of the existence of Mousterian burials stems from the specifics of this archaeological source. Indeed, any rite, including the burial rite, is apparently based on series of actions, norms, or standards repeated in a regular fashion (Perlès, 1982). The rite moulds traditional elements of culture and is aimed at retaining them. Proceeding from this feature of the rite, it may be asked whether the Mousterians subjected their dead to regular ritual actions.

It should be kept in mind that any analysis of Mousterian burials should include the following operations :

- 1) analysis of the sources;
- 2) dating of the burials;
- 3) reconstruction of the funerary rites and their local specifics in various regions.

Early Mousterian burials of southwestern France are represented by incomplete skeletons : Régourdou, La Quina (fig. 1). Later, complete corpses were buried : Le Moustier, La Ferrassie (fig. 2), La Chapelle-aux-Saints (fig. 2). All skeletons are buried in grave pits on the sites. In some cases, graves have not been registered. Females, adolescents and infants are buried on their right side : La Quina (fig. 1), Le Moustier, La Ferrassie, Roc de Marsal (fig. 3). One arm is either stretched along the body or bent, the hand touching the knee, while another hand is close to the face. The legs are either stretched or bent (slightly or strongly), the knees being close to the chest. In one instance (Roc de Marsal) hips and ankles were pulled down to form an obtuse angle with the pelvis. The skeletons are oriented towards north, northeast or east. The males (La-Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie) were buried in the supine position, their legs were flexed and placed to the right of the body. The right arm was bent, the forearm bones lying parallel to the humeri and the hand bones close to the skull. The left arm was extended along the body (fig. 2). In the male burial at La Ferrassie, a stone was found above the skull and one above each hand. They were apparently placed on the corpse during the funeral. Thus Mousterians of southwestern France performed regular

ritual actions directed at the deceased persons (Alekshin, 1993b). Late Mousterian burials were localized along the entrance to the cave.

Mousterian burials of Crimea are situated on sites. They were made in specially prepared shallow pits or natural hollows. The orientation of the bodies is irregular. They lie across the entrance to the cave, thereby supporting early geological dates of the Crimean burials. In early burials, such as Kiik-Koba VI (fig. 4) and Zaskalnaya VI (fig. 5), various skeletal parts of the dismembered bodies have been found. Late burials are represented by complete skeletons in anatomical connection : Kiik-Koba IV (fig. 4), Starosel'e (fig. 6) (Alekshin, 1994). Thus the Crimean burials also attest to the presence of regular ritual activities.

In the Near East, some male skeletons, namely Skhul V (fig. 7), Qafzeh 11 (fig. 8) were found in a supine position, legs bent, one or both arms bent as well, one or both hands being placed to the right or to the left of the face. In some skeletons, such as Qafzeh 8 and 9; Skhul IV and V (fig. 9, 7), the lower extremities had been flexed to the extent that all their bones formed a right angle with the body. All the skeletons except Qafzeh 9 were male. In the male burials of Skhul V and Qafzeh 11 (fig. 7, 8) a skull of an animal or its part have been found. All burials (Qafzeh) were made on the sites, in grave pits. Early burials (Qafzeh) were oriented across the entrance to the cave, while late ones (Skhul, Tabun) were positioned along the entrance. These regularities are corroborated by the evidence from Shanidar, Iraq, where late burials were oriented parallel to the entrance (Alekshin, 1993a). So in the Near East too, ritual actions were performed with bodies of deceased persons. Like in France, burials of males differ from those of females.

Thus for the Mousterian period in general, regularly performed mortuary activities may be regarded as firmly documented, the main proof being the standard positions of the skeletons, characteristic of both the Neandertals and early modern humans.

Having originated in the Mousterian, the burial rite has been sufficiently stable to be retained over many millennia without being subjected to radical changes. At the same time, being permanently influenced by external and internal cultural stimuli, it has undergone gradual transformation.

The Mousterian funerary rite is similar to that of later epochs in the following features :

- a) burials are made on sites;
- b) grave pits are present;
- c) the postures of the dead persons were apparently ritual. In other features (absence of grave goods, funerary food, red paint, or any other elements of the funerary rite), Mousterian burials differ in principle from all the late ones.

Researchers who recognize the reality of Mousterian burials disagree in their interpretation. Some believe that these earliest burials attest to the presence of beliefs related with the other world in the Mousterians (Bonifay, 1988), others think that the Mousterian burial rite indicates only that these people cared about their dead kin (Chase, Dibble, 1987).

The Mousterian burial rite is a manifestation of a system of ritual behaviour which differs from all the subsequent systems, including the Upper Paleolithic one. The key for the decyphering of the code of Mousterian burials is provided by incomplete disarticulated skeletons which are indicative of postmortem manipulation with corpses. Such customs of handling the corpses may be only partly due to the fact that they were feared. The meaning of mutilations to which the dead bodies were subjected was different. A clue might be provided by the bear festivals in traditional hunting societies. The semantics of these rites consisted in the revival of the killed animals after eating their flesh and burying dismembered parts of their skeletons. These rites, aimed at augmenting nature's productive powers (hence the term "reproduction rites"), are very archaic. They were believed to restore natural balance disrupted by the hunters, and to revive killed animals (Kabo, 1986). By analogy with the bear ritual (Alekshin, 1993a), it may be suggested that the earliest burials restored the within-group equilibrium which had been disrupted by death. The magic of the early forms of funerary ritualism contributed to the emergence of new group members who came to replace the dead. It can be suggested that funerary rites derive from the reproduction rites. The sources of these rites possibly reach down to pre-Mousterian times.

Such interpretation of the Mousterian funerary rites seems to indicate that people of the Middle Paleolithic lacked any established views of the other world.

Funerary rites mirror the sex and age differentiation of the buried people. With one exception (Tabun C), the supine position of the skeletons is associated with burials of men and boys, see La Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie 1, Starosel'e, Qafzeh 11, Skhul V., Kebara (fig. 10), Shanidar 1. Only male burials show certain deviations from the standard ritual norms, like the presence of red paint (La-Chapelle-aux-Saints), the use of stones for constructing graves and for covering the corpses (La Ferrassie 1, Régourdou, Qafzeh 8 and 11, Shanidar 4), the presence of burial goods (Régourdou ?, Qafzeh 11, Skhul V), the presence of a mat woven of bush twigs and possibly flowers (Shanidar 4). Burials of children differ from those of adults in some details of the funerary rite : Skhul I (fig. 11) and Roc de Marsal (an unusual degree to which the bodies were crouched). In Qafzeh 10 burial, the child probably lay supine, its left arm being unnaturally bent and placed under the head. The burial of a child in Shanidar (N°7) has a northern orientation, which is unusual for the graves of this site. The burial of a child in La Ferrassie (N°6) was covered by a stone slab with cuplike depressions (Alekshin, 1993a, 1993b).

Mousterian burial rites practiced in France, Crimea, Levant, and Central Asia, demonstrate the emergence of the system of sex and age classes as early as the Middle Paleolithic. Moreover, the burial rite stresses the leading role of men in the life of the community (Alekshin, 1993a). Certain facts indicate that the skull cult, too, emerged in the Mousterian (Kebara, Shanidar 3, possibly Régourdou). Crania were extracted only from the graves of men (Alekshin, 1993a). Later, this practice became universal in the early Neolithic of the Near East and the Mesolithic of Europe. Its semantics requires special consideration.

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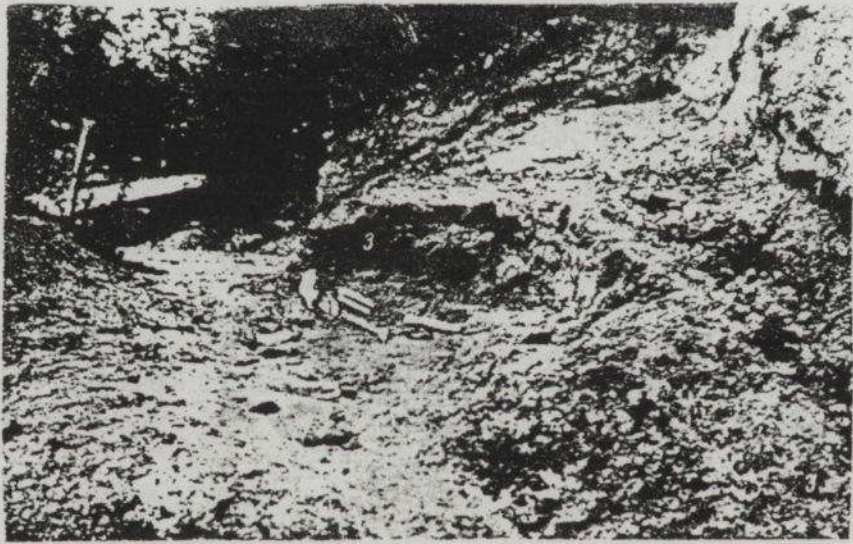


Figure 1 : La Quina. Female Burial (Martin 1911)

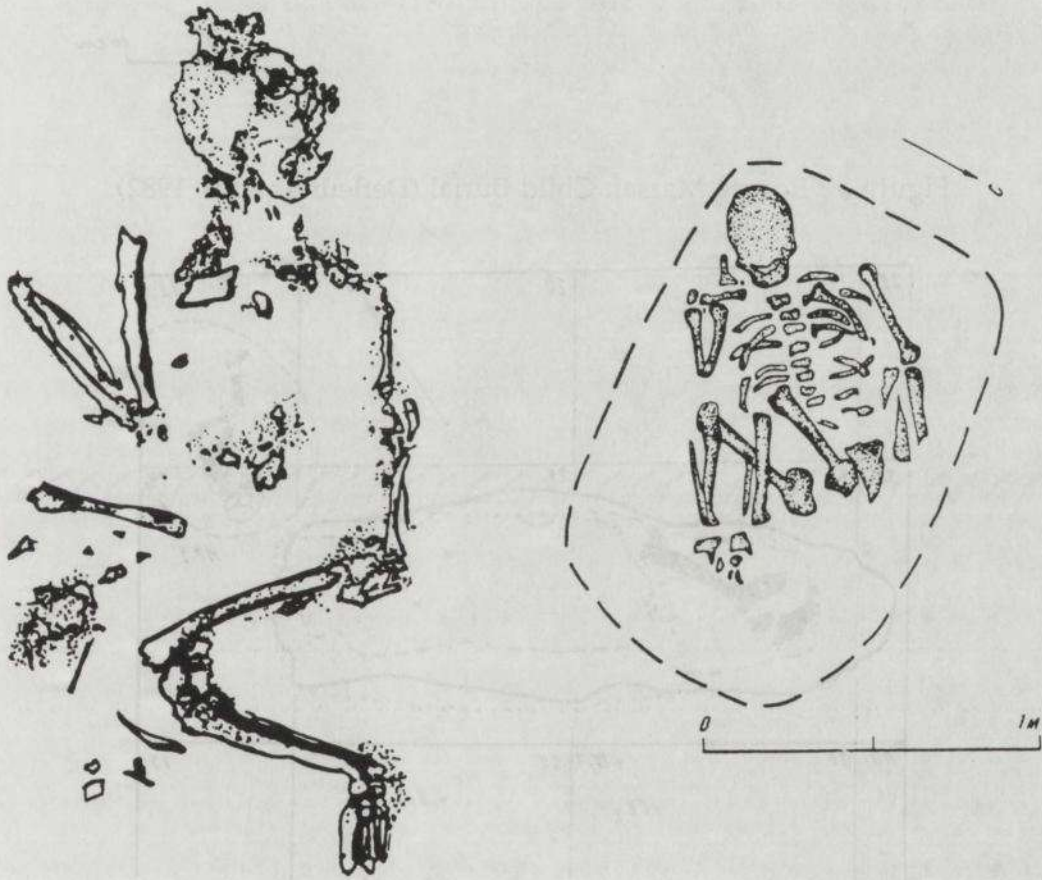


Figure 2 : On the left : La Ferrassie. Male Burial (Ferrassie 1) (Binant 1991).
On the right : La Chapelle-aux-Saints. Male Burial (Smirnov 1991).

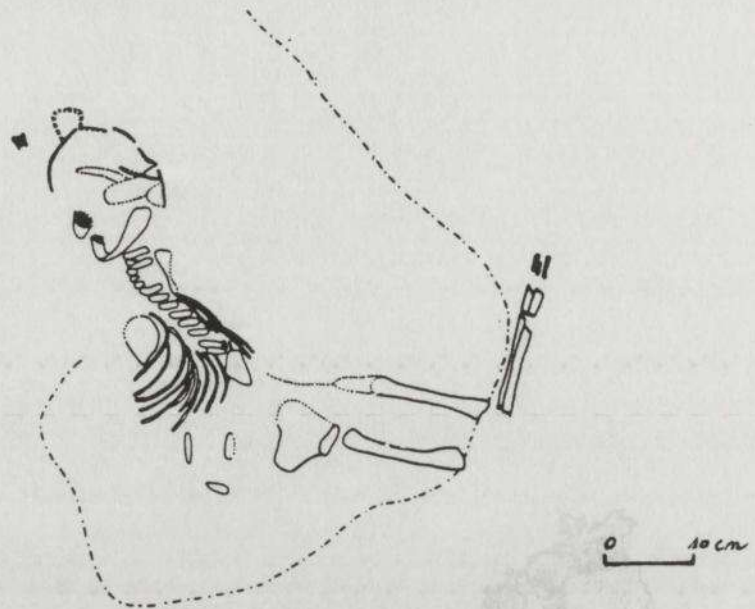


Figure 3 : Roc de Marsal. Child Burial (Defleur-Tanoux 1982).

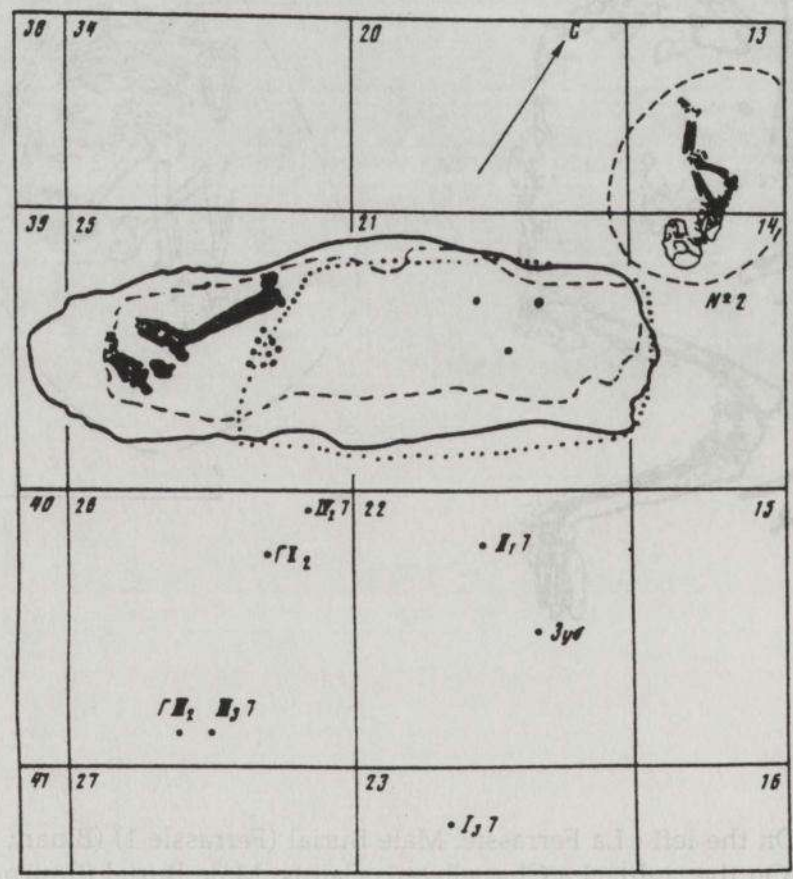


Figure 4 : Kiik-Koba. Female Burial and Child Burial (Bonch-Osmolovsky 1941; Vlcek 1974).

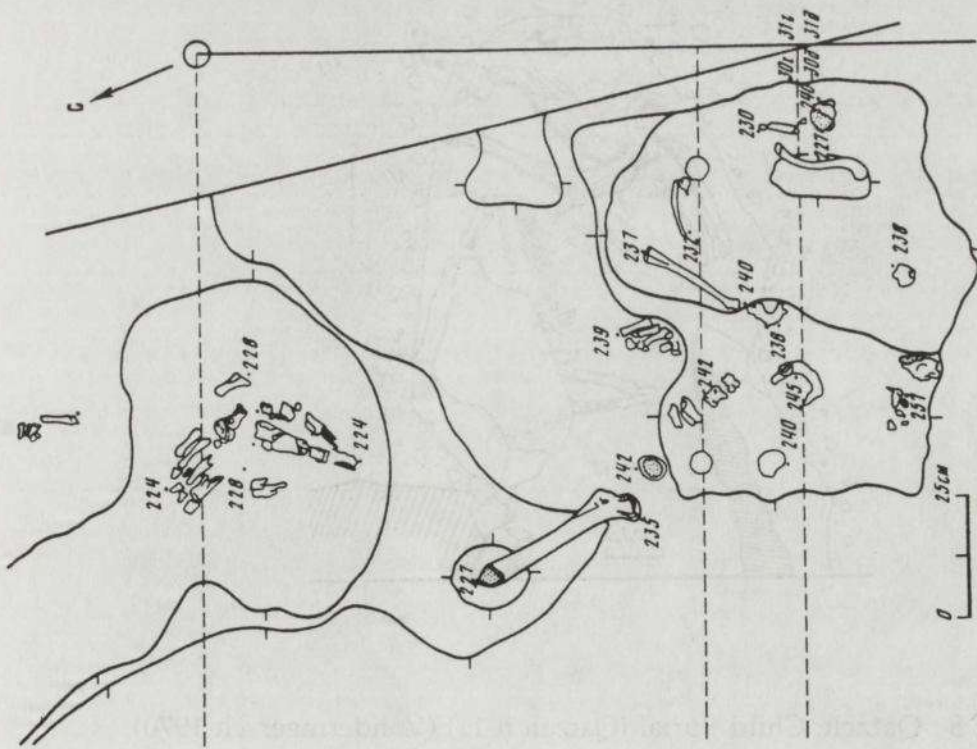


Figure 5 : Zaskal'naya VI. Children Burials (Smirnov 1991).

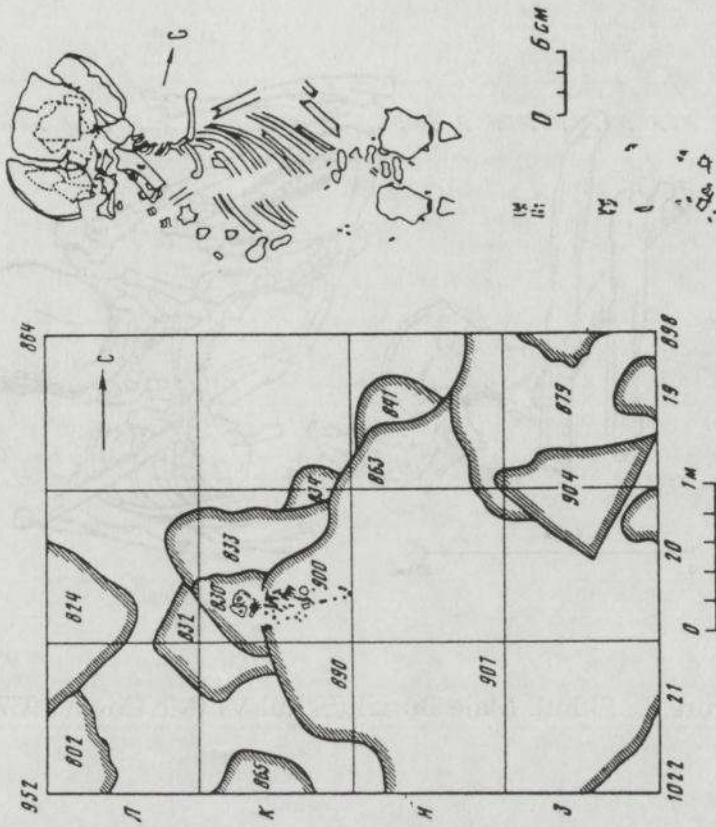


Figure 6 : Starosel'e. Child Burial (Vormozov 1958).

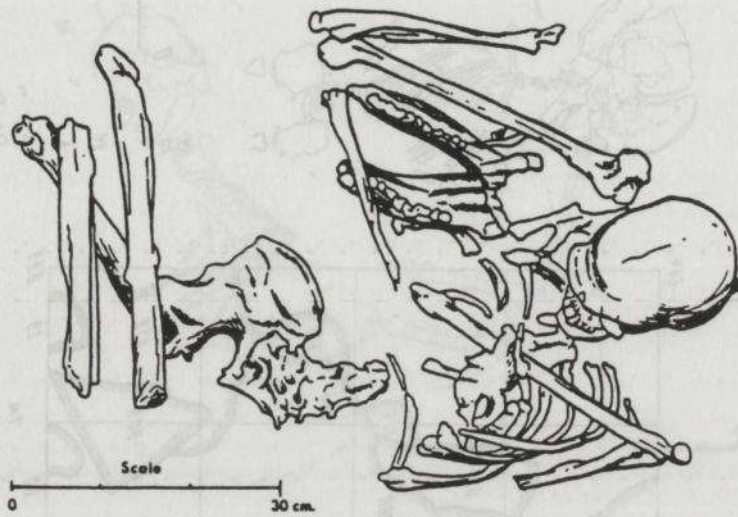


Figure 7 : Skhul. Male Burial (Skhul V) (Mc Cown 1937).



Figure 8 : Qatzeh. Child Burial (Qatzeh n 11) (Vandermeersch 1970).

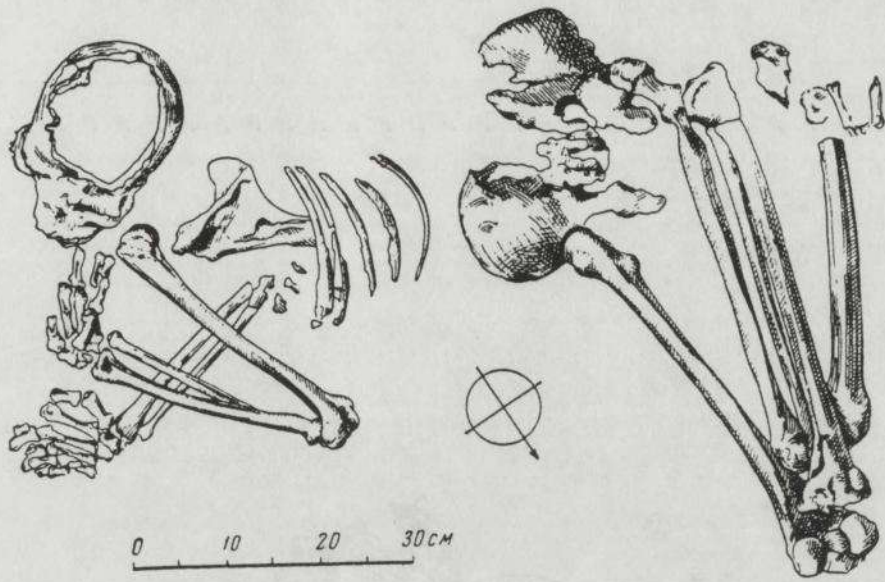


Figure 9 : Skhul. Male Burial (Skhul IV) (Mc Cown 1937).

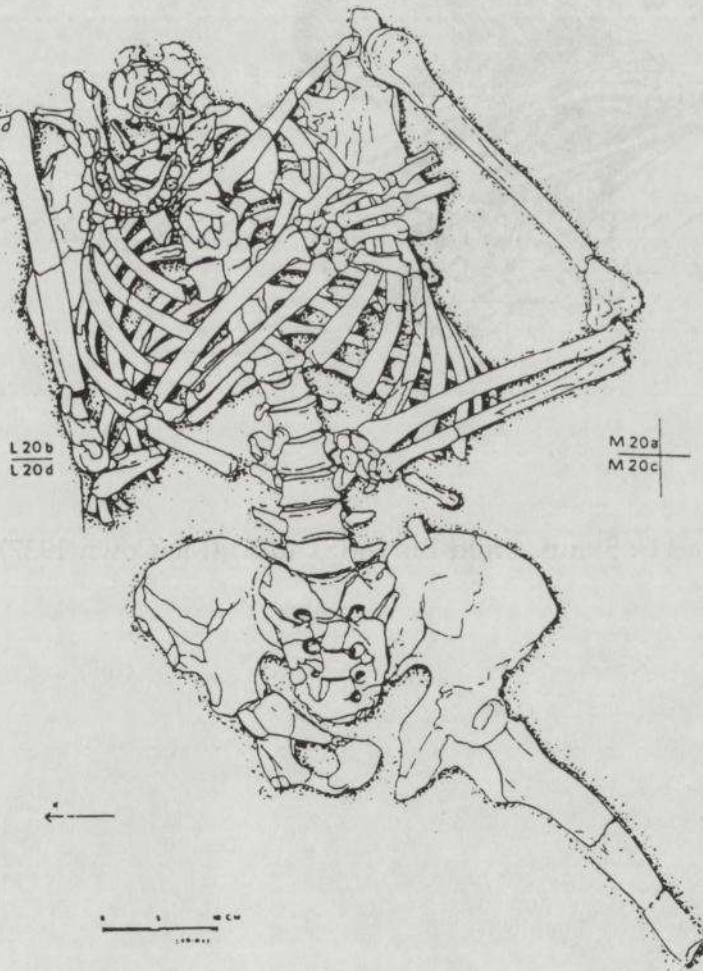


Figure 10 : Kebara. Male Burial (Kebara N 3) (Tillier et al 1991).

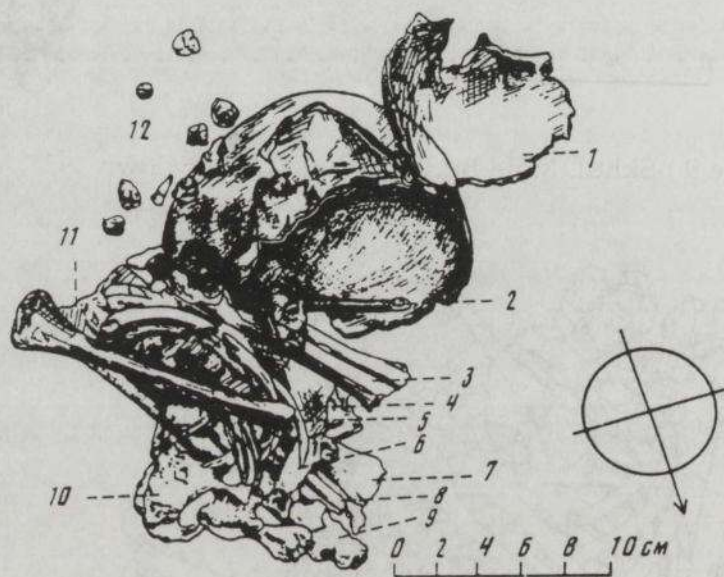


Figure 11 : Skhul. Child Burial (Skhul I) (Mc Cown 1937).