

A NEOLITHIC DEATH

Mélie Le Roy – What I do is to work on group tombs from the end of the Neolithic-beginning of the bronze age in the south of France approximately between 2500 and 2000 BC. And at the moment, I am excavating the Janna sink-hole which is a collective tomb in a cave in le Gard. We have found nine individuals buried inside, six adults, men and women, and three children. It was discovered in June by a German caver, Jan Sekowski. Cavers often wander around, shuffling through the scrubland in search of blow holes! So they are down on the ground, looking for little holes and when they feel a current of air, they begin to clear and then yes, if the hole gets bigger and the draft continues, then they are off, they get in there and remove all the rocks to see what lies underneath. Now Jan, he found a little blow hole like this in the edge of a cliff, he began to clear the hole, he dropped two and a half metres due to an enormous rock and there he found himself at the bottom of the hole and as he got up, that's when he saw that there were human bones. So he got out of the hole straightaway because of course he wasn't alone so he had help to get back up the two and a half metres and straightaway he called the regional archaeology service to secure the discovery until the excavation in 2017 of the Javen sink-hole.

Our objective was of course to secure the various human bones, we didn't even need to excavate since they were just lying on the surface, so we only had to lower ourselves in and collect the bones, but we had to record carefully their position, their orientation and how they appeared in an attempt to reconstruct the funerary placement and to see the arrangement in which the bones were placed. All is recorded by photogrammetry so that it can be reconstructed in 3D and we took out the bones one by one in order to identify if there is any anatomical logic, or rather anatomic connections which could get us orientated, if the bodies had decomposed on site or if they had decomposed somewhere else, if there had been any transfers, any reorganisations or disturbances after their placement. When we began to remove the bones, we found that directly underneath in contact with the bones was a sort of ceramic paving! For the moment, what we think and hey, this is a hypothesis, is that they chose some shards and arranged them like tiles which is something completely unknown in the region, ground with a little ceramic tiled floor there to receive the dead!

We found people with many pathologies at the Janna sink hole who were most certainly invalids while alive but who were even so buried like the others, within the same structure! One is a case of tuberculosis. The vertebrae have completely collapsed and fused which proves that the individual survived and

in fact he was hunch backed and this also certainly caused paralysis in his limbs because his vertebral column was completely folded! So what were the practices and how were selected people who had access to the tomb?

There is great variation among different cultures and populations but children who have not yet integrated into the community, people who die by accident, those who committed suicide, such will be considered a bad death and they will not receive the funerary practices of the community. So for now, by comparison with other studies that I have done, I cannot tell you what was a bad death during the Neolithic period but I can tell you that in the south of France, at the end of the Neolithic, death from a long illness was not considered a bad death...

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