

LIFE AND DEATH OF A NEOLITHIC HOUSE

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Abstract

In the second half of the Early Neolithic (after 5800 BC), the construction of two-story houses began in the Eastern and Central Balkans. For the time being it seems that during the Early Neolithic the two levels of these houses were used almost always residential, and that in the Late Neolithic (after 5500/5400 BC), only the upper floor had residential functions whereas the lower floor was used for economic and production purposes (storage of food or salt production).

Some Neolithic houses were “cremated”, i.e., subjected to domithanasia, a voluntary act of intentional burning of the house. There were apparently different reasons for that though most probably they were not structural but possibly were related to the social sphere.

The deliberately burnt houses were buried in pits following the pars pro toto principle. The debris in the pits contains remains from different parts of the structure and the installations of the interior. For now, it seems that during the Early Neolithic, the pits were located on the periphery of the settlement, and during the Late Neolithic they were relocated to off-settlement ritual assemblages.

In our research thinking, we have no grounds to separate the Neolithic dead from their house-home. Therefore, the “cremated” houses would eventually lead us to their most probably cremated inhabitants. This could be one possible explanation for the large number of “missing” graves in the Balkan Neolithic.

Keywords: burnt houses – two-story houses – house/human burials – Late Neolithic – Eastern and Central Balkans.

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When results of archaeological excavations or short preliminary reports are published, the remains of prehistoric houses usually fall within the group of material culture. This is generally but only partially true. The later prehistoric house is a material structure made within the framework of the early farming religio-mythological system as well as an intersection point of economic and social interrelations and activities dependent upon the cyclic natural model. The history of the Neolithic house and its occupants is “a repre-

sentative sample” of almost all aspects of the early farming society.

At the beginning of the Balkan Neolithic, the house was the focal point of all activities of the family except for occupations which used areas outside the settlement such as agriculture and stock breeding. However, the foods produced by those occupations were stored in the house. In the course of time some nutrition functions dropped out and a number of “home” activities became a matter of more or less specialized production, and their place was taken out of the house. This process began in the Late Neolithic, was elaborated in the Chalcolithic, and in the Bronze Age the houses had a very poor interior.

The Neolithic houses (Nikolov 1992; 2011a, 84–102) were built of wood and clay. The building material was prepared throughout the winter and spring though the construction work was done most probably at the end of the summer, between the harvest and the following grain sowing. The structure usually included four walls which surrounded a single-room, nearly rectangular space. The houses were oriented in the four cardinal directions, *i.e.*, they were designed to be part of the early farming macrocosm. They were commonly one-story buildings with a ceiling and gable roof but two-story houses also appeared as early as the Early Neolithic. The so-called foundation offering was performed before or at the beginning of the construction process, the aim of which was probably to establish “understanding” with the spirit of the place (*genius loci*) which would be conquered, separated from the macrocosm and gradually made part of the home, *i.e.*, turned into a microcosm. House construction was a complicated technological process involving the building of the solid timber supporting frame, as well as of the daub parts and roofing. The life of the Neolithic house was obviously envisaged for more than a generation and in structural terms it was designed to last for several decades. Judging by the size and interior, it seems that Neolithic houses were built for a single smaller or bigger family.

The Neolithic house interior included several types of installations built on or dug into the beaten clay floor. The dome oven was the most solid feature which usually lay on the central axis opposite the entrance. Next to it was the stone mill built in a massive clay bed. Storage bins of various shapes are located on one or both sides of that complex; sometimes they also occupied another part of the house. Besides the oven, a hearth was made in larger houses. A stone mortar was often built in a suitable place of the floor. The cooking place could be a low beaten clay or rather a timber installation which did not leave sufficiently clear traces. The “bed” could also be made of timber and located in a particular area though for sleeping, people seem to have more often just used free places on the floor. In some houses, a warp-weighted loom was built and used. Sometimes a specially designated place was used to produce tools. It is noteworthy that in some cases there were also ritual features such as niches, anthropo-zoomorphic reliefs, plastic or painted ornamental wall panels, a columned altar or ritual pits in the floor (small, *e.g.*, at Slatina, or large, *e.g.*, at Kapitan Dimitrievo). An undoubted ritual feature is a vessel containing cremated child remains (Tell Azmak) dug in the floor by the oven. Wooden shelves were apparently fixed on the walls of the house as a place for storing pottery, small artifacts

and tools. Farming inventory was probably also hung on the walls. As to what place was designed for a window or windows, the question remains open though logic dictates that there must have been such openings.

The Neolithic house is a building for complex use with dynamically changing and merging invisible boundaries of the inner areas (Lichter 2004; Nikolov 2011a, 102–105). It is a place for the intimate family relations (*e.g.*, conception, birth, raising children, rest, sickness, and death), a place for preparing and consuming food by the occupants (*e.g.*, mortar, stone mill, “table”, hearth, oven, ceramic vessels), a place for storing food (*e.g.*, grain in storage bins), a place for domestic production (*e.g.*, weaving and clothes making, making tools of different materials, making ceramic vessels), a place for storing and using ritual artifacts and status symbols of the family members (*e.g.*, figurines, “cult tables”, beaded necklaces, bracelets, pendants, etc.), a place for ritual features and ritual activities, a place for social contacts and modelling the hierarchical structure of the kinship group. As a whole, life in the house was a separated part of social life. It was a mechanism for its reproduction in the context of traditionalism and innovativeness. In spite of its overall structural and content complexity, the house as a whole symbolized the female principle and in certain cases in combination with the male principle though it was an apparent woman’s domain.

For the time being, at least, the case with the two-story houses looks more peculiar. As far as evidence is found on Early Neolithic two-story houses, *e.g.*, at Kapitan Dimitriev (Nikolov 1999), Stara Zagora – Okrazhna bolnitsa (Kalchev 2013), Balgarchevo (Perlicheva-Perets et al. 2011, 69–106), and especially at Mursalevo (Nikolov et al. 2015), the two stories almost always contain the same type of installations and artifacts (including the basic installations and features) thus making it possible to assume that those houses were inhabited by different generations of an extended family. Construction and life in such a “family cooperation” certainly presupposes features that still escape our notice, not the least because of the greater loss of informativity which the remains from the second story present as compared with those from the first one. Even more interesting from the point of view of the residential-family economy and the related social innovations in the house is the evidence from two-story houses dating to the Late Neolithic. In these cases, *e.g.*, at Tell Karanovo (Nikolov 2001; 2004) and Tell Provadia-Solnitsata (Nikolov 2008), the second story was used for residential purposes with all the complexities of life whereas the first level probably had only economic and production functions. While the clarification of the character of the non-residential functioning of the lower level at Karanovo is more difficult, the lower floor in the house at Provadia-Solnitsata was certainly used for specialized domestic production, in this particular case, brine boiling. In comparison with the Early Neolithic, this was already a serious innovation which brought a considerable dissonance in the structuring of the internal real and sacral space, in the manner of using the house as well as in the character and priorities, and the family-kinship relations. I would define the life in that house as an economic-social experiment, an innovation

which ended up in the following chronological period with taking the specialized production out of the settlement and the appearance of a new social (or family-social) group. The latter is an issue that could be the topic of another paper.

The life of a Neolithic house is a series of cyclically repeating events and activities happening or caused by the life of the inhabiting familial community. However, life is always in dialectical unity with death. Death of a Neolithic house came due to its own structural aging and self-destruction (as was non-alternatively assumed until recently) or as a voluntary deliberate act of the family living in it, *i.e.*, *domithanasia* (a term coined by Ruth Tringham: 2005, 106ff). The latter case has been getting more attention lately in field research supplemented by scientific analyses. One variant is the mechanical demolition of the house without fire. The other one is intentional firing and burning down (Stevanović 1997; Chapman 1999). The assumption of a random fire which brought about the destruction of a Neolithic house now seems to be less probable and even totally illogical. Burning down a house built of timber but with a cladding of such thick layers of daub is impossible without introducing and purposeful firing a considerable volume of wooden material. Only in this way can we explain the thick layering of massive burnt daub remains of walls and especially of upper-story floors fired to over 1200° C¹. The “cremation” of the house in the Neolithic could be the result of different factors which for now we can only speculate on, *e.g.*, risk of self-destruction of the house, the death of the highest ranking “figure” in the family-kinship hierarchy, in-family tensions and a need to divide it, a simultaneous cremation of the house and a dead family member or an in-community social conflict which could have only be solved by a *domithanasia* of the entire settlement (as is apparently the case with the last settlement at Mursalevo–Deveboaz).

Regardless of the reasons, the burnt Neolithic houses are an archaeological fact. Fire releases the soul of the house, and its remains should be buried following the attitude to the body of a dead family member who lived in it. Only then could a house be reborn, *i.e.*, its soul could “relocate” to a new body, *i.e.*, another newly built house in the same or another place. The manner of burying the house remains can also be a matter of multidirectional speculations. It is obvious that some part of the ruined structure stays in place. Nevertheless, the reconsidered approach to the excavation and interpretation of Neolithic pit assemblages gives a possible direction of speculations about the subsequent manipulation with the remains of the burnt house. A large number of pits have been uncovered – that were earlier considered unanimously to be rubbish pits – in the Neolithic settlements, including on their periphery. They often contain layers of burnt daub pieces (*e.g.*, at Mursalevo–Deveboaz). To this group can be referred the ritual pit in the floor of an Early Neolithic house at Tell Kapitan Dimitriev, deliberately packed up with burnt house debris (Nikolov 2006). However, even more striking is the case with the Late Ne-

¹ Similar results for the firing temperatures were also obtained for the houses at the Neolithic site of Mursalevo–Deveboaz in the Struma River Valley (rescue excavations directed by the author and Krum Bacvarov in 2014–2015); see Jordanova et al. 2018.

olithic off-settlement pit assemblages which were very recently identified as such. They often contain deposits with layers of burnt house debris – including the top layer – or the whole deposits consists of such remains (Nikolov 2011b). In both cases, especially apparent in the latter one, the debris includes different parts of the structure and the installations from the house interior as well as ceramic vessels and small artifacts. All these cases and variants obviously represent burial of intentionally burnt houses by the *pars pro toto* (part taken for the whole) principle which was valid for the prehistoric way of thinking.

For the burial of unburned houses, I would currently suggest a procedure without taking their parts outside the settlement. However, due to the low informativity of those remains I have no grounds to propose a more concrete interpretation.

Human life has always been related to some dwelling which provided protection against extreme natural forces. While the first residential buildings of the early farmers in Southwest Asia had primarily protective functions, with the final settling down and the appearance of permanent settlements, the dwelling turned into a family home. It became a place for domestic-economic, social and sacral activities that were inseparable in the minds of prehistoric people. The house and its inhabitants represented an indivisible unity, the house “lived” with the rhythm of life of the people who inhabited it, it was their microcosm, and had a soul like their own souls. The house lived through its inhabitants who created it, and they felt unified and strong in its domesticated space between the walls and under the roof. The death of the builders and first inhabitants led to the death of the house itself. The house was buried in the same way as were the dead family members who had lived in its “womb”. A human soul was reborn into a new human like the buried house’s soul was reborn into a newly built house. The lifecycle of each person and their family group of which they were a part was organically intertwined in the life of the house-home. The lifecycle of the farming society was impossible without the house-home which gave birth to and raised its inhabitants, accepted some of its dead “children” under its floor or nearby to breathe new life into them; and the house itself died in order to be reborn thus starting the cycle again. Breathing new life, however, was impossible without the death of the material body from which only thus could the soul be freed. Sooner or later the house died due to its own “frailty” or because of the biological-social end of its inhabitants; it should then be “buried” in order to free the soul which could be reincarnated in the body of the newly built house. In this way it could accept the reincarnated souls-people and start the new cycle. Apparently, fire was the element which was most often called for by the living to free the soul from the dead body of the house.

And was it that freeing the soul from the dead human body passed again through fire, the way the body of the animal killed for food passed through fire? Is it that the “absence” of Neolithic graves, except for those in the settlement, is due to the cremation of the dead and the subsequent procedure that did not leave any archaeologically identi-

fiable traces? Let us not forget how many new types and variants of prehistoric sites were identified over the last two or three decades in the Eastern and Central Balkans. Perhaps we do not yet investigate the proper areas where we could find traces of “the other” manner of burying?

And isn't it that the pits containing buried remains of burnt houses were also places for burying the remains of the burned bodies of the houses' dead inhabitants? Do we have grounds today to separate in our thinking the dead people from their house-home? These are all questions which we should ask ourselves in the context of the fast-complicating picture of our knowledge of the early farming times. In fact, until recently we could not identify the ritual pits containing buried remains of intentionally burnt houses and considered them to be rubbish pits. Perhaps it will soon become clear that the ash layers in them contain also cremated human remains? In this regard, I call attention to the burned human bones found in a vessel in an Early Neolithic house at Tell Azmak (Georgiev 1972, 17, Abb. 4), of the Late Neolithic cremation burials at Soufli and Platia Magoula Zarkou in Thessaly, of such graves in Transylvania and elsewhere in the Balkans. We should not leave out the possibility of a sharp increase in the number of Neolithic ritual pit assemblages in the Balkans (of the type of those at Krum, Ohoden, Vinča, Zlatara and Galovo) where buried human bodies were laid and buried, respectively, amidst burnt house remains (possibly the result of human sacrifice?). The early farming religio-mythological system was constructed according to a basic structural pattern but in numerous variants. The latter can undoubtedly be referred to the Neolithic mortuary practices of which we currently know a limited number of varieties (Bacvarov 2003, 225–247). I therefore believe that the heuristic model applied in this aspect of investigating the later prehistory should be related to a careful research of all types of Neolithic house remains which will sooner or later show us the way to solving the problem of the “missing” Neolithic burials.

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