Dead and Living
during the Early Mesolithic

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Abstract

Some years ago, two Early Mesolithic collective tombs have been excavated in southern Belgium. The study of those burials allowed the reconstitution of some funeral practices which suppose complex communities of dead. Actually, it is the social structure of the dead that we can observe and this information is necessarily connected to the conception of the death. Anyway, this fact definitively stops the way to considerations about the social organization of the living people, unless to know the role of the dead in the Early Mesolithic societies of North-western Europe. Maybe, dead and living people constitute two different entities, each of them having its own rules and thus its own categories of individuals.

Keywords: Mesolithic, funeral practices, social structure.

Résumé

Il y a quelques années, deux sépultures collectives du Mésolithique ancien ont été découvertes dans le sud de la Belgique. L'étude de ces tombes a permis la reconstitution de gestes funéraires qui montrent toute la complexité de la communauté des morts. En ce sens, c'est bien la structure sociale des défunts que l'on atteint, qui ne peut que refléter la conception de la mort de l'époque. Ce fait nous barre définitivement l'accès à la structure sociale des vivants, à moins de connaître le rôle des morts dans les sociétés du début du Mésolithique du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe. Éventuellement, morts et vivants constituaient-ils deux entités différentes, chacune d'entre elles ayant son propre rôle et, par là, ses propres catégories d'individus.

Mots-clés : *Mésolithique, pratiques funéraires, structure social.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is often tempting to look at prehistoric funerary documents as an image of the organization of the societies of that time. But the results of these investigations are not always convincing. Let us remember, for instance, Renfrew's works (1976) who thought that the megalithic society was fragmented and rather egalitarian because of the probable division of the territory by megalithic monuments and according to the collective inhumations which occurred inside these monuments. Nevertheless using the same data, Tilley (1996: 157-166) proposed quite a different image of the same society: the monuments build with big stones, inside which the dead were egalitarian gathered, could have justified the power of some of them. In fact the collective tomb would have masked the arbitrariness of this authority and, at the same time, would have legitimated the social inequalities!

Actually, each situation which was met in the tombs may testify a definite kind of social inequalities as well as its contrary. Do vagueness and oppositions not come from our ignorance about the identity and the function of the dead? In other words, is it not vain to look for some correspondence between living people and dead, while we do not master neither the role of the dead, nor how the different prehistoric civilizations did think about death?

Many questions remain without answer. Did all the dead of a community have a sepulchre? Were the inhumed ones only dead, from whom the community had to take care of, or were they ancestors, meaning still active personalities for the living people? Why did we think that the differences we noticed between individuals coming from a same necropolis or a same tomb necessary concerns social inequalities?

Recently, two Early Mesolithic collective tombs have been excavated in southern

Belgium (Fig. 1): the first in the Margaux cave, the second one in the Autours rock-shelter (Cauwe, 2001). These investigations established the great antiquity of a type of funerary practices previously thought to have begun with the first farmers (Cauwe, 1998b). But beyond this aspect, those two sites allowed the reconstruction of funeral practices that let suppose rather complex communities of dead. In fact, it is first of all the social structure of the dead that we reach and there is no reason to think that it was build according to the model of the living people. On the contrary, dead and living can eventually constitute two different entities, each of them having its own rules, and thus its own categories of individuals.
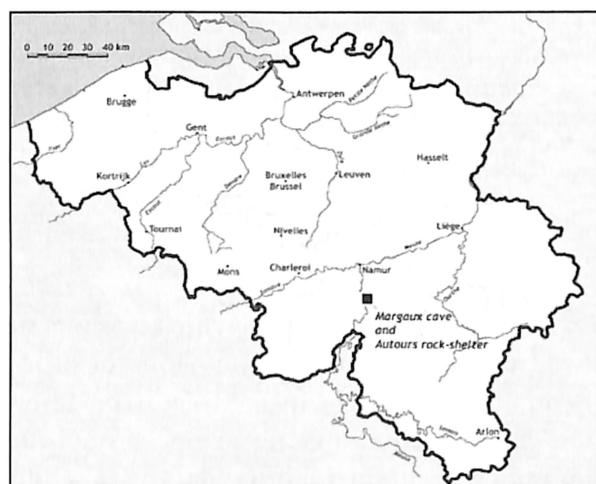
the building seem thus to correspond to have been specifically designed to bring bodies into close spatial association. Moreover, considering the available space within the cave, the accumulation of human remains within such a limited area must be viewed as an intentional act.
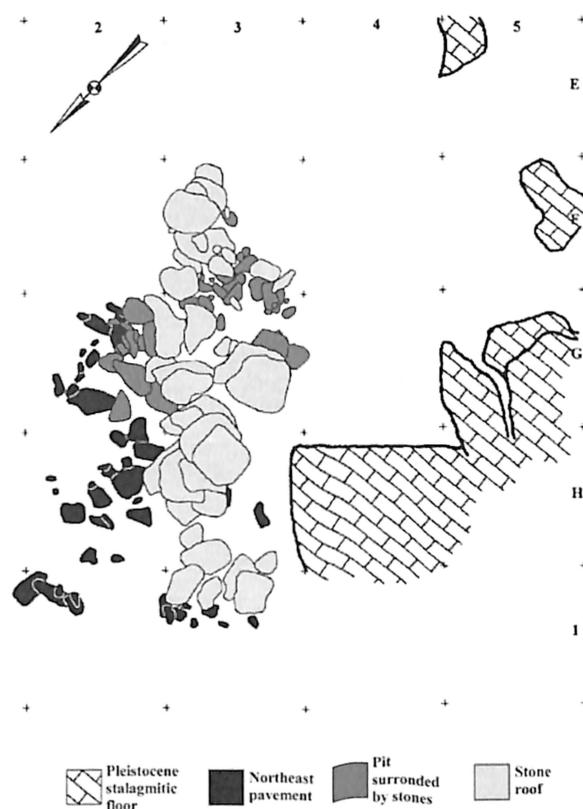

Fig. 1 — Localization of the Margaux cave and the Autours rock-shelter in Southern Belgium.

Fig. 2 — Plan of the Early Mesolithic collective tomb from the Margaux cave (9th millennium cal. BC).

2. THE MARGAUX CAVE

A monographic study of the Early Mesolithic collective tombs from the Margaux cave has been published some years ago (Cauwe, 1998a). Let us remind of the tomb, dated from the 9th millennium cal. BC, was found in surface at the end of the cave. It consisted of a small pit, partly surrounded by a dry-stone wall and a pavement (Fig. 2). These constructions were covered by a stone roof. Neither the pit nor the adjacent pavement could contain several complete bodies at the same time. The small dimensions of

2.1. Identity of the dead

The identity of the ten dead accumulated in this grave is interesting. The tomb did not contain any remain of child or adolescent. On the other side, we notice the morphological homogeneity of the bones and their generalized slenderness. These facts and metrical indications seem to confirm the feminine character of all of the present skeletons. In other respects, the same no-metrical traits are present on all of the bodies, allowing to suggest some genetic links between these women. The terms of this proximity are uneasy to

determine: direct links —mother, daughter, niece, etc— or consequences of weddings organized inside limited groups (Masset, 1993). Thus the selection of the dead buried in the Margaux cave depends certainly on the age-group, probably on sex and perhaps on familial links.

This selection does neither correspond to a normal demographic sample, nor to a quick inhumation resulting from an epidemic or another similar phenomenon. Thus the choice of the dead meets ritual requirements or social and cultural obligations, if not all these terms together. Nevertheless, as we do not know anything about the fate of the children and of the masculine adults of the same community, it seems to be hopeful to ask more to the documentation by proposing some precise interpretation to this special choice. Anyway, this choice largely overruns the frame of practical or material dispositions (Cauwe, 1998a).

2.2. Categories of dead

Beyond the homogeneity of the buried population, we find that not all the individuals received the same treatment. The accumulation of ten women and the dislocation and mixing of their skeletons throughout the tomb do not indicate that they were all treated equally in death. For example, a skull shows evident traces of cut marks (Fig. 3), while several skeletons are very incomplete probably as a consequence of some

Fig. 3 — Cut marks on a skull from the Margaux cave (zygomatic bone).

setting-apart of bones; finally, one skeleton — eventually that of the last buried woman— is less dislocated throughout the grave than the others. Thus, different categories existed in the treatment of the dead at the Margaux cave. Men and children were excluded from the tomb, but there are also distinctions between the women who were buried in the cave.

3. THE AUTOURS ROCK-SHELTER

The Autours Rock-shelter contained three prehistoric graves, two from the Early Mesolithic, but without chronological connections between them, and one from the Middle Neolithic (Michelsberg Culture: Cauwe, 1998b). We only discuss here the Early Mesolithic collective grave, dated from the 9th millennium cal. BC (Cauwe, 2001).

3.1. Dichotomy children / adults[1]

The accumulation of dead in the Early Mesolithic collective tomb of the Autours rock-shelter (Fig. 4) seems to be only the consequence of following natural deaths: adults of both sexes and children are together in proportions which look coherent as far as demographic hypotheses can be applied on such faraway times.

The bones of the half-dozen adults contained in the tomb have been found throughout the grave. Some laid inside a pit, in the right corner of the rock-shelter; others were put in a crown eastwards; finally, some of them were thrown northwards, along the cave wall. In contrast, the children, from which the number is equivalent if not slightly superior to that of the adults and from which the skeletons

were likely broken, were preserved on a quite smaller area: their only traces were found in the northern sector of the tomb.

The age at the death thus seems to be important and the topography of the rock-shelter has been used to materialize this distinction. The northern sector is only limited by the straight wall of the bottom of the rock-shelter; there is easy access to this part and it has not very much natural protection. On the other side, no infrastructure has been made in this part of the tomb: the bones were laid on the ground, without any particular way. By contrast, in the southern sector, the human remains were put in

an angle in the wall, where the vault of the rock-shelter is at its lowest, and some of them were placed in a small pit.

The young dead had a relatively single fate: they had access to only one sector of the tomb and their bones were spread on short distances. The adults benefited much more care. The most protected part of the rock-shelter had been reserved for them, a funerary pit was dug specially for them and their skeletons were dislocated in the whole tomb. We cannot tell anything about the status of the children in the society of the living people but, obviously, at the moment of the death, they were not equal.

3.2. Removed bones

In the Autours rock-shelter, the taphonomic processes were important but not enough to justify the disappearance of a large part of the bones, otherwise we cannot explain the preservation of ones among the most fragile, like milk teeth or child sternum. Moreover, a great part of absences concerns very precise anatomical categories and the natural taphonomy cannot be selective in such a way to provoke the same deficiencies on several bodies. The most obvious case is that of the skulls. None of the seven children contained in the tomb is represented by the slightest fragment of its cephalic skeleton, except by some teeth. To the six adults of the same tomb, we only can attribute two skullcaps and some tiny elements of the temporal bones. Even if we refuse the possible associations between fragments and skullcaps —in other words if we over-estimate the number of adult skulls inside the tomb—, a lack does remain: almost the half of the adults have been deprived of it. The long bones of the legs and the pelvis of the adults are also under-represented.

Are we faced to post-inhumation samplings or incomplete bodies brought in the tomb? The answer is not obvious. But the number of teeth, patellae and tarsal bones which were discovered on the site allows to prefer the first hypothesis. Their presence testifies that heads and legs were —at one moment— present in the tomb. What ever it could be, some selected
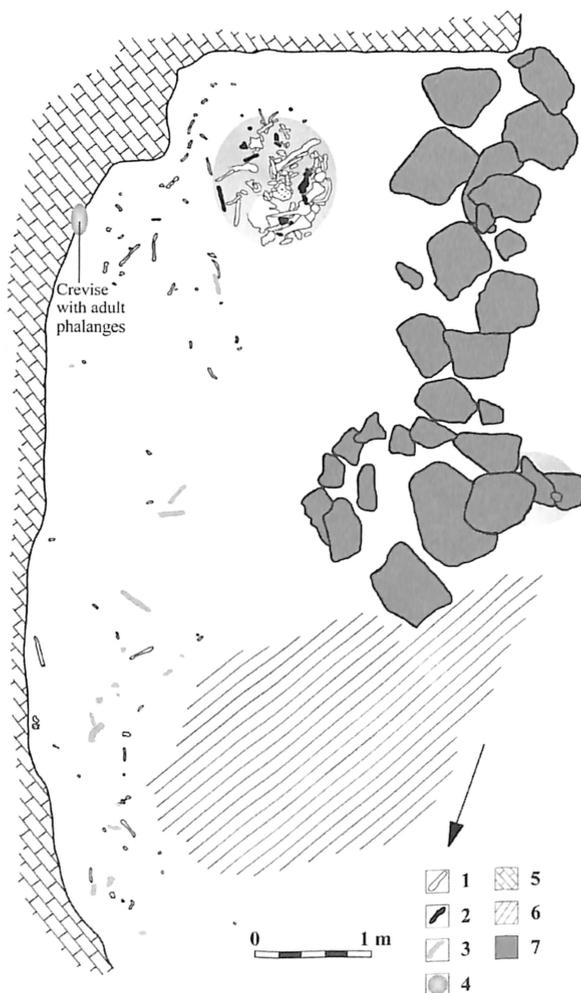

Fig. 4 — Plan of the Early Mesolithic collective tomb from the Autours rock-shelter (9th millennium cal. BC): 1) adult bones; 2) burned adult bones; 3) children's bones; 4) pits; 5) wall of the cave; 6) area destroyed by earlier excavations; 7) stones of the closing-wall of the grave.

bones interested the Mesolithic community for an activity which we do not know but which took place outside the tomb.

Several cases of reduction of bodies are known from the Mesolithic of the north-west Europe, the most famous being certainly that of Petit-Marais, at La Chaussée-Tirancourt in the Somme (Ducrocq & Ketterer, 1995). In such conditions, the bones of the limbs, the pelvis and the skull were usually the only bones conserved. In the Autours rock-shelter, we are faced to the opposite situation: the most significant bones are lost while the small and fragmentary pieces are preserved. Are we in presence of a site only meant to assure the treatment of the dead, not their preservation?

The selections have not been made the same way on all the bodies so that we notice once again the existence of different categories of burial treatment. To the dichotomy between children and adults may be added, based on the sampling of bones, the distinction of two groups of adults. Actually, some adults were taken off entire long bones, others only fragments. The same observation occurs for the skulls. The bodies from which the long bones were taken off also have no skull anymore. Those which still have some elements of the long bones are also represented by fragments of their skull. In other respects, the sampling of entire bones only concerns the skeletons buried outside the pit, this one of fragmentary bones only the adult partly preserved in the pit. In conclusion, the relics that were taken away are almost the same for all the adults but their state when they were taken off is different according to the fact that samples were taken from bodies laying in the funerary pit or from others next to it.

3.3. A cremated dead

An adult —too incomplete for its sex to be determined— has been cremated. The deposit is clearly secondary because no traces of fire were found in the rock-shelter. So, the absence of some bones is not necessary due to post-inhumation samplings; they also could result from a selection that occurred before the body were brought to the shelter.

The phalanges of the feet are missing as well as the most part of the skull from which we have only some tiny fragments. Nevertheless, we cannot have any doubt about the care of the Mesolithic people to collect all the remains out of the pyre, even very small human remains were brought to the tomb, but any charcoal was found during the excavation nor next to the burned bones, neither elsewhere in the tomb or even in the cave. The burned bones were probably washed before being definitively inhumed.

Did head and feet hang out of the pyre so that it did not seem useful or necessary to collect them? It is possible, moreover as we know that one tibia and some fragments of the skull show a lower level of combustion than the rest of the skeleton. But we should not forget that the removal of skulls interested the Mesolithic gravedigger. Furthermore, we will see that phalanges have had a particular lot. All these elements allow to have some hesitation about the interpretation that has to be given to the absences of some bones. Is the cremated body voluntary incomplete? If yes, did the samplings occur before or after the definitive inhumation? Were some elements forgotten during the cleaning of the pyre? We also have to note that the dead were not put randomly in the tomb. The burned body was put in the funerary pit and it is the unique adult from whom the skeleton was not spread among the child remains.

3.4. Movement of bones

In the south-eastern corner of the tomb, the rock wall is crossed by a crack of several centimetres long which contained 32 phalanges, a rib fragment and a canine or a much damaged incisor. All the fragments of the tarsus certainly belong to one. The bones of the hand, on the contrary, belong to a minimum of three individuals, including the cremated one. This particular concentration of phalanges clearly indicates the intentional movement of bones within the tomb.

On the other side, very few anatomical connections are preserved in this tomb. Only the base of a vertebral column and the pelvic girdle of one individual were preserved in their natural order. The skeletons of the children and of the other adults were rather dislocated. It is less probable that these dislocations are not partially the result of intentional gestures. If not, how could we explain that the children's remains have a smaller distribution area than that reserved to the bones of the adults? As well, we could not define the reasons of the absence of anatomical links between the remains contained in the pit and those laying immediately in its periphery. The skeletons were moved but following a certain order: without being able to distinguish precisely the perturbations from the intended acts, it is quite obvious that, globally, the movement of the remains belongs to the frame of ritual gestures.

The play on the dead is quite subtle. On one hand, the tomb was divided into sectors allowing a classification of the dead; on the other hand, the movement of bones allowed links to be made between all the categories of the dead. The adults —cremated or inhumed, would entire or fragmentary bones been kept, laying in the funerary pit or along its edge— have been gathered into one unique community by the bones of their hands. The children were not left alone in the northern sector: except the cremated individual, all the remains of the other adults were partially moved towards the area of the children. Difference and assimilation worked at the same time and this ensures the unity of the grave. We obviously have here a collective tomb and not a kind of small necropolis with separated units.

There is still one element which clearly indicates the intentional removal of bones. In front of the tomb, a low wall of some centimetres high was build covering a small pit which was previously dug. In that pit, we found a temporal bone of an adult which probably belonged to one of the adults who were partially contained in the funerary pit already described. This temporal does not show any cut-marks or slightest of breakage. Therefore we can be sure that it was collected and moved before the natural decomposition of the flesh. All this once again ensures that the dead admitted to the tomb were treated individually.

Classification of several phalanges inside a natural crack of the rock-shelter, removal of bones within the tomb, introduction of a cremated body, post-inhumation samplings on several skeletons, ..., the dead of the Autours rock-shelter certainly did not rest in piece and quiet ! As the process occurred along the time, we feel it could be profitable to control the succession of the events (Fig. 5).

4. Discussion

It is obvious that the collective tomb cannot systematically be considered as a space that was only used to accumulate equal dead. Anyway, we have to be careful not to immediately use this situation to define some model for the society. It is too easy to think that dead systematically conserve in the grave links with the function they had during their life. Since a long time, the cultural anthropology has shown that such relationships were scarcely met (Guidieri, 1979). If the study of these two Early Mesolithic collective tombs in southern Belgium attests the existence of categories of dead, it does not allow any conclusion about a kind of social hierarchy; we would then ask the documentation more than it can tell.

On the contrary, the relation between dead and living people can be evoked in another way. The treatment of the dead depends on the way people think death. Throughout the examples given here, it clearly appears that the dead were regularly visited and that material relationships were maintained between the living and the dead: let us think about the manipulations and the samplings of bones or the classifying of individuals.

Such process evokes more a cult for ancestors rather than a homage rendered to the dead. By cult for ancestors, we understand preoccupations towards active entities. Nevertheless, as for social structures, it is not credible to recog-

NORTH SECTOR

SOUTH SECTOR

Phalanxes

NATURAL CREVISE

Children

SURFACE

Adults
3 individuals minimum
(entire bones removed)

SURFACE

Adults
3 individuals minimum
(fragmentary bones removed

Two buried   One burned

PIT

CLOSING-WALL OF THE TOMB

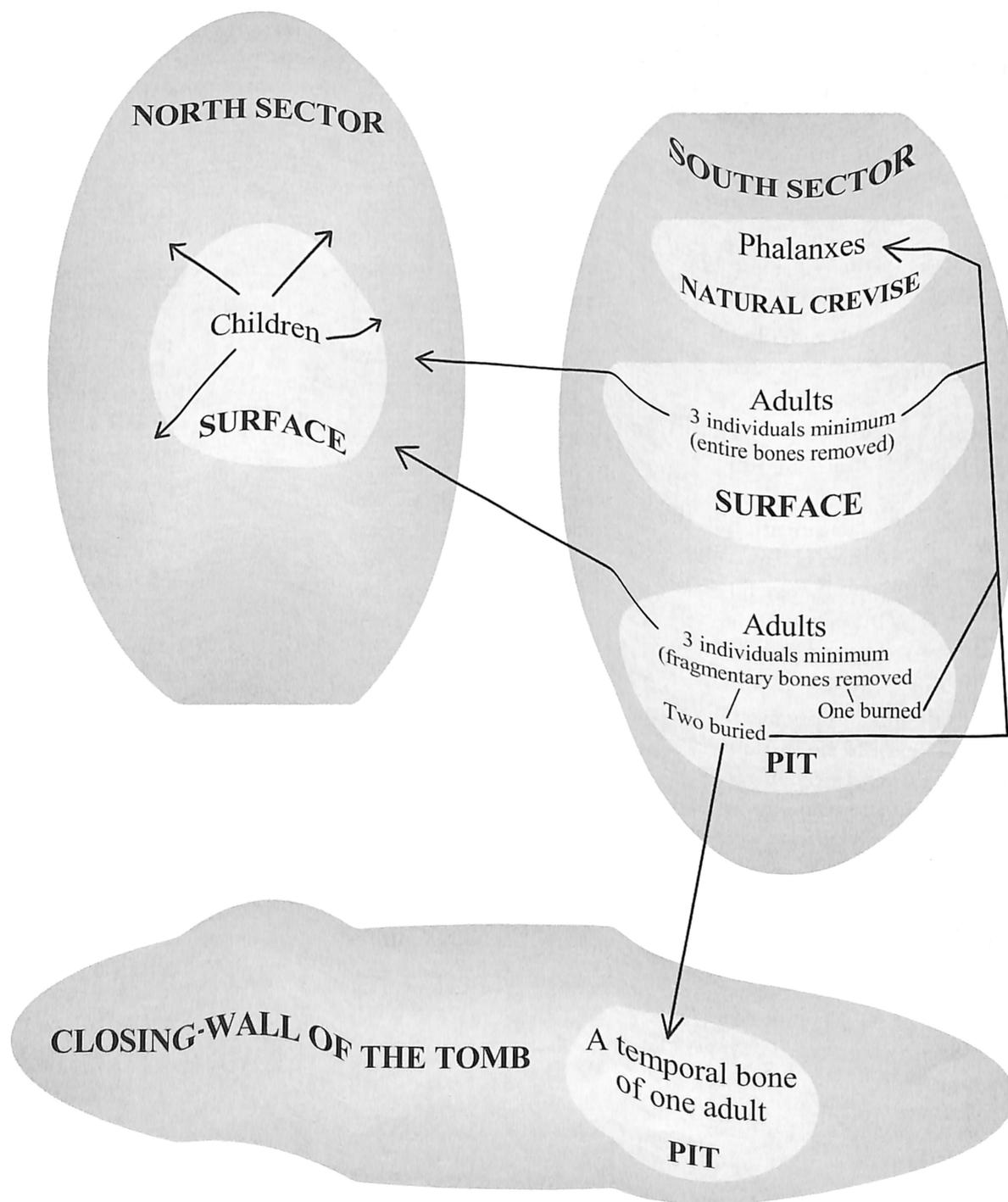A temporal bone
of one adult

PIT

Fig. 5 — Organization of the Early Mesolithic collective tomb
from the Autours rock-shelter (9th millennium cal. BC).

nize direct links between the undergone treatment and the status of the dead. But the general context within which the Early Mesolithic collective tombs are located certainly contributes to give a meaning to the described facts here. At the end of the Ice Age, the world changed and the human beings certainly re-considered their place within the nature. While art was discrete, dead were more visible. Bones were still left at the limit of the settlements, but the number of graves grew, the collective tombs appeared, necropolis were build. Maybe, at the beginning of the Holocene, ideologies were focalized on the human being (van Berg & Cauwe, 1996; Cauwe, 2001b).

In such a context, the hypothesis of a cult for ancestors is more credible. The frequentation of the dead world by some contemporaneous living, their classification in the tombs and the sampling of their bones could be explained this way. Anyway, the social structures of the dead noted by the study of the Early Mesolithic collective tombs are first of all linked with a particular play on death. But we cannot define in details the precise nature of this play. Whatever it could be, it definitively stops the way to considerations about the organization of the community of the living.

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