

## **Men and Caves in the Neolithic Period**

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### **ABSTRACT**

From the beginning of archaeological excavations in the 19th century up to the present day, caves as archaeological sites have most often been interpreted as longer- or shorter-term settlements, hideaways or shelters for herdsmen; other interpretations that are considered for caves are cult functions and shelters for social outcasts. I see the beginnings of these notions of universal functions for caves in two contexts. Up until the second half of the 20th century there was a predominant interest throughout most of Europe in Palaeolithic history, and an interpretive model of Palaeolithic cave settlement was subsequently applied to frequently less distinct or even different find situations dating to post-Mesolithic periods. Secondly, at the close of the 19th century caves in the general consciousness of society (i.e. including archaeological) were mainly thought of as warfare shelters or as cover from inclement weather during agricultural activities away from the settlement. Speculation on the greater importance of cult activities and the symbolism of caves doesn't appear with greater regularity in literature until the 1980s; and yet, the settlement impression of caves persists.

Using the Neolithic period as an example, the submitted work attempts to describe the phenomenon of cave use both in broader chronological contexts and as a functional interpretation of archaeological evidence in connection with the natural character of caves. Cave sites are chronologically followed from the Late Palaeolithic period in the Near East and the Early Neolithic period in selected areas of the Balkans and Central Europe up to the period around 4000 BC. The use of caves can be divided into five main periods: 1) The Epipaleolithic, Natufian and Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods – spacious, dry and light caves were sought as dwellings; these sites typically contained distinct cultural layers with a range of archaeological finds of the majority of settlement components (in particular remnants of food, evidence of production and tool-making, often even dwelling foundations) and document long-term settlement. 2) The Pottery Neolithic in the Near East and the Anatolia region – interest in the earlier typical settlement caves dropped significantly and, for the first time, larger karst systems were visited, though archaeological evidence is limited mainly to illuminated entrance areas. The change in preference might be connected to likely climate change at the turn of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period and the Pottery Neolithic period, when the underground areas with karst water acquired new symbolic importance for agricultural civilizations. 3) The Early Chalcolithic of Anatolia, the Early Neolithic period in the Balkans and the Middle Neolithic period in Central Europe: on the basis of conspicuous chronological associations, the occurrence (spread?) of the cave phenomenon can be followed from Starcevo-Körös culture (IIB – IVA) to Late Alföld Linear Pottery and Bükk culture and up to Late Linear Pottery in Moravia and Bohemia. The overall nature of the sites is reminiscent of the previous period: find situations are very frequently tied to active karst systems or stalactite and stalagmite caves, the microclimate conditions of which are entirely incompatible with inhabitation. From a global climate perspective, this period in Central Europe is connected with the dry fluctuations of the incoming Epiatlantic period. 4) The Middle Chalcolithic period in the Near East and Anatolia, the Middle Neolithic in the Balkans and the Late Neolithic of Central Europe: the renewed interest in caves in the Near East and Anatolia with the first evidence of separate burial caves is chronologically synchronous with several areas in Europe where caves were temporarily frequented (Dobruja, western Transylvania and Hihot, Bohemia and, to a small extent, Moravia). 5) The Late Chalcolithic

period in the Near East with the intensive use of caves, especially for burial and cult purposes corresponds chronologically to a distinct European horizon represented by several cultures of the Late Neolithic and Early Eneolithic. These individual waves of interest in caves are more or less divided depending on the region by periods of longer disinterest in karst areas. It is also interesting that archaeological cultures with a high degree of civilization and cultural development (e.g. the existence of settlement agglomerations) show a lasting disinterest in caves even in climatically critical periods; on the other hand, increased interest is connected with dry climatic swings among cultures in regions less suitable for agriculture.

From the perspective of the use of Neolithic caves, it is clear that a marked difference in the selection of the types of sites (suitable for settlement in the late hunter-gatherer period versus those unsuitable for dwelling in the Neolithic period), as well as in the structure of finds and the form of find situations which, compared to the previous period, appear unbalanced (e.g. remnants of food or evidence of work activities are missing; on the other hand, there are mass stockpiles of vessels indicating final deposition at the site, or obvious cult objects). The most striking situations and largest finds are connected with dark and damp cave systems. On the basis of the presented arguments, I do not find verifiable evidence in the Neolithic and Early Eneolithic periods in the studied parts of Europe of cave settlements or even a more general use of caves during the herding of animals; instead, I connect the majority of important cave locations with the cult aspect of Neolithic society. Theoretically, it is not possible to rule out that a less distinct find situation could document another type of activity, one conditioned by the local or cultural peculiarities of the specific region. However, the close connection between interest in caves and periods of climatic instability, as well as information from outside of Europe on the importance and function of caves, speaks in favour of a distinct symbolic and religious significance of caves in general for agricultural societies. As such, caves appear as a universal archetype of natural in human culture; forgotten at times of social stability, they always regained their importance under the threat of climate changes. This apparently held true in more traditional societies without a strong socio-cultural consciousness, whereas the most advanced (the most civilized) Neolithic societies probably no longer reflected on this "return to natural awareness" and instead attempted to solve the global crisis using their own cultural resources.