

# The oldest known cremation in the near east dates to 7000 BC

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Picture of bones in situ: A. Segment of axial skeleton: ribs and vertebrae exposed in the middle of the structure. B. Right coxal in situ; preserved almost complete by a piece of collapsed mud wall (see Fig 2D). C. Four right pedal proximal phalanges found directly under the right coxal. Credit: Bocquentin et al, 2020 (PLOS ONE, CC BY)

Ancient people in the Near East had begun the practice of intentionally cremating their dead by the beginning of the 7th millennium BC, according to a study published August 12, 2020 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Fanny Bocquentin of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and colleagues.

Excavations at the Neolithic site of Beisamoun in Northern Israel have uncovered an ancient [cremation](#) pit containing the remains of a corpse that appears to have been intentionally incinerated as part of a funerary practice. These remains were directly dated to between 7013-6700 BC, making them the oldest known example of cremation in the Near East.

The remains comprise most of one skeleton of a young adult. The bones show evidence of having been heated to temperatures of over 500°C shortly after death, and they sit inside a pit that appears to have been constructed with an open top and strong insulating walls. Microscopic plant remains found inside the pyre-pit are likely leftover from the fuel for the fire. This evidence leads the authors to identify this as an intentional cremation of a fresh corpse, as opposed to the burning of dry remains or a tragic fire accident.

This early cremation comes at an important period of transition in funerary practices in this region of the world. Old traditions were on the way out, such as the removal of the cranium of the dead and the burial of the dead within the settlement, while practices like cremation were new. This change in funeral procedure might also signify a transition in rituals surrounding death and the significance of the deceased within society. Further examination of other possible cremation sites in the region will help elucidate this important cultural shift.



The individual buried in the pyre-pit was injured by a flint projectile several months before dying. Credit: © mission Beisamoun





A section of the Beisamoun site where the pyre pit is visible Credit: © mission Beisamoun

Bocquentin says: "The funerary treatment involved in situ cremation within a pyre-pit of a young adult individual who previously survived from a flint projectile injury— the inventory of bones and their relative position strongly supports the deposit of an articulated corpse and not dislocated bones." She adds, "This is a redefinition of the place of the dead in the village and in society."

**More information:** Bocquentin F, Anton M, Berna F, Rosen A, Khalaily H, Greenberg H, et al. (2020) Emergence of corpse cremation during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the Southern Levant: A multidisciplinary study of a pyre-pit burial. *PLoS ONE* 15(8): e0235386. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235386](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235386)

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