

## Awareness of death and religious sentiments.

Awareness of death, along with awe towards nature, held significant meaning for the emergence of religious sentiments. When early humans became aware of the inexplicability of death in the face of their loved ones passing away, religious sentiments took a profound leap forward, shrouded in deeper shadows.

As a person approaches death, consciousness fades away, accompanied by labored breathing. Eventually, the heartbeat becomes irregular and finally ceases. Once death is certain, the body rapidly cools down, rigor mortis sets in, and decay soon follows. Left undisturbed, the decaying corpse is consumed by birds, animals, and insects; maggots appear, and within months, it becomes skeletal remains. Even these bones erode over time, leaving no trace behind. The phenomenon of death in humans is eerie.

Death, that is, the ceasing of the living, the disappearance of what once existed—this profound concept has posed an eternal question to humanity since ancient times. Why do people die? Where do we come from, and where do we go? Is there truly an afterlife? These timeless inquiries, unanswered then as now, have been fundamental since the dawn of humanity, alongside the awareness of death itself. With this awareness, the world itself has become a monumental question: where did it come from, and how did it come to be? To acknowledge one's own death is simultaneously to recognize something greater than oneself. Religion, since the beginning of human existence, has sought to answer these questions of human mortality and the existence of the world through myriad myths and rituals. Indeed, the issue of death was a pivotal starting point for the concept of religion itself.

Death was an inevitable reality for humans. Everyone was bound by the fate of inevitably dying, and no one could avoid death. Death would surely come. This awareness of unavoidable death stirred thoughts about the unseen world. Yet, one could never know when death would arrive. Death often came unexpectedly. From the certainty and randomness of death, all vanity was acknowledged. Death nullifies everything. Those born into this world are destined to die, and everything is

impermanent. This awareness of life's transience would likely also evoke thoughts about the unseen world.

## **The Meaning of Burial**

The act of burial is an expression of awareness of death. The concept of an afterlife is also expressed through the act of burial. Humans live in a world of meanings and express that world through their actions. When the ritual of burial began, it can be said that humans reached a clear awareness of death.

It was in the late Paleolithic era, with the Neanderthals, that evidence of a practice resembling elaborate burial rituals was confirmed. As well-documented, at the Shanidar site in Iraq, copious amounts of pollen were found around the skeletal remains buried in a flexed position. This discovery suggests a custom of burying the dead with flowers during this era. The Neanderthals of this period already seemed to possess emotions of mourning and respect towards the deceased, as well as an interest in the unseen world. It can also be argued that they sought to maintain a deep connection between those who journeyed to the invisible world of the deceased and those who survived in the visible world. This marks the earliest glimpses of primitive religious practices.

In the later stages of the Upper Paleolithic period, evidence shows practices such as burying the deceased with stone pillows or placing them on shells. These elaborate burial customs clearly reflect feelings of mourning and respect towards the dead. Furthermore, they suggest the emerging concept of an unseen afterlife.

Although not necessarily common, the practice of burying the dead with various grave goods can be traced back to the later stages of the Paleolithic era. Burials accompanied by animal bones, shells, goat horns, beads and ornaments made from teeth, and stone tools are frequently observed. Among these, there are instances where the deceased were adorned with red ochre, possibly symbolizing blood and life, and cases where yellow ochre was sprinkled over them before burial. Considering these practices, it is anticipated that during the later stages of the Paleolithic era, there existed a concept not only of mourning and respect for the

deceased but also of a belief in an afterlife where the departed would continue to exist eternally.

The places where the deceased are buried are diverse, including examples where they are buried beneath the hearths of caves or dwellings where they once lived, a practice that has been carried out since the later stages of the Paleolithic period up until the later stages of the Neolithic period. Already, the concept of spirits of the deceased is evident here, suggesting that the living have always coexisted with and formed deep connections with these spirits. The living were protected and lived alongside the spirits of the deceased. In this context, there is no clear boundary between the afterlife where the deceased reside and the world of the living.

The postures in which the deceased are buried have varied since the Paleolithic era, with both extended and flexed burials observed. However, the custom of flexed burials, where the arms are crossed over the chest and the knees are bent in a crouched position, has been found in various regions from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic periods over a long span of time.

The interpretation of this flexed burial practice, as is well known, involves two conflicting interpretations, making it impossible to assert definitively. According to one view, the deceased's spirit was thought to return to this world and by bending the body, they were buried to prevent harm to the living. Indeed, when we observe that bodies subjected to flexed burial are often bound with ropes or cords, or have large stones placed on their chests or abdomens, it becomes clear that this fear of spirits theory cannot be dismissed. However, even if this were the case, it still suggests the presence of a concept of the deceased's soul and an emotion of reverence towards it. This represents a manifestation of religious sentiment—an awe of powers greater than humanity—which is evident in this context.

As is well known, there is a theory that this fetal-position burial was intentionally adopted, placing the deceased in the posture of a fetus buried beneath the earth. Such intentional burials mimicking the fetal position are widely documented. If this is indeed the case, it suggests the belief that the deceased would return to the womb of Mother Earth and eventually be reborn. Indeed, the concept of eternal life supported by the earth, that is, the idea of death and rebirth under the earth, is generally considered to have emerged with advanced agricultural cultures, particularly those centered around grain cultivation. However, it cannot be

definitively asserted that the germ of such earth worship did not exist in earlier hunting and gathering periods. Even in those times, abundant nuts and rich game were solely provided by the grace of the earth. The notion that the deceased would return to this bountiful earth and be reborn as plants or animals likely did not require such a long period to develop.

Generally, for primitive peoples, death was perceived through two conflicting emotions. To them, death was both an object of fear and a subject of deep sorrow. They simultaneously sought to avoid and fear the dead, while also mourning and grieving profoundly. They feared the wrath of the spirits of the dead intensely, yet simultaneously desired to maintain a lasting bond with the deceased. The origin of the dual meanings found in the long-standing custom of burial rituals probably lies in these conflicting emotions toward death among primitive peoples. In any case, there existed a sense of awe and fear towards the unseen greater world. Religious sentiments emerged from this awe towards the greater unknown.

### **The concept of spirits of the dead**

The custom of exhuming skulls and other remains of the deceased for ritual purposes, whether through burial or sky burial, was observed in various parts of the world as early as the Mesolithic era. This practice of secondary burial became increasingly prevalent not only in the Neolithic era but also in ancient and modern societies. It reflects the notion that death signifies the separation of soul and body, as well as the belief in an afterlife. The primary burial ritual symbolically returns the deceased's physical body to the earth or sky, while secondary burial involves preserving a part of the body to house the soul and to honor it. The preserved bones also symbolize the soul. This concept suggests that human existence combines both body and soul, with death being the separation of these elements, where the body perishes but the soul endures eternally. In ancient times, it was believed that life did not end with the physical world, as the soul detached from the body was thought to live eternally after death. This notion had its origins as early as the Mesolithic era.

It is said that the custom of cremation began in the later Neolithic period, and it became widely practiced during the Bronze Age. Even during this time, there was a custom observed where after cremating the body, the bones were buried again. This practice was also a form of secondary burial, aimed at preserving a part of the deceased's physical remains while venerating their spirit. It reflects the belief in the separation of the physical body and the soul.

The practice of secondary burial is deeply intertwined with the preservation and veneration of skulls, which dates back quite far in history. Instances of isolated skulls being discovered span the Paleolithic era. Particularly from the later stages of the Paleolithic period, decorated and modified skulls have been found, a practice that became more prevalent in the Mesolithic and Neolithic eras. These skulls were enshrined in specific locations within residences or residential areas, where they were revered. Skulls were considered a part of the deceased's physical body but also symbolized the spirit or soul of the departed. It was believed that the spirits of the deceased lingered in these skull sanctuaries, watching over the living members of their families or villages indefinitely. This context already hints at the emergence of ancestral spirits in belief systems.

The concept of ancestral spirits emerged sometime in the later Upper Paleolithic period, although the exact timing remains unclear. However, if we interpret the drawings of house-like structures known as "house motifs" found in cave paintings from the late Upper Paleolithic as dwellings of ancestral spirits, then we can infer that the notion of ancestral spirits existed at least during this period. Worship of ancestral spirits became dominant starting from this point in the Mesolithic era, and grew increasingly prominent into the Neolithic era. During the Neolithic, the concept of ensuring stable residences for the deceased emerged, alongside practices such as burial of bodies, inclusion of grave goods, and preservation of skulls. Consequently, the deceased were interred in chambered tombs or stone coffins shaped like houses or boats, and large megalithic tombs like dolmens and tumuli were constructed extensively. These chambers, coffins, and tombs were considered residences for ancestral spirits. Though the physical bodies decayed, it was believed their spirits would endure eternally as ancestral spirits, leading to organized worship and rituals dedicated to them.

Religion began with awe towards the great unknown. The awareness of death held profound significance in the genesis of this religious sentiment. Primitive humans

feared death and feared the spirits of the dead, but within this fear also emerged a reverence towards unseen mighty forces. Through the act of burial, humans expressed that death is nothing but a return to the great unknown. The emotions of awe and unity towards the great unknown, and towards the cosmic life, are indeed unique to religion. The primal dual emotions of fear and mourning towards death also stem from this distinct religious sentiment.

Humans come from the great source of the universe and return to the great source of the universe. Death is nothing but a return to the unity with universal life. The return to the great entity—that is death. Since humans first stood upon the earth as humans, the awareness of death, which has been embryonic in the human soul, has been expressed through various death rituals. These rituals seem to speak of death as nothing but a return to the great unity, a return to universal life.