

Ancient FanFiction: The Shaman's Burial
By Grace Blaxill

As they're lowering her body into the pit, I remember what she told me about death.

The shaman and I were walking along the river as she searched its banks for smooth stones, animal skulls, anything she might need for her rituals. Well, she was walking, her bad leg dragging as she limped. I was racing and splashing in the water, exultant in my escape from the village and my chores. My parents said it was my duty to assist her, too, but old and wise after many, uncountable seasons, she didn't really need my help.

We had been walking for hours when we came upon it. The sun had reached its zenith in the sky and was beating down hard on our necks. As I skipped ahead kicking up water as I went, I saw something furry just poking out from some brush. I ran forward, expecting to find a small critter to play with, but I pushed past the leaves and reeds to see a small, slender animal lying in the dirt. Dead.

She followed me into the bushes a few minutes later to find me curled into a ball and sobbing. She asked,

"Why do you cry, little one?"

I looked at the broken animal, its fur blackening and breeding flies. I could smell the rotting flesh, and turned my head. She sighed, softly and not unkindly.

"Don't be afraid of death, child. It is just the underside of life."

She bent slowly, her leg stiff and straight as it stuck out at an angle. She pulled a short flint blade and rested it on the top of the creature's skull.

"Fearing death is like fearing night. No amount of fear will stop it from coming."

I remember this as they bring out the feast, passing out the burned creatures. The shell-walker's meat tastes fatty and rich, like how I imagine it would feel to eat the colors that slink across an oil bubble in a puddle. Everyone's heads are buried in the shells, some savoring the meat slowly, others licking the shell's interior, desperate for another taste of what they already finished. I know my family and my village spent days preparing this feast, that it is a luxury, but all I can think about is how the little creature screamed as it roasted over the fire. It bounces back and forth between my ears, echoing louder and louder, as I try to enjoy the taste. I remember the shaman's wisdom, but I can't take comfort in the words now. I'm not scared. I'm lonely without her here. As much as the Earth will cycle on, it won't bring her back.

That day, she rocked the knife back and forth, skinning the already-rotting fur and revealing the white bone beneath. I tried to look away, scared of seeing the little animal pulled apart, but without looking she sensed my avoidance.

"Look, child."

I looked. She had pulled the skull free, and was dipping it in the water. With her free hand, she took me by my hand and pulled me close.

"Here." She pulled the skull from the creek and pressed it into my chest.

"Keep death close with you. So it doesn't scare you anymore."

I had thought about whether or not to do this, in the days leading up to and following her death. About what she would have wanted. I pulled the old white skull from my dress and held it in my hands. I know she had told me to keep it, but I didn't need it anymore.

One by one, as my parents and the other adults started tossing the shells into her grave, I tossed the skull in, too. Her life and her death, her memory, would always be close to me. With her in my heart and my memory, I wouldn't be scared anymore.

Context:

The Natufian culture was one that lived in the Levant some 12,000 years ago. In Hilazon Tachtit, a cave in Northern Israel, a Natufian shaman's grave was discovered. The evidence from her burial suggests that the 45-year-old shaman was respected by her people, as her grave pit was filled with many tortoise shells, a sign of a lavish feast, and rarities like a leopard pelvis and a marten skull. Examinations of her skeletal remains reveal that the shaman's atypical pelvis would have caused her to limp. Today, we tend to view disability as a disadvantage. This shaman's disability did not hinder her rise to a position of reverence within her community and may have even contributed to it. For more on this Natufian shaman and disability, please check out these resources:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/8/100830-first-feast-science-proceedings-israel-shaman-sorcerer-tortoise/>

<https://www.pnas.org/content/105/46/17665>

More resources on disability in the ancient world:

https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/06/17/878896381/ancient-bones-offer-clues-to-how-long-ago-humans-cared-for-the-vulnerable?utm_medium=social&utm_term=nprnews&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=npr&fbclid=IwAR3sRiQnM_wLTf-eq9zxxl0qNvJBDFle_QAsThNuORDZHjG0YyxgDIQtp3yg

<https://www.jhrehab.org/2018/04/30/empowered-not-disabled-an-ancient-shaman-effigy-vessel-at-the-carlos-museum/>

<https://www.disabilityhistory-ancientworld.com/new-cover-page>



If we give credit to the artist (Greg Harlin), can we use the image? It's from the Nat Geo article referenced above.