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A 'GOOD DEATH':

The life and times of an experimental Neolithic house and its reception in Nebelivka

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Abstract

Most archaeological fieldwork projects have stories about the interactions between their host village and the project, although such accounts rarely make it to publication. The Anglo-Ukrainian Trypillia Megasites Project differs in that we developed a closer than usual relationship with the residents of Nebelivka, largely because of an experimental house-building and -burning operation that involved a number of villagers—from young reed and hazel withy collectors to the mayor. In this article, we weave together different threads of actions, decisions, agendas and attitudes of different stakeholders (team, villagers, politicians, journalists, conference delegates, etc.) with respect to the project's experimental programme, focusing on the day of the house-burning and its spectacular multi-sensory results. In conclusion, we reflect upon the application of the question 'what is a good death' to a prehistoric house, taking into consideration the varied views of the participants.

Keywords

house-building, house-burning, experimental archaeology, Nebelivka, Trypillia group, Neolithic, Ukraine, national media, local media, community engagement

Introduction

What is a 'good death'? There have been many attempts to answer this question, some of which focus on the presentation of the orderly qualities deemed 'good' in life (Morris, 1989), while others consider the dignity of the person dying and the absence of pain (Meier et al., 2016). But what constitutes a 'good death' for a house? In this article, we consider this question in the context of experimental house-building and -burning conducted as part of the AHRC-funded project 'Early urbanism in Europe? The case of the Trypillia megasites of Ukraine' (Gaydarska, 2020¹). We examine the varied responses of Nebelivka residents to a large-scale international project in their village, especially their reactions to the house experiment. This paper is an attempt at a specific kind of public archaeology, where we weave together the different threads of actions, decisions, agendas and attitudes of different stakeholders (team, villagers, politicians, journalists, conference delegates, etc.) to form a conspectus of the varied responses to a house-burning event.

The Trypillia megasites constitute a sub-group of the overall Cucuteni-Trypillia group (henceforth 'CT')—a large entity distributed over 250,000km² in modern Romania, Moldova and Ukraine, and lasting over 2,000 years (5000- 2800 BC) (Videiko, 2013; Monah & Monah, 1997). As their name implies, the megasites were the largest settlements of the group—not found at all in the Cucuteni group, but concentrated in the Southern Dnieper-Bug interfluvium, midway between Kyiv and Odessa, together with other peripheral examples (Fig. 1). The megasites were the largest sites in 4th millennium BC Europe—perhaps in the world—and it is our contention that they were also the world's earliest low-density cities (Gaydarska, 2016). These megasites principally consisted of houses, the burnt remains

1 The project archive can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.5284/1047599>

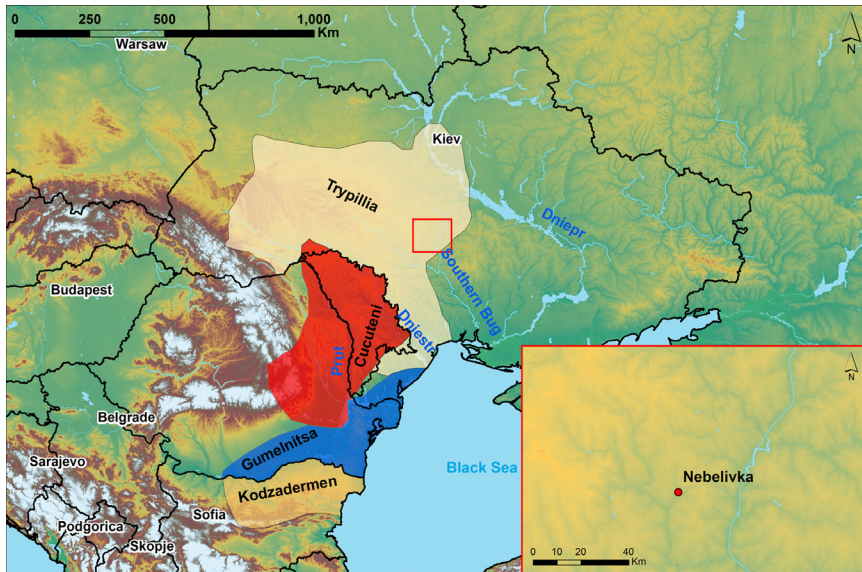


Fig. 1. Location map of the Cucuteni-Trypillia group, with megasites (M. Nebbia).

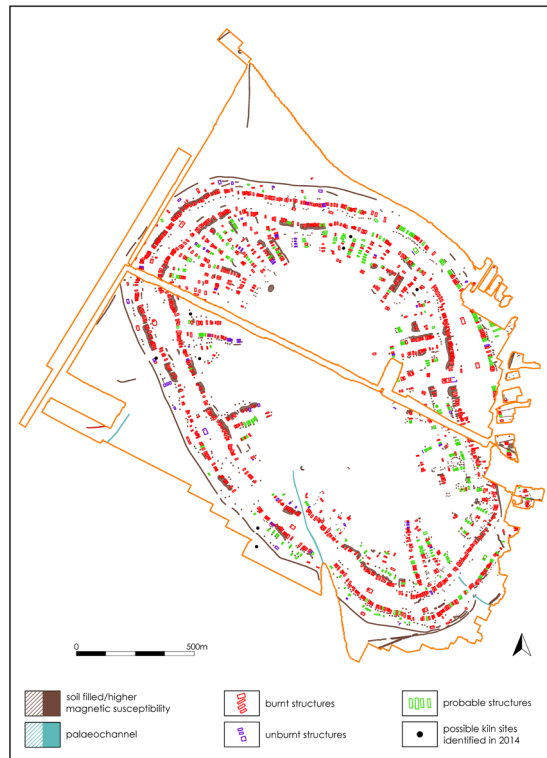


Fig. 2. Geophysical plan of Nebelivka megasite (D. Hale).



Fig 3. An excavated Trypillia house, House A9, Nebelivka, showing the mass of burnt daub (*pleshchadka*) which represents the collapsed remains of the house walls and floors (M. Videiko).

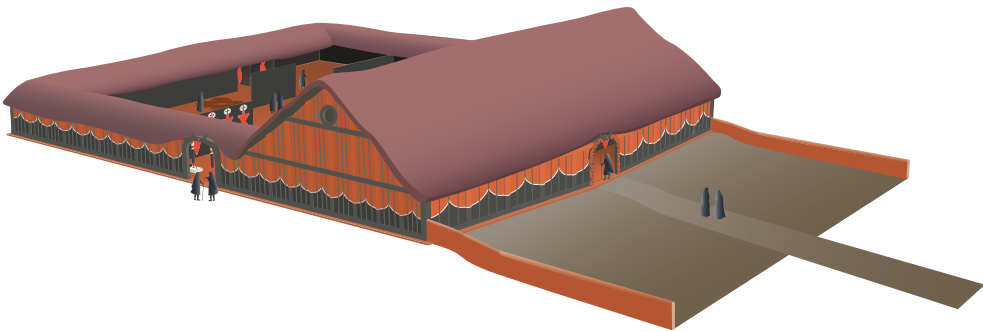


Fig 4. Graphic reconstruction of the mega-structure, Nebelivka (C. Unwin, based on information from S. Johnston).

of which show up well as anomalies against the loess geology on geophysical plans. The Nebelivka plan—the only complete plan of the megasites so far—encompasses 238ha within an interrupted ditch (Fig. 2). Some 1,077 of the 1,445 houses were burnt well enough to produce a mass of burnt daub or *ploshchadka* (Fig. 3). The rest were either burnt poorly, with no compact daub mass, or not at all. A total of over 80 AMS dates allows an accurate dating of the Nebelivka megasite to within two centuries or less, at 3950-3750 BC (Millard, 2020). Population estimates for Nebelivka range from a permanent group of over 8,000 to a more modest assembly site of 4,000 people, mostly visitors.

The geophysical plans produced by Anglo-Ukrainian and Ukrainian-German research teams since 2010 constitute the “second Trypillia megasites methodological revolution” (Chapman et al., 2014a). One of the many results of this breakthrough in the scale and precision of investigation was the discovery of many new megasite features—including unburnt houses, pit clusters, ditches, trackways and larger-than-usual structures that were later termed “assembly houses” (Chapman & Gaydarska, 2016). Fortunately, the largest assembly house in Nebelivka was located in a 2009 geophysical survey, and became the focus of excavation in 2012. Measuring 56 x 20m, the so-called ‘megastructure’ remains the largest known structure in the Trypillia world (Chapman et al., 2014) (Fig. 4) and its excavation provoked wide interest, far beyond the confines of Nebelivka.

Every nation makes political use of its most spectacular archaeological remains, often claiming these to be a representation of all that is beautiful and creative about its present state (Anthony & Chi, 2010; Chapman, 2010). The CT group provides Romania, Moldova and Ukraine with just such a model of an intriguing past—populated with large, spacious timber-framed houses (Fig. 3) and attractive painted pottery (Fig. 5), as seen in popular books about prehistory (e.g., Videiko, 2010). The 2012 excavation of the Nebelivka megastructure attracted wide media attention, with two programmes broadcast on national television and more screenings regionally. In contrast to the project’s low-key beginnings in 2009, the 2012 excavation created a sense of pride among village



a



b



c



d

Fig. 5. Trypillia painted pottery from Nebelivka: (a) Test Pit 21/2; (b) Test Pit 1/3; (c) Test Pit 1/3; (d) House A9 (B. Gaydarska).



Fig. 6. Nebelivka village school (B. Gaydarska).

leaders, notably the mayor Mikola Bobko and the teachers in the local school. The construction of a shower and toilet for the village school that same summer—to ensure good conditions for the large excavation team—made a strong impression on village leaders, who became the proud owners of probably the best-equipped school in rural Ukraine (Fig. 6). These tangible by-products of prehistoric archaeology helped to cement the relationship between the village and the project, with all official visitors to the village being shown the new school facilities.

The income that the project injected into the village economy was also a positive factor, but did not benefit the surrounding villages. These unequal 'benefits' came to a head in 2014, when it provoked a young man from another 'disadvantaged' village to attack the Nebelivka school. As the project continued into 2013, television coverage was limited to regional programmes, more new equipment was provided for the school, and continuing improvements were felt in the village economy, albeit limited to a few entrepreneurial individuals. These were the key background elements before the project's 2014 season, in which the experimental programme was initiated.

The debate over house-burning

To provide further context to the public reception towards the project, we return to the research question of house-burning, central to the issue of a good house death. The discovery of burnt house remains on Neolithic and Copper Age sites is not restricted to the CT group, and is also found widely in the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin (Stevanović, 1984; Kruts, 2003; Tringham, 2005; Chapman, 2015). The debate centres on the cause of the burning—whether deliberate or accidental, for cleaning and fumigation, or due to warlike interventions by neighbours or long-range arsonists (Kruts, 1990; Tasić et al., 2015; Schier, 2008). Trypillia specialists were the first in Central and Eastern Europe to support the idea of deliberate house-burning as a normal ritual (Khvoika 1901; 1904). But there remain large numbers of regional specialists outside Ukraine, Moldova and Romania who deny this explanation (Tasić et al., 2015; Schier, 2008).

A total of 11 experiments in house-building and burning had already been conducted before the Nebelivka project, with rather disappointing results. Only one of the experiments—the Cucuteni house-burnings of 2002-2005—managed to recreate a typical *ploshchadka* of the form encountered on CT sites (Cotiugă, 2009, especially Fig. 12-15). No experiment reproduced the vitrified daub found in many CT burnt houses, indicative of a high temperature of over 1000°C (Burdo, 2011). Thus, there was still no close match between the excavated remains of burnt CT houses and the experimental results. Two other debates over CT houses concerned whether they were single- or double-storey houses (Kolesnikov, 1993; Chernovol, 2012; Kruts, 1990), and whether the houses were subject to low-temperature burning as part of the construction process (Kolesnikov, 1993; Chabaniuk, 2008; Korvin-Piotrovskiy et al., 2012). These considerations led to the formulation of a research design for the Nebelivka experiment.

The origins of the Nebelivka house experiment stemmed from the participation of one Stuart Johnston in summer 2013. Johnston, then a second-year undergraduate at Durham University, but with much experience as a carpenter, had the idea of building two 'Neolithic' houses—one single- and one double-storey—and burning both down to excavate the remains. His idea was put to the Ukrainian co-director Mykhailo Videiko and the mayor Bobko, both

of whom agreed. Johnston wrote his undergraduate dissertation on 'Experimental recreation of house-burning in the Tripolye-Cucuteni culture' (Johnston, 2015). By an accident of publication, the report on the excavation of the burnt house remains (Johnston et al., 2018) appeared before the report on the house-building and burning (Johnston et al., 2019). Full details of the three stages of the experiment are presented in these two reports.

We now turn to the reception of the experiment in Nebelivka and beyond. The framework of this account is a biographical narrative of the birth (building), life (use), death (burning) and after-life (excavation) of the houses. The biographical approach to houses has been current for over 20 years (Bailey, 1997; Hofmann & Smyth, 2013) and seemed particularly appropriate to the Nebelivka experiment.

Birth (building the houses in summer 2014)

As will be readily appreciated by spatial archaeologists, the location of the house-building site was a critical decision. The initial idea was to build the experimental houses on the edge of the village, close to the Trypillia megasite. However, the mayor Bobko (Fig. 7a, right) felt that this left the houses isolated, far from most villagers' circulation patterns, but also potentially put the houses at risk of theft of building materials and, later, of vandalism. We accepted his proposal of building the houses in the centre of the village, close to the mayor's office, kindergarten, health centre and the project laboratory, and also 250m from the school's project base. Bobko made available a plot of land that was a good size and could readily be cleared for building (Fig. 7b).

Participants in the house-building team ranged from the Ukrainian and UK project students who contributed general skills (daub-throwing, wall-plastering and painting) (Fig. 7c-d), young villagers who brought materials to the house site (Fig. 7e), a number of villagers who contributed building skills (construction advice, carpentry and thatching) to the experiment (Fig. 7f) and who helped Johnston (Fig. 7a, left), the 'project manager', who designed the houses, calculated the quantities of materials required, and worked out logistical and pragmatic changes to the design on site. The building operation had

the effect of bringing far more villagers into close interaction with the project team than ever. Most of the younger villagers who brought large quantities of hazel withies and reeds for thatching to the building site had not previously worked for the project as field excavators. In the supply chain, their collection was not only profitable to them as piecework (i.e., they were paid for each bundle of reeds or withies), but also produced a deeper commitment to the operation. Moreover, it took them to parts of their village environment they had rarely, if ever, visited, leading to a deeper appreciation of what the local landscape could offer to builders.

But it was the skilled village builders and their 'team managers' who bonded most closely with the UK project team, developing a genuine sense of identity with, and ownership of, the building operation as it progressed through three weeks in 2014. The difference between Johnston's building techniques and those of the villagers was summarised in a comment by Bobko Junior, a member of the building team, to one of the authors (p.c., Bobko Junior to JCC., August 2014): "We cut timbers to fit by eye; Stuart measures timbers by the millimetre for an exact fit" (Fig. 7g-h). There were clear processes of adaptation by both 'sides' to the methods and techniques of the other. We wish to record the huge personal contribution of Mayor Bobko to the operation; his daily visits were always uplifting and usually the source of excellent advice. With another mayor in place, it is doubtful that the building operation would have succeeded.

With the exception of the timber, most of the materials for the house-building were locally sourced within a few kilometres of the house site in the centre of the village. The pinewood was purchased in the neighbouring town of Novoarkhangelsk and was delivered by lorry to the site. The next bulkiest material was the clay for the daub floors and walls, which came from a local source traditionally used by villagers for house-building (Fig. 8a). The clay was mixed with chaff and water by traditional means on the building site (Fig. 8b). The chaff was brought from the fields (Fig. 8c) and the water was taken from local wells. Two remaining key materials were the hazel withies required to weave panels of wattle (Fig. 8d) and the reeds required for thatching (Fig. 8e). The young villagers started to collect these materials locally—hazel coppices and lakes within the village—but soon exhausted these resources. The collection



Fig. 7. (a) the Nebelivka mayor Mikola Bobko, with the project manager Stuart Johnston; (b) The house site before clearing; (c) Chris Charmley and Tom Wright on building work; (d) Choosing a palette of paint for house decoration; (e) The village collecting team; (f) The building team. From left: Vlad Litkevych, Bobko Junior and Igor Polischuk; (g) Precision measurement by Stuart Johnston; (h) Cutting precise joints. From left: Bobko Junior, Vlad Litkevych and Stuart Johnston (B. Gaydarska).



Fig. 8. (a) The delivery of the clay; (b) Vlad Litkevych collecting chaff; (c) Collecting hazel withies; (d) Sorting reeds for roof thatching; (e) Village children quietly observing the building from the kindergarten; (f) The party after completion of the two houses; (g) The project manager gets his boots dirty mixing clay; (h) The two completed experimental houses (B. Gaydarska).

distances increased to 2-3km, and this was for the construction of just two houses. What became apparent from the building operation was that a Trypillia house was, in effect, a summary statement symbolising all parts of the local environment—mature woodland, areas of coppiced hazel, lakes and rivers, arable fields and the clay-rich quarries and local soils.

During the three-week season, the local kindergarten children kept a close eye on the building (Fig. 8e). In addition, there were many visits to the building site from Nebelivka residents and those from other villages, as well as politicians and administrators from the district capital of Novoarkhangel'sk and the town of Kirovograd, including our colleagues from the Cultural Heritage section (Fig. 9a). In addition to optional drinks in the mayor's office, there were two compulsory stops during the visit—the experimental houses (Fig. 8g), and the shower and toilet block in the school. Hardly any visits took in the excavations at the megasite, some 2.5km from the village centre, with the results in 2014 not being as obviously stunning to the public as during the 2012 megastructure season.

By the end of the three weeks of construction, Nebelivka village had acquired two newly-built 'Neolithic' houses. While everyone in the village was invited to the early evening party celebrating the end of construction, the majority of villagers comprised those most closely involved in the construction itself (Fig. 8f). The satisfaction and pride of the building team made a big impact on a small number of Nebelivkans. A Ukrainian member of the building team, Vlad Litkevych, affixed a pot and a flower to the roof of the one-storey house before the UK team left in August 2014 (Fig. 9b). Interestingly, this symbol of good luck is usually placed on houses just before a family moves in. The notion of 'cultural tourism' enshrined in the experimental houses was still the dream of only the mayor and perhaps some of the senior archaeologists.

Life (intermezzo I, September 2014-April 2015)

Unlike many Ukrainian winters, the winter of 2014/5 was relatively mild apart from early snow in November, with mean temperatures above 0°C until February and above 10°C in March and April 2015. The snowfall was less than usual, and there was



Fig. 9. (a) Visiting delegates. From left: Nadia Lisnyak, Jan Stec, Mykhailo Videiko, Olexander Bosiy, Vita Atamanchuk, John Chapman, Bisserka Gaydarska and Valentin Sobchuk (M. Nebbia); (b) Pot and flower on roof (B. Gaydarska); (c) Plastic sheeting on roof of one-storey house (M. Nebbia).

relatively dry spring weather, with total precipitation below 40mm in March and April 2015.² This meant that both 'Neolithic' houses survived in good condition, with little maintenance required when the project team returned to Nebelivka in spring 2015. One reason for this was that before the first snowfall, Mayor Bobko independently organised for the roof of the one-storey house to be covered in plastic sheeting (Fig. 9c).

The use of the houses over the winter was—perhaps predictably—restricted to short-term visits by two types of people. Children had left reeds, toys and other items in the roof space, which was a challenging place to climb to, but a safe daytime hiding place. Local village youths made probably evening visits, leaving cigarettes, empty cans and bottles and food wrappings. While it is

² Average Weather in Kiev. *Weather Spark*. <https://weatherspark.com/averages/33809/Kiev-Kiev-City-Ukraine>

possible that these visits included youths who had contributed to the building of the houses, there is little sense of commitment to the survival of the 'Neolithic' structures—rather the exploitation of a temporary, informal resource space far from the prying eyes of family. In this sense, it represents two more kinds of public interaction with the project's houses.

A good death? (The burning, May 2015)

The burning of the two experimental Trypillia houses was planned at the end of the first project international conference, after the main part held in the University of Kirovograd on May 12-13, 2015 (Videiko et al., 2015). This visual celebration of the art of house-burning was programmed as a spectacular conclusion to fieldwork in Nebelivka. However, the discussion with Mayor Bobko in advance of the conference led to a drastic change of plans. By early 2015, the mayor's ideas for cultural tourism in Nebelivka had clearly coalesced into a rescue plan for the two houses, both of which should survive as the centrepiece of a plan to attract tourists to the village. His emphasis on the health and safety risks of burning a house so close to the village kindergarten was clearly a strong argument.³ This plan was in direct opposition to the plan to burn both houses as a comparative experiment with later excavation of the burnt remains. This disagreement led to negotiations between the Ukrainian members of the project and Mayor Bobko, which concluded in an 'Anglo-Ukrainian compromise'—the burning of only one house, the two-storey house further from the kindergarten, with the one-storey house remaining as a tourist attraction. Both sides would also seek funding to convert the project lab, part of the upper floor of the kindergarten building, into an exhibition space.⁴

The burning of the two-storey house was still a spectacular climax to the international conference, albeit in diluted form and lacking in an important component of scientific comparison. The project team visited Nebelivka two days before the conference to prepare the house for its 'death'. By then, we had theorised that

³ The distance from the nearer house to the kindergarten fence was actually 18m, and 21m to the kindergarten building.

⁴ Sadly, no funds have yet been agreed to complete this important task.

the good death of a house involved the complete combustion of all of the house components to produce a solid daub mass (the *ploshchadka*). By comparison, a bad house death would have resulted in poor planning of the firing, with incomplete combustion and the absence of a resulting *ploshchadka*. After so many bad experimental house deaths, how would the Nebelivka team manage to achieve complete combustion? There was a sceptical feeling amongst some conference delegates that we would fail to do the job.

We found that there was a straightforward key to the issue: the quantity of fuel used. Johnston's calculations of the interior of the two-storey house showed that there was an area of 30m³ available for fuel. The British co-director temporarily suspended his normally tight financial control and agreed to the sum necessary to purchase such a large quantity of timber. The huge quantity of timber was delivered three days before the conference (Fig. 10a) and it took two full days' work by a team of five led by Vlad Litkevych for the sorting of the timber and its placing in the house in lattice fashion (Fig. 10b). This placing of the timber allowed maximum ventilation paths through the house, whose design also incorporated two windows (Fig. 10c). With the two-storey house prepared for combustion, the team left for the conference, returning to Nebelivka with all of the delegates two days later.



Video 1. Trypillia house burning [QR to watch].



Fig. 10. (a) Stacks of firewood next to houses before burning; (b) Filling in the house with firewood; (c) Vlad Litkevych next to one of the house windows; (d) The two-storey house after 30 minutes of burning; (e) Village audience, dressed up to the nines; (f) Ladies in costume with the secretary of the Kyiv Institute of Archaeology Alexei Korvin-Piotrovskiy; (g) Crowds before the burning starts; (h) Crowds before the burning began (B. Gaydarska).

On May 14, 2015, the weather was overcast but mainly dry, with a light breeze from the east. Bobko organised a ceremony to initiate the house-burning, offering all the guests the traditional gift of bread and salt for good luck. He also threw a bottle of vodka onto the piles of waiting timber—like the smashing of a bottle on the bow of a ship being launched. It did not break, but got stuck in the woodpile.

The second stage of the conference presentations took place in the village hall at the same time as the house-burning. By noon, many of the visitors were eagerly anticipating the conflagration. The house was ignited at 12.50pm and continued to burn until mid-afternoon of the following day. A total of 31 stages were recorded for the conflagration, focusing primarily on the main stages in the collapse of the house (Video and Fig. 10d). Within 40 minutes, the roof thatch had burned and the structure had collapsed. After an hour and 15 minutes, the structure of the loft and its ceiling had burnt down. It took a further five minutes before the first section of one of the walls had fallen out. The vast majority of the structural parts of the house had fallen within four hours of ignition (Johnston et al., 2019).

Apart from the 50 or so Kirovograd Conference delegates, about 40 villagers and 30 guests from at least five other villages were present to witness the conflagration (Fig. 10e-h). Many of the audience had dressed up specially (Fig. 10e), some in traditional costume (Fig. 10f). Men, women and children were all present, although there were no children viewing the event from the safety of the Nebelivka kindergarten. The Kirovograd Regional TV made a film, with several journalists writing for local and regional newspapers (Fig. 12). The Novoarkhangelsk Fire Brigade was in attendance, with three firemen waiting next to their 'modern' fire engine (Fig. 11a-b) parked by the side of—and clearly protecting—the kindergarten.

The burning of a timber-framed, wattle-and-daub house is a special event, with spectacular visual, sound and smell effects. The video gives an impression of a dynamic, colourful and ever-changing performance. The noises of the burning thatch, the crash of a collapsed wall, the hissing of still-damp timber and the roaring noise of burning floor timbers all contributed to an aural spectacle



Fig. 11. (a) The Novoarkhangelsk fire engine, with firemen and the Ukrainian project co-director, Mykhailo Videiko; (b) The fire engine and firemen with mayor Mikola Bobko; (c) A visitor takes a selfie in front of the house; (d) Visitors taking pictures in front of the house (B. Gaydarska).



Fig. 12. Scan of Novoarkhangelsk newspaper article, Kolos, 16th May 2015 (No. 37 [10729]).

that every spectator appreciated. The smells of different elements on fire—especially the thatch— would have evoked memories of other burning events. For one author (JCC), there was the memory of an experimental kiln-firing that started at 6pm in the village of Vădastra, South Romania, and continued until midnight, when the maximum temperature of 980°C was reached (Gheorghiu, 2011). Others may have been in the war zone in south-eastern Ukraine, where many houses have been destroyed in the Russian invasion (2014-present). Yet others may have experienced the burning of houses in the recent Balkan Wars, perhaps in Bosnia or Srpska Krajina (1991-2001).

The house-burning was such a spectacular event that many witnesses wanted to record the conflagration in order to be part of the event. Thus, many visitors to the village took photos of the burning house, with many people included in these photos (Fig. 11c-d). The 'reach' of this event must have increased as the stories and images spread through formal and informal networks, from village to village in South Central Ukraine. In the days following the house-burning, a complete stranger approached two of the authors (JCC and BG) in a bank in Novoarkhangelsk and identified us as the organisers of the house-burning. The gentleman went out to buy us a copy of the newspaper in which an article about the house-burning had been published (Fig. 12).

Another aspect of the house-burning event was the way in which the Nebelivka villagers used the occasion not only to talk up the reputation of their village, but also to interact with friends and relatives from other villagers who had come to witness the event. In this sense, the conflagration acted rather like the visit of a fair or a circus to a town surrounded by rural villages, whose communities would use the occasion to meet friends and relatives they did not often encounter. It is hard to quantify the significance of these encounters but they must have been important to the participants.

The positive archaeological result of the house-burning was that the 'Neolithic' two-storey house burnt down completely, with signs of the production of a fully-formed *ploshchadka* already on the day after the fire had died down. But the full effects of the house-burning, archaeological or other, would have to wait until its remains were uncovered two years later.

Life in the one-storey house (intermezzo II, June 2015-July 2017)

It was difficult to decide on the length of the time interval between the burning of the Nebelivka house and the excavation of its burnt remains. We wanted to leave a decent interval so that some of the processes of interaction between the soil and the burnt clay mass would have started. But leaving the burnt house remains too long risked losing the little remaining momentum of a project which had 'officially' wound down in 2015. In the end, we agreed that a two-year period was a good compromise.

In that period, the villagers made the entirely independent decision to protect the burnt house remains by burying them under 10-20cm of soil, which had to be collected by JCB and transported onto the building site. This act of kindness—in part also showing reverence for, and solidarity with the burnt house—created a local soil environment similar to that of a barrow (Fig. 13). The standing one-storey house was maintained and shown off to official visitors to the mayor's office, even though (nocturnal) activities similar to those in the first 'intermezzo' continued with the same depositional results.



Fig. 13. Covering of soil to form a barrow over the burnt remains of the experimental two-storey house (J. Chapman).

Afterlife (the excavation of the experimental burnt house remains, summer 2017)

The last excavation season of the project in Nebelivka took place against the background of village-scale political change. Bobko, who had been the mayor for three terms, had stepped down from office and had been replaced by the former acting director of the village school, Alla Nikolaevna, whose enthusiasm for the project was less overt (Fig. 14a). This change of circumstance did not, however, stop Bobko from playing an active, supportive role at the time of the excavations.

The excavation team had been selected from the project members most closely connected to the house-building and burning—the authors of this article as well as three new team members, Ksenia Bondar, Oleksandr Diachenko and Patricia Voke. This meant that the excavation season possessed the atmosphere of a reunion, with villagers and diggers alike delighted to renew acquaintances one last time. But the size of the team and the logistical requirements of living out of the village meant that interactions were limited to the mayors and those closely involved in the project from 2012 to 2015. One example was the project driver, Seryozha, from the village, making a special visit to see the excavations. Such visits also showed the kindness of several villagers—especially Alina and her family—in bringing snacks during the excavation breaks and, on one special occasion, the visit of Dr. Dmytro Chernovol and his colleagues to see the excavation and hold a barbeque (Fig. 14b).

The excavations demonstrated that, for the team, the experimental burnt house had experienced a good house death—all of the remains of a *ploshchadka* one may expect to find on the excavation of a burnt Trypillia house were present, including the high-temperature marker of vitrified daub. It confirmed the idea which the team had developed that a good death meant the complete firing of a house, which had been achieved in approximately two-thirds of the Nebelivka houses. It is an interesting archaeological observation that the burnt remains of one burnt Trypillia house in 10 formed a mound that would have been visible on the surface of the site (Fig. 15). So, with the passing of time, a cumulative increase in mound-formation gave the settlement the appearance

of a collective cemetery, until, by the end of the occupation, perhaps as many as 100 mounds were spread across the site. It is thus ironic that the village had decided to protect their own burnt house remains by forming a protective mound which we then had to excavate in 2017.



a



b



c

Fig. 14. (a) The excavation team. From left: Marco Nebbia, John Chapman, Bisserka Gaydarska, former mayor Mikola Bobko, Oleksandr Diachenko and Stuart Johnston (P. Voke); (b) the new mayor Alla Nikolaevna at the time of the burnt house excavation (P. Voke); (c) Barbeque with Dymtro Chernovol and colleagues (J. Chapman).



Fig. 15. Mound formed of burnt house debris, Test Pit 22/4 (J. Chapman).



Fig. 16. Stanislav Terna making an ethno-archaeological study of a modern abandoned house, Nebelivka village (V. Litkevych).

Discussion and conclusions

But was it *their* burnt house? To what extent did the burnt house and the standing one-storey house really belong to the villagers of Nebelivka? There was surely many who never even saw the 'Neolithic' houses that their fellow villagers and our team had built. However, it is by no means obvious that villagers who had not seen the houses had also never heard of the house-burning and the celebrations that that event entailed. This passive knowledge, which does not create the basis for a personal attachment to the 'Trypillia' houses, nevertheless contributes to the current identity of Nebelivka, differentiating it from other nearby villages which do not have any burnt or standing experimental houses in their central space. While actors such as the former mayor draw heavily on the houses for future planning, others may ignore the houses or use their presence to stimulate memories of the days of the active project seasons in their village. It is the day of the house-burning that evokes the most vivid memories of the project team's sojourns in the village.

What cannot be doubted is that the upstanding house gives a far better impression of the nature of a 'Neolithic' house than any of the excavated features we uncovered in the four excavation seasons; very few visitors were ever taken to the project's excavations of the megasite and, out of season, there are no visible features on the vast post-socialist fields of the village. To what extent the villagers associated the 'Neolithic' houses with their own homes is not clear; but the project has conducted ethno-archaeological studies of abandoned modern houses in the village and found the use of several similar building techniques (Jerna, 2014) (Fig. 16).

The third general point concerns the basis for social relations between the villagers and the project team. We previously mentioned the gains for the village economy that the project brought to Nebelivka. While there were evident signs of warmth and hospitality towards the project team in the first three seasons, with the emergence of several long-lasting friendships (2009, 2012-13), there was also the underlying sense that financial motives were underpinning many of the village-team interactions. This is hardly surprising, since the village was not well-off and there were few opportunities for employment unless villagers were prepared

to move (far) from their homes. Thus, the owners of the two shops/bars always filled their fridges with beer and cheese for the arrival of the excavation team. But there was a different feel about social relations in the 2014 season, with far greater interaction as measured in the number of villagers involved with the building team and the intensity of those relations. Thus, alongside the financial interests of village actors, there developed a more communitarian basis of cooperation between building team and villagers, based upon the common purpose of building the 'Neolithic' houses. This had evaporated by 2015 and in the final 'excavation' season of 2017. It is clear to us, therefore, that the deeper social relations that in some way transcended financial motives functioned only during close co-operation for the singular goal of house construction.

There are currently five villages in Ukraine within whose territories lie the largest Trypillia megasites—in order of site size, Taljanki (320ha), Chychykozivka (300ha), Dobrovodi (250ha), Nebelivka (238ha) and Majdanetske (200ha) (Nebbia 2017). Nebelivka is the only village in this group with a reconstructed 'Neolithic' house standing in their central area. The village of Legedzine, 3km from Taljanki, has a museum with Trypillia material mostly, but not solely, from the Taljanki megasite and two full-size 'Neolithic' house reconstructions. So Nebelivka can claim to have a special place in the modern presentation of Trypillia archaeology to the public. The extent to which this is further elaborated in the future depends on a combination of funding and local commitment.

So can we now answer the question posed at the start of this article: what constitutes a good house death? For the excavation team, the creation of a burnt daub mass (*ploshchadka*) defined the good death of a Trypillia house, as created by the methodical filling of the house with large quantities of dry firewood and the burning of the house on a dry, windy day in front of an audience of dozens, if not hundreds of people—villagers and guests from other settlements. For modern Nebelivkans and other villagers, the question of a good house death would make no sense: instead, a good personal death would relate to the confirmation of the place of the deceased in their local community or the wider community. For everyone, holding onto a positive collective experience and memory of the event is what makes for a good death, and this is

no different for a Neolithic house. There is no reason to suppose that the response of the modern audience to the 'Neolithic' house-burning was dramatically different from that in megasites 6,000 years ago. Mourners would have attended the burning as a 'wake' for part of their community, a collective rite of passage, as one may describe funerals in general. The cycle of building a house with its final destruction in mind was probably also the Trypillian practice, just as many artefacts, such as fired clay figurines, were made to be readily fragmented (Chapman, 2000). There is perhaps more to the notion of community continuity in these matters than meets the eye.

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