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The origins of house and home?

Trevor Watkins

Introduction

In the two seasons of excavation at the site of Qermez Dere in northern Iraq (see Fig. 1) the centre of interest in one of the two areas of excavation has been an extremely early and unusual house, which was repeatedly re-modelled and rebuilt. The site is that of a small settlement belonging to the end of the epi-palaeolithic period and the very early aceramic neolithic, approximately 8500 to 7900 bc (uncalibrated radiocarbon) (Watkins and Baird 1987; Watkins, Baird and Betts, forthcoming; Watkins, Baird, Betts and Nesbitt, forthcoming). At that early date and in that part of the Near East the architecture of Qermez Dere is without precedent; only the site of Nemrik (see Kozłowski and Kempisty, this volume), whose first occupation may be at the end of the ninth millennium, provides relevant parallels. The excavations have been mounted by the Department of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, at the suggestion of the Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage, because the site was seriously damaged and in danger of obliteration.

The context of social and economic processes within which Qermez Dere should be viewed, which started life as the 'neolithic revolution', is still one of lively research interest. Early research, supported by the then new radio-carbon dating method, pushed back the beginning of the neolithic to 8000 bc and beyond, but a development of the last decade has been the recognition that an increasing body of data points to later dates for the systematic cultivation of plants and especially the full domestication of animals than was originally thought when sites were first labelled 'neolithic'. Sophisticated combinations of harvesting, gathering, hunting and culling – Flannery's 'broad spectrum economy' – can now be seen to have continued long into the period technically labelled neolithic, and settlement, once thought specific to the neolithic and later periods, has become a regular feature of the preceding epi-palaeolithic. The distinction between the neolithic and the preceding period is no longer based on changes in subsistence strategy and the adoption of sedentary village life but once more on formal differences in material culture, particularly the chipped stone industries.

This essay is an attempt to explore something of the nature of the differences between the two periods at a level deeper than those formal differences. It seeks to define one of the important contributory steps taken in the period before the total adoption of cultivation and herding. The assumption made is that in any given area there is no perceptible difference in the subsistence strategies of the later epi-palaeolithic and earliest neolithic periods. Consequently, any significant difference should be sought in the cultural, social or

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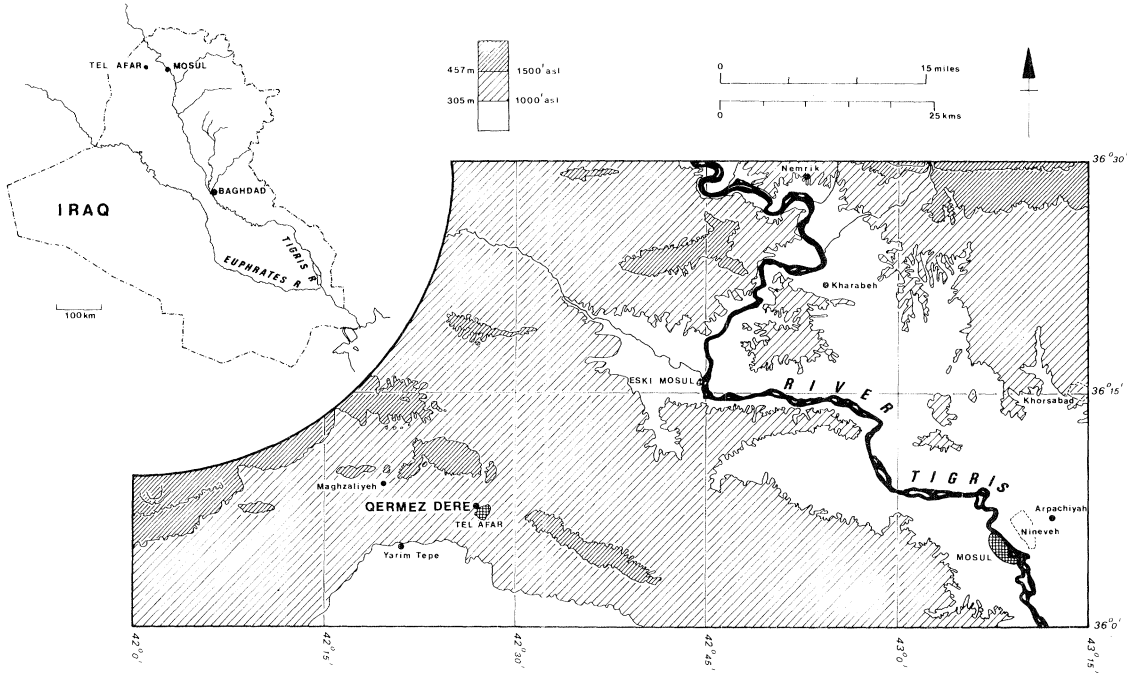

Figure 1 Map showing location of Qermez Dere.

behavioural aspects of these communities. It is the thesis of this essay that Qermez Dere shows important architectural developments taking place at the beginning of the neolithic period, about 8250–8000 bc, developments which signify important social changes. These changes, it is argued, are signified in the title of the essay, a change of view from the house as shelter, the centre of certain everyday activities, to the house as home, the centre of the family and the focus for the representation of appropriate symbolic values.

Archaeological background

Although Qermez Dere is very severely damaged and only small parts of it have survived for excavation, it seems that the site can be divided into two distinctly different zones on the basis of the different types of deposit. Around the margin of the wadi and the south side of the site the deposit is fine loam containing occupation debris; the houses which form the subject of this paper are located in the southern part of the site. The deposits in the central, northeast and eastern parts of the site derive from a red-brown clayey marl; in the soundings so far undertaken there is no trace of houses, but there is a concentration of heavy food-processing equipment, especially boulder mortars, suggesting that this part of the settlement may have been an open, communal activity area.

In the preserved part of the south margin of the settlement a deposit of at least 1.5m had accumulated before the construction of the earliest house so far located. This house and its two successors were subterranean. The stratigraphy of this part of the site has been defined

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in terms of seven successive phases. The three phases of house-building and occupation are the last three in the sealed stratigraphic sequence. The four early phases are represented by a series of super-imposed strata, of which the lowest two phases are epi-palaeolithic in date.

The houses

The remains of three subterranean constructions have been excavated (Figs 2 and 3). They are very similar in construction, consisting of a single chamber formed by plastering the sides and base of a large hole cut into the earlier levels or the fill of the previous building.

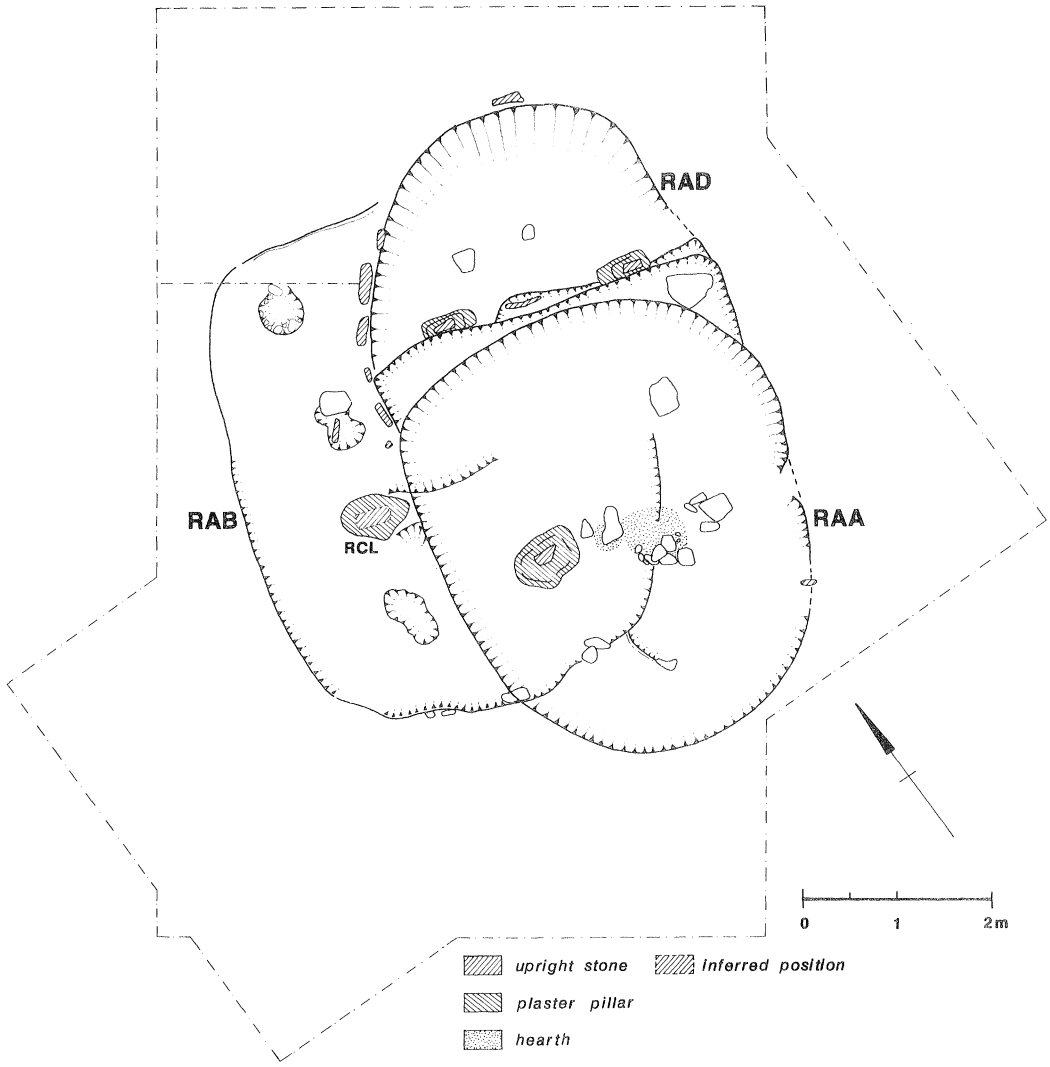

Figure 2 Simplified plan of the three houses.

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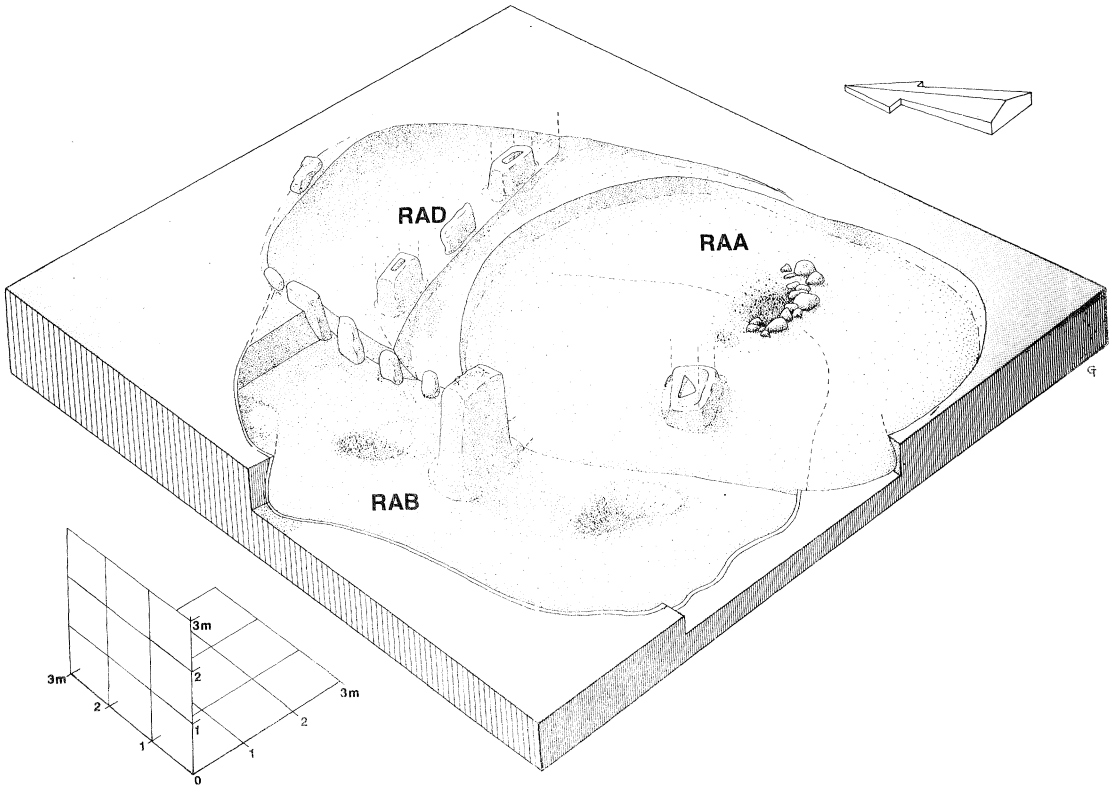

Figure 3 Scaled perspective semi-reconstruction of the houses.

Each replaced the other when the old house was abandoned and destroyed. The three plans overlap, so that the process of replacement involved filling up the old house and then re-cutting a hole for the new one.

The shape of the chambers is between round and rectangular. None is truly circular (though two are rather egg-shaped), and none has a clearly articulated corner angle; only one sub-phase of one house has a reasonably straight side. There is little evidence of above-ground structure or of roofing, since the fills of the abandoned chambers mostly consist of deliberately introduced soil and other debris. It is therefore not possible to reconstruct the upper parts of the buildings, even to the extent of knowing whether the houses were fully subterranean. None of the chambers shows evidence of the means of access; there are no doorways or steps down the inside of the walls. The better preserved houses at Nemrik, only about 60km away on the Tigris, were probably entered by means of a free ladder reaching into the floor area (cf. p. 355).

At Qermez Dere the original construction (so far known), house RAB, was built in a roughly rectangular hole at least 0.85m and perhaps more than 1.5m deep. The surface of the cut was faced first with a red-brown clay and then with a thin coat of fine white lime plaster. The slightly concave floor was finished with the same white plaster and had an area of around 24 square metres. Where house RAA overlay it, much of the floor of RAB has been damaged and is not reconstructible, but the west side of the house is better preserved.

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Here there were four holes in the plaster floor in a line parallel with the long axis of the chamber. None of these has yet been investigated, but one, labelled RCL on the plan (Fig. 2), is fairly certainly the place from which had been broken a tall standing slab of stone coated in red clay and white plaster (restored in Fig. 3). Around the foot of the pillar the floor had been modelled to smooth the transition from floor to pillar, and a ridge in the floor was carried from the base of the pillar towards the centre of the chamber.

The pillar was found in pieces where it had fallen or been felled when the house was demolished and filled in. It had been re-modelled, for inside its outer coat of plaster and tauf was found another thin layer of plaster. In its final form the pillar was a simple slab (Fig. 4b), but in its earlier form (Fig. 4a) it had tapered upwards and been rounded at the sides. Near the top of the slab the earlier coating of tauf had been modelled into a definite shape, rather like a pair of shoulders with raised arms truncated to the merest stumps. In both its forms the pillar had something modelled in plaster-coated tauf upon its top, the shattered pieces of which were found beyond the end of the fallen pillar.

When house RAB had been demolished and its chamber filled, it was replaced by another, similar house (RAD) constructed in a hole which was less deep and somewhat smaller in floor area (about 18 square metres). Only about half of house RAD had survived, for when its successor (RAA) was constructed its southern half was dug away. This surviving part is elliptical in plan.

Across the long axis of house RAD there were three constructions in a line. At the centre was a large, rough slab of stone, set on edge into the plaster of the floor. To either side was a clay pillar built around a stone core and finished with the usual white plaster. The cores of the two pillars were long slabs of limestone, firmly set into pits well below the floor of the house. The grey-green clay modelled around the stone cores was the same as that used in the construction of the sides and floor of the chamber. Both pillars had been truncated, almost certainly by bulldozing. Thus it is not possible to reconstruct their original heights or the features of their upper parts. At some time the floor was re-plastered and the two pillars enlarged.

When house RAD was filled in, its successor (RAA) was constructed over its southern part and the eastern part of RAB; the floor level of RAA was dug lower than that of the earlier RAD. At first the north end of RAA was formed immediately south of the line of pillars and standing stone in RAD, its side walls adopting exactly the same alignment as those of its predecessor. At a later stage RAA was re-modelled, its north wall becoming a broad curve, giving the chamber an egg-shaped plan about 4.8 by 4m and some 19 square metres in area.

House RAA was coated with grey-green clay finished with the usual fine white plaster. In the centre of the floor was a scorched area with a few stones set in the plaster around it. On an earlier floor there was an equivalent hearth a little to the west, consisting of a neat circle of scorched plaster about 30cm across. Close to the hearth was a single clay pillar built about a stone core. It was preserved only to a low height and had been truncated. The upper part of the stone was in fact found, still with some clay adhering to it, in a nearby pile of bulldozer debris. This pillar seems to have been of a different shape from the others; the stone core was a columnar piece of rock rather than a slab, and the pillar itself was of an irregular shape.

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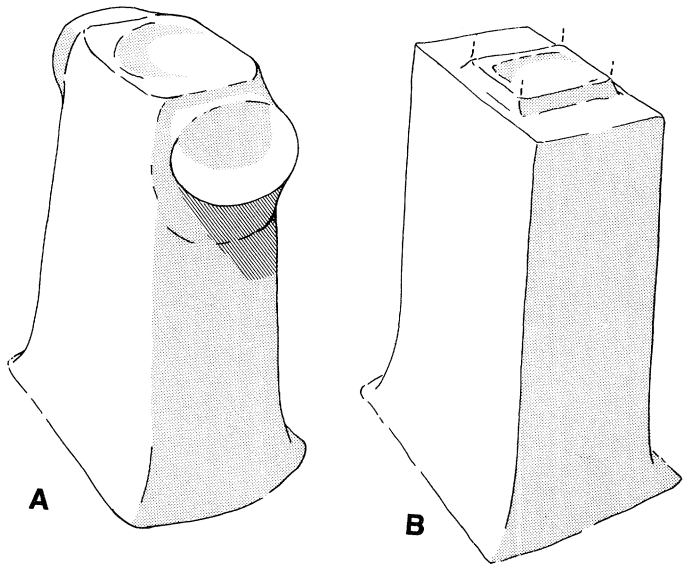

Figure 4 The reconstructed original (a) and final (b) forms of the plastered clay pillar in house RAB.

In 1987 six human crania were found in the northern half of this chamber. These had been placed in the lowest fill, not on the plaster of the floor itself.

Recurrent features

Several features of the buildings, their construction, fitting and use, are striking and merit discussion. One is the activities surrounding the replacement of one building by another, which embrace both the destruction and construction processes. A second is the design of the interior, which can inform us about the uses which were thought appropriate.

All three phases of building and use were terminated by the obliteration of the old building. It is notable that replacement was not effected by the simple expedient of finding a new site for the new chamber, but apparently required that the old chamber be filled so that the new chamber could be constructed on very much the same spot. It is also notable that the fill of the old chamber was not derived from debris from the destroyed superstructure and roof (with the exception of the first house, RAB, where some possible roof and superstructure debris was identified); nor were discarded chambers used as convenient dumping places for midden. Of course, if the houses were completely subterranean there would have been no superstructure to remove; but at least in the cases of houses RAD and RAA the fill was homogeneous, and there was no trace of any material which might have been a mud or clay roof.

The implication is that the process of demolition was deliberate and expensive of effort, involving the importation of many tons of soil. Because the new chamber was to be constructed substantially in the same position, it also required that the fill of the old chamber was sufficiently compact not to cause the collapse of part of the new chamber's wall. It also deserves mention that the lower part of the fill may contain objects not found

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commonly elsewhere on the site and therefore presumably incorporated deliberately. In house RAB a number of large bones of large animals, which were otherwise very uncommon, were recorded close to (but not on) the floor of the chamber; there were also several bone pins and needles, uncommon elsewhere. In house RAA the only stone beads found in the 1987 season occurred in the lowest part of the fill of the chamber. Although there was no observable difference in the general material used throughout the fill, it would appear that the beginning of the filling of an abandoned chamber was the occasion for depositing certain special things. This conclusion is supported by the observation that at the beginning of the filling process in houses RAA and RAB a single slab of stone was propped upright with other, smaller stones in the southern half of the chamber.

None of the houses was abandoned and replaced because of structural weakness or decay so far as could be determined. Indeed, it was notable that the houses were not only carefully made but were also carefully maintained. Each of the three houses exhibited repeated patching or replacing of the plaster and even the primary clay coating. House RAA in particular showed at least three substantial sub-phases, each of which involved re-modelling of the northern end of the house. Two of these are illustrated in Figure 3. In general, then, there was a constant attention to details of maintenance and a fondness for re-modelling.

Another token of this constant attention was the cleanliness of all three chambers. Great care was taken in the excavation to isolate the last few centimetres of material above a plaster floor in order to pick up any occupation debris which might be evidence for the activities which went on within a chamber. In no case was it possible to distinguish an occupation deposit from the general fill of a chamber, and there was no record of artefacts found on the floor (as opposed to within the fill). In addition to the lack of debris related to domestic occupation there was a general absence of the kind of equipment associated with normal domestic activities such as food-processing. The mortars, pestles and various rubbers and grinders which are found elsewhere on the site were totally absent from the houses; in the last of the three houses, RAA, which was the only one to have been found with its floors intact, there was a small, central hearth, but that amounted only to a scorched area of plaster.

While domestic equipment may have been extraordinarily sparse, there was one type of fixture which was present in all three of the houses. Each house had at least one plastered clay pillar somewhere in the middle of its floor. Although the pillars in houses RAA and RAD had been truncated by recent surface damage to the site, the fallen pillar in house RAB gives some idea of the original imposing appearance of these fittings. The pillar in RAB was at least 1.40m tall, discounting whatever was modelled in clay on its top. This pillar tells us that such fixtures were not structural, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that their function was not connected with the execution of the everyday house-keeping activities of the occupants. The pair of pillars and the single standing stone in house RAD show us how these fittings were intended to be grouped; their importance must have been considerable for they stood in the centre of the chamber in a row, which did nothing to improve circulation or facilitate the utilisation of space.

Finally, the deposition of human crania in the last building in the series when it was abandoned and destroyed is another act expressing an attitude towards the house which goes far beyond that necessary at the simple utilitarian level of removing an unwanted hole

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in the ground. The crania await reconstruction and detailed study; as recovered from the soil matrix of the house's fill they were too fragile to handle. The six crania represent individuals of various ages (one at least is a juvenile). None has a mandible and many of the maxillary teeth are also missing, having fallen out post mortem. All that can be said at present is that they must have been exposed for a considerable time before they were brought to their final resting-place, and that final resting-place was in the primary deposition of fill on the floor of the last house to be occupied. How that house-site relates to other houses and the settlement as a whole is unclear at present, but will be the subject of further investigation in a future season. It is hard to avoid wondering whose were these skulls which were thought appropriate to take up occupation of a house whose living inhabitants were finally leaving it.

Discussion

At present there is little if any epi-palaeolithic material from northern Mesopotamia with which the earliest neolithic of Qermez Dere can be compared. Qermez Dere shows that a final epi-palaeolithic is locally present, and the earliest stratum at Der Hall, a multi-period tell-site on the Tigris northwest of Mosul which was sounded as a salvage operation by a Japanese expedition, was laid down earlier in the epi-palaeolithic (Ohnuma and Matasumoto 1989). It is only in the Levant that extensive excavation has taken place on open settlements of the advanced epi-palaeolithic period. Comparison over such a great distance can be justified only because no geographically close comparison is possible and also because it may be argued on the evidence of Qermez Dere and Tell Der Hall that the epi-palaeolithic of north Iraq was at the same cultural stage of development as that in the Levant.

The Natufian culture of the south Levant and its congeners exhibit a general architectural similarity. Houses were substantial constructions which involved the digging of shallow semi-subterranean floor areas and their enclosure with circular or oval walls (Bar-Yosef 1981: 401). Although lime plaster was already employed in the epi-palaeolithic, Natufian houses were not finished throughout with a plaster surface as were the houses at Qermez Dere. More significantly, they were not used in the same way. It is a regular characteristic of Natufian houses to have plenty of food-processing equipment around a prominent, central hearth (cf. Eynan ('Ain Mallaha): Perrot 1966), and it seems also that their floors were allowed to accumulate a great deal of occupational debris of all kinds. Edwards (forthcoming) has analysed tens of thousands of pieces of chipped stone from the floor area of one house at Wadi Hammeh 27, and Valla (forthcoming) is able to undertake a quantified locational analysis of the different classes of finds from one house at Eynan.

The construction of symbolic fittings and wall decorations and the general architectural elaboration of the house are features which made Çatal Hüyük in central Anatolia unique in the 1960s (Mellaart 1967; Hodder 1988), but which are now becoming common-place in the later aceramic neolithic from the south of Jordan (e.g., Basta: Nissen, Muheisen and Gebel, forthcoming; and 'Ain Ghazal: Rollefson and Simmons 1988; Banning and Byrd 1987) to south-eastern Anatolia (e.g., Nevalı Cori: Hauptmann, forthcoming; or Cayönü:

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Özdoğan and Özdoğan, forthcoming; Schirmer, this volume), but their discovery at Qermez Dere pushes back the date of their inception to a point where the contrast in use of buildings between the epi-palaeolithic and the neolithic becomes stark. Aurenche (1980) has also drawn attention to the architectural elaboration at Tell Mureybet early in the aceramic neolithic (noting, incidentally, the almost total absence of tools and equipment from the building). Similarly the reverent and careful treatment of detached skulls and their placing in houses is something known from many sites in the Levantine aceramic neolithic, but now Qermez Dere and the Khiamian settlement of Netiv Hagdud in the Jordan Valley (Bar-Yosef, forthcoming; Bar-Yosef, Gopher and Goring-Morris 1980) show that the tradition goes back to the very beginning of that period. It should be clear by now that the author takes the view that a building housing symbolic elements is not necessarily a shrine, and that a house can be consecrated to everyday domestic purposes without leaving convenient archaeological traces. The case for the Qermez Dere houses remains ambiguous, of course, until further excavation shows whether these structures are the domestic norm or the exception.

The architectural and associated changes which occur at the beginning of the early aceramic neolithic at Qermez Dere, then, may be summarised as being concerned with the re-definition of the role of the house, involving the exclusion of certain food-processing activities and an emphasis on labour-intensive care and cleanliness. The house was now the appropriate place for symbolic constructions, and ultimately for the reception of the skulls of the long dead. In short the house, formerly the shelter for general everyday activities, was being perceived as something more than utilitarian, as the home, the private and concrete expression of a particular family group. Studies of contemporary sedentary hunter-gatherers have shown that they differ considerably from the mobile hunter-gatherer bands which have become familiar to prehistoric archaeologists; various writers (Testart 1982a, 1982b; Woodburn 1980, 1982; Binford 1980) have stressed their interest in investment, or delayed return, and their clear (and to us very recognisable) perceptions of property and territory. Bender (1978) discusses how changes in attitude towards production can be of significance among hunter-gatherer groups. In a recent study Murray (1986) has shown how such studies of recent groups can be applied to the epi-palaeolithic groups of the Levant, but it is suggested here that the implications of the transition from mobile, fluid, hunter-gatherer bands to permanent, sedentary village communities which took place in the epi-palaeolithic period were being realised and articulated only late in the ninth millennium bc at the beginning of the neolithic period.

Another aspect of the recognition of property and territory is the potential for conflicts of interest. It is perhaps not a coincidence, therefore, that the beginning of the aceramic neolithic throughout the Levant, and now in north Mesopotamia, is the time when the projectile point series begins with the Khiamian point as its first manifestation. Since there does not seem to be a change in the species of animals exploited or in the strategies of exploitation, it is necessary to seek an explanation for the projectile points in some cultural or social rather than economic change. That the change may be seen in the emergence of formalised inter-group conflict is suggested also by the discovery of several skeletons among those buried in the settlement at Nemrik with projectile points embedded in them (Kozłowski, pers. comm.; see also p. 349, this volume) and the massive construction of defences at Tell es-Sultan, ancient Jericho, early in the eighth millennium bc.

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However, the main interest of this essay has been the novel architecture of Qermez Dere and in particular the possible interpretation of the contrast between these buildings and their immediate epi-palaeolithic predecessors of the Levant. There is no dramatic change of plan such as Flannery (1972) sought to interpret in contrasting circular and rectangular structures, which also forms an important division in Aurenche's classification (Aurenche 1981). Here, following on the pioneer example of Barbara Bender (1978), who exhorted archaeologists to view the hunter-gatherer/farmer transition in 'a social perspective', the enquiry has started from a desire to use architectural form and detail of the buildings in order to discern aspects of social and cultural behaviour (cf. Banning and Byrd, forthcoming). When the Cauvins examined the question of the origins of agriculture (Cauvin and Cauvin 1983), they argued that no technological, biological or demographic explanation on its own was enough. They concluded that a complex, multi-factorial cause should be sought, whose key elements would be found in social and cultural change. This essay has attempted to suggest that a social and cultural change begun in the epi-palaeolithic was consolidated at the very beginning of neolithic times and finds its expression in significant changes in domestic architecture, the treatment of the dead and the development of armaments.

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Abstract

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The origins of house and home?

Excavations in course at the site of Qermez Dere in north Iraq have revealed a stratified sequence dating from the end of the epi-palaeolithic period into the earliest centuries of the early neolithic. A sequence of subterranean houses belonging in the latter part of that time-span (8250–7900 bc) is remarkable for the elaborate care and effort spent on their construction, maintenance and demolition/replacement. Each house was kept very clean, and there is a distinct lack of debris and even the equipment of everyday life. Each house was equipped with one or more non-structural clay pillars. At the end of the series six weathered human crania were placed on the floor of the last house as it was being obliterated. These very early neolithic houses are contrasted with those of the preceding epi-palaeolithic of the Levant, and it is suggested that they represent an important change in the perception of the house as home and the focus of attitudes and activities of symbolic social significance concerned with the conservation of property and the continuity and solidarity of the owning family.

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