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NOTES ON THE CULT BUILDINGS OF NORTHERN MESOPOTAMIA IN THE ACERAMIC NEOLITHIC PERIOD*

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I. Introduction

Before the series of discoveries of monumental Upper Mesopotamian communal ritual structures, the question of the construction of cult buildings during the Aceramic Neolithic period remained unresolved. The research conducted at the existing Aceramic Neolithic sites in Northern Syria, Iraq, and especially Southeastern Turkey dating to the tenth through the eighth millennia B.C. (fig. 1) provides evidence for the existence of public cult buildings during the period under discussion. The reports and publications on excavations at Hallan Çemi, Jerf el-Ahmar, Tell 'Abr 3, Dja'de el-Mughara, Nevali Çori, Çayönü Tepesi, and Göbekli Tepe are extremely informative.[1] Analysis of the reports and other publications provides an opportunity to trace the development of the general principles of the erection of cult structures in early Neolithic settlements in Northern Mesopotamia.

II. A Review of the Evidence for the Construction of Cult Buildings in Northern Mesopotamia

Hallan Çemi, in Southeastern Turkey, is a small permanent village dating to the beginning of the PPNA period, that is, the last few centuries of the ninth millennium B.C. (uncalibrated). This is one of the oldest settlements in Northern Mesopotamia known today. The discovery of various materials indicates the existence of a complex, nonegalitarian form of social and economic structure there[2] and thus contributes to the evidence for the possibility of public structures having existed in the settlement.

Structures A and B in the uppermost building level differ from others excavated at the site in that they appear to have been differently planned, significantly larger in size, and

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In the footnotes works are cited by the author's name with the year of publication in brackets. For complete bibliographical information, see my bibliography, pp. 98–101 below.

[1] See Çambel [1985]; E. Coqueignot [2008]; H. Hauptmann [1993] and [1999]; A. Özdoğan [1999]; M. Özdoğan and A. Özdoğan [1990] and [1998]; Rosenberg et al. [1998]; Rosenberg [1999]; M. Rosenberg and R. W. Redding [2000]; W. Schirmer [1983] and [1990]; K. Schmidt [1998], [1999] (1), [2000], [2001], [2004], [2005], [2006], and [2008]; D. Stordeur [1998] and [1999]; Stordeur et al. [2000]; T. Yartah [2004]; this list can be expanded. A detailed survey of the reports can be found in T. Kornienko [2006], pp. 23–84.

[2] See Rosenberg et al. [1998], p. 38 and Rosenberg [1999], pp. 26–29.

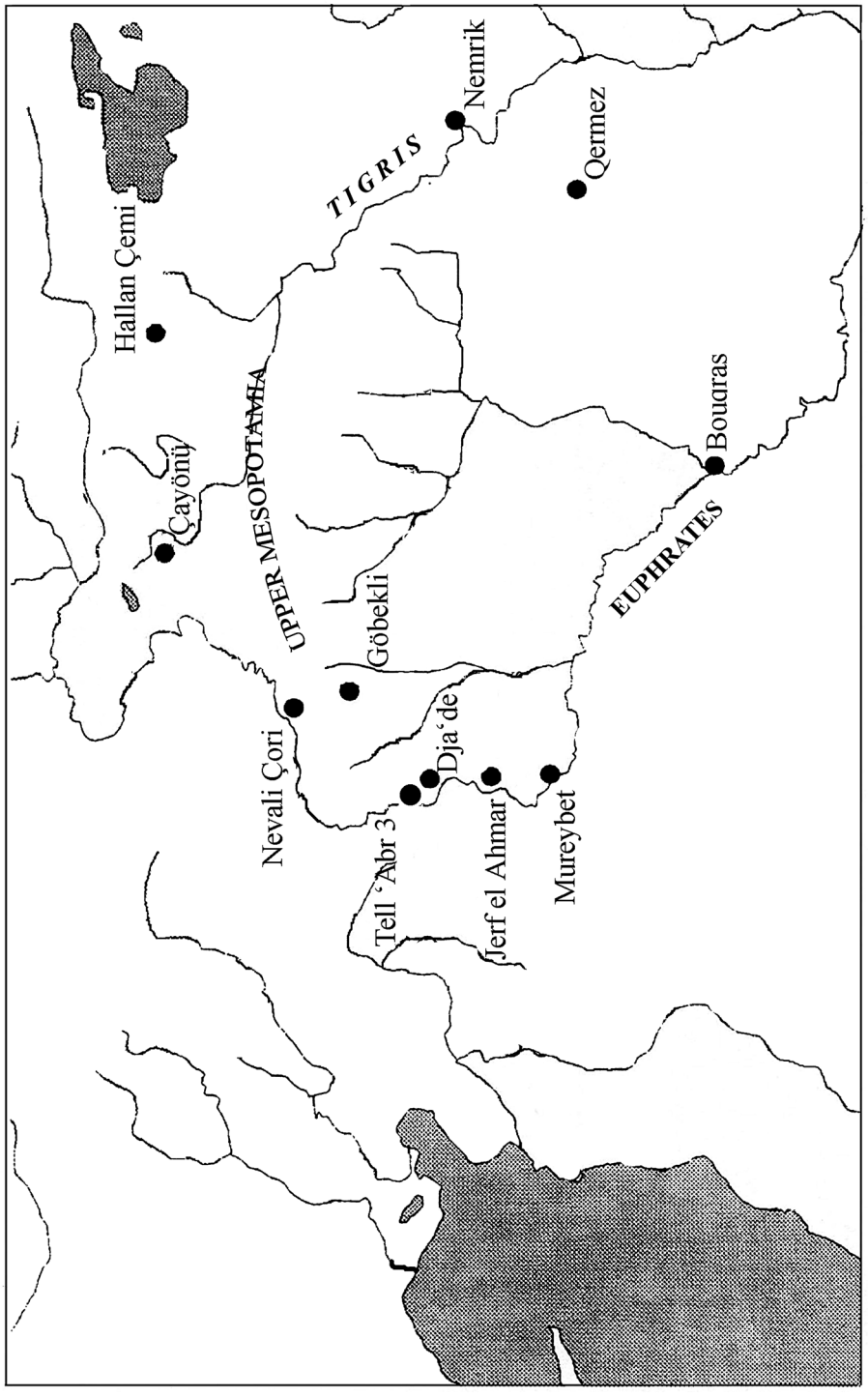

FIG. 1.—Map of Upper Mesopotamia with the Aceramic Neolithic sites discussed in this article

semisubterranean (fig. 2: A and B).[3] In some of their characteristic features they presage the cult construction of the PPNA/PPNB transition period and the PPNB period itself. Unlike what is found in domestic structures, the floors in the public buildings of the first level at Hallan Çemi were deliberately leveled down to the ground. There are traces of specific decoration and internal structures within the buildings that appear to have been carefully planned. For example, there is a stone semicircular bench set against the walls of each structure along the entire perimeter. Evidence of rare imported materials, such as obsidian and copper ore, is found exclusively in and around these buildings. Moreover, one of the structures (fig. 2: A) contained the skull of a *Bos primigenius* (the now-extinct aurochs) that appears to have once decorated the wall facing the entrance. The second structure (fig. 2: B) contained a few partially preserved sheep skulls and deer antlers, whose original location is difficult to determine. There were no other animal or plant remains found.[4] The most recent findings conform to other cult evidence found at the site and confirm the idea that the structures had a specific function and that they were protected by symbols of divine power.[5]

There was no evidence of any domestic activities found in the unusual structures at Hallan Çemi other than specially marked fireplaces (plaster hearths on the floor). As already mentioned, valuable imported materials, in this case, obsidian and copper ore, as well as evidence of traces of their use, were found in the area of the first building-level structures. Archaeologists point out that the presence of these materials demonstrates the existence of long-distance trade networks, even at that early time and, furthermore, that these large, unusual semisubterranean structures were somehow connected with this trade. They may have played a certain role in establishing and maintaining intersettlement contacts.[6] Such links could have been cemented during the exchange of goods, the significance of which in ancient communities is well known. I propose that at Hallan Çemi the public structures of the uppermost building level could have also functioned as production centers for the settlement and/or were the communal storage-and-distribution centers for imported raw materials. In any case, activities significant for the well-being of the community taking place within a sacred space was not unusual in ancient societies.

Excavations at Hallan Çemi have also shown that the center of the settlement was an open area about 15 m in diameter and in use throughout all three periods under analysis. Large numbers of animal bones and river pebbles that had been cracked in fire were found on the square's surface. Among the remains were large, well-preserved parts of animal

[3] The uppermost building level has thus far yielded the remains of four structures: two large, round semisubterranean structures and two smaller C-shaped surface (ordinary for this site) structures. The two semisubterranean structures (fig. 2: A and B) are particularly noteworthy. They are 5 to 6 m in diameter. The form of both these structures is circular, with a doubled wall in the area of the entrance extending out like a set of pincers to create a vestibule of sorts. In both structures, a semicircular stone bench or platform was set along one wall. Small, circular plaster hearths were found on the floors. The floors of both structures were surfaced in a yellow sand and plaster mixture ca. 1 cm thick, and several resurfacings were evident in each. See Rosenberg et al. [1998], p. 28.

[4] Rosenberg et al. [1998], pp. 28–29 and Rosenberg and Redding [2000], pp. 44–46 and 57.

[5] The male horned-animal cult (sheep, goat, aurochs, and deer) reflected in different groups of finds at Hallan Çemi is one of the earliest manifestations of the so-called bull cult, which, alongside a female deity cult, was widespread during the Neolithic period in the ancient Near East. More details about these cults can be found in J. Cauvin [1994].

[6] Rosenberg [1999], p. 27.

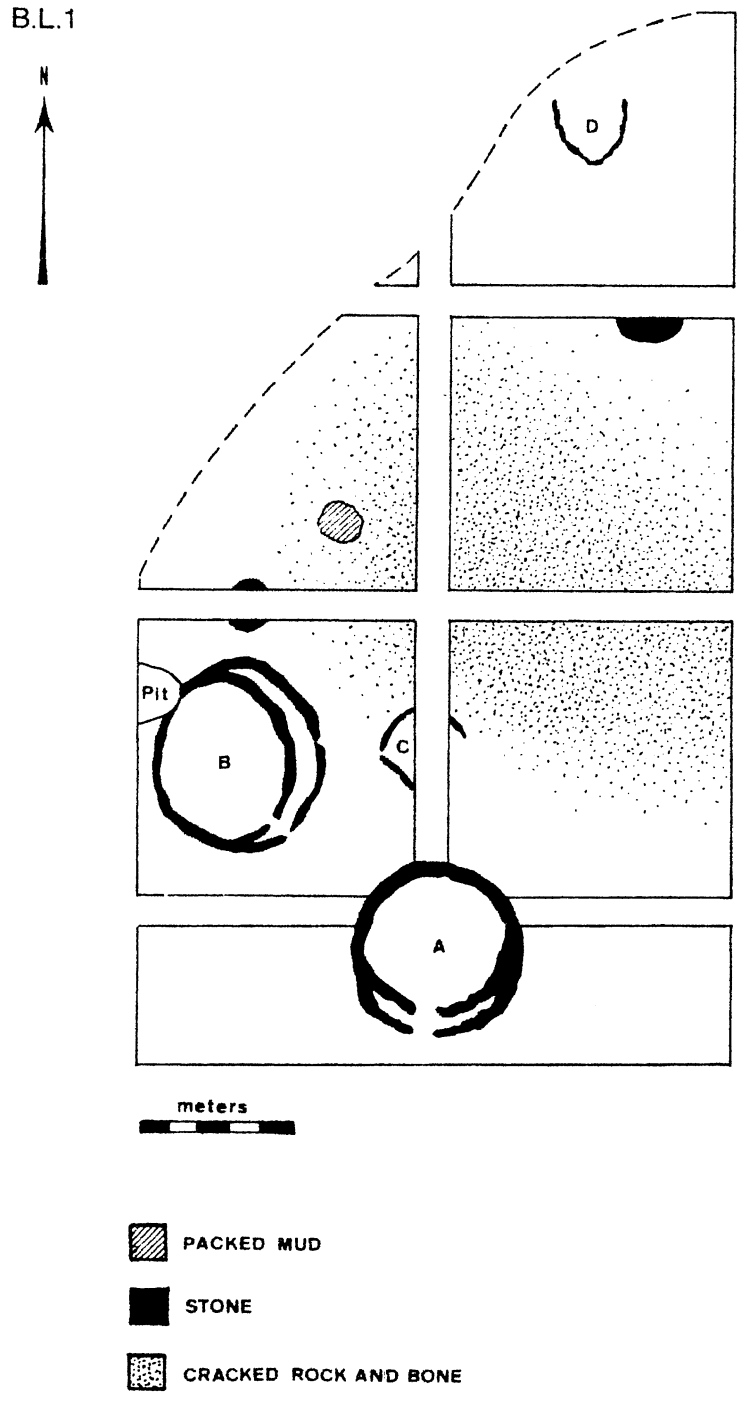

FIG. 2.—Hallan Çemi. Sketch plan of the uppermost building level (1); see especially structures A and B (after Rosenberg et al. [1998], fig. 3).

carcasses, and three horned sheep skulls were found lying in a row. This discovery, along with the large number of bones and evidence of the continuous use of the central square throughout several generations, are indications of the symbolic rituals once performed here. Archaeologists suggest that the area was the community's general meeting place and also the location of ritual feasts, occasions that must have played an important role in uniting the members of the community.

Other discoveries at the site were numerous skillfully made stone bowls decorated with finely incised designs in geometric and naturalistic motifs and a number of stone pestles with stylized handles sculpted in a variety of zoomorphic forms. Both the bowls and the pestles are likely to have been used in the ceremonial acts of cooking and eating during the feasts that took place in the central square, thereby playing an important role in the local ritual.[7]

Recent reports on Jerf el-Ahmar and Tell 'Abr 3 (Syria, Middle Euphrates) reveal that the public structures at these sites (EA 7 and EA 30 at Jerf el-Ahmar during the PPNA period; EA 53 and EA 100 at Jerf el-Ahmar and B2 at Tell 'Abr 3 during the PPNA/PPNB transition period) in many ways develop the Hallan Çemi tradition of public multifunctional structures that also served as sacred places in the settlements. In these cases, it is important to note the finds of deposits of aurochs bucrania inside benches lying against the walls of the communal structures at Jerf el-Ahmar (EA 53) and Tell 'Abr 3 (B2) as well as inside EA 30 at Jerf el-Ahmar and "Building 47" at Mureybet. The data connected with the finds at "Building 47" at Mureybet, located 40 km to the south of Jerf el-Ahmar, correspond to the many materials in EA 7 and EA 30 at Jerf el-Ahmar during the PPNA period.[8] The later EA 53 and EA 100 structures at Jerf el-Ahmar and B2 at Tell 'Abr 3 are comparable to Cult Buildings II and III at Nevali Çori as well as to the now well-known unique structures at Çayönü Tepesi: the Skull Building, the Terrazzo Floor Building, and the Flagstone Building (figs. 3 and 4) and, to all appearances, the "Communal Building" at Dja'de el-Mughara, from the PPNB period;[9] they have the following general characteristics:

— a special location in the settlement area;
— renewed structures at the same location;
— the special preparation of the location;
— semisubterranean construction and large-room planning;
— the architectural and sculptural elements of the most ancient structures were included in subsequent ones;
— the presence of massive stone benches set against the walls of each structure;
— labor-intensive floor-paving (terrazzo-mosaic or tile-paved floor in Çayönü and Nevali Çori);
— traces of colored plaster, engraved pictures, and reliefs on the inner walls and/or the benches;

[7] Ibid., pp. 26 and 28.

[8] J. Cauvin [1977] and Stordeur et al. [2000], pp. 31–37.

[9] The data from E. Coqueignot's preliminary report were presented in a paper delivered at the Sixth International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Rome, 5th–10th May 2008. The report dealt with the most important archaeological discoveries made in the course of fieldwork in 2006 and 2007. The papers presented at the meeting will be published in 2010.

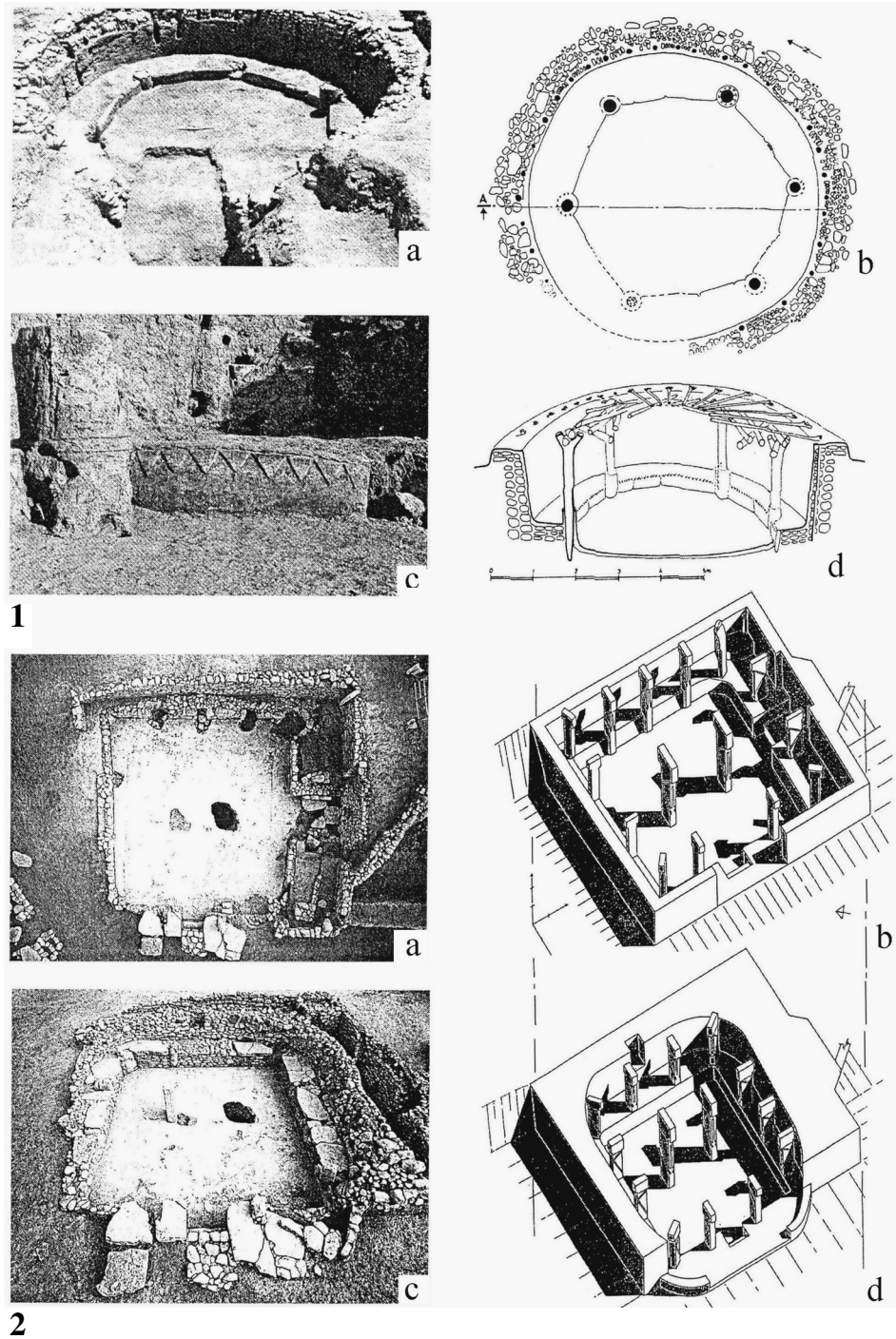

FIG. 3.—Public cult structures. **1**. Jerf el-Ahmar, Special Purpose "Communal Building" EA 53: a. general view of the building, photo (after Stordeur et al. [2000], fig. 8.1); b. plan of the building (ibid., fig. 9.1); c. close view of relief-decorated bench adjoining the wall. A pillar is embedded in the bench, photo (ibid., fig. 8.2); d. isometric reconstruction of the building with suppositional reconstruction of the roof, cross-sectional view (ibid., fig. 9.2). **2**. Nevali Çori, Cult Buildings II and III: a. general view of unearthed Cult Building II, photo (after Hauptmann [1999], fig. 7); b. axonometric reconstruction of Cult Building II (ibid., fig. 9); c. general view of unearthed Cult Building III, photo (ibid., fig. 8); d. axonometric reconstruction of Cult Building III (ibid., fig. 9).

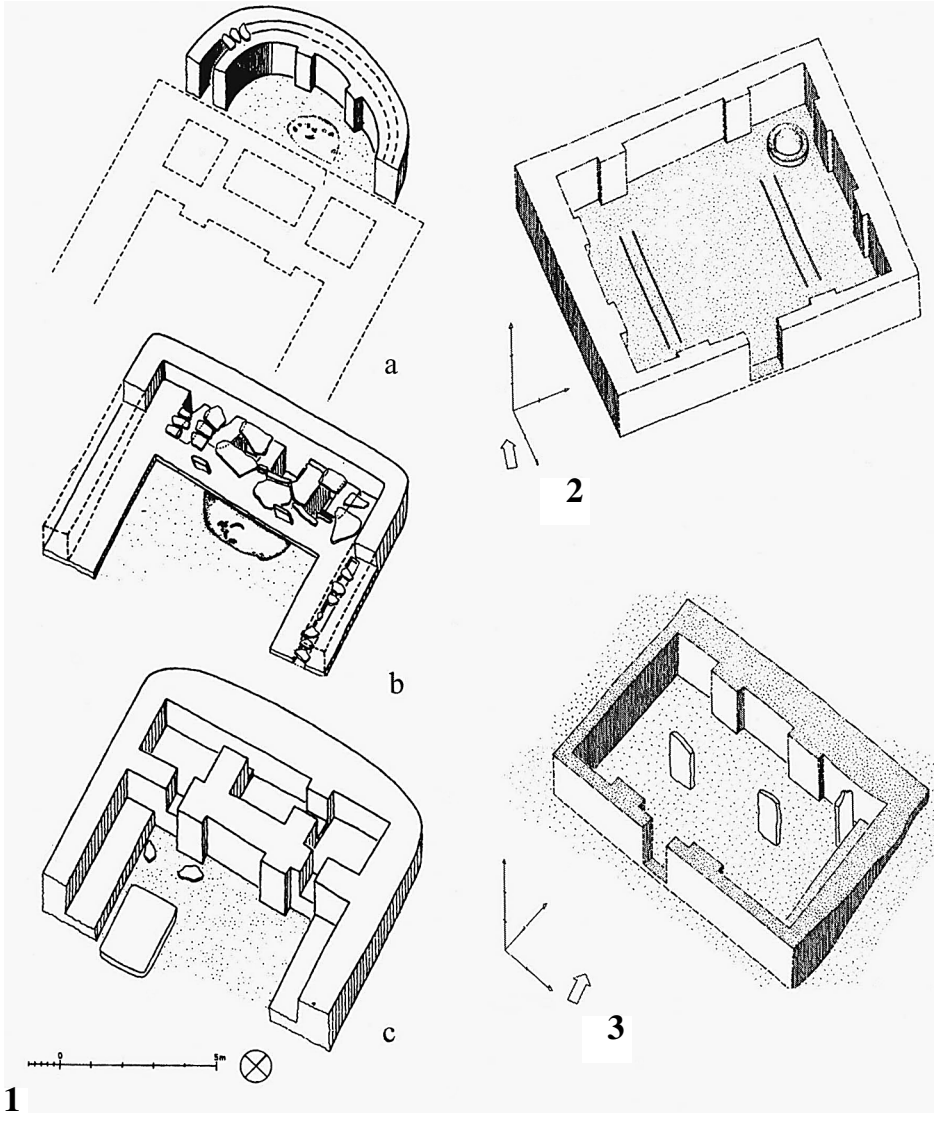

FIG. 4.—"Unique" structures at Çayönü Tepesi: isometric reconstructions. **1**. Skull Building (a—the earlier level—BM 1; b, c—the later levels—BM 2) (after Schirmer [1990], fig. 12). **2**. Terrazzo Floor Building (ibid., fig. 13). **3**. Flagstone Building (ibid., fig. 11).

— the erection of monolithic stelae, pilasters, decorated pillars, or sculpted objects inside the structures;
— the absence of any traces of domestic activities;
— evidence of a variety of ritual ceremonies performed in the structures.[10]

In the most ancient levels of the Terrazzo Floor Building at Çayönü and Cult Building II at Nevali Çori, there was a channel and a special hollow in the floor found in the corners of the structures.[11] The purpose of these elements remains unclear, but traces of fire and human blood found there suggest this purpose was identical in both buildings and was directly connected with the special function of the buildings themselves. Archaeologists excavating at Tell 'Abr 3 came across two similar structures: two hollows were found on the floor of public building B2 near a bench decorated with massive plaques. They formed two channels leading towards the center of the building. According to T. Yartah, these channels were paved with pebbles in white, black, and green. It looked as if the pebbles had been picked according to their color.[12]

The layout of these Çayönü Tepesi structures, which were renewed a number of times and were in use throughout the entire PPNA/PPNB transition period and the PPNB period, is of great interest. The structures were erected in the eastern part of the settlement around a large, open area about 1,000 m^2 in size. This part of the site was clearly meant to be public from the start, and so it was arranged accordingly. There were about forty-six fire pits of different sizes found at its lowest level, which dates back to the beginning of the settlement. Apparently later, the large area was covered with cobbles and then leveled, and this resulted in the creation of a large, open pebble-covered area, namely, the first "Pebbled Plaza" of the site. This pebbled plaza also served as the foundation for the "Earth Plaza" that followed. Moreover, a large part of the eastern section of the site was prepared as a new square, 60 × 20 m in size, during the Cell Building Subphase. Its floor was neatly laid with the remains of burnt brick (*kerpiç*) and/or the remains of dung-burning *in situ*. Archaeologists have come to the conclusion that the reddish floor of the square was renewed at least three times and was carefully cleaned before each renewal. The earliest square had two rows of standing stones (uncarved stelae) that were set into it, and two large, grooved limestone slabs lay close to each other at the southeast corner.[13] The objects were different in size, shape, and decoration, the largest stela exceeding 2 m in height and the smallest about 1 m in height. According to the archaeologists' reports, at least one of the stelae showed traces of red paint, and another had some indications of modeling.[14] During the second renewal of the square, the stelae had intentionally been broken and were buried under the layer of burnt bricks, together with the grooved stone slabs.[15]

[10] Most interestingly, traces of human, sheep, and aurochs blood were observed on the large stone "table" in the Çayönü Tepesi Skull Building. Moreover, both aurochs- and human-blood residue was present on a 20-cm-long black flint knife found in this structure. The researchers who dealt with the blood-residue investigations at Çayönü note that the "presence of human blood mingled with that of *Bos primigenius* would indicate at least an occasional use of the 'slab' for some form of ritual dismemberment" and that the "knife found in association with the 'skull building' might have had some function related to the 'ritualistic' nature of the building"; see A. R. Wood [1998], pp. 763–64, and see also M. Verhoeven [2002], p. 239.

[11] Hauptmann [1993], p. 45; Schirmer [1983], p. 466 and [1990], p. 384.

[12] At the same time, we know that the floor of the building had a brown mud coating on top of a layer of chalk reduced to fine particles. For more details, see T. Yartah [2004], p. 144.

[13] Özdoğan and Özdoğan [1998], p. 592, figs. 1b, 2a, and 7a; A. Özdoğan [1999], p. 50, figs. 40–42.

[14] Özdoğan and Özdoğan [1990], p. 74.

[15] A. Özdoğan [1999], p. 50.

There is no doubt that this well-organized and symbolically decorated place played a significant role in the life of the settlement. According to H. Çambel, the square could have been used for the ritual carving of animal carcasses during collective feasts, since there were many animal bones and fragments of specialized tools found here.[16] As A. Özdoğan mentions, a number of factors indicate that the "Earth Plaza" was an open-air equivalent of the "unique buildings" of Çayönü Tepesi, albeit on a grander scale.[17]

All the evidence available today on Göbekli Tepe, another early Neolithic site in Southeastern Turkey (EPPNA-MPPNB), which is still being excavated, suggests that the site cannot be considered an ordinary settlement of the Aceramic Neolithic period. This is due not only to the tell's size (up to 20 m high with a diameter of 300 m) and topographical setting but also because it occupied the dominant position in the area within a radius of 20 km, clearly indicating that this was an important center. Huge limestone slabs, pillar fragments, and large sculptures were found over the entire mound. These discoveries, as well as the information from excavations carried out since 1995, indicate that the entire mound and not just part of it had been used for megalithic architectural construction (figs. 5 and 6). The buildings must have been used for ritual purposes, since there are no indications of any domestic activities. In this connection, Klaus Schmidt, Director of Excavations at Göbekli Tepe, notes that the tell was not just a typical early Neolithic village with a few cult buildings but that the entire area served a ritual purpose exclusively and was a mountain sanctuary (fig. 7). There is little doubt that the great building projects that took place over a long period of time demanded enormous effort on the part of many people, presumably the representatives of generations of tribes inhabiting the vicinity.[18]

The research started at Göbekli Tepe significantly broadens our knowledge of the construction of religious buildings in Northern Mesopotamia during the Aceramic Neolithic period; it allows us to arrive at some preliminary conclusions about the specifics of the architectural and sculptural decoration of sacred places in settlements during the period and in the region under discussion. There are good reasons to believe that the structures at Göbekli Tepe make up a long-term, sizable, and possibly intertribal ritual complex set up in the mountains and separated from the ordinary settlements. The structures at Göbekli Tepe are larger, more complex, and more varied in planning compared to public buildings in other Aceramic Neolithic sites. The great length (6 to 9 m) and weight (up to 50 tons) of some of the stelae and their fragments demonstrate the possibility that not all the buildings housing them had roofs or, perhaps, that not all the stelae were initially kept inside the buildings. Finally, a number of zoomorphic symbols and figures were found at Göbekli Tepe in addition to anthropomorphic ones, which predominate at Çayönü Tepesi and Nevali Çori. Furthermore, on part of Göbekli Tepe there are combinations of special signs depicted ("hieroglyphs" or pictograms) whose meaning, at present, is difficult to define.[19]

The world of sculptures and reliefs at Göbekli Tepe is diverse and unusual. In a way, however, it repeats and adds to the representative picture already known from Nemrik IX, Bouqraz, Hallan Çemi, Körtik Tepe, Jerf el-Ahmar, Tell 'Abr 3, Nevali Çori, Çayönü Tepesi, and other early Neolithic settlements. The most popular images found at the sites—the objects of worship—are anthropomorphic and mixed-type creatures; female and male

[16] Çambel [1984], p. 187. This can be compared, both formally and informally, to the central square at Hallan Çemi.

[17] A. Özdoğan [1999], p. 50.

[18] Schmidt [2001] (1), p. 46.

[19] Idem [1997], [1999] (2), [1998], and [2006].

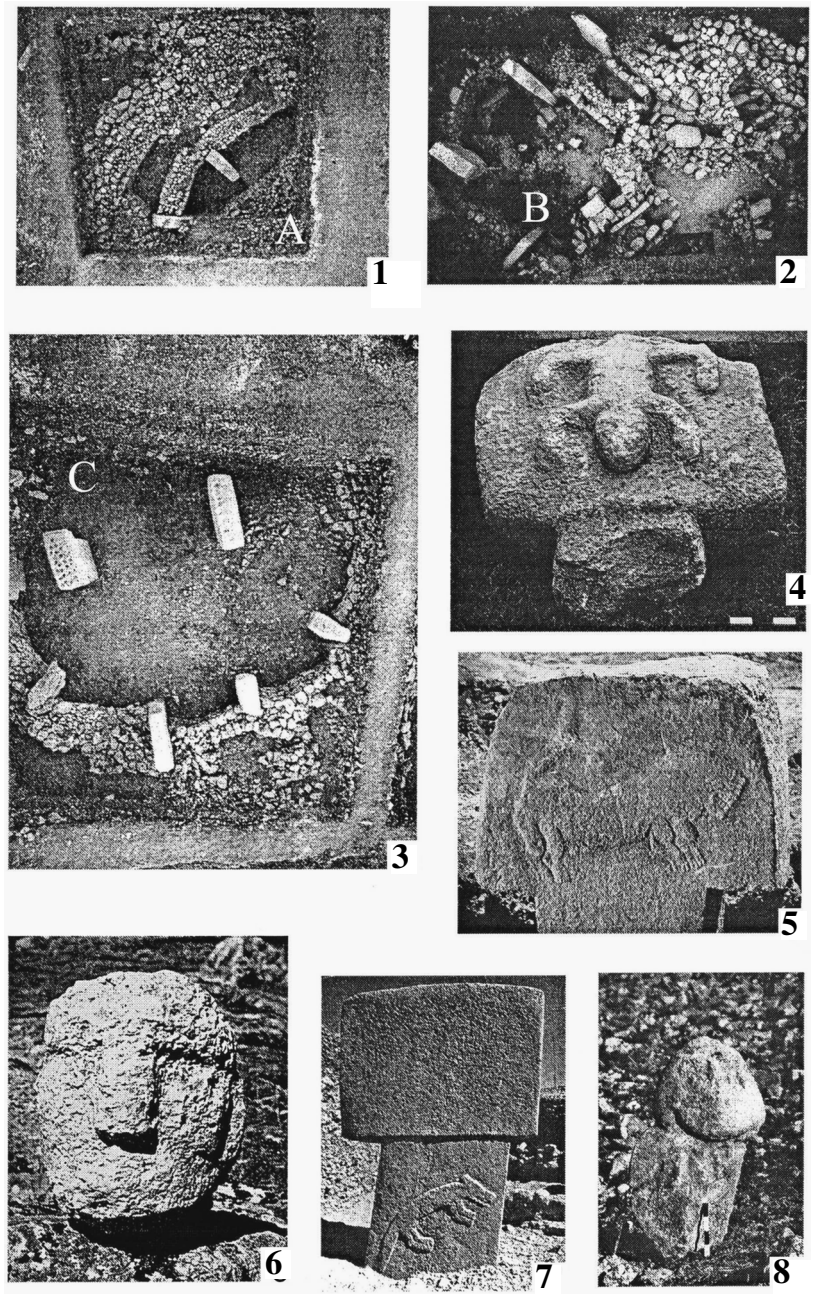

FIG. 5.—Göbekli Tepe, photographs from the excavations: **1**.–**3**. The unearthing/digging of the monumental cult structures on the southeastern part of the tell and structures A, B, and C, with characteristic T-shaped pillars (after Schmidt [2001] (1), figs. 7–8 and idem [1998], fig. 11). **4**. Fragment of a T-pillar with animal relief, discovered on the surface on first day of site round (after Hauptmann [1999], fig. 27). **5**. Pillar 1 with lion relief from "Löwenpfeilergebäude" (ibid., fig. 24). **6**. Sculpted image of human head (ht. 0.23 m) from surface collection (ibid., fig. 28). **7**. Pillar 9 with relief of a fox from the "Schlangenpfeilergebäude"/Structure B (ibid., fig. 30). **8**. Sculpted image of a "human bird" (ht. 0.92 m) from surface collection (after Schmidt [1998], fig. 6).

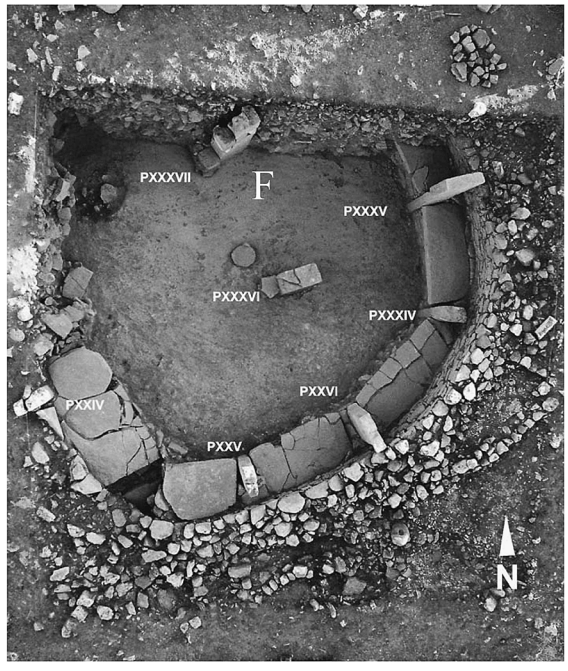

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FIG. 6.—Göbekli Tepe: photographs of the excavations. Aerial views. **1**. Construction F: round, large-room plan of the building, most of which is unearthed. There is a tiled bench adjoining the wall and equally spaced T-shaped pillars along the bench. Two unearthed central pillars can also be seen: PXXXVI and PXXXVII (after Schmidt [2008], fig. 10). **2**. Constructions B and C: round, large-room plan of the buildings with T-shaped pillars adjoining the walls on the inside; construction B has two central pillars; construction C is more complex and consists of a few concentric walls (ibid., fig. 4).

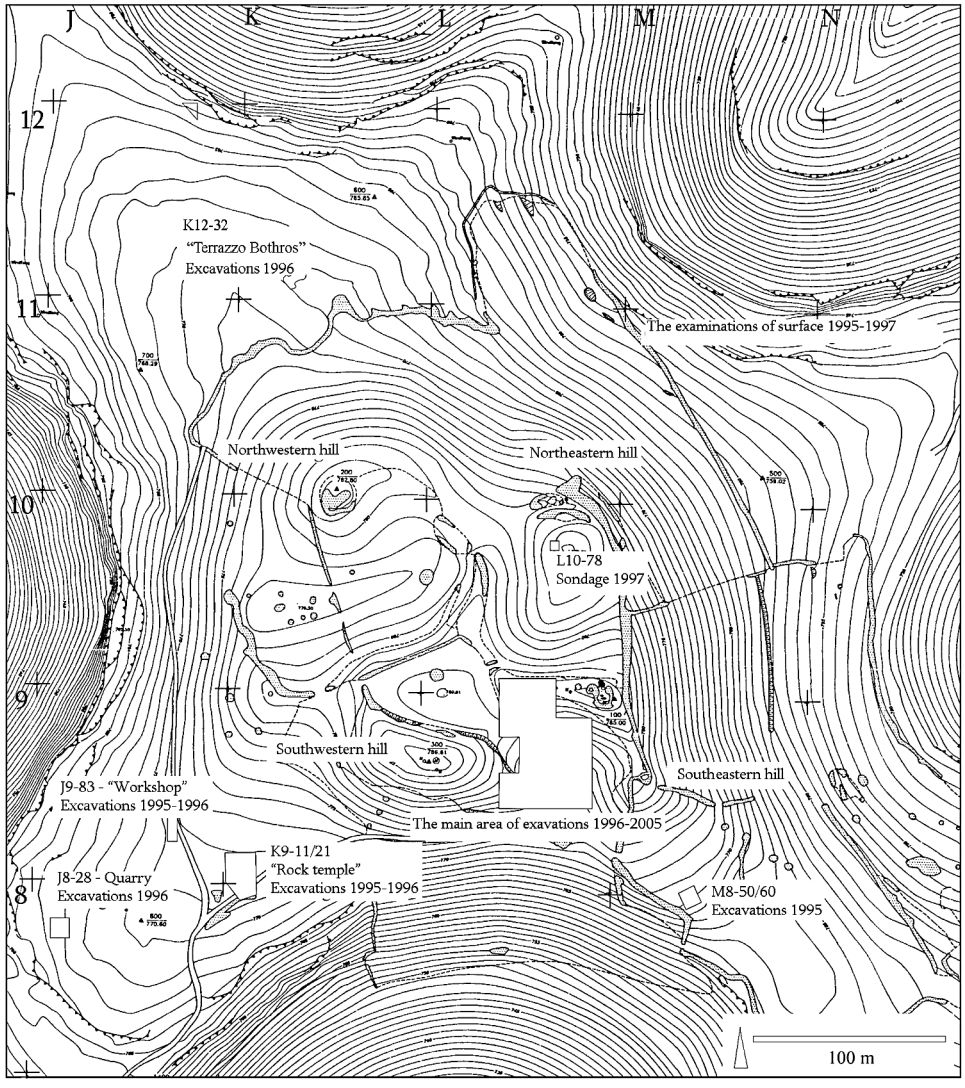

FIG. 7.—Topographic map of Göbekli Tepe with main excavations (after Schmidt [2006], fig. 31)

figures and symbols; heads of people; bucrania; and images of birds, feline predators, snakes, scorpions, and turtles. In Göbekli Tepe's iconography there are also images of a wild boar, a lion, a spider, and a fox. These motifs are characteristic for sites dating to the PPN period in general; however, in Upper Mesopotamia they are similar in meaning, style, and manner and are clearly concentrated in buildings having a special purpose.

III. DISCUSSION

There are other very special finds that have been discovered in cult buildings in the settlements of Northern Mesopotamia. These are vertical, rectangular stone stelae (fig. 8).[20] Schmidt has suggested considering them receptacles of deities or totem spirits, by analogy with European menhirs and Semitic massebs. The Slavic idols initially kept at the center of sacred spaces or special cult structures are believed to have had a similar meaning.[21]

Some of the carved columns at Nevali Çori, Jerf el-Ahmar, and Göbekli Tepe clearly represent massive figures of creatures exceeding the height of a human being. At the same time, other slabs at Göbekli Tepe and Çayönü Tepesi indicate the presence of deities in a building, albeit less clearly.[22] The zoomorphic images and other signs on the Göbekli Tepe stelae undoubtedly conveyed certain meanings, as did the coloring and indications of modeling of the objects discovered at Çayönü Tepesi. I would like to point out that one characteristic feature of the stelae at Nevali Çori and Göbekli Tepe is their T-shaped tops, symbolizing a head and thereby personalizing the stone slabs.

The fact that most stelae and pilasters, which must have had similar significance, were set up in pairs is of great importance. The worship of pairs of central objects in ancient sanctuaries or temples is a characteristic feature of a number of early Near Eastern cultures. Such symbolism represents the binary basis and dualism of people's mythological perception of natural phenomena. For a long period of time, two-headed and/or paired characters were among the worshiped images in the Near East. Similar objects in Anatolia (Çatal Höyük, Hacılar, Kültepe), Syria (Tell Brak), and Jordan ('Ayn Ghazal) date back to the prehistoric period. The divine couples who protected the first cities were well known

[20] In the Levant there is very little evidence of such stelae. Similar objects, dating to the PPNB period, were found in excavations at Jericho (see Kenyon [1957]), 'Ayn Ghazal (Rollefson [1998] and [2000]), and Shaqarat Mazyad (B. D. Hermansen and C. H. Jensen [2002]). In addition, in Southern Jordan there are numerous Late Neolithic desert, open-air ritual structures with standing stones (G. O. Rollefson, unpublished report presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research in 2006). The objects in the Levant and Southern Jordan do not have any obvious traces of symbolic decoration. On the whole, they look much more modest than the objects found in Northern Mesopotamia, where the origin of the tradition of erecting modeled stelae inside structures dates to the early PPNA period; see also the example of modeled twin stelae joined by clay cross-pieces in the central part of the circular sanctuaries in Qermez Dere in Northern Iraq (Watkins [1990] and [1992]).

[21] For more on Slavic idols and cult structures, see I. P. Rusanova and B. A. Timoschuk [1993], pp. 12–15 and 25.

[22] It is noteworthy that the EA 53 and EA 100 columns at Jerf el-Ahmar (mainly) and the B2 columns at Tell 'Abr 3 are wooden pillars, the lower parts of which are covered by a special coating with images engraved on it. Judging from the context, the function of the wooden pillars is identical to that of the stone ones in the public cult buildings discovered at the sites of flat/submountain and mountain areas in Upper Mesopotamia (for a comparison, see fig. 3.1 and 3.2). I suppose that the difference in the materials used for making the decorated columns can be explained by the proximity, and thus the accessibility, of certain natural resources in different areas of Northern Mesopotamia. It is important to note that in the EA 100 building at Jerf el-Ahmar we observe the presence of both wooden pillars and stone stelae.

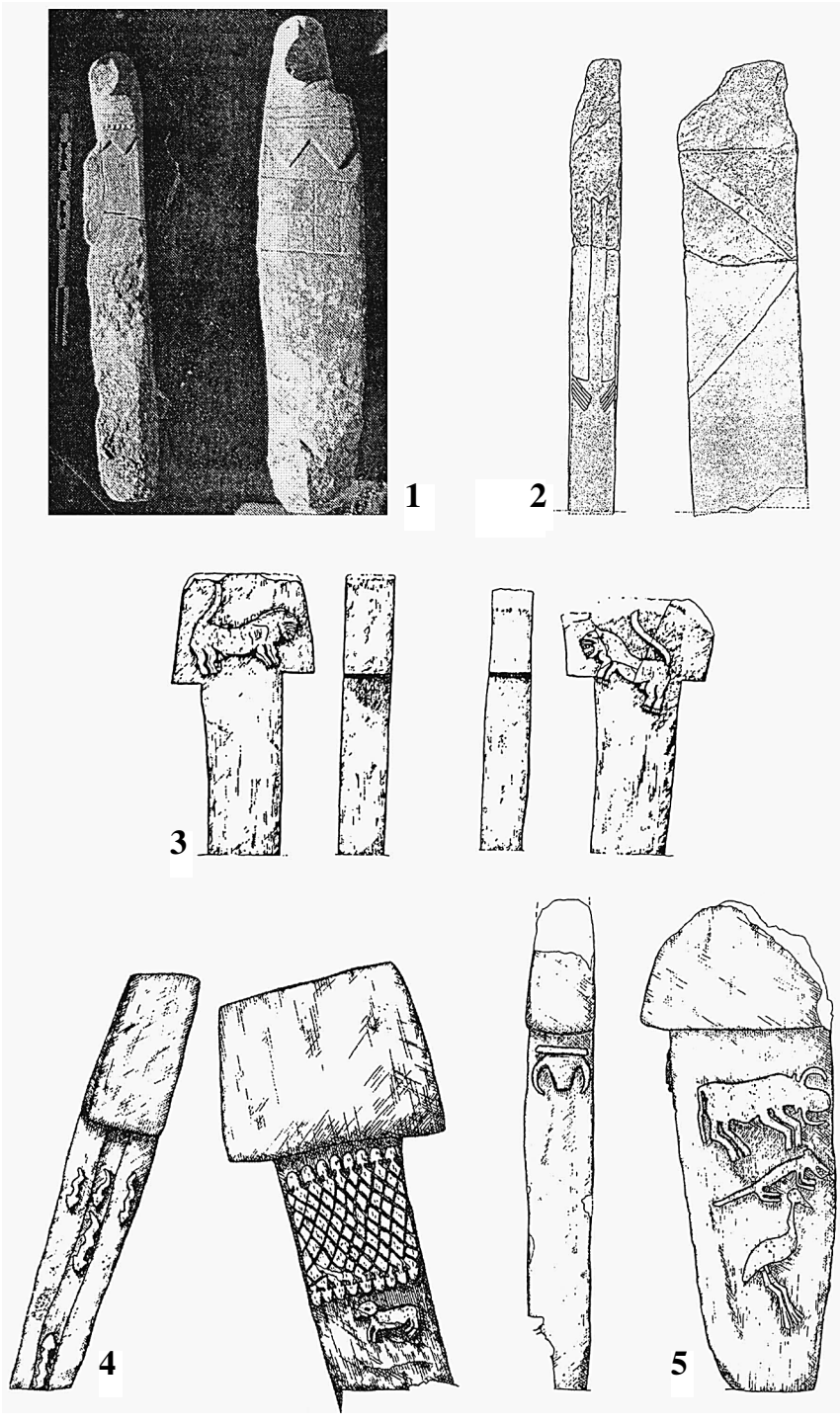

FIG. 8.—Symbolically decorated pillars. **1**. From Jerf el-Ahmar, EA 100 (after Stordeur et al. [2000], fig. 11). **2**. From Nevali Çori, Cult Building III (ht. 2.35 m) (after Hauptmann [1993], fig. 16). **3**. From Göbekli Tepe, "Löwenpfeilergebäude," pillars 1 (ht. 1.60 m) and 2 (ht. 1.45 m) (after Schmidt [1998], fig. 10). **4**. From Göbekli Tepe, "Schlangenpfeilergebäude," pillar 1 (ht. 3.15 m) (ibid., figs. 13–14). **5**. From Göbekli Tepe, "Schlangenpfeilergebäude," pillar 2 (ht. 3.15 m) (ibid., fig. 15).

in the early historic period, and antipodean characters such as Gilgameš and Enkidu can be seen as a different category of worshiped, paired heroes in the cultures of the early historic Near East.

Understanding the purpose of the vertical slabs that were the central objects in these impressive Aceramic Neolithic public structures should become clearer once the function of the structures themselves is identified. Some scholars suggested considering them temples,[23] others strongly objected to this idea,[24] and still others suggested waiting for further discoveries, since preliminary conclusions may not be accurate.[25] I believe the existence of temples during the PPNB period is debatable and that in assuming this existence researchers are making attempts to modernize or adapt ancient reality to present-day terminology. Even in civilizations from much later periods, for example, the Sumerian and Akkadian—the former with the first written language in Mesopotamia—there was no special term corresponding to what is now meant by the word "temple." The words "e_2" (Sumerian) and "*bitum*" (Akkadian), which initially meant "house," were also used for Mesopotamian cult buildings.

The definition of cult buildings as "houses" obviously originates in earlier cultures and, taking into consideration the archaeological evidence, corresponds to the interpretation of some public buildings from the PPN period. The creators of the structures under discussion literally took them for "houses of deities," which, as I see it, corresponds to the evidence from Hallan Çemi, Jerf el-Ahmar, Dja'de el-Mughara, Tell 'Abr 3, Çayönü Tepesi, Nevali Çori, and Göbekli Tepe. The horned skulls of aurochs, the magnificent stelae, and the large-scale sculptures found in the area of the unusual structures at these sites must have manifested the presence of the "masters" of the house, who would have been the patron deities of the community. In this respect, it is quite natural that the layout (or sometimes other building elements) of the most ancient public cult structures demonstrates their "genetic" affinity to dwellings and, in all cases, to the ancient dwellings of the EPPNA period, that is, structures of a circular and semisubterranean type. It is well known that guarding tradition has always been a prerogative of the sacred sphere and that it is still one of the ways of marking sacred space.

IV. CONCLUSION

Differences in the construction and decoration of cult buildings in Hallan Çemi, Jerf el-Ahmar, Dja'de el-Mughara, Tell 'Abr 3, Çayönü Tepesi, Nevali Çori, and Göbekli Tepe are due to the natural manifestation of local sacred and architectural peculiarities and to the differences within the period when a complex was in use.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, on the whole, the Göbekli Tepe materials illustrate the construction scenario of the monumental cult structures in Jerf el-Ahmar, Çayönü, and Nevali Çori,[26] representing their most characteristic features:

[23] Schmidt [1998] and [2006]; Başgelen [1999], p. 8.
[24] J.-D. Forest [1996] and [1999], p. 2.
[25] E. V. Antonova and B. A. Litvinskij [1998], p. 47.
[26] Jerf el-Ahmar, Çayönü Tepesi, and Nevali Çori are the most thoroughly studied of the sites mentioned above. A major portion of the excavation results have already been published. It is worth mentioning, however, that excavation work at Jerf el-Ahmar was performed in a rush within the very tight schedule of salvage operations undertaken before the opening of the Tishrin Dam. According to the archaeologists, under these conditions they could not undertake all the research they had planned. Unfortunately, this also includes work on the public cult building EA 100. For more details, see Stordeur et al. [2000], p. 40.

— the location of the special buildings in a separate area, on a specially prepared lot;
— semisubterranean construction and a specific structural layout;
— the use of the remains of the oldest structures as a part of more recent ones;
— labor-intensive floor paving, usually with tiles or mosaics;
— in front of pillar 9 (Göbekli Tepe, Construction B) there is a stone bowl embedded in the mosaic floor. A small groove runs from the outside diagonally into the bowl. Similar objects were found in other parts of the site. Excavators have preliminarily called them "sacrificial bowls."[27]
— the presence of a stone bench against the walls around the stelae;
— the erection of monolithic stelae, pilasters, decorated pillars, and sculpted objects inside the structures;
— the absence of any trace of domestic activities;
— evidence of various ritual ceremonies performed in the structures.

The discovery of a channel leading to a depression in the floor of structure B (it is circular and belongs to the oldest PPNA/EPPNB layers of the site) probably indicates that offerings(?) were presented here as in the cult structures with similar elements at Tell 'Abr 3, Çayönü, and Nevali Çori. Similar stone slabs were used in cult structures having elements like those found at Çayönü Tepesi and Nevali Çori.

Some of the features listed above were determined on the basis of the evidence obtained from public buildings at Hallan Çemi. This suggests that the formation of the architectural tradition of erecting such buildings in Upper Mesopotamia began during the earliest phase of the Neolithic period. Accordingly, this architectural tradition originated in Northern Mesopotamia during the earliest Neolithic period, and it is possible that the tradition was adapted to new circumstances during the continuation of a more ancient sacred-building construction dating to the Mesolithic period.[28]

On the whole, there are still few, but impressive, examples from Northern Mesopotamia that show that religious architecture was already considered a separate part of the construction process during the early Neolithic stage of Upper Mesopotamian community development and, furthermore, that this architecture had its own specific standards. But the analysis of existing reports allows one to conclude that during the early Neolithic period a few types of sacred places and structures existed across Upper Mesopotamia and contiguous regions. My preliminary classification is based on the level of the social importance of cult centers and their decoration and location.

The first group includes family sanctuaries, which existed in the Near East as early as the proto-Neolithic period. These structures were not yet clearly detached from dwell-

[27] Schmidt [2001] (2) and [2006], pp. 133–34, fig. 51.

[28] One should note here that the lifetime of the oldest layer (III) of Göbekli Tepe with its impressive rounded megalithic architecture, including its mighty T-pillars (more than 3 m high), is apparently even earlier than the one at Hallan Çemi. Layer III is dated to 8,900–9,000 B.C. and perhaps even as early as the tenth millennium B.C. See Schmidt [2001] (1), p. 33 and [2006], pp. 125–26 and 227. Schmidt reports: "The analysis of the animal bones revealed a rich fauna of wild species . . . , but no domesticated species have been identified." And further, "Göbekli Tepe, at least in the lower layers with the megalithic pillars, was not really Neolithic, but Proto-Neolithic or Mesolithic. . . . The construction of the megalithic buildings was accomplished by a hunter-gatherer society"; see Schmidt [2001] (1), pp. 47–48. Thus the point made above does not seem to be a forced one, as it is based on certain sound reasons.

ings in settlements but were usually combined with them (for example, in Nemrik IX and Qermes Dere).

Evidence obtained from Hallan Çemi and Çayönü Tepesi has revealed that among the most ancient decorated public structures there were public "squares" that functioned permanently in the first long-term settlements as places for meeting and performing rituals that were important for the entire community.

The combination of symbolically protected (i.e., sacred) areas and those significant for production activities (production, product-exchange, and storage-and-distribution areas) is characteristic of the communal structures at Hallan Çemi, Mureybet, and Jerf el-Ahmar (EA 7 and EA 30).

Archaeological data also indicate that special public cult buildings already existed during the Aceramic Neolithic period. Thus the Skull Building at Çayönü Tepesi functioned as the community's burial place and was also used for performing special collective rituals, presumably aimed at helping the relatives of those who had died and also at keeping the links and sacred unity between the living and dead members of the community.

The Terrazzo Floor Building and Flagstone Building at Çayönü Tepesi, EA 53 and EA 100 at Jerf el-Ahmar, B2 at Tell 'Abr 3, as well as Buildings II and III at Nevali Çori show the existence of public cult buildings that were not directly linked to any burial rituals or domestic or production activities.[29] I would like to emphasize that the structures at the sites mentioned above[30] were erected *on the border* of the settlements, that is, between the "dwelling" and "nonreclaimed" spaces, at the point where they "touched." Supposedly such locations indicate that zones acted as links connecting the community of the settlement with the outside world. On the basis of archaeological evidence and with the help of general historical and ethnographical knowledge, it is possible to assume that the "masters" of those prototemples had a special "genetic" connection both with the area of the settlement and with the generations of people who inhabited the land over a long period.[31] The ancestor cult was combined with the worship of natural forces and local spirits and was thus well developed.

Finally, a large number of outstanding works of ancient art reflecting the complex ritual systems of typical rites have been found at Göbekli Tepe. These examples allow us to conclude that this settlement was of great importance to the population as a religious center during the early Neolithic epoch. This supposition appears to be quite defensible in light of the latest data on the PPN period. It needs to be confirmed, however, by further archaeological research on comparable sites, ones chronologically close to Göbekli Tepe.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the definition of types of cult structures in early Neolithic Upper Mesopotamia is quite relative, and it is still difficult to establish certain distinctions between them due to the limited number of data available. Another reason for the impossibility of articulating a profound classification is that at some point there must have been some intermediate forms of cult structures (which gradually evolved in their public significance and decorative design) and interim forms of the rituals that were performed in them.

[29] They bear a certain similarity to the unusual structures at 'Ayn Ghazal and Beidha in the Southern Levant; see Rollefson [1998] and D. Kirkbride [1966].

[30] The context of the B2 settlement in Tell 'Abr 3 has not yet been discussed in enough detail.

[31] For more on this, see Kornienko [2006], pp. 82–83.

Despite the limited data, analysis shows to some extent the possibilities that were available to the people (single families or tribes, the entire community, and probably even larger groups of people) who erected the buildings and worshiped the deities living in them.

I share the view that during the Aceramic Neolithic period the land within the borders of the Levant, Upper Mesopotamia, and Iran was a single area in terms of informational links. Moreover, there are signs of probable standardization in PPN Northern Mesopotamian architecture, including the construction of religious buildings and the development in the tradition of symbolic decoration of these types of structures since the earliest period of settlement in Upper Mesopotamia. The evidence indicates that there were even closer links among settlements at the regional level, which may have been the result of cooperation and mutual influence among the dwellers of rural settlements in Aceramic Neolithic Northern Mesopotamia. As a result, a certain cultural unity emerged between separate, local centers, which seem to have played a leading role not only in the manufacturing and exchange of goods but also in the sphere of ideology.

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