

Göbekli Tepe: Ritual Centre or Settlement?

Did Cities or Temples Come First to Human Life? A Comparison between Göbeklitepe, Nevalı Çori, Çayönü, Catalhöyük and Ain Ghazal

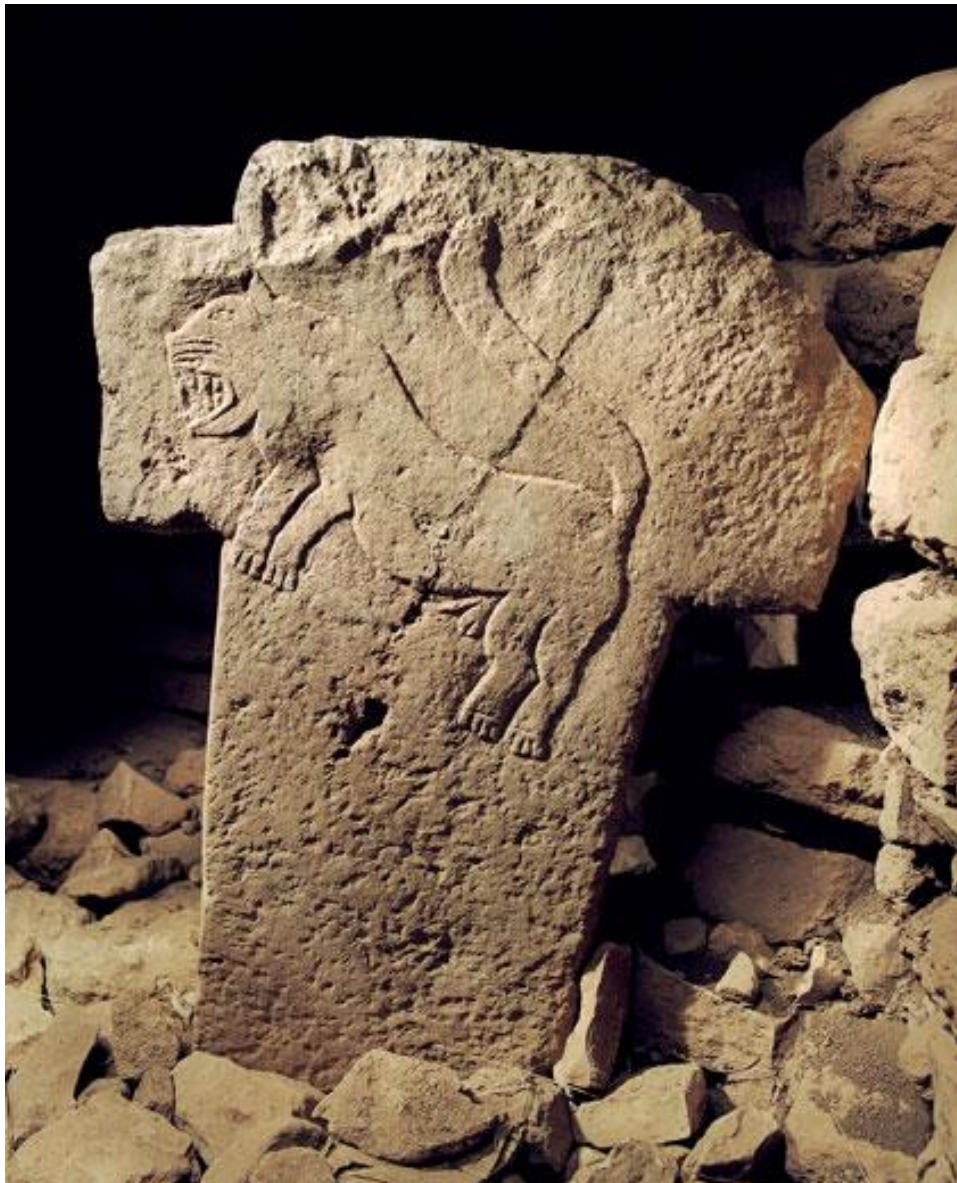


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Introduction

Göbeklitepe has a significant place with its unique design among many ritual centres, shrines, communal buildings and settlements in Near East and Anatolia during the Neolithic Period. Göbeklitepe is located ten kilometres away from Şanlıurfa, Southeast of Turkey (Curry, 2008, pg.1) and covers eight hectares area (*ibid*). Limestone T-shaped pillars weight roughly five to ten tonnes (Banning, 2011, pp. 620-622) and carved figures of dangerous animals such as; rampant lions, wild donkeys, scorpions, snakes, a headless male figure identifiable with his erected penis and many other animal depictions give this place a distinctive character (Zimansky and Sagona, 2009, pg. 61). These megaliths constitute oval structures including two T-shaped pillars in the middle. According to the geometric surveys, estimated total number of the structures are around twenty and only 5% of the whole area has been excavated until 2000 (Schmidt, 2000, pp. 48-50). Another significant feature of Göbekli Tepe is that the entire area was buried with earth and limestone chips after its usage. Due to these reasons and numerous others, important scholars including Hodder and Schmidt are claiming that these buildings and the region in general was used as ritual centre where they reside temporarily. Also, there are other scholars such as Akkermans and Banning who contemplate that Göbekli Tepe rather served as shelters and temporary places for human as a settlement. However, considering differences of Göbekli Tepe against other settlements including possible ritual centres such as, Nevalı Çori, Çayönü or Ain Ghazal, indicates that there was something different going on in the area considering T-shaped pillars which surrounds possible structure and two in the middle, absence of tombs, fireplaces, kilns, domesticated floras and faunas. Since, such structures require great amount of energy to extract limestone blocks only using stone and timber tools, transporting them to the area and erecting and surely requires organisation. However, questions are why people would build such enormous structures and spent significant energy especially if they were going to bury them after usage and not used as a settlement? How did a community of people come to an agreement to build such area if they were living far away from each other? And why is it so unique that we cannot locate and similar buildings anywhere else in Anatolia and Near East? In order to answer to these questions, the research will examine differences and similarities between Göbekli Tepe and other significant archaeological areas from the

Neolithic Period namely, Nevali Çori, Çayönü, Catalhöyük, Ain Ghazal and Jericho in order to understand whether cities or temples came first through case studies.

Similarities and Differences between Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori

Nevali Çori is located in Şanlıurfa, Hilvan region, 70 kilometres opposite site of Göbeklitepe (Türkiye Arkeolojik Yerleşimleri, TAY) and dates back to 8400 to 8100 BCE. The settlement was occupied during the early and middle PPNB (Verhoeven, 2002, pg. 238). The area consists of houses and temples in Level II including huge monolithic T-shaped pillars holding the structure and includes a podium which was believed to be an area for a cult-statue or niche (Zimansky and Sargona, 2009, pg. 57) In comparison to Göbeklitepe, there are more evidences about sedentary life because of a sustainable transformation of houses which can be observed in different time periods. This transformation goes as follows: wattle and daub huts to cell plan buildings, cell plan to large room transition and large roomed buildings (Zimansky and Sagona, 2009, pg.51). On the other hand in Göbeklitepe, we can only perceive same type of T-shaped monoliths built and placed in different eras on top of each other in Level I, II and III (Banning, 2011, pp. 620-621). In my opinion, the most common expectation from a settlement that had been habited for a long time would be continuous change in structure. In fact, if Göbeklitepe would be used as a settlement, earlier phases of structure must have been observed such as, wattle and daub huts likewise in Nevali Çori (Figure I). Moreover, there are different constructions in Nevali Çori and therefore archaeologists can distinguish which building is used for ritual or communal purposes and which ones are for private houses. However, in Göbeklitepe there the absence of diversity as well and therefore archaeologists are unable to categorize the structures since they are all almost identical. Moreover, there are other indications of sedentary life in Nevali Çori such as burials and skull caches that were found beneath the houses. For instance in house no.2, there are up to twelve people's skulls, long bones, skeletons with and without skulls were found (Verhoeven, 2002, pg. 239 also check: Figure II) whereas in Göbeklitepe, Klaus Schmidt and his colleagues could not locate any burials inside and around the megaliths. Therefore, one should raise the question: If people were habiting in Göbeklitepe, where

were they burying their deceased relatives and ancestors? Or, why were they not having intramural burial similar to their neighbours or at least have a burial practices like them since they live very close to each other and there must have been interacted with them due to the short distance in between. The differences between Nevalı Çori and Göbeklitepe are certainly more than its similarities. This could be because of these two centres were serving for different purposes.

Similarities and Differences between Göbekli Tepe and Çayönü

Çayönü is another Neolithic settlement dates back to 8800 BCE and located close to Göbekli Tepe precisely at the foot of Taurus mountains and 40 kilometres away from Diyarbakır centre (Türkiye Arkeolojik Yerleşimleri ,TAY) In Çayönü, the architecture and settlement plan is more sophisticated than Nevalı Çori including grill plan buildings, channelled houses and also two distinguishable structures called “Flagstone” and “Skull” buildings (Zimansky and Sagona, 2009, pg. 53 also check: Figure III).Flagstone building is a rectangular building which has flat large stones as a pavement and two buttresses next to the north wall. Skull building is also located on the eastern part of the mount and used for an extended period of time with multiple reconstructions in the course of time (Verhoeven, 2002, pg. 239). Inside the building, there were skulls lying on the ground including two human skeletons. Also in the later phases of the building, 40 burnt human skulls were located (ibid). Contrariwise in Göbeklitepe, structures are identical and no difference can be observed such as skull and flagstone buildings. Besides, as it was mentioned before, there are no evidence of human bones which was located in-situ in the region. Skull building in Çayönü indicates a possible ritual place that is completely different than Nevalı Çori. Therefore it may be logical to exempt that societies and cultures who are not excessively remote to each other may not have similar cults or ritual practices. In other words, coming together with other settlements in order to build one huge ritual centre (Göbeklitepe) might not sound realistic since they have different ritual cults and practices. Likewise in Nevalı Çori, archaeologists have observed burials in Çayönü. These burials were usually decapitated and some of them were buried with different objects and frequently located under the cobbled floor such as the burials found in Pebbled Plaza (Zimansky and Sagona, 2009, pg. 64). Again, there are clear indications

in Çayönü that this place served for permanent lifestyle including burials, temples and houses whereas we cannot locate any burials, houses or different structures that may indicate a sedentary life in and around Göbeklitepe.

Similarities and Differences between Göbekli Tepe and Çatal Höyük

Without doubt, Çatalhöyük is one of the most fascinating places like Göbeklitepe that dates back to Neolithic Period. It is located in Central Anatolia in Konya basin and occupied between 7500 and 5700 BCE and relatively distant than other places that are mentioned before (about 450 km) and has different religious traditions (Hodder and Meskell, 2010: 32). Similar to Nevali Çori, there have been intramural burials possibly of their ancestors (Hodder, 2010, pg. 275) and the settlement in general was built by three types of spaces: the loam buildings, enclosed open areas and unbounded open spaces (Düring, 2006: 161). Buildings in Çatalhöyük are made of mud bricks whereas the buildings in Göbeklitepe are from stone. (Hodder and Meskell, 2010: 33). This might indicate that people did not require building permanent households to live in it. So, why did people in Göbeklitepe necessitate themselves to build everlasting structures to live in it and cover it up with earth and limestone chips? Also, considering the evolution of structures that had been on-going in the early Neolithic settlements in Anatolia, we can observe that they do not require building houses out of stones although they do when the building requires significance for the whole population such as, skull building in Çayönü and no.2 building in Nevali Çori. Moreover, when it is looked at Göbeklitepe we can observe huge T-shaped pillars and not even a single mud brick structure. That brings Göbeklitepe to a ritual or at least communal centre rather than a settlement. On the other hand, there are not communal or public buildings since the loam buildings are identical (Düring, 2006: 161). This feature is similar to Göbeklitepe in case of identical buildings that are also located in there. In Nevali Çori and Çayönü, we can locate more than one public building (Flagstone, Skull Building, Building no.2). Nevertheless, absence of communal building does not point out the absence of ritual practices and beliefs. In Çatal Höyük, there is existence of phallocentric view according to Ian Hodder. He also states, this view is also present in Göbeklitepe and Nevali Çori. Moreover in Göbeklitepe, there is

only one female depiction incised on T-shaped stones from Level II, L.10.71 (figure IV.) and the case in Nevalı Çori is the depiction of snake is the zoomorphic form of man (Hodder and Meskell, 2010: 41). However, one of the difficulties to emphasize during the process of understanding the main purpose of Göbeklitepe is the animal figures carved on the pillars. Since we can also observed wild animal (vultures, leopards and wild bulls) depictions on the walls of the houses in Çatalhöyük, the purpose of animal depictions carved on the monoliths is blurry to envision. However, it is not impossible to come up with an idea such as; the depictions could be the animals that they fear or the animals that they do not want to see. For instance, the purpose of building the serpent column in Istanbul was because it was believed to protect the city from snakes. Thus, carving the animals could have similar purpose in Göbeklitepe but in a larger scale. They might have been built and worshipped to get rid of these animals which could be dangerous for themselves and for their domesticated animals in their settlements.

Similarities and Differences between Göbekli Tepe and Ain Ghazal

In order to comprehend the uniqueness and significance of Göbeklitepe as a communal building, it is noteworthy to look at the settlements in the Near East as well. Ain Ghazal is a settlement located in the eastern part of Amman in Jordan and was a predominant place in Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B to Pre-Pottery Neolithic C (Verhoeven, 2002: 236). In Ain Ghazal, archaeologists have observed ritual buildings as well as with ritual objects. Also, there are presences of skull caches, plastered human skulls, human and animal figurines (ibid). The ritual buildings are clearly distinguishable from domestic households including hearths, basins and fireplaces whereas, interior furniture is absent and nothing has observed on the floors in ritual buildings. Therefore, when the settlement compared with Göbeklitepe the result gets more obvious. In fact, according to the recent excavations that have been held by Klaus Schmidt, no interior furniture has been located inside the monoliths (except several straight stone structures that are thought as benches) and the floor is remarkably clean (Verhoeven, 2002: 242-243). Also as it was mentioned before, the identical building types in Göbeklitepe is clearly different than what we have seen so far in other settlements. There are also burials in Ain Ghazal in three different styles.

These are; subfloor burials with decapitated skeletons, courtyard burials where the skull is together with the skeleton and infant burials and also it is significant to mention the existence of plastered skulls (Verhoeven, 2002, 237). In comparison, Göbeklitepe is totally clean from both interior and exterior burials and not a slightest human skeletons or skulls have been detected so far.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Göbeklitepe's distinctive features come into prominence when it is compared with other settlements and possible ritual centres. Presence of T-shaped pillars and presence of more than 20 buildings is the major ambiguity that archaeologists faced so far. In fact, in order to extract these stones from the quarries without using metal hammers and chisels would make the process even more difficult. Also, transportation of 10 to 20 tonnes stones would require great amount of energy and communication. Since, the area had built before the emergence of typography, archaeologists cannot go beyond looking at the symbols. The absence of typography at that moment is the greatest disadvantage of understanding the purpose of this location. However, when it is compared with other settlements and ritual centres, we can observe the clear differences in between. First of all, buildings or at least T-shaped columns, their alignment and interior columns are all identical and with each other. Therefore, it is unlikely to perceive the possible different purposes of the buildings. In other words, buildings were probably used for the same purpose. Also, these structures are deprived from interior furniture and floor. Except benches which were located inside columns, no other furniture types such as kilns, fireplaces or a stone floor have been observed so far. Second feature is the absence of burials. Almost in all settlements regardless of their period, burials can be observed eventually. However, in Göbeklitepe there are no burials observed so far. This could be because either cremation was used in this region or people did not bury their dead's for not to contaminate the area which eventually brings us that the area had served as sacramental purposes. However, if the area had a ritual importance for large amount of people in the region, why did they decide to cover the centre with earth and limestone chips? Actually, that might explain why we cannot locate any burials. It could be because the centre was serving to religious purposes and highly sacred that people did not want

to contaminate and wanted to keep it in there forever. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of the area has been excavated by Klaus Schmidt and his colleagues and perhaps it is too early to come with a general judgement. However, considering from what has been excavated so far and geomagnetic surveys which displayed more of T-shaped pillars and structures, the area was most probably serving as a ritual centre. If future excavations that will be held in the area give similar results, then there will not be any doubt that temples came first then cities in human life.

Appendix

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Tables

Table I.		
<i>Nevalı Çori vs. Göbeklitepe</i>		
Differences		Similarities
Large sculpture buried in walls of ritual buildings	Large sculpture found in fill of ritual buildings	Ritual buildings
Burials	No burials	Internal furniture in ritual buildings (benches?)
Skull caches	No skull caches	Possible 'burial' of ritual buildings
Figurines	Figurines are almost absent	Plastered skulls are absent
Marked human-animal linkages	Human-animal linkages are much less marked	Considerable animal symbolism
Table II.		
<i>Çayönü vs. Göbeklitepe</i>		
Differences		Similarities
Animal symbolism less conspicuous	Considerable animal symbolism	Ritual buildings
Figurines	Figurines are almost absent	Internal furniture in ritual buildings (benches?)
Burials	No Burials	Possible 'burial' of ritual buildings
Skull caches	No skull caches	Plastered skulls are absent
Almost no large sculptures	Large sculptures	

Source: Verhoeven, M., 2002. Ritual and Ideology in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Levant and Southeast Anatolia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 12, pg. 243.

Table III.***Çatalhöyük vs. Göbeklitepe***

Differences		Similarities
No T-shaped pillars	Large T-shaped pillars, many with animal depictions	Ritual buildings
Burials	As yet no burials found	Animal symbolism is apparent
Many Figurines	Only very few figurines	No skull caches
No large sculpture of animals	Large sculpture of animals	Plastered skulls are absent
No communal or religious building	Communal or religious building	Internal furniture in ritual buildings (benches?)

Table IV.***Ain Ghazal vs. Göbeklitepe***

Differences		Similarities
No T-shaped pillars	Large T-shaped pillars, many with animal depictions	Ritual buildings
Plastered skulls	No plastered skulls	Possible 'burial' of ritual buildings
Skull caches	No skull caches	Internal furniture in ritual buildings (benches?)
Burials	As yet no burials found	Large statues
Many Figurines	Only very few figurines	
No large sculpture of animals	Large sculpture of animals	
Large lime plaster statues	No large lime plaster statues	

Source: Verhoeven, M., 2002. Ritual and Ideology in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Levant and Southeast Anatolia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 12, pp. 242.

Figures

Figure I.

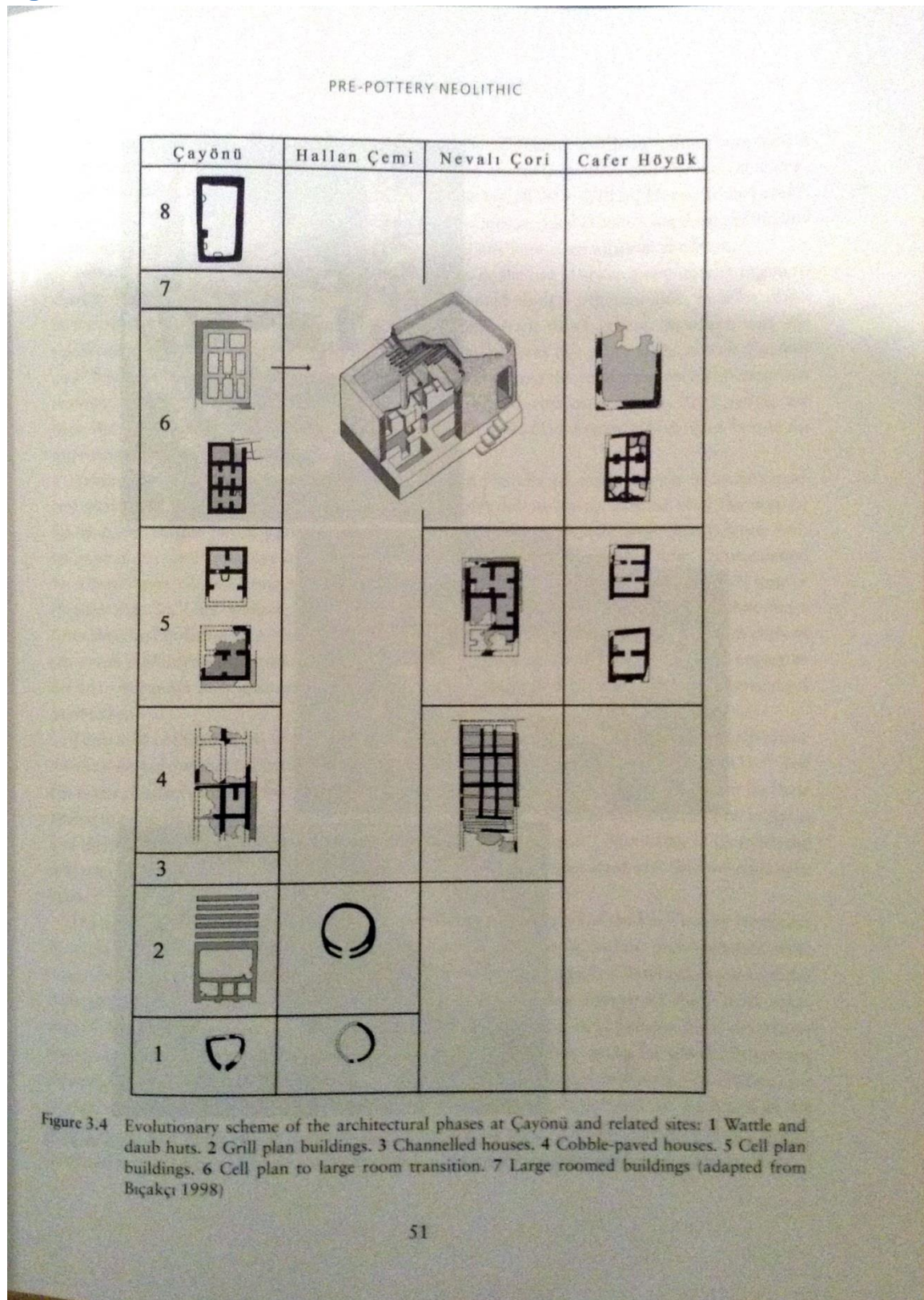
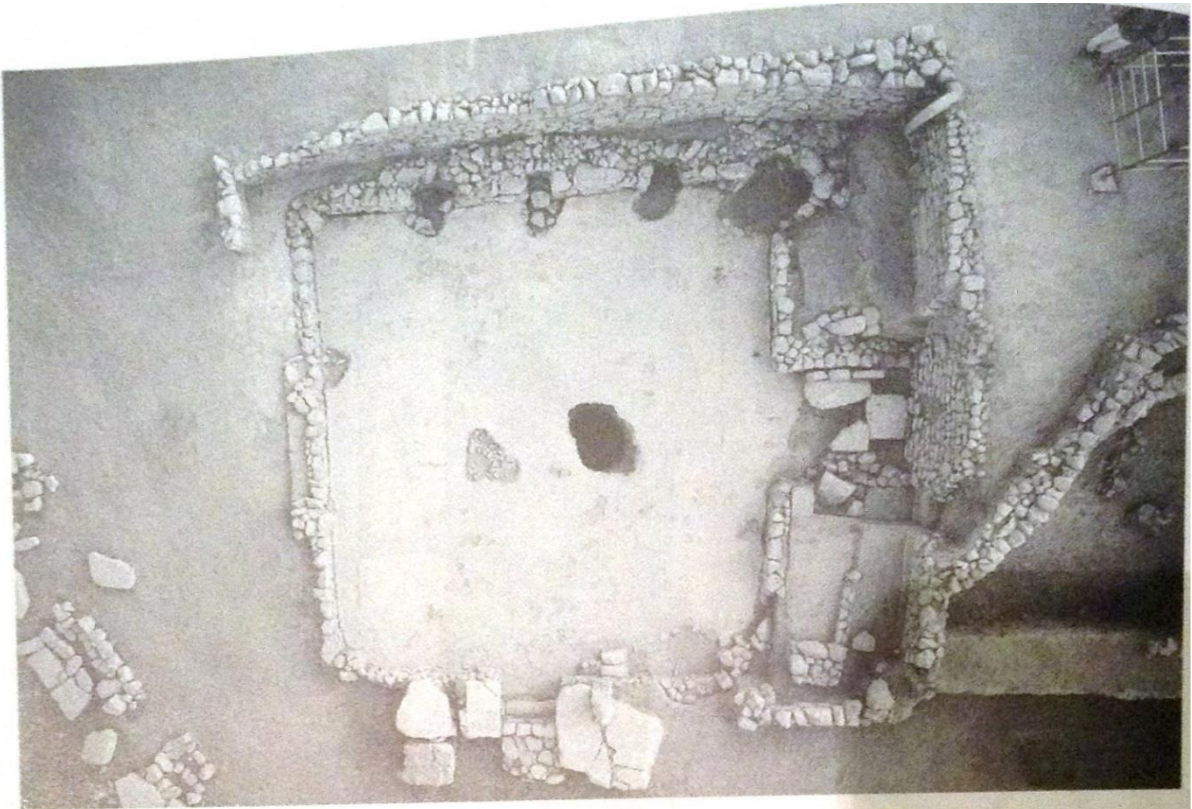
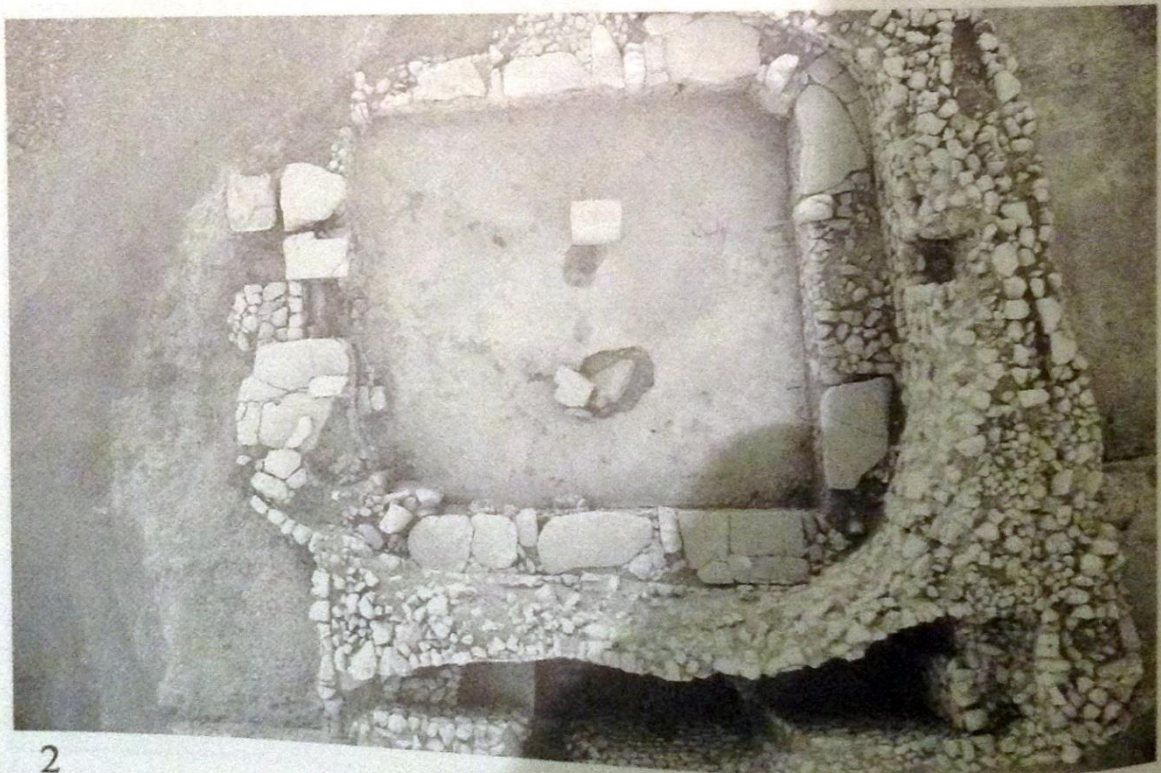


Figure II.

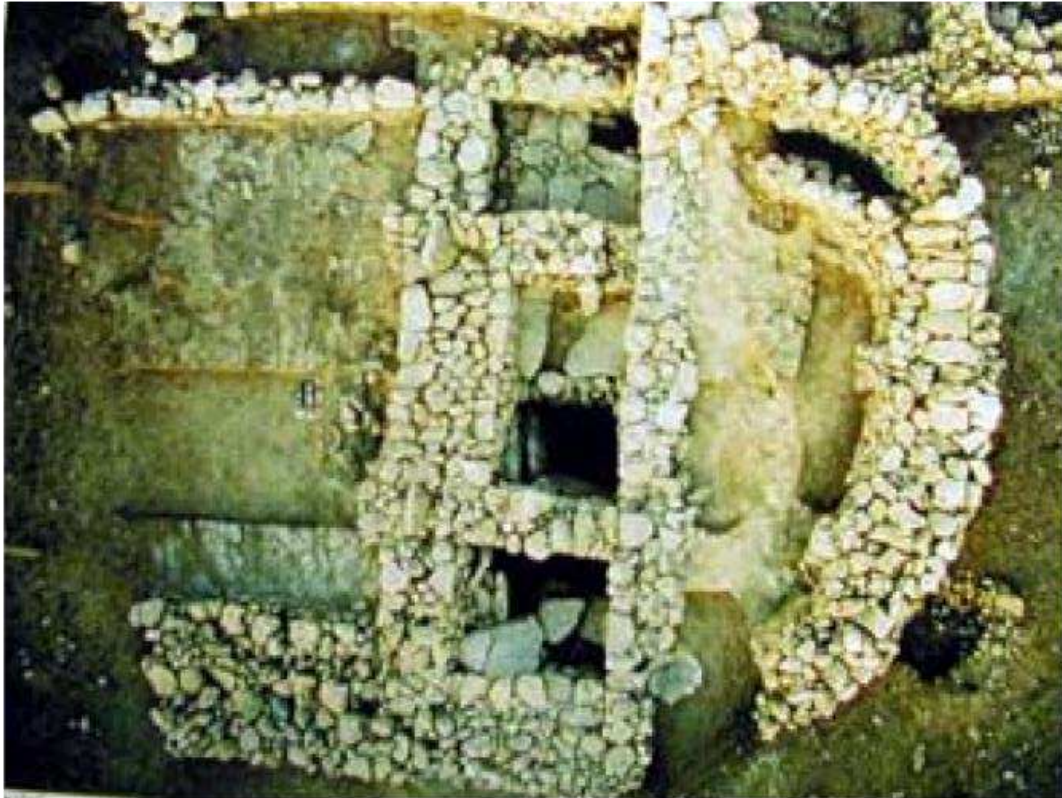


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Figure III.



Source: Sagona, A. & Zimansky, P., 2009. *Ancient Turkey*. Abington: Routledge. pg.52

Figure IV.



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