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Universität Heidelberg

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Magic Figurines? Some Remarks About the Clay Objects of Nevalı Çori

Michael G. F. Morsch

Abstract: *The excavations of Nevalı Çori in the Taurus foothills in Southeast Turkey have revealed a large PPNB site with remarkable architecture and monumental carved sculptures. In addition, 1289 clay objects were found. The large number of objects and the extended excavations allow a very detailed analysis including typology, statistics, context and technological aspects. As a result, there are several possibilities to interpret the use of the figurines. Whether they were toys, narrative or magic figurines embedded in a complex religious system cannot be said with absolute certainty, but it is very doubtful that they are goddesses.*

Topographic and Chronological Setting of Nevalı Çori

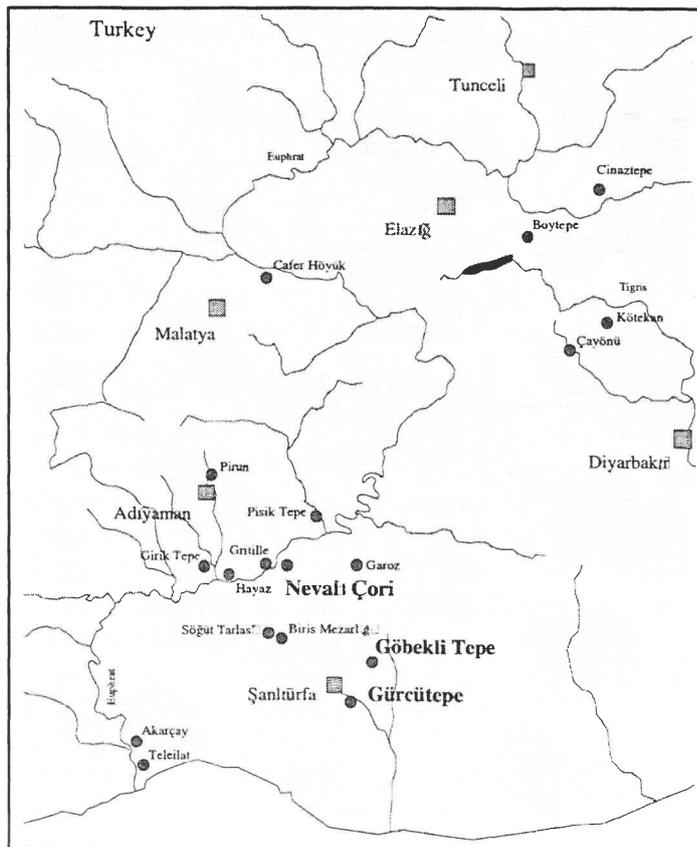


Fig. 1. Map of main Neolithic sites in Upper Mesopotamia.

The site of Nevalı Çori is located in the Taurus foothills, in south-east Turkey (Province Şanlıurfa, District Hilvan) near the village Bahceli (Gebel 1984: 240, Nr. 3.7; Hours *et al.* 1994: 259) in a side valley of the Euphrates. The formerly flat depression of the valley is deeply furrowed by the section of the Kantara stream, about 6m in depth. Several other tributary wadis, together with the main stream, destroyed some parts of the site. (These erosional features do not antedate Roman times. Heijns 1984: 11ff.; Völk *et al.* 1987: 3f., 1994). The settlement is situated on both sides of the stream. The main and better preserved part of the settlement is located on a triangular terrace on the river's eastern Bank beneath a steep hilltop. The Kantara stream and two deep wadis separate the plateau from the rest of the bottom of the valley.

The site was excavated by H. Hauptmann during seven large-scale excavation seasons between 1983 and 1991. The excavations were concentrated on the eastern bank of the creek where among other things a settlement of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (henceforth PPNB) was exposed (Hauptmann 1993: 39). The PPNB layers are 2.50 m in thickness and could be divided into five architectural subphases (henceforth Phase I-V). The buildings of Phase I were founded on virgin soil and could be regarded as the oldest subphase.

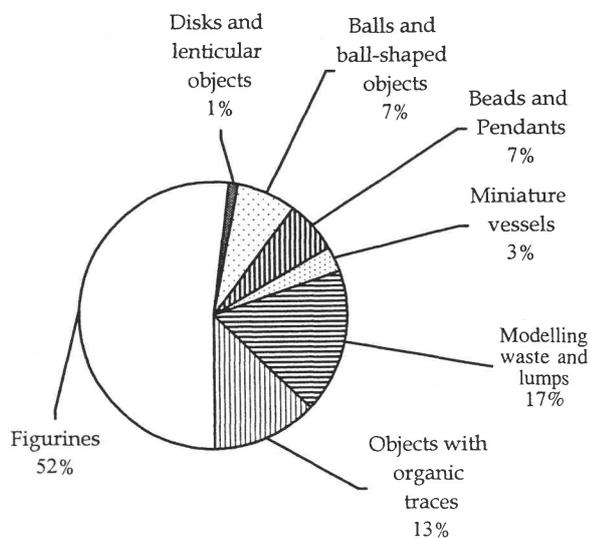


Fig. 2. Distribution of quantities of the different types of objects.

The architectural remains mainly reflect rectangular buildings consisting of two parts: a storage unit with two or three rows of cells and a living unit, the two units being divided by wall projections (Hauptmann 1988: 103, 1993: 39ff.). Most of these "houses" were set parallel to each other in one row, the living unit facing the creek.

In the south-eastern part of the settlement, a 'cult building' was discovered that showed three construction phases, one built into the other, of which the youngest is contemporary with Phase III and the oldest with Phase I. The two younger phases of the building had a plaster floor, executed in a terrazzo-technique. All three construction phases provided numerous finds of life-size or even larger limestone sculptures, which are extraordinary within the art of the early Near Eastern Neolithic.

The setting of Nevalı Çori in the relative chronology of the PPNB depends on its flint industry and architectural remains. Byblos-points without surface retouch dominate the projectile points (Schmidt 1988: 180) and date the settlement to O. Aurenche's Phase 3 (Aurenche *et al.* 1981: 571ff., Cauvin 1994: 20-21). Phase 3 is contemporary with the early and middle PPNB. There is also the evidence that the site was still settled in Phase 4 (Schmidt 1988: 181), contemporary with the late PPNB.

A more distinctive location within Phase 3 is possible, according to the architectural remains of the settlement. The "channelled houses" mentioned above, which are typical for the Phases I-IV, are also characteristic for the "intermediate level" or channelled subphase in Çayönü. (Hauptmann 1988: 103, 1994: 39; M. and A. Özdoğan 1989: 68f; Schirmer 1988: 146, 149, 151, Fig.7-8). The only building of Phase V with its different adjustment (Hauptmann 1988: 103, Fig. 1) seems to be related with the building type of the cell plan subphase (Schirmer 1988: Fig. 9-11).

The location of Nevalı Çori in the absolute chronology is based on four ¹⁴C – dates:

- Hd-16782-351: 9243 bp ± 55; 8345-8235 8275-8125 8110-8095 cal BC
- Hd-16781-835: 9261 bp ± 181; 8470-8080 cal BC
- Hd-16783-769: 9212 bp±76; 8340-8295 8270-8085 cal BC
- Hd-16784-768: 9882 bp ± 224; 9775-8950 cal BC

(The calibration was carried out by the use of Calib 3.03, the 1 sigma - value after Method A is quoted.)

Three of them belong to Phase II and thus date it to the second half of the 9th millennium, mainly contemporary with the early dates from Çayönü and those from Mureybet IVA (Cauvin 1987: 329). They also sustain the dating to Phase 3 after Aurenche. The fourth date, belonging to Phase I, should be regarded as isolated since its 10th millennium age would be the oldest known date for the PPNB.

The Finds, Their Context and Their State of Preservation

The total number of the figurines and other clay objects is 1289. They have been classified into five groups: figurines (665), beads and pendants (84), miniature vessels (39), disks and lenticular objects (13), spheres and spherical objects (93), and modelling waste and lumps (386). The latter show occasional traces of various organic materials and structures, mainly fibres and plaited work (Fig. 2).

Clay objects have been found in almost all parts of the settlement: mainly in pits and in the open spaces between the houses. Interior finds are limited to the round "houses" detected in Nevalı Çori. They are almost completely absent in the "rooms" of the rectangular houses as well as in the walls of any kind of house. Only six clay objects have been discovered in the walls of the cult building, most of them spheres.

Almost all the items have been found broken, especially the figurines. Only two pieces could be joined into one item. It is possible that the figurines have been intentionally damaged, in fact many of them were broken not at the weakest points, but at the parts with the greatest strength. The figurines may have been broken during cult activities or magic rituals (Talalay 1987: 168f., Ucko 1962, Voigt 1983: 195), but also possibly by chance or by use. Archaeological finds are generally found broken, especially if they are made of fragile materials. A figurine that is found intact is regarded as a phenomenon that needs explanation (Garfinkel 1995: 52).

Typology

The range of classifiable groups, i.e. figurines, disks and lenticular objects, spheres and spherical objects, beads and pendants, miniature vessels, modelling waste and lumps and their shapes coincide with the items known from other contemporary sites (Fig. 2). The high proportion of figurines is remarkable, a new phenomenon for sites of the early and middle PPNB (Fig. 2).

Figurines

The number of items assigned to this group is 665, which is more than 50% of all items. The figurines can be subdivided into three groups:

- a) Anthropomorphic figurines
- b) Abstract forms, a type which could be anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic
- c) Zoomorphic figurines

Anthropomorphic Figurines

The anthropomorphic figurines can be divided into two groups: sitting female figurines, which can be subdivided into three types, and upright standing male figurines. The figurines of each group were manufactured with the same specific, composite technique. Exceptions or variations are very rare.

To make a female figurine, the torso was modelled first, including the head. The buttocks were made of two small clay spheres, pressed together and then pressed on a smooth and flat surface. Then the torso was put on top and the clay at the joint was smoothed to make it invisible. The legs and feet followed and the joints were smoothed again.

To make a male figurine, the torso was modelled in a way similar to a female figurine, including the head. The legs were made of two clay cylinders pressed together, including the feet at the lower end. Again the torso was put on top and the clay at the joint was smoothed to make it invisible. (Some figurines have no supporting surface at the soles of their feet, so they were not made to stand). Next, small pieces like the genitals and sometimes a sash-shaped belt was applied. Finally, the figurine was smoothed again and sometimes additional decoration such as incisions or punctures was added.

Female with "Child"

This type is represented by only two items. It is the representation of a woman holding a child in her arms. In this case only the essential meaning is represented: arms holding a child under the breasts. Head and legs are only hinted at (Pl. 1: 1-2). Similar representations can be found in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic and Pottery Neolithic periods of Central Anatolia at the settlements of Çatal Höyük (Mellaart 1967: Fig. 49) and Haçılar (Mellaart 1970: II, 472, 474-519, Figs. 190, 192-244) – a corpulent woman seated or standing, and occasionally holding a child or a young animal in her arm. They are regarded as cult figurines of a fertility goddess, possibly a prototype of Hepat, Kupapa, Kybele, and the Magna Mater (Cauvin 1972: 96f., 1978, 134f., 1994: 48ff.; Mellaart 1961: 59f., 1963: 30, 1967: 236ff.; Todd 1976: 53, 93.), or as a predecessor of ancient Mesopotamian goddesses such as Ishtar, Inanna, Ninlil or Ninhursag (Ippolitioni Strika 1975: 171, 1983: 3, 38ff.). This cannot be proved with certainty (Hodder 1987: 45, 50f., 55f.). It is uncertain if these figurines have fundamentally the same meaning as the two items from Nevalı Çori.

Pregnant Woman

Only eight specimens of this type were detected. It is again the representation of a woman, with strongly protruding belly (Pl. 1: 3-6), made according to the pattern described above.

Female, Seated

With 159 pieces, this type dominates the female figurines. Here sitting women or girls are represented. Note that these figurines are quite slim, in spite of an emphasis on the hips and buttocks. Presumably young women are depicted here; there are also clearly mature representations. They seem to be naked, since no indications of either applied or carved garments could be detected. Non-decorated figurines occur as well as incised and punctuate decorated ones (Pl. 2: 1-6).

Male Figurines

Male figurines are the most frequently represented type with their 179 pieces. They are normally represented standing upright. Upper body parts, hips, legs and feet are only roughly modelled. Only a few statements can be made about the head of this type, for only a few examples were found complete with head. The genitals are only hinted at in form of a pouch. On some figurines a kind of carved or punched belt or sash is around the hips, although the genitals are always shown (Pl. 3: 3-4.6). The remaining figurines are completely naked (Pl. 3: 1-2.5).

Considering the frequency and the stereotype with which the male figurines were produced in Nevalı Çori, it is amazing that almost no comparable specimens have been found in other contemporary settlements. Only one similar piece comes from the settlement of Cafer Höyük (Cauvin 1989: 81, Fig. 11:1). The representation of naked men standing upright, with detailed legs, is to be found only in the older to middle PPNB of the Taurus foothills, in Nevalı Çori and Cafer Höyük.

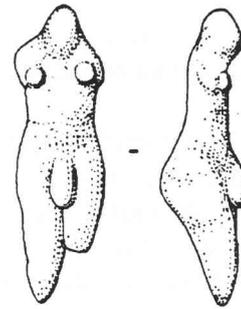


Fig. 3. Male clay figurine from Cafer Höyük (after Cauvin 1989).

Abstract Forms

This figurine type has a more or less round base with a shallow depression. Two small projections on the front represent the feet. The conical body generally ends with a stylised head. These figurines seem to be the strongly reduced representation of living beings, although they can-not with certainty be considered purely anthropomorphic pieces. Even more simplified forms belong to this group as purely conical objects. Their number is 39 (Pl. 4:1-3).

Zoomorphic Figurines

Unlike at other aceramic settlements, where the number of zoomorphic figurines always constitutes the larger part of the finds (often 70%), at Nevalı Çori they do not even reach 30 specimens in number, i.e., 4% of the figurine objects. However only two heads, two torsos and two legs are to be identified with certainty as fragments of animal figurines. A clear identification of the animals is difficult. The heads may belong to images of sheep/goat or bovines (Pl. 4: 4-5), while one torso might belong to a bear or boar (Pl. 4: 6). The other torso looks like the skin of an animal lying on the floor, and significantly it has impressions of matting on the lower side (Pl. 4: 7). The remaining pieces are small horns, although some of them could just be modelling waste.

Non-Figurine Objects

This second large group of the clay objects of Nevalı Çori can be subdivided into beads and pendants, vessels, disks or lenticular pieces, spheres or spherical objects, modelling waste and clay lumps but also objects with organic impressions. The beads and pendants as well as the vessels represent the most important group, showing that working with clay was at a well-developed stage at Nevalı Çori.

Beads and Pendants

Eighty-four beads and pendants of clay were found. They can be subdivided into five types: Disk shaped beads (41), cylindrical beads (22), spherical beads (9), spacer beads (2) and varia (10).

The disk shaped beads form the largest group with 41 specimens (Pl. 5: 6-9). Made of clay or stone with simply round, oval or rhombic forms, they are a very common bead type in the finds spectrum of aceramic settlements that remained in use into the early Bronze Age (Braidwood and Braidwood 1960: Figs. 67, 166, 252, 296, 378).

A special form of the disk shaped beads is the so-called *butterfly bead*, characterised by a lengthened eyelet. In Nevalı Çori it is represented only twice (Pl. 5: 8). They are normally made of stone. The asymmetric form presupposes that these beads were possibly put up vertically and

worn with the broader side down. Butterfly beads are known from Abu Hureyra, which seems to be a bit later than Nevalı Çori.

Twenty-two cylindrical beads have been found. Cylindrical beads made of clay, stone or organic materials (Bar-Yosef 1988: 19f; Broman-Morales 1983: 388f., Figs. 168: 10, 1990: 68, Pl. 27: d-e; Moholy-Nagy 1983: 297f., Fig. 136) represent a simple form easy to produce, also present amongst the finds of other aceramic sites (Broman-Morales 1990: 68, Pl. 27: e-f). The 9 spherical beads are more or less perforated clay spheres (Pl. 5: 5-6), again a simple form, which could be easily made.

Only two spacer beads with two perforations were found (Pl. 5,4). Stone spacer beads are very frequent and can have up to four perforations. They also occur in other aceramic settlements and remain in use. Five further specimens of clay with two perforations have been found in Jarmo (Broman-Morales 1983: 388f., Fig. 168: 12).

Ten specimens have been classified as *Varia* (Pl. 5:10-11). One remarkable item is an oval pendant (Pl. 5:10) found in Nevalı Çori. Similar examples are also known from Sarab (Broman-Morales 1990: 25, Pl. 17: n) and Jarmo (Moholy-Nagy 1983: 297ff., Figs. 140: 11-12). Similar forms were still in use into the early Bronze Age in the Plain of Antioch (Braidwood and Braidwood 1960: Figs. 100: 12-14, 296: 18).

In summary, it may be said that aceramic bead types have no extraordinary shapes and no great informational content for a chronological analysis except for the "butterfly beads". The clay beads were almost surely subject to an intended burning process. An unburned bead was not sufficiently hard and moisture-proof and therefore not suitable for use. In fact, traces of heating were detectable on all beads.

Vessels

Thirty-seven objects can be principally regarded as miniature vessels, a high number for a PPNB site. They can be mainly classified into two groups: vessels with flat (Pl. 6: 1-2,4) and vessels with round bottoms (Pl. 6:3). The vessels with a flat base were modelled on a flat surface, the ones with a rounded base in the hollow hand. Footed vessels are rare (Pl. 6: 5).

The relatively high number of (miniature) vessels reveals that the people of Nevalı Çori were essentially already familiar with the production of vessels of clay or other ceramic materials. The large amount of flat-based specimens indicates indeed a certain standard of production, but the forms and functions of these early clay products nevertheless were too simple to have been of any utility in everyday life, as for example for the storage and the transport of liquids. The small number of vessels found in Nevalı Çori also supports this view.

Discussion

The clay objects from Nevalı Çori, based on their great number and their broad spectrum of types, occupy a special position among the collections of early ceramic products up to now. Early Neolithic man already had a comprehensive knowledge of the extraction of clay and its modelling to ceramic products like clay figures, miniature vessels and beads. This is demonstrated by the following points:

- a) The relatively large number of objects.
- b) The great amount of modelling waste and clay lumps (386) prove an intense work with the material in the settlement.

- c) According to an analysis of colour and consistency, all of the intentionally produced artefacts such as human and animal figurines, spheres, beads, and vessels were seemingly burnt. This observation is supported by scientific analyses on the clay objects (M. T. Crepaldi - Affonso, PhD Diss., Heidelberg 1997).
- d) The individual figurine, vessel, and bead types were produced in high number and with great regularity. They were fashioned intentionally, not haphazardly.
- e) The miniature vessels found in Nevalı Çori and other PPN sites confirm that the principle of production of clay vessels was essentially known but not routinely utilised. Containers made of stone and organic materials were used instead, possibly explained by the way of life of the population.

The type spectrum of the figurine objects can be strongly distinguished from that of contemporary aceramic settlements, both in its type composition and numbers: an amazingly small number of animal figurines (30 or less than 3%) and a very high number of human figurines (486 or 38%) (Fig. 2). Among the representations of human beings, the masculine figurines with their high number (179) represent a novelty for the aceramic Neolithic period. Furthermore, there is a surprising similarity in the making of male and female figurines. Furthermore, the fact that the number of both types of objects (179 : 159) is almost equal is intriguing. Possible interpretations could come from a broad range of speculation and can only be restricted by considering their context (Bánffy 1986: 154, Hamilton *et al.* 1996, Talalay 1983: 233) within a contextual analysis. The possibilities of the use of clay objects go from toys or educative figurines to shamanism and up to complex cults.

The interpretation of the Nevalı Çori clay figurines is more or less a process of exclusion of what functions they definitely could not have been used for, followed by a discussion on the remaining ones. One can only create one or more models or hypotheses about their function, which can never be proved.

One possible function of the figurines which can never be completely denied is their function as toys. The figurines are small, easy to produce, and male and female figurines together with the abstract forms can be easily used for all kinds of role-play exercises concerning the family or the whole society. But it is a little strange that there are no animal figurines to play with and that there is little variation in the design of the figurines. This would mean a standardised and specialised production of toys in a hunter and gatherer culture, which has not yet been reported in any other case.

Another aspect, very close to the latter one are figurines, made to express a sudden impression/feeling like the "Pieta" of 'Ain Ghazal (Rollefson 1986: Pl. II:3) and therefore are narrative images or idols if a wish that should happen in the future like pregnancy/ children is expressed. This would be an explanation for the images of pregnant women or women with children etc.

The dressing of the male figurines with a "belt" around the waist, as described above, shows strong similarities to the one of the "dancing men" on the wall paintings of Çatal Höyük (Mellaart 1967: Pl. XIII, Pl.61-64). These are seen in a ritual context and represent human beings. Also the Nevalı Çori clay figurines possibly could represent human beings in a ritual ceremony. The number of male and female images is equal, which might be representative for the real population of Neolithic Nevalı Çori. This might mean that the ceremonies in which they were used also concerned both the male and the female populations of Nevalı Çori equally. As there are also pregnant figurines or such with children, the figurines played a certain role in important stages of human life such as birth, childhood, incarnation or marriage, when support or even protection and healing by shamanistic practices was needed.

Iconographic - religious system of Nevali Çori

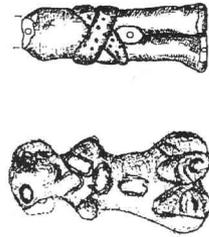
(Created by typology of artifacts, statistics and contextual analysis)

Real existing world:

Human beings

Manifested by clay figurines

Themes: humans



1. Magic aspects:

representaion of humans at ceremonies

- Healing
- Stages of life (birth, incarnation, death etc.)

2. Secular aspects

- Reports/educative
- expression of feelings
- wishful thinking (also magic)

Context:

- pits
- walking areas

Spiritual / Ghost world

Supernatural powers: higher beings, ancestors, animal spirits

Ceremonies

Take place at

Cult buildings,

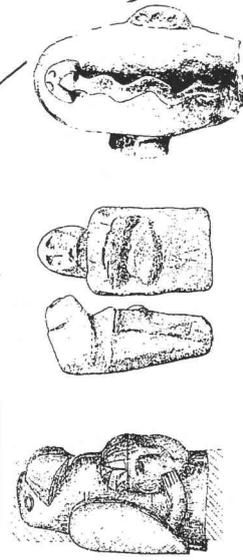
Plazas

Influence/contact by ceremonies

Manifested by stone sculpture

Themes: human-bird hybrids

Animals, humans,



by death

1. Magic aspects:

- higher beings / goddesses ?
- worshipped ancestors

ceremonies

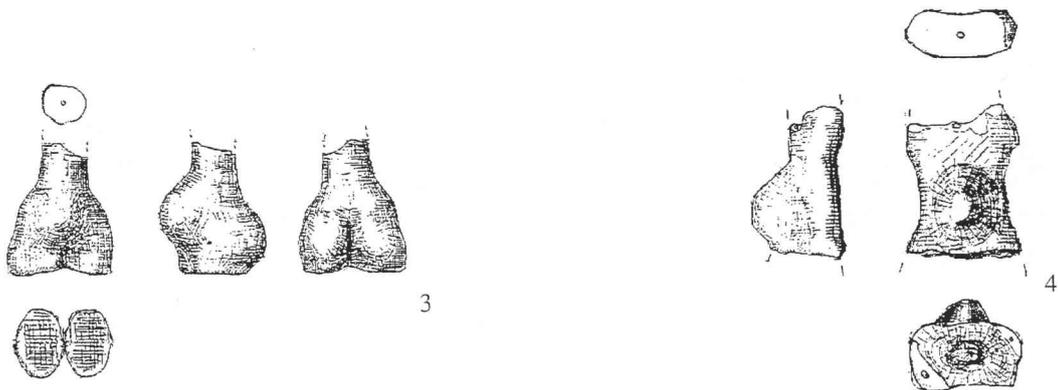
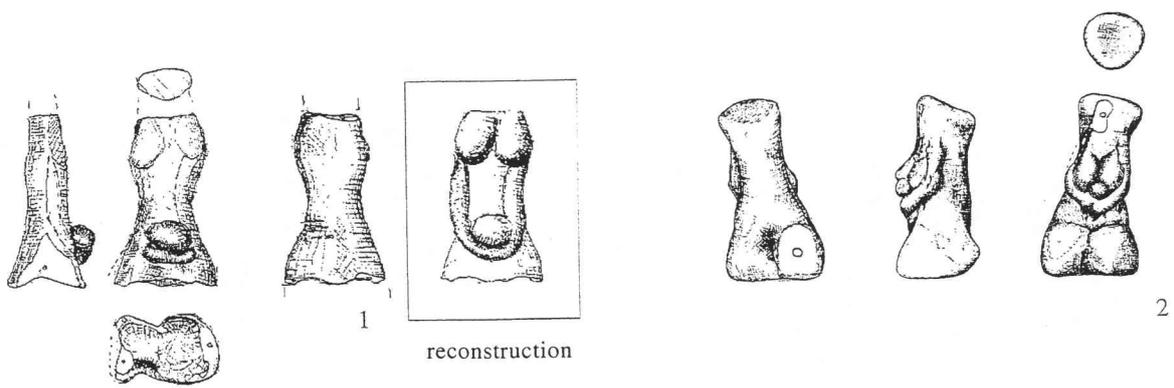
1. Magic aspects:

- Spirits of animals
- Totem (protective)

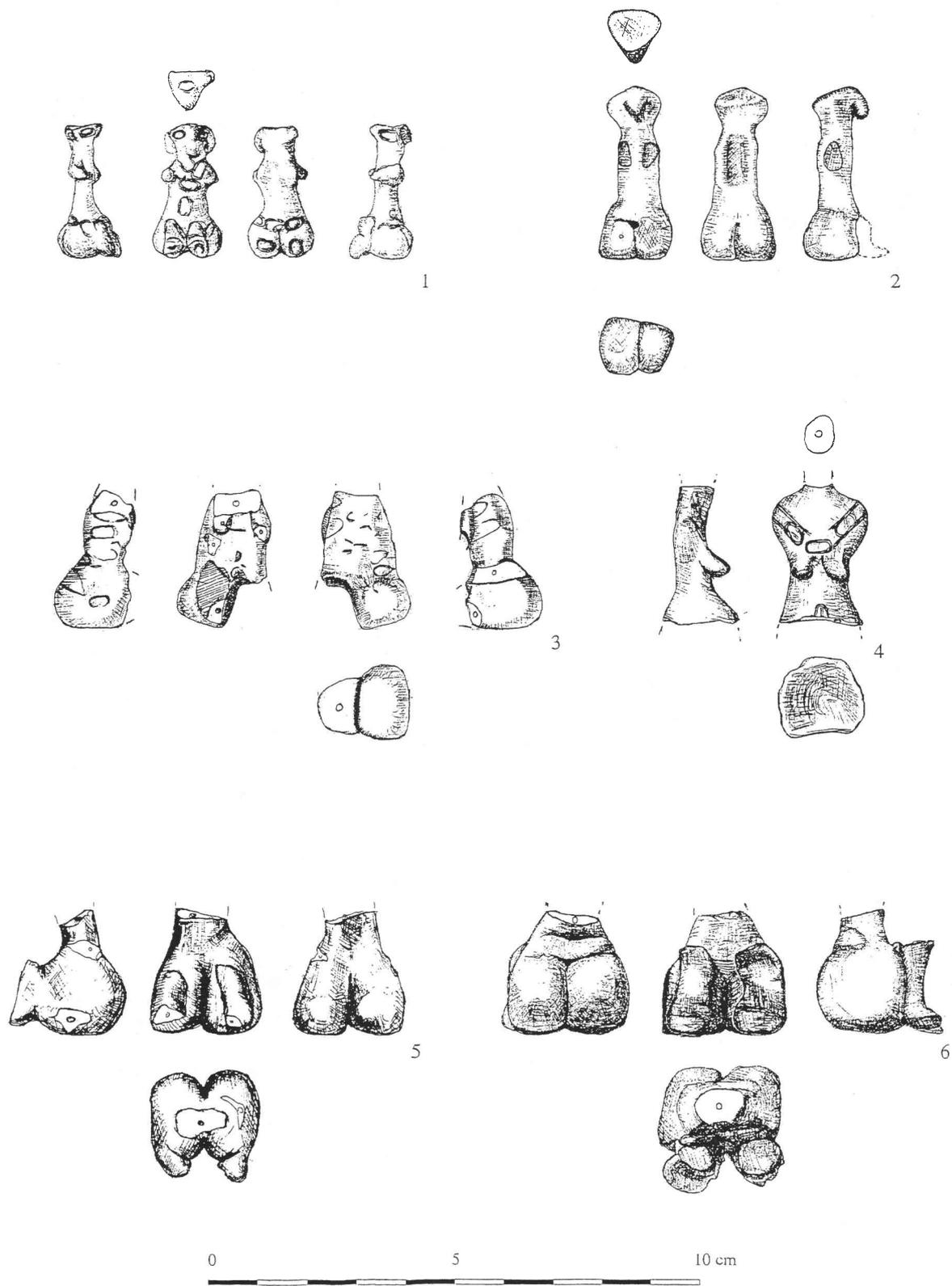
Context:

- cult building
- houses

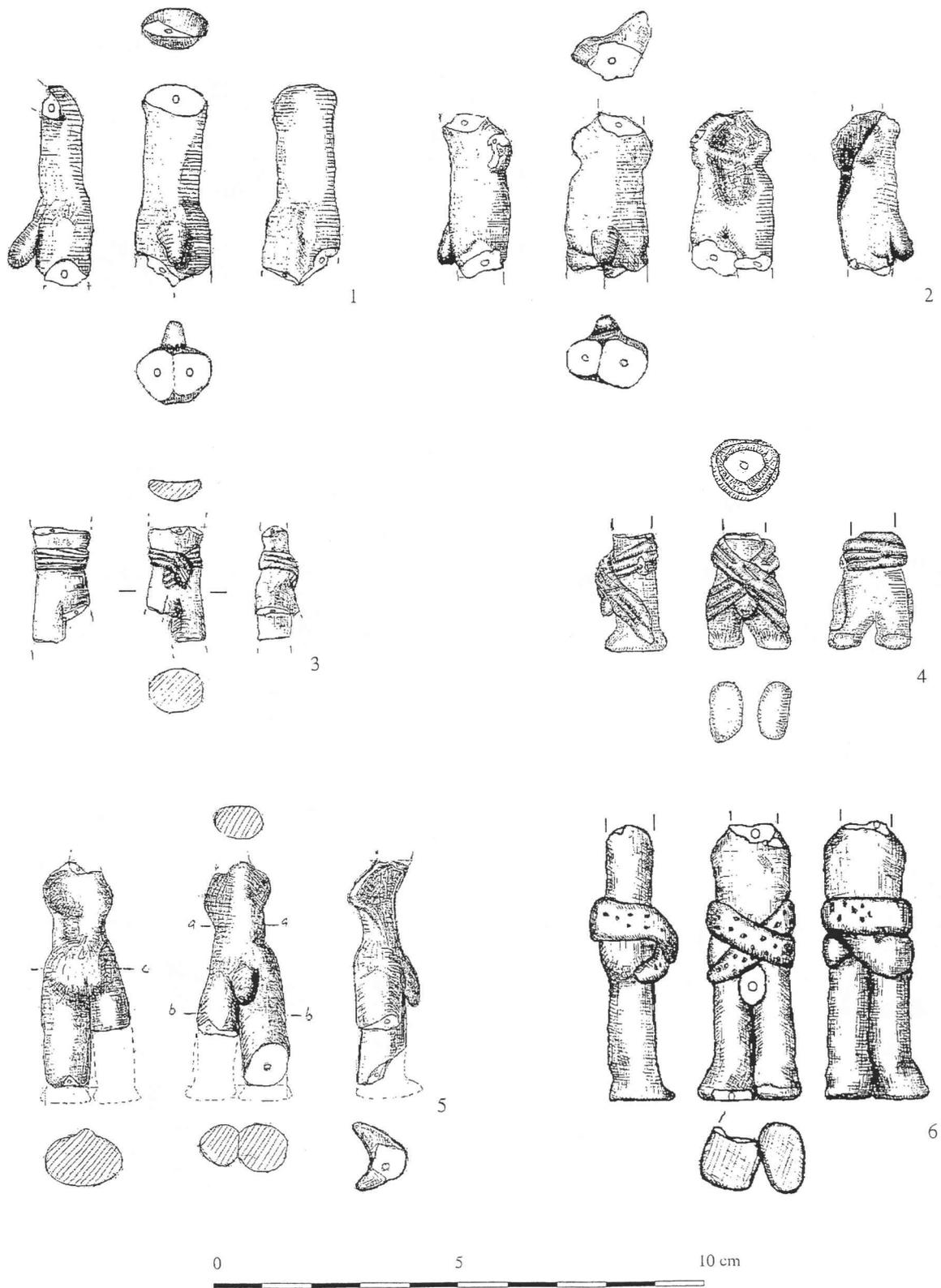
Fig. 4. Iconographic relation system of Nevalı Çori (reconstruction drawings after K.P. Schmidt).



Pl. 1. Anthropomorphic figurines: 1-2 female with "child", 3-6 pregnant women.



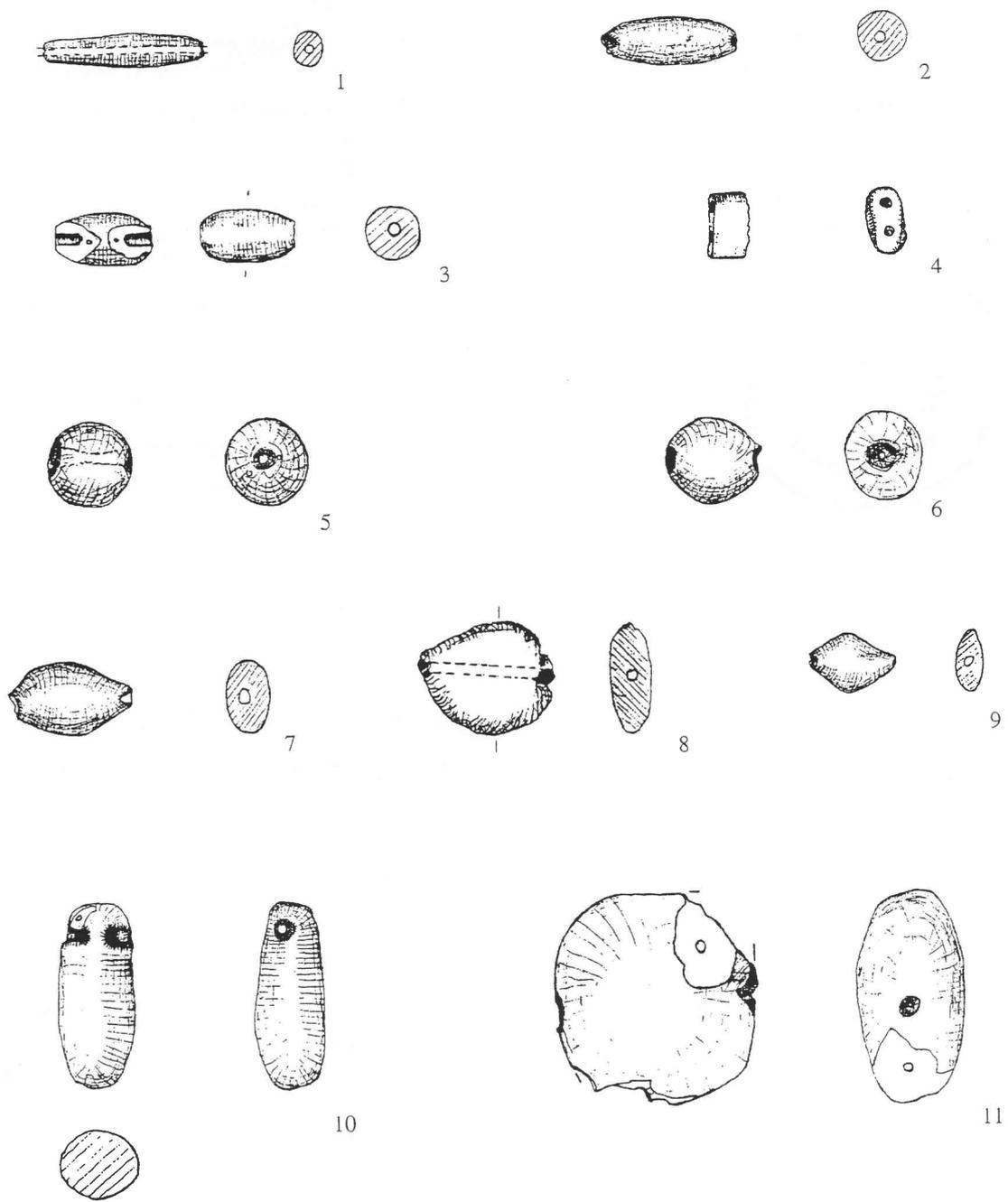
Pl. 2. Anthropomorphic figurines: female seated, 1-2 complete, 3-4 fragment of torso, 5-6 fragment of buttocks and legs.



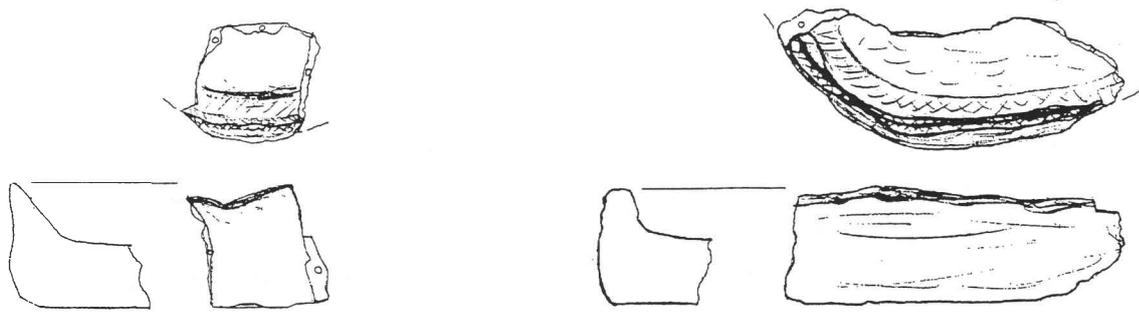
Pl. 3. Anthropomorphic figurines: male standing 1-2, 5 undressed, 3-4,6 with belt.



Pl. 4. 1-3 abstract forms and 4-7 zoomorphic figurines: 4-5 head of bovids or caprids, 6-7 torsos.

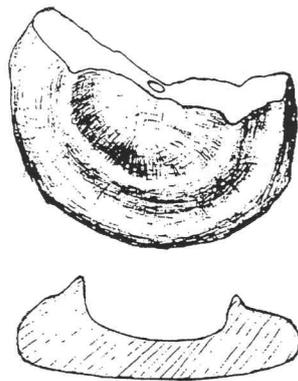


Pl. 5. Beads: 1-3 cylindrical, 4 spacer beads, 5-6 ball shaped, 7-9 disc shaped, 10 pendant, 11 large formate.

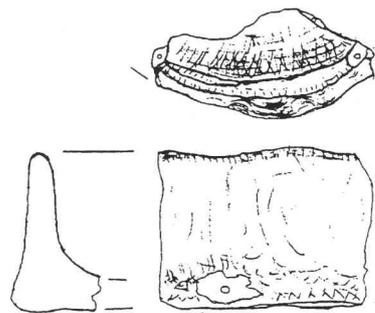


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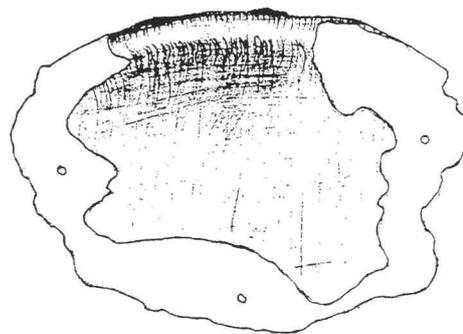
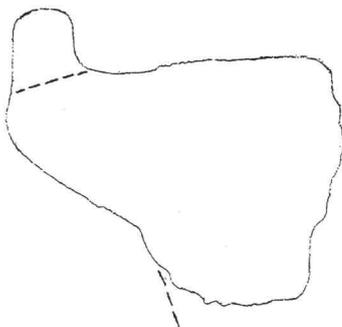
2



3



4



5



Pl. 6. Miniature vessels: 1-2, 4 flat based, 3 round based, 5 footed.

According to the context where the figurines were found, the figurines were carelessly thrown away after using them, evidently because they had lost all worth. In fact, so many of them have been found broken that they also might have been regarded as dangerous, especially after healing ceremonies, so that it was necessary to destroy them.

Many considerations of clay figurines involve interpretations that, even if they are very small, they are representations of deities. Female figurines are especially stereotypically regarded as images of mother goddesses. In Nevalı Çori clay figurines are only one aspect of representational art. The other part of the figurine art of Nevalı Çori are the stone sculptures with different motifs such as animals (especially carnivores and birds) and combinations of human beings and animals, but also human beings alone, particularly their heads (Hauptmann 1999: Figs. 10, 12 A-B, 13 A-B, 18). In fact the stone sculptures are much larger than the clay figurines and have different motifs pointing to spiritual purposes. The fact that they were found in the houses and the temple could support the theory that they could be regarded as images of deities or representations of a "ghost world" on one side and the real world on the other side (Fig. 4). The combined images of human beings and animals do not interfere with this model.

The images of the human beings may represent death, especially the items that only show a human head, or a human head held by an animal, in most of the cases a bird. Similarities to this iconography can again be found on the wall paintings of Çatal Höyük, showing vultures "attacking" / excarnating headless human corpses (Mellaart 1967: Pl. 45-49). The combinations of humans and birds (Hauptmann 1993: Figs. 21-25; 1999: 75f., Figs. 12-14) can be regarded as a scene showing a human becoming a bird as a result of such a ceremony (The author realises that there is a large distance in space and time between the two sites). Stressing a human character of the birds could mean they are the personifications of the ancestors in this model. Thus the totem pole-like construction (Hauptmann 1999: Fig. 14: A-B) possesses a narrative character. The bird on the top might be the ancestor / result of the action in the image. The two human-bird-beings crouching back to back might be two dead people who are becoming birds / are being "pulled" or carried up. So the whole image shows the ideology behind the practice of expressing death with birds (Hauptmann 1999, 76). Images such as the "head with snake" (Hauptmann 1999: 75f., 1993: Fig 19.), found in the central niche (Hauptmann 1993: Figs.10, 12-13) of the cult building in Nevalı Çori might be representations of leaders or great men of the society that cover a special position even amongst the dead. The animals too can have a spiritual character (totems) and have a special meaning for the society. They can influence the fortune of both society and the individual, and therefore they must be contacted in special ceremonies, which might explain the large number of animal figurines made of stone in Nevalı Çori.

In summary, it may be said that the Nevalı Çori clay figurines do not seem to be representations of divine beings (Hauptmann 1993: 67). Analysed in the whole of the figurine objects of the settlement, including the monumental limestone sculpture, the clay figurines play a secondary role in terms of size and quality. They also portray a different iconography, a view supported by the topology of the finds of these objects. In fact they were not found within the houses or inside the cult building, but in open spaces between the houses and in the pits, where they had been thrown away after being "worn out". There are several possibilities to interpret the clay figurines of Nevalı Çori. It cannot be said with absolute certainty if they were toys or magic figurines embedded in a complex religious system, but the representation of goddesses is very doubtful.

Michael G.F. Morsch
Steige 16
D- 69181 Leimen

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