

Networks of exchange and knowledge: The spread of
T-shaped pillars in Upper Mesopotamia in the PPN.

Merlijn Veltman
Studentnumber: s2003910

Prof. dr. P.M.M.G. Akkermans

Specialization: Town and Country in the Mediterranean
Region and the Near East

1045NE01Y: Advanced Studies in Neolithisation in the
Near East

Leiden University, the Netherlands

November 12, 2018
Final Version
Wordcount: 2485

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CENTRISM OR SUPRA-REGIONAL NETWORKS.....	5
3. THE SPREAD OF T-SHAPED PILLARS THROUGH UPPER MESOPOTAMIA.....	7
4. NETWORKS OF INTERACTION, EXCHANGE AND KNOWLEDGE.....	9
5. CONCLUSION.....	10
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	11
7. FIGURES.....	13

1. INTRODUCTION

The discovery of Göbekli Tepe, a site with monumental architecture, changed how archaeologists approach the PPN period in the Neolithic. Traditionally considered an era of hunter-gatherer subsistence, the monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe presented the excavators with a confounding situation: how could small bands of hunter-gatherers come together and in concerted action design, construct and subsequently decorate such an elaborate series of structures? (Nortoff et al 2014, 84) The most striking of the architecture found at Göbekli Tepe are the T-shaped pillars, of which an estimate of two-hundred dot the tell at Göbekli Tepe.¹ The pillars range from two to five meters high and boast a weight of up to fifty tons (Schmidt 2011, 5). It would take a significant amount of manpower to move these pillars and set them upright in the bedrock of the site.

However, the T-shaped pillars are not only found at Göbekli Tepe. Smaller variants can be found at a myriad of tells surrounding the site through surface surveying: Hamzan Tepe, Karahan Tepe, Harbetsuvan Tepesi, Sefer Tepe, Tasli Tepe and Nevali Cori.² While there has been significant discussion on the meaning behind the T-shaped pillars (ranging from humanoid gods to domestic symbolism) and the function of the space that the T-shaped pillars indicate (i.e. domestic or communal space; cf. Schmidt 2011; Banning 2011) there is another significant factor that is worth discussing: the spread of the T-shaped pillars throughout PPN Upper Mesopotamia. This paper focuses on the spread of T-shaped pillars, asking the research question:

“How did the architectural element of the T-shaped pillar spread throughout PPN Upper Mesopotamia?”

This is a point of scholarly contention as two prevailing attitudes persist. The centrist argument sees Göbekli Tepe and the surrounding sites as hierarchical, with Göbekli Tepe as the centre and the surrounding sites as satellites (Schmidt 2001, 11). The supra-regional network argument focuses on networks of exchange, and tries to move beyond a culture history approach by looking at interactions (Watkins 2008, 155-165). This paper can be placed within this academic discourse.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I situate my research into the current discourse on the spread of monumentality through Upper Mesopotamia by creating a theoretical framework, examining primarily the different theories of Schmidt and Watkins. Subsequently, I discuss the

¹ See fig. 1.

² See fig. 2.

spread of T-shaped pillars throughout Upper Mesopotamia focusing on local variation: is there uniformity in the function and form of T-shaped pillars? Finally, I propose a novel theory focusing on networks of interaction in Upper Mesopotamia and the transferral of knowledge.

My methodology is comprised of two aspects. First, I discuss the distinct theories focusing on the exchange and distribution of material culture, specifically T-shaped pillars, throughout Upper Mesopotamia. Second, I examine several distinct sites that contain T-shaped pillars or a likeness thereof, in order to facilitate a discussion on whether there is local variation or uniformity in the form and function of the pillars. This is pivotal for developing novel ideas and theories about the spread of the T-shaped pillar, and has the potential to provide new avenues of research in the PPN period in Upper Mesopotamia.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CENTRISM OR SUPRA-REGIONAL NETWORKS

The PPNB period of the Neolithic witnessed the spread of constructed spaces that some scholars argue had a ritual, divine or at least communal function (Schmidt 2001; Schmidt 2011; Dietrich et al 2012; Nortroff et al, 2014), while others consider the domestic function of these spaces, specifically at Göbekli Tepe (Banning 2011). Integral to these spaces are the T-shaped pillars that feature prominently at Göbekli Tepe and a myriad of tell sites surrounding the site. Similarities in material culture such as the T-shaped pillars or, for example, lithic industries have for decades been interpreted as evidence for particular, cohesive ‘cultures’, the so-called ‘Childean culture history’ (Watkins 2008, 145). This development is especially present in the discussion of the PPNB period, which has traditionally been characterised by a doctrine of PPNB cultural superiority over local traditions, establishing the dominance of PPNB material culture.

Already in 1974, the attribution of cultural characteristics to material culture became the topic of debate, as Colin Renfrew strongly, and successfully, dismantled the theory behind archaeological cultures (Renfrew 1974, 69). However, in recent years, a firm critique, led by Thomas Watkins, has shown the continued depth and the pertinence of this ‘culture history’ in more recent prehistorical studies of the Epi-paleolithic and Neolithic in southwest Asia (Watkins 2008, 145). Words such as ‘assemblage’, ‘traditions’ and even ‘interaction spheres’ are used as substitutes for the word ‘culture’, but maintained similar characteristics and essentially remained Childean culture histories (Watkins 2008, 145-146).

Watkins, subsequently, proposes a different model, focusing on supra-regional networks of interaction that moved beyond cultures and allowed for human agency in a much higher degree than Childean culture histories ever allowed - essentially, coming as close to the individual and local as possible in prehistoric research (Watkins 2008, 155-165). He examines the different types of exchange that played a part in Upper Mesopotamia, ranging from lithic tool to obsidian exchange, and finds evidence of significant networks of entanglement in the area.

Schmidt, the principal excavator of Göbekli Tepe, proposes another theory about the site and the surrounding area: Göbekli Tepe was a ‘central place’ where people from surrounding settlements met for ritual purposes (Schmidt 2005, 14-15). He subsequently argues that many of the surrounding sites featuring central places and T-shaped pillars could in fact have been the cultic centres of communities in the area, binding these communities together by religious ties (Schmidt 2005, 16-17).

In essence, both theories focus on supra-regional networks of exchange, but there is a profound difference between the two. While Watkins argues for an interconnected network of

different central places that exchanged and interacted with each other, Schmidt's proposition indicates many small communities that all owned a singular cultic site. Essentially then, Watkins argues for interconnectivity in the PPN, while Schmidt sees the PPN sites more as evidence of localised, bounded entities that were less in connection with each other and had distinct religious traditions, much like Greek sanctuaries of antiquity. It is clear, however, that the architectural element of the T-shaped pillar spread throughout Upper Mesopotamia - if every community had a distinct cultic site, would they not also have a distinct material culture or a focus on a particular divine figure, lacking therefore T-shaped pillars?

Perhaps iconography might provide an answer. Much of the recovered iconography is similar at the different sites, featuring recurrent themes of large cattle, snakes and predators. However, iconographic elements that might recur in different sites can still have different meanings within those societies. Attempting therefore to find one, universal meaning for particular iconography is 'destined to fail from the start' (Benz & Bauer 2013, 12) Nevertheless, there are local variations in terms of architecture and location, placing so called 'communal spaces' inside settlements (i.e. Nevali Cori) and building rows of T-shaped pillars seemingly not demarcating a particular space. (i.e. Karaman Tepe). There appears to have been some kind of connection between the different sites featuring monumentality, and the shape of the T-shaped pillar spread throughout Upper Mesopotamia, but local variations show that this connection was not necessarily that of one superior culture spreading towards other locations, and that these architectural elements could have been adopted and given different meanings and functions in distinct societies.

3. THE SPREAD OF T-SHAPED PILLARS THROUGH UPPER MESOPOTAMIA

It should be noted that the spread of architectural elements does **not necessarily** indicate that the meaning of these elements also spreads alongside of them. The meaning of material culture, and the concept of it, is not invariably connected to the material culture, but exists separately from it. Thus, if material culture, such as T-shaped pillars, is found in two distinct sites, their meaning might have been significantly different at either site. It is often assumed that the dispersed T-shaped pillars at other sites are comparable to Göbekli Tepe's T-shaped pillars, because of their similarity. However, there are indications that the form and/or function of the pillars differed at distinct sites.

Some pillars are extensively anthropomorphised, such as the Kilisik statue discussed by Hauptmann in 2000 and Verhoeven in 2001. This statue has a clear anthropomorphic T-shaped 'head', and either a phallus or another anthropomorphic relief on its base (cf. Hauptman 2000; Verhoeven 2001).³ Another pillar uncovered in Nevali Cori, a site close to Göbekli Tepe, shows very similar traditions to the pillars uncovered in structure D in Göbekli Tepe, with anthropomorphising features such as arms on the side of the pillar (Hauptmann 1993, 37). It do has to be noted that in this pillar the T-part is missing, which might lead to erroneous conclusions or reconstructions.

Yet not all T-shaped pillars were anthropomorphic. At Göbekli Tepe, the T-shaped pillars also contained iconography of animals, lacking anthropomorphic features. The famous T-shape pillar depicting a large group of diverse animals is an example of such pillars (Schmidt 2013). It appears that the T-shaped pillar had multiple functions and could depict distinct iconography, be anthropomorphic and similarly merely a medium for the depiction of incised drawings. This is also evident when viewing the enclosures at Göbekli Tepe, which contain pillars surrounding the enclosure, in a way 'demarcating' the space within the enclosure, and two pillars in the middle of the demarcated area, which were always considerably larger and elaborately decorated (Schmidt 2011, 5).⁴

The T-shaped pillar was also adapted and transformed as it spread throughout Upper Mesopotamia. At the site of Gusir Höyük large upright stone slabs were uncovered in the centre of buildings that were missing the T bar that is prevalent in T-shaped pillars (Karul 2011, 2-3).⁵ They were in essence upright rectangular monuments. However, their position within the structure,

³ see fig. 3

⁴ See fig. 1.

⁵ See fig.4.

centrally placed, is reminiscent of the structures at Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Cori, which contain T-shaped pillars in the centre of structures as well. It seems as if the role and function of the T-shaped pillars was adopted but that the architectural element of the T-shape was transformed. Such stone slabs have also been uncovered at Cayönü, in the “Plaza” area, and Qermez Dere, significantly widening the sphere of interaction of the stone monoliths (Özdögän 1998, 74; Dietrich 2016). Another such case is Karaman Tepe, where the T-shaped pillar was adapted but was not used to demarcate space in a small enclosure, but placed in long rows, comparable to the stone slabs uncovered in Cayönü’s “Plaza” area.

Karahan Tepe is relatively large site (60.000 square meters), close to Göbekli Tepe, and on the Harran Plain in south-eastern Turkey. On the basis of lithic finds, it has been dated to the PPNB period. (Celik 2000, 7) The site has produced a staggering amount of 266 T-shaped pillars (Celik 2011, 241). However, most of these pillars have been found covered in soil, with only the top emerging about 50-60 cm’s above ground. We do know that these are T-shaped pillars, due to one pillar found in situ at a nearby quarry.⁶ Interestingly, these pillars have been placed in rows, rather than circular structures as was the case in Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Cori, with an intermittent distance of about 1.5 metres (Celik 2011, 242).⁷ The pillars are similar in size to the pillars found in PPNB layer II at Göbekli Tepe, measuring about 70 cm’s in width and 1.5 metres in length.

Celik is quite quick to name the large area that contained the T-shaped pillars a ‘ritual area’, however, the question remains what that area precisely is. In Göbekli Tepe, the smaller sized T-shaped pillars had a clear function: the demarcation of space. The pillars at Karahan Tepe do not demarcate space as they are placed in rows - allowing a large open space to exist that is not bounded at the borders by pillars. Can we then call this a ‘ritual area’ and compare it to the much more demarcated and constructed spaces of Göbekli Tepe? It is very much possible that the function of the pillars is different from that of Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Cori.

⁶ See fig. 5.

⁷ See fig. 6.

4. NETWORKS OF INTERACTION, EXCHANGE AND KNOWLEDGE

When examining the spread of T-shaped pillars, it becomes clear that there are many local variations that do not concur with the hierarchical model of Göbekli Tepe as the centre and the rest of the sites as satellites, as posited by Schmidt (Schmidt 2001, 11). A supra-regional network, as envisioned by Watkins, does not necessarily explain local variations when it comes to the function and form of the T-shaped pillar, but it does propose both an equal exchange between distinct societies in which goods flow between areas. These goods of course denote interaction on a human scale as well - in order to exchange, one had to meet another human being. Through such intercommunal contacts, that were the mainstay of exchange, we can explain the transmission of architectural knowledge over a wide area.

“Materiality - the properties, affordances, functions and styles of different materials - is intrinsically linked to the way in which knowledge flows and technologies are transmitted” (Rebay-Salisbury et al. 2014, 1) Similarly, we should see networks of material exchange as networks of knowledge - with the flow of goods and objects come ideas and concepts as well. The spread of a particular culture would most likely denote uniformity, but as illustrated above, local variations are prevalent in the function and form of T-shaped pillars. It would therefore be unwise to consider Göbekli Tepe as the mainstay from which Upper Mesopotamian PPN ‘culture’ emerged and spread. Instead, exchange could have fostered contacts that spread particular architectural elements, which were then adopted and transformed, leading to wholly different and novel functions and forms. The concept of the T-shaped pillar, its irregular spread and its changing form and function could then be better explained - increasing connectivity in Upper Mesopotamia allowed the concept to spread from one site to another, where it was adopted, appropriated and finally transformed.

5. CONCLUSION

The T-shaped pillar is one of the fundamental monumental architectural elements that dominate the PPNB in Upper Mesopotamia, but its function and meaning have often been considered comparable throughout different sites. This invoked comparisons between different sites, which led to an understanding that was often hierarchical and center-focused. However, considering the local variations in the function of the T-shaped pillars, it is more plausible to view them not as Göbekli Tepe's 'culture' dominating surrounding sites, but instead as a result of a supra-regional network of interaction in Upper Mesopotamia, that facilitated the transmission of the knowledge of architectural elements between distinct groups, who then appropriated, adopted and transformed this knowledge into their own symbolic world.

In order to study these developments, new research avenues should be developed. It would be prudent to examine the developments that are occurring at the moment in other archaeological and historical disciplines. There an understanding of 'cultural transfer', the distribution of cultural traits throughout areas, material culture, exchange and knowledge transfers, is slowly coming into existence. (Cf. Parzinger 2008; Mairs 2013; Hoo 2015). Studies in Neolithisation will potentially be able to benefit from the theoretical models that are being generated in cutting-edge research on globalisation, networks and the concept of 'culture'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Banning, Edward B., "So fair a house: Göbekli Tepe and the identification of temples in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the Near East." *Current Anthropology* 52.5 (2011): 619-660
- Benz, Marion, and Joachim Bauer. "Symbols of power-Symbols of crisis? A Psycho-social approach to Early Neolithic symbol systems." *Neo-Lithics: The Newsletter of Southwest Asian Neolithic Research* 2 (2013).
- Çelik, Bahattin. "A new early Neolithic settlement: Karahan Tepe." *Neo-Lithics* 2000.2-3 (2000): 6-8.
- Çelik, Bahattin. "Karan Tepe: a new cultural centre in the Urfa area in Turkey." *Documenta Praehistorica* 38 (2011): 241-254.
- Dietrich, Oliver, et al. "The role of cult and feasting in the emergence of Neolithic communities. New evidence from Göbekli Tepe, south-eastern Turkey." *Antiquity* 86.333 (2012): 674-695.
- Dietrich, O. "The current distribution of T-shaped pillars." 2016. <https://www.dainst.blog/the-tepe-telegrams/tag/t-pillars/>. Accessed 10 November, 2018.
- Hauptmann, Harald. "Ein frühneolithisches Kultbild aus Kommagene." *Gottkönige am Euphrat: neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Kommagene* (2000): 5-9.
- Hauptmann, Harald. "Ein Kultgebäude in Nevalı Çori." *Between the Rivers and over the Mountains* (1993): 37-69.
- Hoo, M. "Maanvrouwe aan de Oxus: Baktrisch Ai Khanum als casus voor globalisering in de Oudheid" *TMA: Tijdschrift voor mediterrane archeologie*. 54.(2015): 34-40
- Karul, Necmi. "Gusir Höyük." *The Neolithic in Turkey: The Tigris basin* (2011): 1-17.
- Mairs, R. "The 'Temple with Indented Niches' at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria." R. Alston and O. van Nijf, eds. *Cults, Creeds and Contests in the Post-Classical City, Leuven, Peeters*. (2013): 85-119
- Notroff, Jens, Oliver Dietrich, and Klaus Schmidt. "Building Monuments—Creating Communities. Early monumental architecture at Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe." *Approaching monumentality in archaeology* (2014): 83-105.
- Özdoğan, M., and A. Özdoğan. "Çayönü: a conspectus of recent work." *Paléorient* (1989): 65-74.

- Parzinger, Hermann. "The 'Silk Roads' concept reconsidered: about transfers, transportation and transcontinental interactions in prehistory." *The Silk Road* 5.2 (2008): 7-15.
- Rebay-Salisbury, Katharina, Ann Brysbaert, and Lin Foxhall, eds. *Knowledge Networks and Craft Traditions in the Ancient World: Material Crossovers*. Vol. 13. Routledge, 2014.
- Renfrew, Colin, Ian Todd, and Ruth Tringham. "Beyond a subsistence economy: The evolution of social organization in prehistoric Europe." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research. Supplementary Studies* 20 (1974): 69-95.
- Schmidt, Klaus, and Ü. Yalçın. "„Adler und Schlange “–„Großbilder “des Göbekli Tepe und ihre Rezeption." *Anatolian Metall VI. Der Anschnitt Beiheft* 25 (2013): 145-152.
- Schmidt, Klaus. "Göbekli Tepe and the Early Neolithic sites of the Urfa region: a synopsis of new results and current views." *Neo-Lithics* 1.01 (2001): 9-11.
- Schmidt, Klaus. "Göbekli Tepe: a Neolithic site in southeastern Anatolia." *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Anatolia*. (2011): 1-17.
- Schmidt, Klaus. "Ritual centers" and the Neolithisation of Upper Mesopotamia." *Neolithics* 2.05 (2005): 13-21.
- Verhoeven, Marc. "Person or penis? Interpreting a 'new'PPNB anthropomorphic statue from the Taurus foothills." *Neo-lithics* 1 (2001): 8-9.
- Watkins, Trevor. "Supra-regional networks in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia." *Journal of World Prehistory* 21.2 (2008): 139-171.

FIGURES



Fig. 1. Large central T-shaped pillar with anthropomorphic features. After Dietrich 2012, 682.

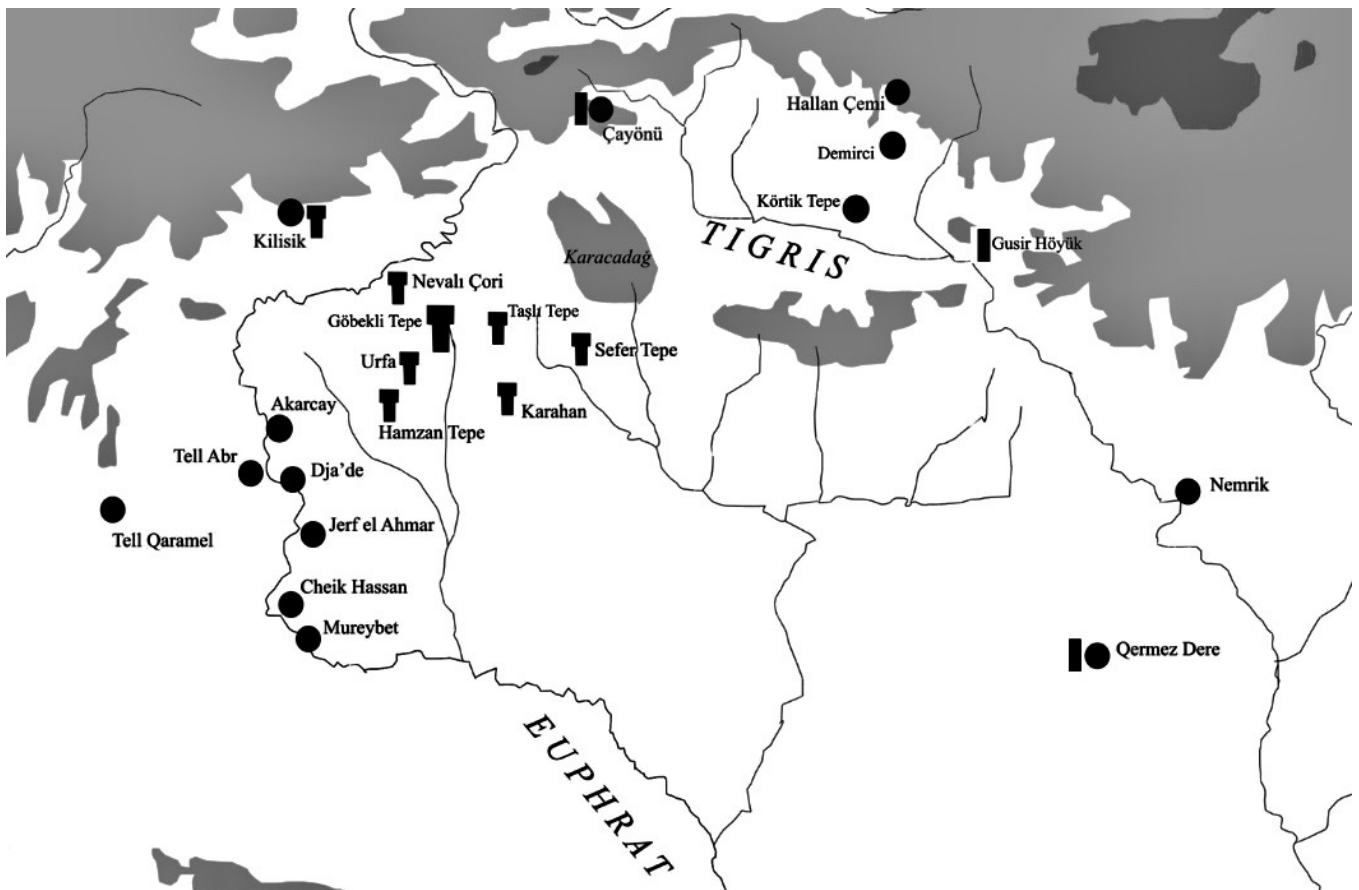


Fig. 2. Distribution of T-shaped pillar sites. After Dietrich 2016. <https://www.dainst.blog/the-tepe-telegrams/tag/t-pillars/>. North is up.

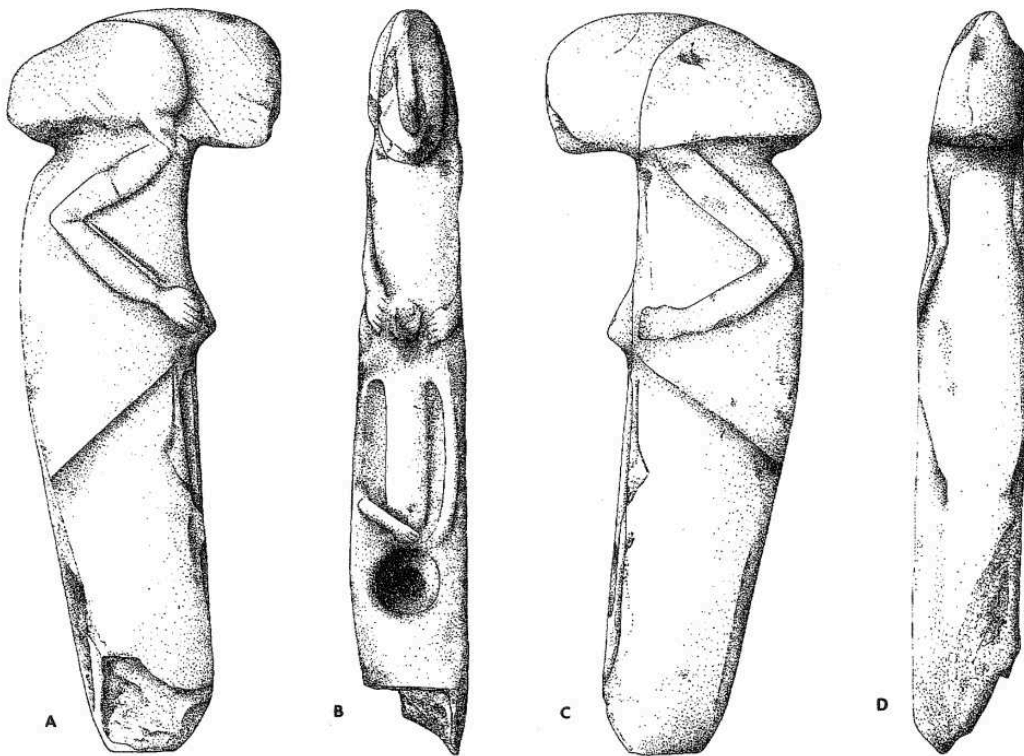


Fig. 3. Kisilik anthropomorphised T-shaped pillar. After Hauptman 2000, fig. 9.



Fig. 4. Large building in phase I at Gusir Höyük. The stone slab is distinctly and centrally placed within the structure. After Karul 2011, 10.



Fig. 5. T-shaped pillar in situ at the quarry at Karahan Tepe. After Celik 2011, 249.



Fig. 6. Rows of T-shaped pillars at Karahan Tepe. After Celik 2011, 249.