Old Wine in New Skins:
The Meaning of the Twin Pillars of Göbekli Tepe

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the bas-relief pictograms at the necks of the paired central pillars of Enclosure D of Göbekli Tepe and explain their symbolism. To do so is to reveal the underlying meaning of the entire enterprise there. The site can be understood as an act of devotion to the divine pair, the mother and the bull, the figures that lay at the core of the religions of Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean up through classical antiquity. Although these figures at Göbekli Tepe stand on their own, their significance is best understood within the context of the preceding development of the human mind and of the mythology that succeeded them.

This paper is drawn from a book currently in the process of publication titled *A Brand New mind: How Cognition, Language, Myth, and Culture Came Together To Make Us What We Are*. In the course of writing this book I all but stumbled upon unexpected symbolisms at the much studied Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepe. It puts the entire enterprise of Göbekli Tepe in a new light. In a previous work I had dealt in mythology that opens the way to this new understanding, and this is perhaps why the symbolic connections in question caught my eye while failing to catch that of the many experts in the field who have focused on Göbekli Tepe. Because I think the findings are important to the archaeology of the site, I offer them now rather than delaying until they can be brought to final form in the publication of the book. Every sort of wild conjecture has of course been made as to meanings behind Göbekli Tepe. What is offered here lies closer to home. A good deal of build-up is necessary, however, in order to put this understanding in full light.

The goddess and the bull

There have long been reservations among Middle East archaeologists in connection with a mother goddess as a presiding presence at the point of the inception of agriculture and in all that followed in its wake. The suggestion of such a figure in the early Neolithic of the Levant and Anatolia was first made by Jaques Cauvin in 1994 (2000). It constituted a challenge to the then orthodoxy established in the nineteen-twenties by Australian archaeologist Gordon Childe, who found economic determinism in the face of the exigencies of the Younger Dryas to be the source of what he named the “Neolithic Revolution” (Watkins, 2011, pp. 30-31). Cauvin led the excavation of Mureybet in northern Syria and his emphasis on mother goddess imagery found there was consistent with findings of such a divine presence in Southeast Turkey by James

Mellaart at Çatalhöyük, and later by Claude Schmidt at Göbekli Tepe. The idea of a mother goddess, nevertheless, while catching the popular imagination, failed to gain credence, generally, among professionals in the field.

What Cauvin had found at Mureybet was the development of an art form entirely new to the Levant. And, as he pointed out, citing Lévi-Strauss, art is a very special cultural marker. Because it has least to do with practical utility, it can tell us most about the symbols that inform the daily life of a society. It can speak to the present about images that moved an ancient culture in its bloom. Natufian art was essentially zoomorphic, whereas, beginning at about 10,000 BC human figures appear for the first time in the Levant, taking the form of female statuettes (Cauvin, 2000, pp. 22-25). The Mureybet archaeological site yielded eight female figurines from about 9500, some in stone and some of baked clay, most with pronounced sexual markers. With the build-up over time of a similar iconography, this female figure takes on the unmistakable stamp of a goddess. She, further, comes to be found at Mureybet and elsewhere in association with another figure, that of a bull (Cauvin, 2000, pp. 28-29). The bull, as the imagery progresses, metamorphoses in time into a masculine human figure.

The proliferation and elaboration of these images in varying media throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and in Anatolia and the clear centrality of their role in the life of the societies that produced them strongly suggest a religious predicate. It was Cauvin's conclusion that, just on the eve of agriculture's birth, there was a momentous shift in the way the people of the Middle East looked at themselves and the world. The motive force of what Childe had called the Neolithic Revolution was not economic necessity, but rather a psycho-cultural change. The Mureybetian culture lasted from 9500 to 8700 BC. Evidence of a farming economy appears only after 9000 BC (Cauvin, 2000, p. 39). Hence the agricultural economy was established, not at the beginning of, but rather during the course of, the cultural development of the Mureybetians, "as if, in a certain way, farming grew out of it" (Cauvin, 2000, p. 50).

For Cauvin, the figures unmistakably betoken a religion reigned over by a goddess, and a goddess who bore "all the traits of the Mother-Goddess who dominates the oriental pantheon right up to the time of the male-dominated monotheism of Israel" (Cauvin, 2000, pp. 29-30). Cauvin concluded that this new orientation became the source of the psychic energy that launched humanity upon the Neolithic Revolution. He underscores the symbolic difference between the goddess figurines and the famous cave paintings of western Europe. Justly celebrated for their sophistication and elegance, the latter do not of themselves speak to a religious belief system.

Göbekli Tepe

In the several Neolithic settlements in the upper Euphrates region of southeastern Turkey uncovered to date, a particular form of architectural structure appears. Research over the last twenty years has identified these structures as being for the apparent purpose of communal or ritual activities. To avoid the bias of contemporary cultural labels they have been called "special purpose" buildings. Central to more than a handful of these are T-shaped monoliths or pillars set in pairs (Dietrich, 2016, May 8). Far and away the most striking of these structures are those of Göbekli Tepe.

Göbekli Tepe is the oldest human enterprise of its scope of which we have any knowledge. It is likely the work of nonresident hunter-gatherer groups assembling there

from various locations. Excavation is still ongoing, but indications are that there are up to twenty structures, each apparently designed for ceremonial purposes. They are placed at several levels in the tell, and represent accordingly construction in successive periods of time. These structures clearly fit the category of special purpose buildings. Curiously, a structure seems to have served for a time and then been intentionally covered over with debris, to be replaced by another. In the end all was covered over and the site abandoned.

Enclosure D, at the lowest and hence oldest level of the site, has been fully exposed. Its two central T-shaped pillars dominate the structure, there being smaller such pillars facing them in the surrounding circular walls. Stone benches spaced between these suggest, but possibly only suggest, a convocation of some sort. The late Klaus Schmidt, the initial director of the excavation, and colleagues described the scene. The central pillars stand at the height of 18 feet. Hands and fingers and elements of clothing are indicated in both. "These abstracted, impersonal, but clearly anthropomorphic, T-shaped beings clearly belong to another, transcendent sphere" (Dietrich, O., Heun, M., Notroff, J., Schmidt, K., & Zarnkow, M., 2012, p. 679).

Göbekli Tepe puts the sophistication of early Neolithic hunter-gatherer groups at a very high level. There is clearly a symbolic meaning behind what transpired there, but it is not just the structures themselves or such ritualistic activities as may have been associated with them that are symbolic. The builders and craftsmen were at pains to fashion a multitude of iconic images, some of true beauty, that are themselves of symbolic significance. Taken altogether, the import of the site may be all but impenetrable to minds so far removed from those at work there. Even so, I am prompted to try to take on the question of what lay behind these singular artifacts. If the arguments themselves are not successful, the predicates for them may nevertheless serve as fodder for further discussion.

While Schmidt and others have postulated a religious theme at Göbekli Tepe, there seems to be in the archaeological community nothing in the way of a consensus as to whether practices there might have been akin to religion as we apprehend it today. With agriculture in the offing and the arrival of a new symbolical orientation, societies in the Levant and Anatolia were on the cusp of far-reaching cultural developments. They were moving in a new direction — or directions. To the north the new symbolism is marked by paired monoliths in special purpose buildings; to the south there are clay "goddess" figurines and bucrania. Although this symbology suggests in both regions a cultural change, there is no assurance that it is the same one. Agriculture in a short time was to take hold and spread. Various cultural threads could have collectively been pointing in that direction, or it could be that the diffusion of farming simply engulfed cultural impulses headed in other directions. Regardless, humanity seems to have been verging on the time in history when the religious impulse begins to emerge. But from where might it emerge?

From magic to religion

In my extended work I rely to a great extent for an understanding of the primitive world of magic primarily upon the researches at the turn of the nineteenth century of the French archaeologist Marcel Mauss(1902/1972). Probing the ethnological record for the sources of religion, he and collaborator Henry Hubert came to the conclusion that at

the beginnings of thought, before there existed anything in the nature of religion, human mentation was cast in a spiritual realm of magic. They attribute to magic a spiritual force prior even to the souls of animism that have been said, following nineteenth century philosopher Sir Edward Tylor, to inhabit the world of the earliest human imagination (Mauss, 1902/1972, p. 131). Going forward, I will link magic to the arrival, ultimately, of the mother goddess, as symbolic of the life-death continuum, the elemental round of nature that seems to have informed the human mind from time immemorial. At this point, however, accepting simply that magic is prior to religion, I am prompted to ask whether and in what way the Great Mother/Son-Lover combination of the subsequent religions of Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean might relate to it.

The historical record reveals the rite of sacrifice as a marker for religion. The goddess, the essence of fecundity, is representative of the earth. The bull fits the early agrarian cycle because his potent sexuality betokens the fertility so desired of the earth. Human sacrifice that was to attend the worship of the goddess bespeaks the cost that is to be paid in exploiting the fruits of the earth. In nature's round death is essential to life. Inevitably, life must be extinguished: the sheaf must be cut, the fruit picked, the meat killed. Even so, it would seem that in the magical realm of thought the appropriation of nature's usufructs constitutes a violation — an encroachment, in the most fundamental sense, upon the sanctity of nature. An essential orientation of the primitive mind seems to have been an implicit recognition of the interdependence of life and death. An attending sense of reverence for this cycle must have characterized the spiritual realm of magic.

We gather this from cultural practices of the earliest times as they have been preserved in the ethnological record. Sir James George Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and others have recounted the harrowing variety of forms of human sacrifice that have characterized expiatory rituals all over the world. In the calculus of the majestic round of life and death, the sacrifice of an individual life must have counted as but little. It is hard to know how such a sense of the sanctity of nature might have come to register itself in this way. Nothing that we know about the figures of the woman and the bull at earlier stages seems obviously to portend sacrifice. There is no clear evidence of it among the hunter-gatherers of Göbekli Tepe or even later, with an exception not relevant here, at Çatalhöyük, where agriculture had been long established. Human sacrifice would no doubt not have been congenial to the egalitarian life of hunter-gatherer groups, at least in respect of fellow group members, nor to settled groups, so long as they remained small in size. By the Neolithic, however, settlement size had increased considerably. In any case, whenever it first emerged and whatever sacrament it came to enshrine, at the heart of the sacrificial rite lay the interdependence of life and death. The rite often conjoined copulation, with its implication of new life, with sacrificial death.

A time of transition

In the two thousand years between Mureybet and Çatalhöyük we can trace a marked progression of culture. It can be followed through the crude depictions of the woman and the bull at Mureybet to their considerably enhanced and refined iterations at Çatalhöyük. As might be expected in the course of the development of a culture over

such a time, its conception of its deities and their relationship had taken on clearer definition. There is no evidence at Çatalhöyük of sacrifice to the goddess, but what we do find there provides an insight into the spiritual dimension implicit in the life/death continuum as reverenced in the magical realm. It is seen in the association of the goddess with the natural world, with fecundity, and with death. Depicted at Çatalhöyük is the all-embracing goddess, mother, and lady of the beasts. But likewise to be taken note of are her attendants — potent and lethal carnivores, both bird and beast. Her nourishing breasts are shown split open to reveal, harbored within them, dealers of death.

Jaques Cauvin notes that her discoverer, "James Mellaart, the excavator of Çatalhöyük, quite rightly underlined the funerary association of this imagery, the Mistress of Life also ruling the dead" (Cauvin, 2000, p. 29). Cauvin went on to develop the point:

> We shall see that from the Neolithic onwards suffering and death are well represented in the attributes of the oriental Goddess. These are lions or panthers, vultures and other animals that are dangerous for man, which form the immediate retinue of the Goddess and specify her powers.... The ambiguity of the symbol, where birth and death are joined, is readily decipherable for us who bear the 'terrible mother' in the deepest strata of our unconscious (Cauvin, 2000, p. 71).

To be seen, then, at Çatalhöyük, embodied in the Great Mother is a sacred awe in the face of nature's indivisible round of life and death, of nourishment and extinction. With an increased cognitive power and an expanding cultural facility gathering over the course of its history, the Great Mother/Son-Lover combination was to become honored in sacrifice and enshrined in religion. Solid evidence of human and animal sacrifice is found in the Halaf culture (*circa* 6500 to 5500 BC) that was to emerge within the time horizon of Çatalhöyük out of the Pottery Neolithic in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. Populations appear to have become stratified and organized. Ceramic remnants associated with sacrifice on a large scale probably reflect the presence of religion. Bucrania are a prominent device in the iconography of figurines and clay pots (Carter, 2012). Bull imagery remained pronounced thereafter into biblical times, in parallel with the Son-Lovers of mother goddesses, and continued to flourish up into classical times. As societies softened, the bull became, in the flesh, a favored object of sacrifice. But in the beginning there was the primal magical matrix sanctifying life and death, out of whose element of spirit the shadowy forms of the goddess and bull were to crystallize and grow.

The question we confront, then, may be framed, in terms of what signs there may be, if any, that what transpired at Göbekli Tepe can be seen as expressive of a transition from the world of magic to that of religion. In response to it, I would reflect a bit further on where Middle East archaeological scholarship seems to stand today in respect of the mother goddess of the early Neolithic. As I have indicated, there have long been serious reservations among the professionals in field as to a connection between a mother goddess and the origins of agriculture and all that followed. This attitude reflects a healthy reticence respecting overarching approaches to complex and varied realities and, as well, a warranted scholarly reluctance to find gods of any sort front-and-center at crucial stages of human development. A great deal of recent archaeological

discovery and scholarship has accumulated, and the resistance persists, although taking on perhaps something of a new flavor. Beyond a reaction to the mother goddess idea as lodged in the popular mind, there is also a growing sense that agriculture was not a singular development of a particular time and place, but rather the outgrowth of cultural processes in respect of which its emergence was in some ways a secondary event. To be sure farming and herding shaped the future, but we are beginning better to understand forces afoot in the Upper Paleolithic that could be seen as making changes in the mode of subsistence all but a sidelight.

Against this background Trevor Watkins considered the possibility of a transition toward religious thinking at Göbekli Tepe and proposed a mechanism for it. He thinks that ritual practices may, in and of themselves, have been a conduit to religion.

> I suggest that the creation of the Göbekli Tepe monoliths and their erection in their formal places within the enclosures should be understood as the ritual making of the gods. In this way, the rituals were literally make-believe, the actions that were the making of beliefs about the supernatural beings. Religious practice, in fact, was the creating of religious belief (Watkins, 2015, pp. 158-159).

I find this to be a penetrating insight, and I find the religion in the making to be that of the Great Mother/Son-Lover, on which I shall dilate further as we go along. Before setting off in that direction, however, it is well to consider whether the dominion of a goddess might be excluded by other findings in the larger vein of archaeological thought laid out above.

Point, counterpoint

Ian Hodder is the now long-time director of excavation at Çatalhöyük and successor to James Mellaart. Hodder, is very respectful of Mellaart, but, nevertheless, working the site today with modern techniques and the benefit of thousands of artifacts uncovered since Mellaart's time, he is dubious as to any pronounced role in Çatalhöyük society of a fertility goddess. In 2011, he and Lynn Meskell published an influential article, which included generally approving comments from a distinguished collection of other Middle East archaeological experts. The device of the piece is to compare the iconography of Çatalhöyük, the theretofore undisputed pinnacle of middle-eastern archaeological discovery, with that of Göbekli Tepe. The conclusion of the authors was that there is very little at either site in the way of a mother goddess. Rather, Hodder and Meskell find three distinctive common threads in the imagery of the two sites. These they see, taken collectively, as foreign to notions of matriarchy and fertility (Hodder and Meskell, 2011, p. 236).

The themes are masculinity or phallocentrism; dangerous wild animals; and the cutting of flesh and the removal of heads. I will take up these three threads in reverse order. Across the Neolithic, rituals have involved the severing and removal of heads, both animal and human. Excarnation was likewise widely prevalent (Hodder and Meskell, p. 247). At both Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük birds, and especially vultures, were associated with removed human heads. Prominent vulture imagery at Göbekli Tepe has been seen by the excavation team there as illustrative of a preoccupation with the eternal round of life and death (Dietrich, 2016, July 15). At Çatalhöyük, vultures nakedly symbolize life thriving upon death.

At Göbekli Tepe, there was a decided funerary cast to observances (Notroff,2017, January 24). Burial practices may have been involved, and there seems to have been a studied deposition in special places of sacred items associated with death. Most notable in this respect is evidence that the heads of life-sized, naturalistic human male statues were intentionally removed and deposited in special spots, such as at the foot of one of the central pillars. This appears to have been done in contemplation of the final covering over of the entire structure (Dietrich, 2016, May 5). Even this — the burial of one of these structures directly following its complex and energetic build-up — seems to replicate the cycle of life and death.

Hodder's and Meskell's second thread, the treatment of wild creatures, also, as I see it, feeds into the magical life/death milieu. Animal life abounds at Göbekli Tepe. Depicted in etchings, reliefs, and sculptures, images of wild creatures are rendered in some cases schematically and in others with impressive naturalism. At first glance the presentation of the figures takes one away from life/death imagery and the concept of a mother goddess. Most frequently depicted are potent beasts, and where it can be indicated they are pointedly male, with penises erect. Moreover, at least one of the human male statues is likewise ithyphallic. On the other side of the equation, no overt human female image of any sort has been found, save a single carving on a stone slab, and it can hardly be seen as casting womanhood in a positive light. In consequence, Hodder and Meskell find the thrust of what was going on — the whole of the feel of the place — to be one of overwhelming masculinity. They see in it, therefore, little ground for the existence of a pervading feminine presence such as in that of a mother goddess (Hodder, 2011).

Conversely, in keeping with the theme I have been developing, the fact that a high percentage of the animals, birds, and invertebrates depicted at both sites are of the deadly sort in no way militates against the presence of the mother goddess. The focal sculpture at Çatalhöyük is of an imposing female figure with an animal retinue consisting of just such powerful and dangerous creatures. I find in this figure an important link between the goddess and the abiding sense of the profundity of the interplay between life and death. The excavators of Göbekli Tepe see this interplay to be illustrated in the fact that some of the carnivores are depicted there as in distress. Spine and ribs are shown as protruding, as if of a predator searching for prey while at the point of starvation itself. By the same token, potential prey such as wild boars can be found depicted as dead (Dietrich, 2016, July 15).

The woman at Çatalhöyük, taken in the wider context of the site, reveals herself persuasively as a goddess figure. Her portrayal invokes the understanding of her both as mistress of wild creatures and as psychopomp, intermediary between the realms of the living and the dead. I have pointed out that the later mythology of the Great Mother/ Son-Lover is associated with the ubiquitous conduct of sacrifice as an expiatory rite. A goal of that ritual seems to be the expiation of the transgression upon nature entailed in killing — even killing in the furtherance of life. The mother goddess taken as above is the symbol *sine qua non* of nature herself in this equation balancing life and death.

We come last to the first thread advanced by Hodder and Meskell: the prevailing masculinity and phallocentrism of the iconography of Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük. This they take as being alien to a maternal presence. I see it, by contrast, as a natural concomitant of the presence of the mother goddess. To be sure, the goddess is a

fecund and nurturing mother, but her immersion in the round of life and death carries with it likewise a terrible and remorseless aspect. Moreover, the "animality and phallic masculinity that downplays female centrality" (Hodder, 2011, p. 236) found by Hodder and Meskell need by no means be taken as putting her aside. Part and parcel of the Great Mother/Son-Lover combination of the later mythology is the fertilizing masculinity of the Son-Lover. And at the time of Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük, the Son-Lover consort would have taken the form of the bull, the rampant masculinity of which could hardly be in doubt. Bull imagery had been associated with goddess imagery in the northern Levant as early as 9500 BC.

There is a possibility that Göbekli Tepe was simply a male bastion, a thing apart from the society as a whole. Perhaps the structures were for strictly male observances. It is quite plausible that, on a number of grounds, women might have been excluded from entry or participation. The undertaking itself, however, would seem an enormous venture to have been brought off by just the men alone. More probably the enterprise involved the entirety of a number of hunter-gatherer groups, fully inclusive of both men and women. That the whole of the society was embraced was clearly the case at Çatalhöyük, where the notable symbolic features were embedded in everyday village life. And, while the nature of the two sites is different, the male-dominant orientation evidenced in both probably fairly reflects how the two societies were structured in terms of gender relationships.

This would not, in my view, in any way detract from the existence of a female deity at the culture's core, nor deny the goddess a pronounced presence in ritual life. A female goddess can most certainly preside over an overwhelmingly male-dominated society. Were that not so, we would expect to find in the historical record only male deities. Put the other way around, the worship of a mother goddess does not imply a matriarchal society. There is, in fact, no sure instance of the existence any such society in the course of human history. There were the early egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, and there have been matrilineal societies, and also many cultures in which women may have ruled at home, but societal dominance writ large can reliably be counted on to have been male. There have been no female popes, no lady Genghis Khans. Joan of Arc was an anomaly. Female pharaohs and queens may usually be found to have served to secure the continuation of hereditary male lines. From the inception of complex, hierarchical societies men have predominantly held the power, in part because they were physically the more powerful. Even in the most civilized societies of today the patriarchy has been tardy to yield up any fair measure of its power. It should not be forgotten that, but a hundred years ago, women in the United States did not have the right to vote.

Historically speaking, an exclusion of a goddess presence in keeping with the Hodder/Meskell findings would amount to the absence of a central divinity altogether. It would indicate that at the time of Göbekli Tepe or even at the later time of Çatalhöyük the concept of a central deity had not been born. Polytheistic notions might have surfaced as an outgrowth of the magical world of spirit; indeed the Great Mother, when she arrived, was quite congenial to coexistence with lesser divinities. It was not until the much later emergence of unrivaled male deities in Egypt and Palestine that the concept of monotheism arose. Before that time, there is no evidence of such a male god, and it seems that male gods, when they arrived, insisted on being the sole deity.

It could very well have been the case that no central deity ever materialized at Göbekli Tepe or Çatalhöyük. I have made much of the evidences of the magical realm in both places. Magic may well have remained the suffusing cast of thought throughout in those societies. As we know, however, that religion did in time develop in Anatolia, the interesting point is whether at the time of Göbekli Tepe or, indeed, of Çatalhöyük a religious factor had come to exist. I turn now to specific findings at Göbekli Tepe.

Were the woman and the bull there?

Given that there is only one overt reference to woman at Göbekli Tepe and that the bull appears there in company with a host of other animals, establishing a connection between the symbology at Göbekli Tepe and the palpable symbolism of the woman and the bull at Mureybet would seem an unpromising prospect. *The evidence about to unfold, however, argues strongly that, far from having a mere presence at Göbekli Tepe, the woman and the bull were the abiding presence there, and that everything else turned upon them.* If so, we would find there also echoes of religion's beginnings.

How might this be? To begin with, the ground was fully prepared. If, as one may suppose, all who approached one of the structures at Göbekli Tepe were thoroughly conversant with its meaning, a presiding presence could hardly have been more imposingly invoked. A person of faith entering the cathedral at Chartres does not need a depiction of Christ or the Virgin Mary to know what lies at the heart of the edifice. It is quite possible, further, that the want of specific definition in the central pillars at Göbekli Tepe reflects a reluctance of a religious sort. Strong strains of iconoclasm in all three Bible-based world religions testify to a reflexive reticence toward the physical depiction of divinity. The prohibition of graven images in the Old Testament second commandment is a prominent example. An analogous Jewish tradition goes so far as to avoid even the pronunciation of the *name* of God — either aloud or to oneself.

There does not seem to have been found a great deal of ground for scientific analysis as to why there should have been two central figures in each enclosure — and not just at Göbekli Tepe, but also in comparable special purpose structures located in the general vicinity. Yet it is an unbudgeable fact that the dominant symbol behind whatever was going on had a dual aspect. In a field decidedly lacking in candidates with evidentiary support, the woman and the bull would be an obvious fit, assuming evidence in their favor could be found. Unfortunately, however, insofar as that pair is concerned, there are concrete obstacles. The pillars are indisputably anthropomorphic in form, and there is nothing about them to suggest a woman. Needless to say, there is nothing, either, in the way or shape of a bull.

In the fully exposed Enclosure D both pillars have rudimentary or stylized hands and arms carved in low relief, and, as well, a belt and fox skin loincloth. It is true that in the subsequent mythology the bull, as the masculine element of the pair, was ultimately to take on human form. However, the bull did not morph into a human in the mythology until much later. Göbekli Tepe may well have been covered over and abandoned before the first prefigurations of the human Son-Lover were to appear. There is, therefore, no basis on which to suggest that either the bull or the woman might be represented as embodied in the anthropomorphic pillars in any but an abstract, purely symbolic, way.

Nevertheless, let us follow the evidence. Intentionally, it would seem, definition of the human forms in the pillars is is quite spare. Insofar as a deity may be suggested,

we have advanced a good reason for that, based in awe and reverence. The pillars do, however, appear to be humans. Why? Perhaps because that is how God appears. God does not make man in his own image; man conceives God as in the image of man. Now, how a bull came into it, heaven only knows, but we have inklings. Hodder and Meskell pointed out the overwhelmingly masculine atmosphere of the place. There was a great deal of heavy work that went into the structures at Göbekli Tepe. One would assume that the men bore the brunt of it. Indeed, given human history virtually up to the present, one might assume that men took control of things, generally — as I have said, just because they could. If therefore men were to construct a non-definitive image of a god, it would likely take on something in the way of a human form, and one that might have a male aspect — because they were men. If it were to be a dual form, well, then, two men.

This is a totally different question from that of why, with men in control, the deity was not a masculine one. DNA in its scope is neither masculine nor feminine, and I would argue that it was simply an evolutionary eventuality the first imagery of a deity to spring forward in human minds was a female one. It was an image, moreover, as I say, that came to instantiate both genders: a woman and a bull. We know that a female deity along with a consort was to dominate the pantheon throughout the long early course of patriarchal societies: a male god was not to be found in charge until the late Bronze Age.

A decisive factor

There are a number of bucrania at Göbekli Tepe. The bucranium is a symbol initially derived from the skeletal head and widespread horns of the wild bull aurochs. Signally, a bas-relief bucranium is carved into one of the two central pillars of Enclosure D, the earliest enclosure. It is a small figure, but it is saliently placed — at the neck or throat of the pillar. It could be determinative. If the partnering pillar were to be identified as the woman, that would have far-reaching implications. As it happens, the positioning of the bucranium on the one pillar directly corresponds with that of a similar relief carving at the throat of the companion pillar. The figure there appears to combine basic forms that are mimicked in three letters. The uppermost is the shape of an “H”. Directly below it is a circle “O” figure, and directly below that, a “C”, lying on its back. I suggest that the latter two images, the “O” and the recumbent “C” represent, respectively, the full and crescent phases of the moon. As they are carved, they fit this interpretation cleanly. The “C” and the “H” also appear on the belt of this pillar, with a pair of upright “C’s” facing each other to embrace the “H” in between. The belt on the bucranium pillar is left blank.

I make no interpretation as to the “H” figure, except to speculate that it might, as posited with the “O” and the “C”, represent a figure from the night sky. A possible candidate that has been suggested is the prominent constellation Orion. Orion can be visualized as a capital “H”. A row of three bright stars, the readily identifiable “Orion’s belt”, would form the crosspiece, with the four other most brilliant stars forming, in pairs, the uprights. There have been a number of technical interpretations of celestial configurations having to do with Göbekli Tepe, mostly with respect to the positioning of the structures in relation to heavenly events. These have support in the orientation of

the megaliths of Stonehenge and other Stone Age structures in respect to the summer and winter solstices. However that may be, I do not insist in any technical sense on conjectures as to the “H”. There is much to be said I think, however, for the “O” and the “C”: the moon is a long-standing symbol of the goddess.

The positioning of these markings at the neck of the figures in the two pillars suggests emblems or insignia of some sort. It seems improbable that, matching each other in size and placement as they do, they might have been arbitrarily placed. They could be positioned as they are for purely symbolic reasons or, from their location, possibly as representing pendants, or, perhaps pins holding together a garment closed at the neck. Even if serving as ornaments, however, it is unlikely that the designs for this position were randomly selected. Consequently, taken as emblematic, these two figures can be seen as identifying markers for their respective pillars.

Figures such as the “O”,”C” and “H” are pictograms or ideograms: pictorial signs for something of greater scope; what has come to be called in the digital age an icon. There seem to have been but few pictograms deployed at Göbekli Tepe (Lawson, 2017, February 16). If the bucranium is taken as one — something other than a literal animal representation — it would be part of an exclusive set. In that case, we have something quite definitive: corresponding symbols of a sort rare at the site significantly placed on the central, paired pillars. A straightforward interpretation of the symbols urges the conclusion that they identify the personae of the pillars, respectively, as the bull and the woman: the bucranium pillar as the bull, and the pillar with the possible moon symbol as the woman.

To say this is to link Göbekli Tepe with Great Mother/Son-Lover motif, so it is a far-reaching position to take. The interpretation is, however, strongly supported in the mythology. The lunar cycle is linked with the bull through the fortunes of its successor, the Son-Lover, who, like the moon, waxes strong and then fades to extinction — soon to be born again. Joseph Campbell, who treated the Son-Lover extensively, took note of the comparison between the paired horns of the bull and those of the crescent, or horned moon, the moon at the point of disappearing from the night sky and of later reappearing. Campbell finds that the cult of the bull-god “was diffused, with the art of cattle-breeding itself, practically to the ends of the earth” (Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, p. 143). He drew the comparison between the paired horns of the bull and the those of the crescent, or horned moon, the moon before it disappears from the night sky and, after an absence of a little more than two days, reappears. The Son-Lover replicates this cycle. The association of the moon, furthermore, with the feminine — the lunar cycle paralleling as it does the menstrual cycle — is likewise an ancient one. The moon, accordingly, was a symbol of the ancient and devoutly worshipped Greek goddess, Artemis, whose Roman counterpart was Diana, who was also, as pertinent to our broader discussion, goddess of wild animals.

It is worthy of observation that, as taken in connection with the moon’s course in the night sky, the crescent of the growing moon seen before sunset is oriented toward the western horizon it approaches as might be a bow bent to send an arrow in that direction. Conversely, the bow of the moon newly rising before dawn is bent to point in the opposite direction, toward the eastern horizon from which it rises. This contrast could be reflected in the two “C’s” framing the “H” figure on the belt of the “moon” pillar.

It is arguable that this symbolic configuration refers to the relation of the moon in its cycle to a constellation, such as Orion.

Maria Gimbutas describes the profusion of bull symbolism in Upper Mesopotamia and, as well, later on, in Europe: “With the advent of sedentary life, horns, bucrania, bull figurines, and tauromorphic vases become omnipresent in the art of the Middle East and Old Europe” (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 265). Gimbutas also strongly links the bull with the mother goddess.

A confirming report from the excavation site

Are the bucrania in fact symbols? It is possible that they could be just animal depictions, of a piece with a host of others. I had this discussion with Oliver Dietrich, a senior member of the Göbekli Tepe Research Staff, on the staff’s blog. The relevant sequence of the discussion is illuminating. I introduce it here, verbatim, with my further observations intervening as called for. The actual online conversation is in italics (Lawson, 2017, February 16).

Tom Lawson

02/16/2017 at 17:43

Is that a bucranium top center on the porthole stone?

Oliver

02/16/2017 at 17:50

If you are referring to the image in the post about Enclosure B, yes, it is a bucranium.

The object in question is a large stone block fitted into a wall with a rectangular opening at the bottom, possibly an entry portal. It is clearly an important element of Enclosure B. Vertically aligned antithetically on the two sides of the opening are matching foxes in low relief. Centered above the opening, much larger, and dominating the block in more pronounced relief, is the bucranium (Dietrich, 2017, February 3). The whole set-up of the porthole stone points to the bucranium as of special significance, at least for Enclosure B.

Tom Lawson

02/16/2017 at 17:52

Thanks. I’ve noted three. Do they seem to abound?

Oliver

02/16/2017 at 17:59

There are around ten on pillars and stone slabs.

Tom Lawson

02/16/2017 at 18:12

Thank you. This is very instructive. It strikes me that the bucrania(?) may serve as emblems or insignia of a sort. In the photographs I don't see other figures of such a character, where the part stands for the whole. For example, there are naturalistic depictions of bulls in addition to the bucrania. Am I on the wrong track here?

Oliver

02/16/2017 at 19:47

We have several more pictograms at GT, most notable are "H" and "C" shaped symbols. Their meaning is open to discussion.

It is interesting to note that naturalistic depictions of aurochs show the animals' bodies from the side, while the head is shown in frontal view, similar to the bucrania. Obviously the head with the dangerous horns was of importance for the artists.

Dietrich treats the "H" and "C" pictograms as being of the same order as the bucranium, recognizing therefore that the bucranium is present on the pillar as a pictogram or icon. This view is reinforced by what would appear to be a decidedly symbolic deployment of the bucranium as the dominating feature of the porthole stone in Enclosure B, with which we began the discussion. In a later post, made after our conversation, Dietrich elaborates:

> Notably, the cattle head is one of the few depictions also transformed into a possible ideogram at Göbekli Tepe. Bucrania can be found on several pillars and other elements of architecture (like so-called porthole stones). It is obvious that the mode of representing animals in Neolithic art is far from arbitrary (Dietrich O. (2017, April 3).

Tom Lawson

02/16/2017 at 21:18

Oliver, that is a nice observation respecting the orientation of the head and horns of the naturalistically depicted aurochs. This is a bit early for bull-leaping, so I hope the artists didn't too often encounter one head-on. It does seem clear, though, that

the frontal aspect is an object of fascination. I am grateful for your prompt and apt responses. Keep up the good work. Tom

Oliver

02/17/2017 at 11:41

Unfortunately for them these encounters seem to have been very frequent indeed. Aurochs comes second in the hunted fauna at Göbekli after gazelle.

Reply

Tom Lawson

02/17/2017 at 17:58

Hearty fellows. Beef fed. Now I see your point about being galvanized by the face-on view.

I had assumed that the hunters of Göbekli Tepe did not normally venture to take on the bull aurochs. Jaques Cauvin had noted that the villagers at Mureybet but rarely included local cattle in their diet (Cauvin, 2000, p. 28). If one were to face down a bull in the act of trying to kill it, the image would tend to stick with one. Ask any bullfighter. The riveting effect of this view no doubt added punch to the bucranium as a symbol. In any case, the bucrania seem to have a different character from the face and horns of the fully rendered bulls, notwithstanding that in the latter the artist somewhat unnaturally presented the heads face-on. There my have been a simple reason why Neolithic stone-cutters might present a face-on view of bulls otherwise depicted in side profile. Rendering the head of a bull with widespread horns from the side offers a decidedly reduced effect. The head must be turned to some degree in order to make the horns readily intelligible, and even a moderate turn presents foreshortening problems.

Reply

Tom Lawson

02/17/2017 at 18:56

Going back to pictographs: Jens in his 6/10/16, “Temples”, post suggests that the symbols at the neck of the apparent garments on the central pillars of Enclosure

D might have served to identify the figures to Neolithic viewers. On one is a bucranium. On the other there appears to be an H and something like an S just below it. Is that correct?

Reply

Oliver

02/17/2017 at 19:49

A circle and a lying 'C'.

Tom Lawson

02/17/2017 at 21:40

Thanks for clearing that up for me.

Tom Lawson

02/17/2017 at 22:15

Sorry I'm so slow to come to this: possible full and crescent moon?

Reply

Oliver

02/18/2017 at 0:56

That is definitely a possibility. However there is a clear danger of misinterpretation. These shapes may have that meaning in our cultural background, they could have meant something completely different in the Neolithic (Lawson, 2017, February 16).

* * * * *

An unbroken chain

As I see it, finding the bucranium on the pillar to be a symbol and not merely an animal depiction is all but conclusive as to the presence in the pillars of both the woman and the bull. To accept the bucranium in this way strongly argues for the acceptance of its pillar as a representation of the bull. For what other reason would a device symbolic of the bull be so placed? The excavation team conceives the two icons as likely identifying markers. Here is team member Jens Notroff describing the pillars:

> There are no eyes, no nose or mouth present, these pillar-statues remain bereft of individuality on first glance — only to be distinguished, at least in the case of the central pillars of Enclosure D for example, by peculiar symbols below their heads — not unlike where one would wear necklaces. So, while still nameless to us, the Neolithic people may well have recognized who it was depicted here towering above them (Notroff, 2016, June 10).

If the pillar with the bucranium is identified as the bull, the woman becomes a prime candidate for the other pillar. Beyond doubt the two pillars stand meaningfully in relation the one to the other. Something has to be paired with the bull. Interpreting the “O” and the “C” as a moon symbol simply nails it down. The mythological connection of the moon with the feminine is unimpeachable. Therefore, accepted as a moon or feminine symbol, the pictogram on the pillar adjacent to that of the bucranium in effect selects the woman as paired with the bull on the twin pillars. The force of the argument is magnified by the fact that either symbol, standing alone, would be persuasive in identifying, not only its pillar, but also that of its mate. That the two together match up in a predictable way makes an interpretation of them jointly as representing the woman and the bull all but inescapable.

Two arguments to the contrary come to mind. One could doubt that the icon on the mate of the bucranium pillar is a feminine or moon symbol. One is then, however, still left with the practical reality that, if the bucranium marks the one pillar as the bull, the place of the other must, all but by default, fall to the woman. It is true, that if this icon could be irrefutably identified as something excluding the woman, something perhaps by way of an explanation of the “H” part of the icon, then my argument would fail. Indeed such an explanation would presumably resolve altogether any mystery surrounding the two pillars.

A second argument might be that, while the two pillars respectively bear the insignia of the woman and the bull, they do not themselves represent the woman and the bull. It would be difficult, however, to conceive of placing identifying symbols on corresponding pillars to some other purpose.

If it is taken as established that the paired pillars of Enclosure D represent the woman and the bull, then so must also the other dual pillars at Göbekli Tepe that were to follow and, as well, those of a number of other sites in that part of Anatolia. Furthermore, a direct link is established between the symbologies of Göbekli Tepe and Mureybet. The bucrania of Göbekli Tepe must be taken as akin to the bucrania that had been a symbolic presence in northern Syria for 500 years. And bucrania were associated at Mureybet by this time with the imagery of the woman. Accordingly the pair reflected in the pillars at Göbekli Tepe must be the same pair as that at Mureybet — and at Çatalhöyük, and in later mythology. Hence an important link will have been forged between the symbology of Göbekli Tepe and the Great Mother/Son-Lover

mythology which was in time to become the core of religion in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean.

Cultural dispersions

Göbekli Tepe and Mureybet are roughly contemporary. The focus of Göbekli Tepe seems to have been as a gathering place, while Mureybet was a village of permanent habitation. Cultivated grains seem to have been transported to Göbekli Tepe, whereas farming was actually in practice at Mureybet. The linkage of the woman and the bull seems to have migrated north from Mureybet in the northern Levant to Göbekli Tepe and environs in Anatolia. From there, with cultural elaborations, it spread back into the whole of the Levant. Initially, in south and central Levant the goddess stood alone. Goddess depictions were not associated with bull imagery. The masculine principle embodied by the bull arrived there only later as a part of an expansion of the culture that had taken hold in Anatolia and then worked its way back southward.

> Cauvin laid out succinctly these cultural and associated religious movements: Wherever it extended, the PPNB brought with it the legacy of the religion of the PPNA in its specifically Mureybetian version; it consists of not only the female divinity, who appeared simultaneously throughout the Levantine corridor, but also a masculine principle represented in animal form, the Bull, whose presence had not previously been indicated in the southern Levant…. The new religion seems to arrive [in the southern Levant] precisely with the middle PPNB, at a later stage therefore than in Anatolia, where it had arrived rather earlier through the influences from northern Syria (Cauvin, 2000, p, 105).

Goddess figures had been in evidence in northern Europe during the Upper Paleolithic, coextensively with the Franco-Cantabrian cave paintings in the south. Goddess and bull imagery became coupled in Europe only much later, as sedentary societies took hold, presumably with the arrival of agriculture spreading from the east.

At bottom, we cannot know for certain what was the import of Göbekli Tepe. Available to us are only the artifacts themselves and what we know of mythologies, if such there be, that can be linked to them. One can only guess as to what was actually in the mind of a Neolithic hunter-gatherer of the tenth century BC. We have put forward an hypothesis. If our interpretation of the symbolism attaching to the central pillars should not withstand critical analysis or should be undercut by future discoveries, then, as to the meaning behind what went on at Göbekli Tepe, we are back where we began. But even if our specific interpretation turns out not to square with a fuller understanding of what transpired there, it must nevertheless remain the case that Göbekli Tepe reflects a profound development in the way hunter-gatherers looked at the world — and likely one that reflects the arrival in humanity of a new religious sensibility, or at least one that marks a transition pointing in the direction of religion.

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