Rethinking the Neolithic Revolution

Symbolism and Sacrifice at Göbekli Tepe

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Çatalhöyük, dating from 6,400 to 6,200 BCE, presents evidence of one of the earliest human settlements: its construction, its social organization, its symbolic, artistic, and ritual life. A lesser known, but much earlier and potentially even more significant link in the evidential chain of the story of "how we became human" is provided by another archaeological site, situated some 450 miles east-southeast of Çatalhöyük. This site, generally recognized to be a temple complex, has been discovered at Göbekli Tepe (literal translation: "Potbelly Hill") in southeastern Turkey, near the present-day frontier with Syria. It lies about fifteen kilometers northeast of the present-day city of Şanlıurfa, at the highest point of an extended mountain range that can be seen from many kilometers away. To this day, it is a landmark visible from afar. Looking toward the Middle East's fertile crescent, it may be said to be sited at a nodal point of the great migration "out of Africa."

Crucially, it has been authoritatively dated to the astonishingly early period of 9,600–8,200 BCE, corresponding to the Epipaleolithic, or Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA). It dates, that is, from some three millennia before Çatalhöyük. According to the late director of excavations, Klaus Schmidt of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), is that the still unexplored deeper layers of this nine-hectare site will show that "the place has a history

stretching back over several thousand years to the Old Stone Age [that is, to before the Ice Age, which lasted from c. 10,800 to 9,600 BCE]" (Schmidt 2010, 245).

Here, in the words of Patrick Symmes, the reporter who broke the story to the wider world in *Newsweek*, has been discovered

> a vast and beautiful temple complex, a structure so ancient that it may be the very first thing human beings ever built. The site isn't just old, it redefines old: the temple was built . . . a staggering 7,000 years before the Great Pyramid, and more than 6,000 years before Stonehenge first took shape. The ruins are so early that they predate villages, pottery, domesticated animals, and even agriculture—the first embers of civilization. In fact, Schmidt thinks the temple itself, built after the end of the last Ice Age by hunter-gatherers, became that ember—the spark that launched mankind toward farming, urban life, and all that followed. (Symmes 2010)

Here, if anywhere, we might hope to be able to discover evidential traces tending to confirm or disconfirm empirically Girard's theory of hominization, in particular its claim that religion predates, and is actually the origin of, any form of sophisticated (i.e., evidently human) technical, economic, and social organization (Girard 1987; Girard, Antonello, and de Castro Rocha 2007).

But what is it, first of all, that has been discovered? And why is this discovery already, in advance of the test of Girardian theory we are proposing to conduct in this chapter, considered to be of five-star significance?

A Remote Hilltop in Southern Turkey and the Dawn of Civilization

The American author and scientific journalist Charles C. Mann, who has visited the site for *National Geographic*, describes Potbelly Hill as "vaguely reminiscent of Stonehenge, except that Göbekli Tepe was built much earlier and is made not from roughly hewn blocks but from cleanly carved limestone pillars splashed with bas-reliefs of animals" (Mann 2011, 39). A team from the University of Chicago visited the site in the 1960s for the purposes of a

FIGURE 1. Göbekli Tepe: overhead view of the main excavation area. Photograph: N. Becker. © DAI, Orient Department.

survey; it saw evidence of human activity in the broken pieces of limestone that festooned the hilltop, but it took these to be gravestones and concluded that this was the site of a Byzantine military outpost, without great interest. The real discovery occurred in 1994, when Klaus Schmidt revisited it and knew within minutes that this was a major find. Initially alerting signs were the huge numbers of flint chips, indicating that scores or even hundreds of people had worked there in millennia past. Then, inches below the surface, he found a large, elaborately fashioned monumental stone, soon followed by similar others—a ring of standing-stone pillars. From 1995, when excavation began, Schmidt's German-Turkish team found a second and a third and then ever more numerous standing-stone rings, until at length, in 2003, a series of geomagnetic surveys revealed at least twenty rings, piled together higgledy-piggledy, under the earth.

Gradually, it was understood that this was a pointer to the most curious feature of the site: the fact that the standing-stone rings, whatever their function, had seemed to lose their virtue or their potency, so that fresh, near-identical structures (albeit progressively less elaborate) had, over a period of nearly 1,400 years, been built nearby or else simply on top of previous constructions, first filled in for the purpose—seemingly in the hope of making good some mysterious yet central deficiency. "Every few decades, people buried the pillars and put up new stones—a second, smaller ring inside the first. Sometimes, later, they installed a third. Then the whole assemblage would be filled in with debris, and an entirely new circle created nearby. The site may have been built, filled in, and built again for centuries" (Mann 2011, 48).

In short, the labor devoted to this temple complex was "never-ending," since it had to be constantly improved and even replaced (on average every seventy years). A similar technique of cyclical filling and reconstruction is recognizable as having applied to the houses of the Çatalhöyük settlement, with similar periodic frequencies—this correspondence perhaps pointing to a cultural and ritualistic continuity between these prehistoric sites, in spite of their structural difference and separation in time.[1] And yet,

> bewilderingly, the people at Göbekli Tepe got steadily worse at temple building. The earliest rings are the biggest and most sophisticated, technically and artistically. As time went by, the pillars became smaller, simpler, and were mounted with less and less care. Finally, the effort seems to have

> petered out altogether; by 8,200 BC, Göbekli Tepe was all fall and no rise. (Mann 2011, 48)

What ritual enterprise could have motivated such rare and remarkable persistence? What manner of ritual, what social functionality, could have generated such hope and/or such despair?

The pillars discovered were big—the tallest 18 feet in height and weighing sixteen tons. "By the end of the 2002 excavation season, 37 pillars [had] been found *in situ* in Layer III, 22 of which have animal decoration in relief" (Peters and Schmidt 2004, 182). The circles follow a common design. All are made from limestone pillars shaped like giant spikes or capital T's. Bladelike, the ring-forming pillars are easily five times as wide as they are deep. They stand an arm span or more apart, interconnected by low stone walls.

In the middle of each set of concentric rings are two taller pillars, symmetrically facing each other, with a perceptible interval or space between them. Their thin ends are mounted into shallow grooves cut into the floor ("they had not mastered engineering," says one German engineer at the site, who surmises that wooden props or posts would have been needed to keep the taller pillars upright). To Schmidt himself, the T-shaped pillars at the center of the rings are stylized human beings, an idea bolstered by the carved arms that angle from the shoulders of some pillars, reaching towards their loincloth-draped bellies. All the standing stones, a category embracing both the support ring stones and the central pair of T-shaped *figurae*, face the center of a circle—as at a meeting-place or dance, says Schmidt—a representation, perhaps, of a religious ritual.

As to the prancing, leaping animals carved on the pillars and, to a lesser extent, on the T-shaped central stones—Schmidt notes that they are mostly ferocious or dangerous creatures: snakes, scorpions, boars, lions. There are naturalistic representations showing, for instance, a male wild boar "signalling its readiness to attack, its mouth opened in order to display its impressive tusks. . . . below the wild boar is the head of a fox flashing its teeth" (Peters and Schmidt 2004, 184). The human figures represented by the central, dolmen-like T-shapes may be guarded by them, or appeasing them, or incorporating them as totems (Peters and Schmidt 2004, 209).

Related in some way to this puzzle is another. Other parts of the hill were littered with the greatest store of ancient flint tools Schmidt had ever

FIGURE 2. Arms, hands, and elements of clothing reveal the anthropomorphic character of the pillars (pillar 31 in the center of Enclosure D); photograph: N. Becker. © DAI, Orient Department.

come across—a veritable Neolithic warehouse of knives, choppers, and projectile points. ("There were more flints in one little area here, a square meter or two, than many archaeologists find in entire sites," he confided to Mann [2011, 41]). Again, this is a highly suggestive datum—to the point of suggesting to American anthropologist Karl W. Luckert the hypothesis that the function of Göbekli Tepe must have been that of a weapons factory, and that the violence recalled and addressed at this site generated, in some way or other, its own need for ritual purification (Luckert 2013).[2] We may perhaps put this theory on hold, while noting clearly that the pointer it is following towards human violence is, at all events, inescapable—and, of course, entirely Girardian. Göbekli Tepe is the oldest known example of monumental architecture—the first structure human beings put together that was bigger and more complicated than a hut. It is also, in its technological realization, a stupendous feat. It involved quarrying the tall T-stones in the rock and prizing them loose from it, then transporting them, often many kilometers, by large teams of men using a roller-log method, not far short in ingenuity of the later roller-sled technology thought to have been used at Stonehenge, or the stone-walking technology used on Easter Island. It involved temple design, artistic polishing and carving, erection of the stones, the building of intermediary walls of the ring linking the support stones, and further operations of artistic chiseling and decoration—finally, an art of ritual and mythic symbolism, the form and meaning of which are still largely hidden from us. All of which supposes a degree of social integration and an organization far greater than anybody had ever thought of attributing to the small, wandering bands of hunter-gatherers who made up the quasi-totality of humanity in the tenth century BCE. (While the site formally belongs to the PPNA, up to now, in fact, no traces of domesticated plants or animals have been found.) Mann underlines this monumental novelty:

> At the time of Gobleki Tepe's construction, much of the human race lived in small nomadic bands that survived by foraging for plants and hunting wild animals. Construction of the site would have required more people coming together in one place than had likely occurred before. Amazingly, the temple's builders were able to cut, shape, and transport 16 ton stones hundreds of feet despite having no wheels or beasts of burden. (Mann 2011, 39)

The Neolithic Revolution under a New Sign

Yet the truly monumental significance of the site lies not solely in the technological exploit it constitutes, nor even solely in the precocious realization of human group intelligence and cooperation that it supposes. For the implications of these things have still to be seen within the wider context of a momentous culture shift proceeding in the late Neolithic. They are to be deciphered afresh, that is, in relation to the way in which this change is traditionally thought to have proceeded:

> Archaeologists are still excavating Göbekli Tepe and debating its meaning. What they do know is that the site is the most significant in a volley of unexpected findings that have overturned earlier ideas about our species' deep past. Just twenty years ago most researchers believed they knew the time, place, and rough sequence of the Neolithic Revolution—the critical transition that resulted in the birth of agriculture, taking *homo sapiens* from scattered groups of hunter gathers to farming villages and from there to technologically sophisticated societies with great temples and towers and kings and priests who directed the labour of their subjects and recorded their feats in written form. (Mann 2011, 39)

The Neolithic Revolution was once viewed as a single, unilinear-plot story: almost as a single event, representing, Romantically enough (since the scenario just quoted is an invention of Victorian ethnology and anthropology), a sudden flash of genius occurring in a single location (Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and the Euphrates: spreading out then to India, Europe, and beyond). It was believed by most archaeologists that this sudden blossoming of civilization was driven largely by environmental changes: a gradual warming, as the Ice Age receded, allowing some people to cultivate plants and begin herding domesticated food animals. New research of our own times suggests, on the contrary, that the Neolithic Revolution was actually carried out across a huge area and over thousands of years. The view of botanists seems to have swung away from the idea of a rapid process of domestication of cereals, towards a long period of "predomestication agriculture," that is, cultivation before the recognizable traits of the domesticated species

were manifested. George Willcox and his colleagues have shown us the process towards domestication in progress over about 1,500 years from the late Epipaleolithic (Willcox, Fornite, and Herveux 2008). Another recent study proposes that cultivation may have begun as early as the middle Epipaleolithic (Allaby, Fuller, and Brown 2008; Watkins 2010, 624).

One of the things not found at Göbekli Tepe is any trace of human habitation. This is a considerable paradox:

> Hundreds of people must have been required to carve and erect the pillars, but the site had no water source—the nearest stream was about three miles away. These workers would have needed homes, but excavations have uncovered no sign of walls, hearths or houses—no other buildings that Schmidt could interpret as domestic. They would have had to be fed, but there is no trace of agriculture. For that matter, Schmidt has found no mess kitchens or cooking fires. It was a purely ceremonial center. If anyone ever lived at this site, they were less its residents than its staff. To judge by the thousands of gazelle and auroch bones found at the site the workers seem to have been fed by constant shipments of game, brought from faraway hunts. (Mann 2011, 49)[3]

"These people were foragers," Schmidt himself concludes: people who gathered plants and hunted wild animals. "Our picture of foragers was always just small mobile groups, a few dozen people. They cannot make big permanent structures, we thought, because they must move around to follow the resources. They can't maintain a separate class of priests and craft workers, because they can't carry all the extra supplies to feed them. Then here is Göbekli Tepe, and they obviously did all that" (Mann 2011, 48). Clearly enough, then, the scattered groups who came together to this hilltop to construct this temple did not live here. They came in order to engage in ritual activities.

Who were they? They may originally have included some Natufian settlers (i.e., hunter-gatherers who also built, for occasional or temporary use, stacked stone huts, roofed with animal hides, typically comprising eighteen or so people). Just conceivably, some among the later of them may have been among the first settlers of the early PPNA: ex-hunter-gatherers, who were beginning to live in villages of mudbrick huts, comprising up to ninety people, and which included places of food storage (evidence of plant domestication

is debated, but some wild grains were cultivated). Göbekli Tepe is so very significant precisely because it spans the great transition and attests to it.

Lest we miss the cumulative point made by these combined factors (monumentality, antecedence, transitionality, and religious function), and lest we underestimate the significance of their coming together in this site, *National Geographic* interprets in the form of a schematized graphic the "two paths to civilization" recognizably set in opposition by the discovery of the Göbekli Tepe site. The graphic interprets recapitulatively, on the one hand, the scenario envisaged by a traditionalist anthropology (going back to V. Gordon Childe), and, on the other, the new understanding of cultural development represented by contemporary researchers in archaeology and anthropology, among them Klaus Schmidt, Ian Hodder, and William Durham of Stanford University.

The traditional view, pursued by the Victorians and their twentieth-century epigones, holds that when the last blast of the Ice Age ended (ca. 9,600 BCE), more abundant vegetation and wild game led to domestication of plants and animals, to agriculture, and so to permanent settlement. After people began settling in villages, as farmers, religion arose to promote social cooperation.

For the newer school, wonderment at changes in the natural world led to organized ritual cults or religion—which in turn produced the effects of domestication of plants and animals, agriculture, and permanent settlement. On this view, people came together for rituals, creating the need to grow food for large groups gathering near sacred sites—a perspective often held alongside a functionalist and socially useful view of religion, while yet insisting on the lead role of religion as driving, shaping, and enabling reality.

Girard, following a Durkheimian lead, is clearly among the tenents of the second perspective of interpretation. He insists, for instance, that animal domestication and agriculture arose out of ritual practice, rather than the other way round; and that "humanity is the daughter of the religious dimension of things" (Girard 1987, 70–71; Girard, Antonello, and de Castro Rocha 2007).[4] Yet his assent to *National Geographic*'s formulation of the matter, as given above, would still be conditional, since it does not—or does not yet—acknowledge the preponderant role of violence, the management and the attempted exorcism of which must, in his view, condition the very notion of archaic religion and our entire understanding of its ritual practice.

For the moment, however, we may retain the simpler and more general point about temporal antecedence and lead-role functionality. Göbekli Tepe dates from a good three millennia before Çatalhöyük, and the conclusion to be drawn from this simple fact alone is clear and inescapable: *religion preceded settlement*. Which is to say that the "Ascent of Man" narrative, forged by Childe in the 1920s, owed more to the ideological conviction of this passionate Marxist than to any empirical data.[5] Childe thought that agriculture came first, and that this innovation—"the greatest in human history after the mastery of fire"—had allowed humans to seize the opportunity of a rich new environment, to extend their dominion over the natural world, only then developing a series of late-flowering cultural achievements, such as religion and writing. The discovery of Natufian sites of the Levant has since come along, suggesting strongly that settlement had occurred first and that farming arose later, as a product of crisis.[6] Equally, the idea of the Neolithic Revolution driven solely by climate change is now seen to have owed a great deal of its resonance to the fact that in the 1990s people became increasingly aware of environmental and planetary factors, often driven by concern about the effects of modern global warming.

Meanwhile, a suggestion from French archaeologist Jacques Cauvin was generally taken on board. Chauvin's suggestion was that the fundamental factor enabling the formation of mass settlement and of agriculture was the facility for using symbolic culture that enabled communities to formulate their shared identities and their cosmos. The Neolithic sea-change was at bottom a flowering of symbolic behaviors (recognizable in elementary forms from some 100,000 years BCE) (Mann 2011, 57).

The discovery of Göbekli Tepe is, in fact, the latest in a series of disconfirmations and rethinkings that have come as so many rocks thrown through the ideological windows of the basically nineteenth-century "Ascent of Man" narrative. Many anthropologists and cognitivist thinkers of human origins have taken over a preformed view of religion, seen as a way of salving the tension that inevitably arose—and arose solely, so it is supposed, or at least, arose critically—only when hunter-gatherers settled down, became farmers, and developed large societies. These assumptions form a bottom line of conviction, resting on not a great deal more than ideological prevention, yet decisively inhibiting a sufficient curiosity about what is actually meant by religion, and what ritual enterprise it was that proceeded at Göbekli Tepe.

Girard is surely not among those disconfirmed in his basic presumptions by this new and strategically important archaeological find. On the contrary, he is shown to have been fundamentally correct when he speaks of the centrality of violence, and to have been highly prescient once more when he speaks of the priority and antecedence of the sacred as a generative matrix in the genesis of human culture.

Perhaps, then, we may now proceed to bring together the two terms thus validated and to enquire more directly what sense Girardian theory can make of archaeological data. Can this theory of "Violence and the Sacred" be said to point the way towards a cogent decipherment of the central enigma of Göbekli Tepe: the puzzle of what actually went on there?

We shall need here to take two new steps: the first interpreting the ritual activity of the site, insofar as this is inferable from its symbolic and mythical dimension; the second, reconstructing hypothetically what can no longer be observed, namely, the sacrificial functionality of this ritual design, with its sacred space and its highly characteristic layout in concentric circles. Each step will lead us in turn beyond the conclusions that the descriptive and empirical academic archaeologists, like Schmidt, have drawn from the—so far one-tenth excavated—22-acre site; and both steps, it is hoped, will tend to compose a holistic pattern of understanding that will integrate the extant data while remaining capable of being amended and refined as new data emerge.

Mythic Symbolism and Ritual

As we have seen, Schmidt is persuaded that Göbekli Tepe "was not a mundane settlement of the period, but a site belonging to the religious sphere, a sacred area." It seems, he thinks, to have been "a regional center where communities met to engage in complex rites" (2010, 240) But which rites? Schmidt's instinct, in pursuit of an answer, is to question the "extraordinarily rich symbolism that challenges our ability to interpret" (2010, 253). And firstly, he interrogates its animal symbolism.

Animals must be expected to be hugely present, both materially and symbolically, in the mental world of foragers who survived by hunting. The evidence of the filling debris is that of the food animals consumed at the

site by builders and by "pilgrims" (red cattle, wild deer, gazelle, onager, wild pig, and wild caprovids were consumed) (Schmidt 2010, 242). Yet what, for their part, the reliefs adorning many of the monumental pillars depict is a wide range of different wild animals, such as predatory big cats, bulls, wild boar, foxes, ducks, cranes, wild asses, gazelles, snakes, spiders, and scorpions (figure 3), but also vultures and a hyena (figure 4). These—predominantly dangerous—wild beasts constitute an "iconographic repertoire" (246) that may have been progressively unveiled with the seasons (252).

If still baffled by the sense of this iconography, Schmidt is confident of the fact of its significance in the symbolic and mythological order:

> These reliefs open a view of a new and unique pictorial language not known before whose interpretation is a matter of important scientific debate. So far as can be seen, the mammals depicted are male. It remains a mystery whether the relief images were attributes of the pillars, or whether they were part of a mythological cycle. They may have had a protective aspect, serving as guards, or—perhaps more probably—are part of a horrific scenario somewhat like Dante's inferno. (Schmidt 2010, 248)

No images of hybrid beings (human-animal) have so far been found; these, Schmidt asserts, are creations of later cultures.[7] The same remark is applied to anthropomorphic beings with animal heads, a group he summarizes under the term "goat demon," known from Upper Paleolithic art (Schmidt 2001), "but so far not seen at Göbekli Tepe." And the same holds again for another image, the bird man, whose meaning, Schmidt says, "is unclear" (Schmidt 2010, 246). What these comments indicate most conspicuously is that Schmidt has in mind a sort of logic or grammar of ritual symbols (whether this is applicable locally or more universally); hence the expectation, here said to be disappointed—at least so far—of the appearance of these key images in this particular site.

Yet the assertions of absence and ambiguity are also themselves subject to interpretation. On the one hand, in an early account of his finding, he had listed animals "with human head," and a "bird on human head" (Schmidt 1998, 2). More interestingly still, the declaration that hybrid images are absent at Göbekli Tepe has to be qualified in the light of other statements. Schmidt tells us that a billy goat is one of the three animals adorning in

FIGURE 3. Pillar 43 in Enclosure D. © DAI, Orient Department.

FIGURE 4. Fragment of a decorated pillar found in the debris of Enclosure D, north of pillar 18; photograph: K. Schmidt. © DAI, Orient Department.

high relief the porthole stones discovered near the upright central T-shaped pillars, which are, by his own account, of anthropomorphic tenor (Schmidt 2010, 252). He suggests that these stones are close to, and very much like, the base or socket stones that can, in one enclosure, be seen to be holding the central T-shapes upright. So that the association of animal and human is in fact present virtually, anticipating implicitly the hybrid forms Schmidt declares to be missing.

This reminds us strongly of Girard's view that the victimary ritual starts in total unawareness of itself, and progresses towards an ever-inadequate awareness through the practice of representation and ritual organization. Iconography and its symbolic logic, that is, function like a dream in process of an ever-unfinished awakening. So that the pictures are always saying more than their creators can clearly grasp, or realize pictorially, or, of course, explain; yet the further advanced they are in the process of awakening, the more they represent and declare explicitly the logic that generates them.

This perspective opens up the possibility of a fully Girardian interpretation of Göbekli Tepe. The goat-demon, whose subterranean presence-absence

at this site can in fact be discerned, sounds suspiciously like the Girardian scapegoat,[8] as perceived by the community at the point of victimary slaughter. More than that: it situates the range of fearsome animals specifically depicted in a relationship to the human subjects and actors of Göbekli Tepe that can be described as one of victimization-through-violence and of sacralization. The animals depicted are of course really frightening, in an immediate and concrete sense; but they are also demonized, i.e., held to be guilty of all the woes afflicting the community, including violence born of intra-community conflict, and the perceived violence suffered from acts of cosmic nature. It is in this sense that the goat is a goat-demon.

Schmidt's entire iconography is thereby placed under the sign of a dynamic of transformation implied by the victimary pharmacology that Girard has described: a polarity of life forces is here being reversed symbolically, from negative to positive, i.e., from death to life, from disorder to order, from violence to peace. On reflection, it will be seen that this dynamic explains the bird-man image, which Girardians will recognize from a striking analysis of a Tikarau myth in *Things Hidden* (Girard 1987, 106–7); in mythic imagination, the bird man literally flies away from the cliff (over which he is in sober fact pressurized to jump by group violence, thus falling to his death on the rocks below). His flight is, then, the mythically coded expression of a victimary guilt reversed, and resacralized as a form of benevolent provision towards the community. It is a sign of an ex-victim who, in the process of sacralization, has escaped his guilt and become divine. By extension, this same coded logic explains also a curious overlap between the two lists of Schmidt's animals: ducks and gazelles are to be found in each list, because both possess at once the mundane property of being comestible and the symbolic attribute of flying or leaping.

Schmidt's iconography of course looks towards the animals that threaten and terrorize: on this point, Schmidt's intuition of a Dantesque nightmare scenario is highly pertinent, at least to the dream or nightmare from which the symbolic-mythic ritual is attempting to awaken. Through ritual acts of counter-violence, including ritual baiting and sacrificial slaughter, what is felt to be the malefic potency of these animals is appropriated, their meaning for the community reversed. The demon becomes sacred by virtue of his function as emissary victim. And the conferred sacrality (which is also a stolen or appropriated potency) confers on the victimized animal a status as totem or

guardian of the community. We may thus think of the bird man, symbolically speaking, as the scapegoat liberated: the true spirit of the sacralized animal.

Our preliminary conclusion must be that Girard's reading of Çatalhöyük would appear to provide a real hermeneutical key to the antecedent—and correspondingly more implicit—symbolic-mythic grammar of Göbekli Tepe; it helps us decipher its most notable—and carefully noted—ambiguities. Of course, this fact implies a new flexibility in Girardian theory itself (in relation to its first delivery, as a single structuralist scenario of *ab origine* human sacrifice). Girard himself now seems very happy to admit an interpenetration of hunting and ritual practice, such that the first may have preceded and even overlapped with the second (see his chapter in this volume). We can only reflect that such an interpenetration would be entirely natural in the mental world of hunter-gatherers, whose artifact weapons would be, indistinctly, at the disposal of both their material needs, on the one hand, and their symbolic desires and mythic imagination, on the other. Animal baiting may well have been a proto-form of human sacrifice—or an adjunct to it.

Can a Girardian understanding of the carved animal reliefs help us interpret the symbolism of the pillars themselves? For Schmidt, "The T-form of the pillars can easily be interpreted as anthropomorphic, as some of the pillars appear to have arms and legs: they are, in other words, stone statues of human-like beings" (Schmidt 2010, 244). In fact, it helps us to distinguish more sharply than Schmidt does between the smaller, supporting ring-stone pillars and 18-foot-high twin pillars at the geometric center of the circle—these latter being set apart both by their greater height and their attitude, facing not so much inwards as (given that their polarity already stands at the center of the circle) towards each other. Both types are, in some sense, stylized representations—and/or representatives—of human beings. But in what sense, exactly?

Schmidt notes the excitement with which the central pillars (only) were first discovered to be subtly carved with what looks like a ritual stole and a loincloth (2010, 245). He seems disposed to conclude that this suggests priests at the center, with lesser acolytes attending and supporting from the intermediate wall-linked rings—and perhaps, if the earth banks outside the outer-walled ring turn out, as he supposes, to be spectator ramps, a vast congregation of ordinary pilgrims looking on or looking in from outside towards the sacred space.

It is possible—he says prudently—that only certain persons were permitted to wear the stole—the stole being an important element of a ritual robe (2010, 244). Perhaps the stone buttons, which occur in large numbers on the site, also contribute, he thinks, to this same scheme of self-representing ritual design.

Yet this is not quite what is suggested by his notably tentative, but perhaps more prescient, conclusion:

> The question of who is being represented by the highly stylised T-shaped pillars remains open, as we cannot say with certitude if concepts of god existed at this time. So the general function of the enclosures remains mysterious; but it is clear that the pillar statues in the centre of these enclosures represent very powerful beings. If gods existed in the minds of early Neolithic people, there is an overwhelming probability that the T-shape is a first known monumental depiction of gods. (Schmidt 2010, 254)

If we follow a Girardian logic, this very tentative supposition becomes more transparent and much firmer: the monumental T-stones at the center represent darkly—i.e., without clear consciousness of their function and sense—the process of sacralization itself. They are the poles between which this transforming communal electromagnetism of sacralization operates; and the supporting rings themselves express mythically the social force field thus generated. This sense is conveyed invincibly by the vertically plunging view of Enclosure C offered in photographic representation by figure 5.

Schmidt himself provides a series of supporting evidence in favor of this reading:

> An important role must also have been ascribed to the pairs of pillars at the centre of each space which tower over the other pillars. It seems probable that they depict twins, because twins, or at least pairs of brothers and sisters, are a common theme in mythology (Levi-Strauss 1991; Meixner 1995). (Schmidt 2010, 244)

If we care to read Girard in addition to Levi-Strauss and Meixner, however, we will know that the symbolic and mythic significance of twins is that they epitomize the dynamics of the mimetic crisis and its scapegoat resolution.

FIGURE 5. Enclosure C seen from above; photograph: K. Schmidt. © DAI, Orient Department.

They allude to threatening undifferentiation and to the violence born of a rivalry that both precedes and follows from this (Girard 1987, 28–29). Behind the twins is the phenomenon of conflict and crisis within the social group, which is resolved only by the killing of one twin by the other. In later developed mythologies (including Babylonian creation stories),[9] the slaughtered twin is often buried under the founding stone of the city—this differentiating sacrifice being synonymous with the act of foundation on which civilization itself is based. In his chapter of this present volume, William Durham, after Bruce Lincoln (1975, 1981), speaks at length of the presence of primordial twins in Indo-European foundational myths.

The *dédoublement* of the central pillars, if it is related to this symbolic logic of twins, could well have the sense of a saving and founding differentiation. This is something directly suggested by the differential ornamentation appearing in Enclosure D, where "the western pillar is wearing a necklace in the shape of a crescent, a disc and two antithetical elements whose meaning is not understood"; whereas the "eastern pillar also holds a fox in the crook of its elbow" (Schmidt 2010, 239). Each pillar attests, that is, to the ambiguity

of cosmic forces (just as, for instance, Kali is, in Hindu mythology, the deity of creation and destruction, life and death); but a founding differentiation is introduced by the ritual itself, which is played out in the most sacred space between the stones, and which is such that, at the outcome of the ceremony, by way of signifying its action of transformation, the second pillar carries a tutelary and totemic wild animal.

This transformational and founding sense is reinforced if we consider that the pillars themselves are mounted in base-socket slabs that strongly resemble the "porthole stones" said by Schmidt to offer an access to the world of the dead. If so, we are perhaps in the presence of a first allusive hint at the sacrificial nature of the ritual action itself that is played out in the most sacred space between the pillars: the victim enters the world of the dead (metaphorically, "he climbs through the porthole"), and, in his place, a god arises to protect the community. This transformational account chimes well with the double porthole stone, which Schmidt instinctively considers to be of capital significance.

Is this transformation the founding difference of the twin T-shapes; the secret of the central "space in-between"; and the functional raison d'être of the Göbekli Tepe site? If so, we need not share Schmidt's inhibitions as decipherer, or follow him in wondering whether god is involved. The archaic gods, on this view, are sacralizations of collective human forces symbolically and mythopoetically activated; and Göbekli Tepe, as interpreted by the light of a Girardian template, shows us how this happened (without, of course, saying anything at all of metaphysical import).

Was Göbekli Tepe a Sacrificial Site?

The Girardian reading of the symbolic logic of the site's iconography and its monumental design takes us very convincingly into the mental world of the early humans who built and ran this extraordinary temple complex. But can we be sure that these meanings were duly enacted? Is it reasonable to think that this was a site devoted, in actual and sober fact, to a ritual of sacrifice?

Peters and Schmidt mention the possibility that "the pillars could have witnessed the performance of hunting rituals, initiation and passage rites, spiritual encounters or funeral practices" (Peters and Schmidt 2004, 179).

Schmidt also mentions the presence of "bones, which exist in huge amounts" (2010, 241):

> It should be mentioned that the bone material from the backfilling includes some human bones. Their appearance is similar to the animal bones—they have been broken into small pieces; several have cut marks; and it appears that they were treated in a similar way to the animal bones (2010, 243).

A recent, detailed scientific and forensic analysis of these human bones confirms their ritualistic manipulation, alongside a significant presence of skull fragments (Gresky 2011), which were part of the ritualistic practices of many archaic populations, as confirmed for instance by similar findings in Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2006, 23).[10] Schmidt mentions, only to relativize it—and probably rightly, since there is no evidence of carbonization—the possibility of cannibalism; and he suggests instead that the treatment of the human bones may relate to special rituals performed with the buried, but subsequently disinterred, dead. His reticence may, however, be the sign of the typical overcautiousness that archaeologists and anthropologists have shown in the past half-century in reference to prehistoric cannibalism. The evidence for cannibalism has been growing steadily; it may well be that recognition of the ritual violence of human sacrifice will emerge in its wake from a lingering post-Darwinian shadow zone (or "shudder zone") of misrecognition.[11]

Because of its abundantly evident cultic vocation, Göbekli Tepe in particular is a site that, like others in the region, asks to be considered and studied in this new light, given the amount of evidence it displays. Nerissa Russell, discussing similarly the occurrence of animal sacrifice in Çatalhöyük, particularly with reference to the hunting scenes (Russell 2012), which are discussed also in this volume by Girard, makes reference to archaeological evidence of human sacrifice at Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) Çayönü in southeast Anatolia (Loy and Wood 1989), at PPNB Khirokitia on Cyprus (Dikaios 1953), and at Pottery Neolithic Ain el-Kerkh in Syria (Tsuneki 2002), while Sharon Moses has discussed the presence of child sacrifice in Çatalhöyük (Moses 2012).

The strongest evidence, however, probably lies in a simple and immediate deductive probability: if the Stone Age weaponry—knives, axes,

arrowheads—is found in such extraordinary profusion at this ritual site, is it not most economically logical to think that they arrived there not just by chance, with the pilgrims, but because they were manufactured on the site for the ritual purposes of the site: namely, the sacrificial immolation of animal and/or human victims?

The iconographic images also suggest sacrifice, animal or human: "The representation of a headless human with erect penis is recognizable quite clearly. The state of the man could indicate a violent death, and his company of scorpions, snakes, and vultures strengthens this impression" (Schmidt 2006, 39). We note also other images consistent with this interpretation: a boar, splayed out upside down with its feet in the air (on the rim of one of the porthole stones); or the image of the vulture grasping in its claws two severed human heads. The design and layout of what Schmidt calls the circles or the enclosures of this temple complex are also highly revealing, particularly in light of Girard's theory. The circles separate the sacred and the profane spheres, both excluding the mass of the pilgrims, who are relegated to the role of spectators standing on the earthen ramps beyond the outer perimeter, yet at the same time engaging the participation of all, as suggested by the human-like T-stones facing inwards towards the center, perhaps representing ritual representatives (shamans or early priests) in whom the crowd find their own drama expressed and through whose actions it is played out—representatives who, perhaps in the order of ritual precedence, as marked by their iconographic insignia of animal images, advance into the third, second, or first ranked circle, leaving the innermost circle to the victim, who is both most intensely identified with and, at the same time, done to death sacrificially, both victim and god, as the two towering pillars suggest.[12]

It is thought that the innermost circle of this Dantesque structure was most generally without an entrance, and was accessed by the priest-sacrificers by means of ladders; though a temporary breach may well have been made to admit the animal or human victim. For this reason, no doubt, the multiple walls create a massively secure and deliberately concentrational structure—not only to exclude the profane but also to contain the potent pharmacology that proceeds ritually in the most sacred space in between the two tall T-stones. For these walled rings, supported by the community and representing it, are designed also to imprison the victims, as in many other ancient arenas.

If we look at the entrance, it is a funnel or tunnel reminiscent of the Roman gladiatorial arena; if we look at the circles or rings within, they often form a labyrinth, such as is familiar from mythic representation of the Minoan bull-leaping arena.[13] If we measure the vertical dimension of this space, we will realize that the arena is sunken, improving visibility for the banks of spectators just as in the amphitheaters where Greek tragedies were performed, so Girard suggests, as an aesthetic development, precisely, of the ritual of sacrifice (Girard 1977, 178).

There is a further element that points to a Girardian understanding of the ritual practices at Göbekli Tepe, consistent with Schmidt's findings: namely, the view that Göbekli Tepe was also a site where extensive feasting, with large consumption of alcoholic beverages, was held (Dietrich et al. 2012). As Girard claims, rituals would always try to reenact the primordial sacrificial event of a spontaneous, collective, violent frenzy ended by the unanimous convergence on a random victim whose killing brought order to a community plunged into a total mimetic disarray; such a ritualistic reenactment would include the repetition of the hallucinatory paroxysm of the mimetic crisis, achieved through trance techniques, or by the use of drugs or intoxicating food or drinks (for instance, during Dionysian Mysteries or Kaingáng rituals) as prelude to the ritual killing of human or animal victims (Girard 1977, 145, 134).[14]

A final and related argument is to be found in another simple deduction: whatever proceeded had to make a potent, life-transforming difference to the community. This much we know from the very fact that, when it failed to do so, the temple builders began again, in the hope that the next temple—and, no doubt, the next sacrifice—would do so.

Girard explains this riddle cogently. He points to the fallacy underlying ritual sacrifice: it is false and self-deceiving to think that the victim is genuinely responsible for the ills offloaded onto him by the community. Not addressing the real causes, such a pharmacology developed around the emissary victim cannot, in any genuine or permanent way, remedy the ills addressed, even if its assured failure is temporarily disguised by the pacifying, reordering, and generally therapeutic social effects of the sacrificial ritual. This same pharmacology will be tried again, therefore, as soon as its effects wear off, and as the ills of conflict and violence reassert themselves—producing, in time, the same evidence of failure. Misrecognition of process and

agency and the failure to learn from ritual failure, plus the need for expedient remedies, equals vain repetition.

Göbekli Tepe illustrates this Girardian equation precisely, with this unexpected but entirely confirmatory harmonic that, if belief in the efficacy of the ritual wore down only slowly, this was because, for a long time, hope sprang anew in the vain expedient of reprising the same ritual formula in an infinitesimally displaced site. It is as though the favor of the gods would be won, or their disfavor removed, by more, newer, harder labor until hope and belief itself ran out.

It is not, in the nature of the case, possible to claim that this preliminary Girardian reading stands validated beyond the possibility of either doubt or of correction. Yet it has the merit of integrating the data intelligibly, cogently, and economically; as a research hypothesis, it works where lesser framings of theory, and provisional overviews, visibly do not. And we are perceptibly close here to the point where empirical discovery and the deductive certainties of the theorist join hands.

We conclude that Girardian theory has a deserved place at the table of further research, indicated by Klaus Schmidt:

> But to understand the new finds, archaeologists need to work closely with specialists in comparative religion, architectural and art theory, cognitive and evolutionary psychology, sociologists using social network theory, and others; it is the complex story of the earliest large settled communities, their extensive networking, and their communal understanding of their world; perhaps even the first organised religions and their symbolic representations of the cosmos. (Schmidt 2010, 245)

Notes

1. As Ian Hodder writes, "Çatalhöyük is as much a cemetery as a settlement. It is as much a ritual centre of production. These various functions are integrated in the house" (Hodder 2006). "Some of the feasting seem associated with the foundation and abandonment of houses" (Hodder 2006, 172). The seventy-year cycle of habitation and reconstruction may indicate a ritualistic practice based on astronomical observations, and resonates also with early Jewish writing, in which there is a connection between temporal cycles based on the seven sequence and apocalypticism, i.e., destruction and ritual reconstruction of devotional building, as expressed for instance in Isaiah 23:15, Jeremiah 25:11–12, 29:10, Daniel 9:24–25, Levi literature, and in the Apocalypse of Weeks (1 Enoch 93:1–10, 91:11–17).
2. This hypothesis is mentioned by R. Hamerton-Kelly following Karl W. Luckert's book *Stone Age*

Religion at Göbekli Tepe: From Hunting to Domestication, Wayfaring and Civilization (2013), which includes a foreword by Klaus Schmidt. See also our companion volume, *Can We Survive our Origins?*

3. Ofer Bar-Yosef, professor of prehistoric archaeology at Harvard, is more cautious: "They haven't found much habitation, but they will. . . . It's impossible to have such a large site without people to take care of it." Schmidt acknowledges there must have been a few residents—"personnel" he calls them—but insists the site was exclusively a ritual destination rather than a settlement, which would make it unique for this period (Curry 2008, 280).

4. "The economic motive is not sufficient to explain domestication, but sacrifice can result in economic practices that gradually become independent of their origin. . . . domestication is only a secondary effect, a sub-product of a ritual practice that is nearly identical in every case. The practice of sacrifice has been extended to extremely diverse species, including human beings, and only chance, the accident of selecting a certain species in combination with its given aptitude, has made for the success of domestication in some cases and its failure in others. In this sense sacrifice became a means for exploring the world" (Girard 1987, 70–71).

5. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, well before the advent of radiocarbon dating and other methods of absolute chronology that are now standard in the field, Childe had no way of measuring the rate at which mobile populations of hunter-gatherers in diverse environments began to settle down into more permanent communities and adopt new subsistence practices involving the domestication of plants and animals.

6. Dating from as early as 13,000 BCE and ending as the Ice Age drew to a close, the Natufian villages—despite being sometimes considerable settlements—were peopled by foragers, not farmers; they hunted gazelles and gathered wild rye, barley, and wheat. The discovery of these proto-villages, without farming or animal domestication, was the first discovery to destabilize Childe's version of how complex societies began (Mann 2011, 56).

7. "The earliest known evidence, anywhere in the world, for large-scale distributions of composite figures is concentrated around the first centers of urbanization and state formation in the ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean regions, the composite beings that appear at the dawn of urban life, towards the end of the 4th millennium BC. . . . [However,] the issue here is not whether Palaeolithic and Neolithic societies created images of imaginary beings. It is beyond doubt that they did (cf. Nakamura and Meskell, 2009), although the number of convincing examples is smaller than might be imagined" (Wengrow 2011).

8. This concept is not to be understood in its modern or its Biblical senses, but simply, at this stage of cultural development, as an "emissary victim." For this consideration see Dawson (2013) and our introduction to this volume.

9. R. Hamerton-Kelly treats this theme in his chapter of our companion volume *Can We Survive Our Origins?*

10. The practice of artificially modifying the human skull has been a part of human culture as far back as 45,000 years BCE (Trinkaus 1982), and it has been shown to occur on every inhabited continent (Dingwall 1931; Ortner 2003).

11. "Cannibalism tends to invoke a strong emotional response, and for that reason the standards of proof for accepting archaeological evidence of cannibalism seem to be unfairly high" (Stoneking2003; see also Diamond 2000). However, as Ann Gibbons has argued, "the skepticism with which archaeologists once regarded claims of cannibalism among human ancestors is dissipating, thanks to a set of rigorous new criteria for identifying its marks on human fossils." Now archaeologists are making a strong case that the practice may have occurred

among our ancestors as early as eight hundred thousand years ago; among the Neanderthals; and more recently, among the Anasazi, the Aztec of Mexico, and the people of Fiji (Gibbons 1997). Moreover, a new study of molecular variation at the prion protein gene locus in human populations (Mead et al. 2003) seems to suggest that "once we were cannibals" (White 2001). The strong selection documented for the prion protein gene is consistent with the growing view (however disquieting it might be) from archaeological evidence, that cannibalism may have been widespread among prehistoric populations (see Fernandez-Jalvo et al 1999; Marlar et al 2000; White 2001).

12. Michel Serres, in *Les origines de la géométrie*, discusses the sacrificial origins of abstract forms of calculation and measurement, which were mapped onto the social structure, where social circles or strata were organized through mechanisms of progressive exclusion. In this originary social topography, everybody concentrically faced the *Kentron*, the center, which etymologically defines both a tool used to torture a victim and the victim herself (Serres 1995, 141).

13. Sacrificial rituals might have originally included the agonistic deadly fighting between animals and humans, as in the later Roman gladiatorial arenas.

14. Interestingly enough, there is also an ongoing discussion among archaeologists about the hypothesis that the discovery of fermentation and the use of beer in religious rituals have led to the domestication of early cereals, which were "better suited to making gruel or beer than bread because of the glume adhering to the grain" (Dietrich et al. 2012, 689)—thus confirming Girard's hypothesis that religious rituals brought about, as an accidental byproduct, the domestication of plants and animals (Girard, Antonello, and de Castro Rocha 2007).

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