

Self-Revelation: An Origin Myth Interpretation of the Göbekli Tepe Culture

(An Alternative Perspective on Anthropomorphic Themes)

Kendini Açıklamak: Göbekli Tepe Kültürü'nde Bir Köken Miti Yorumu

(Antropomorfik Temalara Alternatif Bir Bakış)

Orhan Ayaz

Dr. Academic Member, Harran University, Department of Sociology of Religion, Şanlıurfa, Turkey

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Harran Üniversitesi, Din Sosyolojisi, Şanlıurfa, Türkiye

ORCID 0000-0001-8599-0485 | orhanayaz76@hotmail.com; orhanayaz@harran.edu.tr

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Abstract

The humans of the Göbekli Tepe Neolithic culture of the Upper Euphrates Basin left behind long-term settlements with surprising monumental structures and a rich set of symbolism. This study puts the various symbolic themes of this culture at its center, and attempts to offer a reasonable interpretation of how the people of this culture and period constructed a “reality” about themselves. When the themes of the human head and phallus are positioned at the center of the interpretations of this period’s symbolism, it is possible to claim that the Neolithic people conceptualized/explained themselves through a complex mythological narrative. This paper also hopes to contribute to the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and history of religions by asserting that the T-shaped pillars of the Göbekli Tepe Culture are the phalli of the ancestors representing these ancestors’ remaining fragment/aspect on “the World” and thus, are the material representations of the “now” and “this World” rather than mythological ancestors themselves, supernatural beings or gods. In this context, it is possible to relate the T-shaped pillars with ancestor cult, and also an important part of the anthropomorphic statues and reliefs to the initiation rites in which a person gains status in society. One of the biggest goals of this study is to begin a discussion about what can be the main mythological narrative of this culture.

Keywords

Göbekli Tepe, anthropomorphic images, phallus, Pre-Pottery Neolithic, initiation rites

Öz

Yukarı Fırat Havzası’nda Göbekli Tepe Neolitik kültür bölgesinde insanlar, arkalarında şaşırtıcı anıtsal yapıların ve zengin bir sembolizmin olduğu uzun süreli yerleşim alanları bırakmışlardır. Bu çalışma bu kültürdeki farklı sembolik temaları merkeze koyarak bu dönem insanların kendileri hakkında nasıl bir “gerçeklik” inşa ettiklerinin makul bir yorumunu yapmaya çalışacaktır. Bu dönem sembolizminin merkezine insan kafası ve fallus teması yerleştirildiğinde neolitik insanların kendilerini bir mitolojik anlatıyla kavradıklarını/açıkladıklarını söylemek mümkündür. Makale, Göbekli Tepe kültürünü temsil eden Neolitik sitelerde T-biçimli dikili taşların mitolojik atalar, doğaüstü varlıklar veya tanrılardan ziyade “şimdinin” ve “bu dünyanın” nesnel bir temsili olarak atanın “dünyada” kalan parçasını/tafını temsilen (onun) fallusu olduğunu ileri sürerek antropoloji, sosyoloji ve dinler tarihi disiplinlerine de katkı sağlamayı ummaktadır. Bu bağlamda T-biçimli dikili taşları atalar kültürüyle, antropomorfik heykel ve kabartmaların önemli bir kısmını da kişinin statü kazandığı erginleme ritüelleriyle ilişkilendirmek mümkündür. Bu çalışmanın en önemli amaçlarından biri de bu kültürdeki temel mitolojik anlatının ne olabileceğine ilişkin bir tartışma başlatmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Göbekli Tepe, antropomorfik imgeler, fallus, Çanak Çömleksiz Neolitik, erginleme ritüelleri

Introduction

The Natufian Culture, which had intentional and planned food production since the 12th Millennium BCE in the Levant region was followed by the Pre-pottery Neolithic A and B periods in which we can see the beginnings of a conscious strategy for animal and agricultural production (Hodder, 2006; Özdoğan, 2003; Schmidt, 2006b). During this transitional period dated approximately to the 10th Millennium BCE, the human species has witnessed a major transformation with repercussions that are still reverberating today. One of the most striking places where this transformation occurred is the region of "the Göbekli Tepe Culture," which represents a unique cultural area (Fig. 1). This culture exhibits quite different features from the Epipaleolithic Culture before it and its contemporaneous Neolithic societies. Thanks both to the abundance of its rare monumental structures and detailed symbolic imagery, along with its tradition of burying structures along with those structures' contents (Karul, 2021), this Neolithic region represents a unique cultural area that allows for detailed interpretations.

The unearthing of the Göbekli Tepe Culture began in 1979, first with the excavation of Nevalı Çori, discovered in a Southern Anatolia archaeological survey. However, the importance of this area was realized with the Göbekli Tepe Neolithic site, discovered in 1994 and excavated one year later. Consecutive archaeological surveys revealed the presence of a dense Neolithic settlement within an area of approximately 100 km around Urfa province of Turkey (Çelik, 2000; Güler et al., 2013; Çelik, 2017, 2019). Along with the on-going excavations, there are excavations recently being conducted within the scope of the recently launched The Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project, known as Taş Tepeler, at many sites of this cultural region (Karul, 2022b). Especially, the findings received from the excavations at Karahan Tepe, Sayburç and Çakmak Tepe bear the potential to shed light on the structures and the symbols of Göbekli Tepe (Karul, 2021; Özdoğan & Uludağ, 2022). While the previous interpretations considered the site to be a "temple" or a "sanctuary", a site where hunter-gatherers met periodically to perform certain rituals (Schmidt, 2010), it is almost clear with these findings that Göbekli Tepe was actually a Neolithic settlement, (and this is perhaps true for the other sites of the region; Clare, 2020; Jeunesse, 2020, Karul, 2022a). The simultaneous repetition of the materials and symbols in different contexts and forms provides deeper insights into the economy, architecture, belief system and sociology of this culture.

The difficulty of interpreting a culture that has not left any writing system behind is obvious. The task becomes more difficult, especially when the issue is the complex mythological plot of a Neolithic world that coincides with "the first times" of human culture. Social scientists charged with such a task will predominantly tend to act within the categories formed by their own cultural background and biases (Gadamer, 2006) when referring to a point in time approximately 12,000 years ago – the time when the early Neolithic communities began to emerge (see Dietrich et al., 2017). Yet, it is highly likely that symbols in use throughout history referred at that point in time to a "web of significances" (see Geertz, 1973), altogether different from our biases acquired within our own historical process. Despite all the difficulties, there are also conveniences offered by the sites that still make it possible to say something about this culture (see Hodder, 2006). First of all, since the Göbekli Tepe cultural region is home to a dense Neolithic settlement in an area of about 100 km², we have relatively large archaeological data in our hands relatively big archaeological data that can shed light on this cultural area. This is important because the findings from various different excavation sites often shed light on each other. Thereby, it is possible to interpret most of the materials and symbols within their own context. Another important convenience offered by the site is the cultural tradition of burying structures with their contents. This allows archaeological materials to reach us today with less destruction, therefore allowing them to be evaluated within their spatial context. One of the most striking aspects of the Göbekli Tepe Culture is that it offers concrete architecture and iconographic evidence that points to a complex belief system (Peters et al., 2020, p. 4614). The most fundamental archaeological data that we will interpret within the scope of this study pertains to the anthropomorphic themes that refer to a belief system. These themes are formed sometimes by the T-shaped pillars (Fig. 2, Fig. 5) and human statues (Fig. 3), and sometimes by the figures related to human depictions on the pillars, and as in the examples at Sayburç, on the walls (Fig. 9). Composite statues having human and animal themes together will also be interpreted in this context.

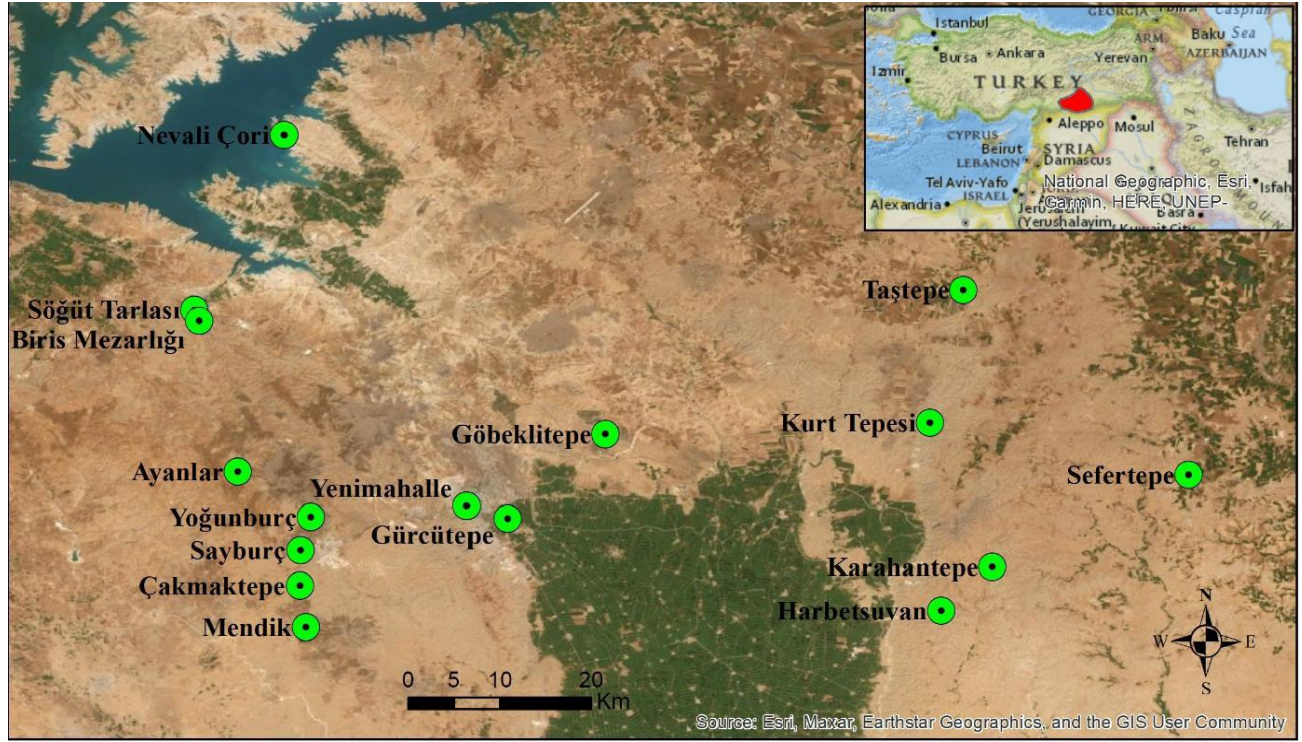


Fig.1. Göbekli Tepe Neolithic culture geography and the principal settlements that stand out with T-shaped pillars (Excavation work on some of the sites that are marked has not yet begun).

1. The Mythological Conceptualization of the World

Humans structure the world by expanding into the world with both physical and mental activities, and trying to explain it (Berger, 2011). In other words, when all the intellectual attempts of the humans are taken into consideration, the humans' tendency to observe the world always in some form of order would always appear prevalent. In this sense, it is possible to say that since humans are too much part of the universe, the observed state of regularity in the universe gives rise to the basic need of the mind for order (Lévi-Strauss, 2013, p. 32). The human species has attempted to maintain this order with various types of conceptual devices. The most striking among these types of devices are mythology, theology, philosophy and science. Mythological conceptualization represents the oldest form of establishing an ordered universe and then legitimizing it (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Here, the mythology should be viewed as an ideological framework, just like other belief systems, explaining to humans how the world works and making sense of humans' place in it, rather than providing an explanation of a subsystem of human behavior, such as economics (Insoll, 2004; Hoppal, 2021; Finlayson, 2014, p. 138). This reminder is important, since most approaches to religion in archaeology have proved to be naïve (Çelik & Ayaz, 2022; Kafafi, 2010, p. 303).¹

From the perspective of our objectives in this study, we can define mythology "as a conception of reality that posits the ongoing penetration of the world of everyday experience by sacred forces" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 128). The myth, which is just an illusion, provides humans the sensation that they can understand and that they do understand the universe. In this context, a person who conceptualizes the world through mythology understands herself, her environment and her community as if using the devices that a philosopher and a scientist might employ. Mythic thinking in this particular form plays the role of conceptual thought (Lévi-Strauss, 2013). It is possible to observe the best examples of mythological conceptualization in Ancient Mesopotamian cultures. The Ancient Mesopotamians thought that they could not explain the world by itself alone. A group among them, formed of highly intelligent people with depth of thought (which quite possibly is present in every culture) have tried to explain the universe that surrounds them via the powers of their "minds". With this intellectual power, they were able to explain themselves and the universe full of mysteries they lived in by linking images, events and conjectures to the things they could not control (Bottéro, 2020, p. 243). Among the greatest of these mysteries were the *raison d'être* of the world, the things and humans, and their origins. The myths of origin, known as aetiological myths and important from the point of view of our study, are considered to be the oldest myths. This type of myth provides "an imaginary explanation" of how something originates (Hooke, 1963, p. 13). The earliest explanations of humans' origins and the meaning of their existence are found in the Ancient Mesopotamian tablets. These tablets depict how and why man was

¹ Theology, from the aspect of definitions of reality, is closer to mythological conceptualization, rather than philosophical and scientific ones (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

created in detail (Bottéro, 2020, p. 247; Demirci, 2013; Kramer, 2014).

Durkheim, in his well-known work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2008) focuses on the functions of myth, but he covers widely the myths of origin. He recounts the indigenous Australian myths and argues that "primitives" designed myths that facilitated the difficulty in understanding their origins or at least "mitigate[d] its shocking logic" (Durkheim, 2008, p. 105). According to him, despite basing their ultimate (and at the same time, imaginary) origins in uncertain beings and humans, the point of origination of most of these societies is a totemic animal. Durkheim claims that albeit the existence of variations, all myths have the same plan. Their goal is "to establish genealogical relations between man and the totemic animal" (Durkheim, 2008, p. 105). In preliterate Neolithic societies, too, some symbolic themes were part of myths. Some symbolic images used in Neolithic Anatolia were imaginary. There are abundant examples of these mythological imaginary beings in the Göbekli Tepe Culture (Hodder, 2006). In this context, thanks to the abundance of preserved structures and materials they left behind, it can be deduced that the community that lived in the Göbekli Tepe Culture had a rich mythological plot.

2. A Central Theme in the Göbekli Tepe Culture

Phallic symbolism is not a universal theme, yet it has been widely used in many societies for different meanings and purposes (Sütterlin & Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2013, p. 44). While the theme of "The Mother Goddess", associated with reproduction and fertility in the Neolithic period (Cauvin, 2000; Hodder & Meskell, 2011; Rudebeck, 2000), was foregrounded for a long time, subsequent studies have shown that the theme of the phallus can also symbolize fertility. It is possible to come across phallus-themed objects on many Pre-Neolithic and Neolithic sites in the Southern Levant. One of the best examples representing this theme in the cultural region in question is the mortar pestle, which is physically compared to phalli (Mithen et al., 2005). Similarly, the concept of fertility was expressed in the erotic ritual practices of the middle of the Neolithic period of Northern Eurasia (a geography different from the Near Eastern Neolithic) that included the notion of fertility as phallus (Hoppal, 2021, p. 83). Back when other sites of the Göbekli Tepe Cultural Area were yet to be excavated, Hodder and Meskell (2011) had emphasized that one of the three major symbolic themes common in the first established communities of the region, referring to Çatalhöyük and Göbekli Tepe, was "penis".

However, what clearly demonstrates that we can place the phallus² theme at the center of the symbolic system of this culture are the structures and findings uncovered at sites such as Harbetsuvan Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Sayburç that were to be excavated later. The understanding that phalli are of central importance developed with these new findings, and this understanding also offers the opportunity to review previous interpretations of what the T-shaped pillars, adorned with various symbols and one of the most characteristic features of this cultural region (Fig. 2), might be.

² Another central theme, the head, will be the subject of a more detailed discussion in a future study.



Fig. 2. The illustration of a T-shaped pillar with a high level of personification at Göbekli Tepe (Notroff, 2019, p.x; used with permission granted by Notroff to re-publish the image within the framework of this paper).

Excluding the animal depictions with penises (often encountered in the Göbekli Tepe Culture; See Ayaz, 2023), the phallic themes can be examined under two categories: first of which is the erect phalli reflected in sculptures and other depictions with exaggerated penises that this study associates with initiation rites; and second is the T-shaped pillars carved deliberately in a phallic style that this study associates with ancestors. Before discussing the possibility that whether the T-shaped pillars represent phalli, it is worthwhile observing the various widespread sculptures and depictions with penises that we associate with initiation rites in the Göbekli Tepe Culture.

The phallus theme of this Neolithic region was first observed in the Kilisik Statue found by a farmer in Adıyaman province, yet its context was at the time not fully identified (Notroff, 2019). Then, this theme was again encountered in the first site of excavation of this cultural region, Nevalı Çori; Harald Hauptmann noted a stone on this site that depicted hands holding an erect penis (Hodder, 2006). Another striking phallus-depicted archaeological finding was a statue from the Neolithic settlement of Yeni Mahalle –the Urfa Man statue. This statue (Fig. 3) similarly holds a phallus (but how the statue holds it is still debated; Çelik, 2000; Hodder & Meskell, 2011). Also, the phallus theme is revealed in a very large range of depictions at the Göbekli Tepe site far beyond the scope of this study, both on human and animal depictions on the T-shaped pillars, the statues and the figurines (Köksal-Schmidt & Schmidt, 2010, p. 74; Clare et al., 2019, p. 111). One of the best depictions of the theme is a 70 cm tall sitting human statue with phallus at another Neolithic site of this area, Harbetsuvan Tepesi (Çelik, 2019, p. 28).³

³ In this sculpture there is a socket where a phallus was apparently placed. The phallus itself either has not survived or is yet to be found.



Fig. 3. Left: Urfa Man (Schmidt, 2010, Fig. 14. The Urfa Statue, Photo: Irmgard Wagner, DAI).

Right: 70 cm tall partial statue with phallus from Harbetsuvan (Çelik, 2019, Illustration 12, Photo: B. Çelik).

While the examples above are surely of importance, it can be further argued that the Karahan Tepe and Sayburç excavations have provided examples so good that the phallus depictions should be moved to the center of the study of the symbolic world of the Göbekli Tepe Culture. In addition to the statue of the man whose phallus almost extends to his knees at Karahan Tepe, there are 10 phallus-shaped pillars carved from bedrock with heights ranging from 1 m to 1.7 m in the Structure AB with a more special function (Fig. 4) (Karul, 2021). These pillars are important for understanding the place of the phallus theme in the symbolic world of this culture. Other striking examples are the two human depictions with phallus, found at the lowest step of a special building at Sayburç (Fig. 9). In one of them is the high-relief depiction of a male holding his phallus, standing between identical leopards in attack position. Although there are two predators on either side of this human depiction, one can get the impression that the central element of the depiction is the phallus. The reason for such an impression is that, unlike other depictions on the wall, this depiction of a man is a high relief, and that the phallus is in comparison exaggerated. The depiction right next to it is that of a human figure facing a bull, holding an object. There is an extending phallus of the male figure in this depiction as well, yet it is not that much obvious (Özdoğan & Uludağ, 2022). Özdoğan interpreted this object in the figure's hand as "a snake, or a rattle" (Özdoğan, 2022). However, the possibility that the object used to tease the wild ox could be the tail of another animal should not be ruled out. The placement of phallus themes on these two sites by the Neolithic people to the center of symbolic scenes within the special or most special structures may provide a clue as to which theme should be placed at the center of the interpretations of this culture. Thus, it would be appropriate to add the spatial context to the diversity and prevalence of the phallus theme as one of its signifiers of its centrality.



Fig.4. (Fig. 6. Str. AB, view from West, Karul, 2021)

How should we interpret the T-shaped pillars within special structures when considering the assumption that the central theme of the symbolic world of the Göbekli Tepe Culture is the phallus? Such interpretation is important, since these pillars within these special structures are considered the most important characteristics of this cultural world. Hands and arms that represent human body and signs of clothing and ornaments like loincloths and necklaces have given rise to the interpretations of them being stylized humans (Fig. 2) (See Dietrich et al., 2019). The first excavation team vouched for the view that these stones could be the first depiction of gods known in the minds of the early Neolithic people, or at the very least, they could be the representation of entities belonging to a transcendent sphere (Dietrich et al., 2012, p. 679; Schmidt, 2010, p. 254). The first reason for such an interpretation was that while the Neolithic people had the artistic skills sufficient to sculpt elaborate human statues on T-shaped pillars, they avoided doing so. In this cultural area containing T-shaped pillars that reflect stylized humans, there are also detailed human sculptures. The second reason for the interpretations that considered T-shaped pillars as a representation of different fields of existence was that while human statues have a natural size (life-sized or smaller), the pillars have a relatively exaggerated height when compared with the statues. This has even given rise to comments that the naturalistic human sculptures may be a protector of some kind of the T-shaped pillars, and as such, a signifier of their lower status as beings (Dietrich et al., 2019). Again, there are other interpretations that consider the T-shaped pillars as the representation of the founders of prestigious lineages and/or being related to an ancestral narrative (Jeunesse, 2020, p. 55; Kinzel & Clare, 2020, p. 44).

Hodder and Meskell (2011) have claimed that the T-shaped pillars represent humans or human form and are phallic with their long shaft and distinct glans (p. 238). When the previous data is reevaluated with the recent findings from the Göbekli Tepe cultural area, it can be argued that T-shaped pillars not only evoke phallic imagery, but also they can be the personified phalli of the ancestors, representing them (Fig. 5). The pillars and statues of this area have often been evaluated with a focus on similarities. However, the differences as well as the similarities between the statues and the pillars with anthropomorphic features are critical in interpreting this culture. The differences must have originated from an existing hierarchy between the pillars and the statues. And whereas the similarities should indicate the ontological continuity between these, their differences should be indicating different areas of existence in the mythological narrative.



Fig.5. The Structure D at Göbekli Tepe site with T-shaped pillars that we argue to be the personified phallus of the ancestor as that ancestor's representation (Clare, 2020, Photo: Lee Clare).

It can be said that there is a consensus on the argument that the anthropomorphic pillar and the statues found at Göbekli Tepe are related with “ancestors” (See Clare & Kinzel, 2020; Dietrich et al., 2019; Jeunesse, 2020). In this study, I will, too, assume that the T-shaped pillars that contain anthropomorphic themes are related with the ancestors (not excluding other persons of importance), but are not the ancestors themselves. Based on both the shape of the stones and the symbolism of the region, T-shaped pillars may represent (that ancestor's) personified phallus, in turn, representing the ancestor⁴. First, in most of the non-stylized human statues and reliefs, the body itself, except for the phallus, was sometimes rendered in proportion with natural dimensions, and sometimes smaller. From this aspect, the only organ in the Göbekli Tepe Culture that is characterized with exaggeration appears to be the phallus. At Göbekli Tepe and Harbetsuvan, phalli of statues smaller than their natural size are very distinct and exaggerated unlike other body parts. As stated above, Karahan Tepe offers perhaps the best examples of this exaggeration with phalli that reach almost the height of 1.7 m (Fig. 4). In T-shaped pillars, the situation is the opposite. Contrary to the exaggeration of phalli of human statues of natural size, no phallus has ever been detected in T-shaped pillars. Therefore, if the T-shaped pillars are already the personified phalli of the ancestors as those ancestors' representation, then it would be pointless to illustrate those stones with extra phalli. On the contrary, in realistic human statues and reliefs, the heads are depicted in detail and the phalli are exaggerated. I consider that in most cases, as I will discuss further in the paragraphs below, these depictions represent the youth of the ancestor. More precisely, it can be argued that the sculptures and depictions with phalli represent the ancestors' status during the initiation rites from which they attain their position in the ontological order (as well as the social order). In this regard, the exaggeration of the size of the T-shaped pillars must be a reflection of the exaggerated phalli within a different context.

Another important point associated with the form in the Göbekli Tepe Culture is that the depicted realistic phallus usually have a long shaft and a glans penis expanding outward from it. However, in human statues, both shoulders expand outwards with respect to the head. In contrast, in the T-shaped pillars that are the personified form of the ancestor's phallus, shoulders are either narrowed down or of equal proportion with the head. When the statues of this style have elements such as hair, beard and masks⁵, the differences between the pillars and the statues decrease; yet, in that case, the human head is narrower with respect to the lower parts of the body.

⁴ These pillars, identified as anthropomorphic due to their arms and hands, are wearing belts. At Nevalı Çori, only the figurines of male individuals are depicted wearing belts (Morsch, 2002; Becker et al. 2012).

⁵ Stone masks were common in the Göbekli Tepe Culture (See Dietrich et al., 2018, 2019).

Yet, the formal and stylistic similarity between the realistic phalli and the different versions of the T-shaped pillars can be observed in:

- 1) the unfinished stones left in the quarries of Karahan Tepe (Fig. 6/a),
- 2) the T-shaped stones in the monumental structures of Göbekli Tepe (Fig. 6/b),
- 3) and their miniature replicas (Fig. 6/c);
- 4) also, the realistic, yet exaggerated phalli, up to 1.7 m in size, found in the Structure AB of Karahan Tepe (Fig. 6/d),
- 5) and the statue at Karahan Tepe with phallus extending to its knees (Fig. 6/e).

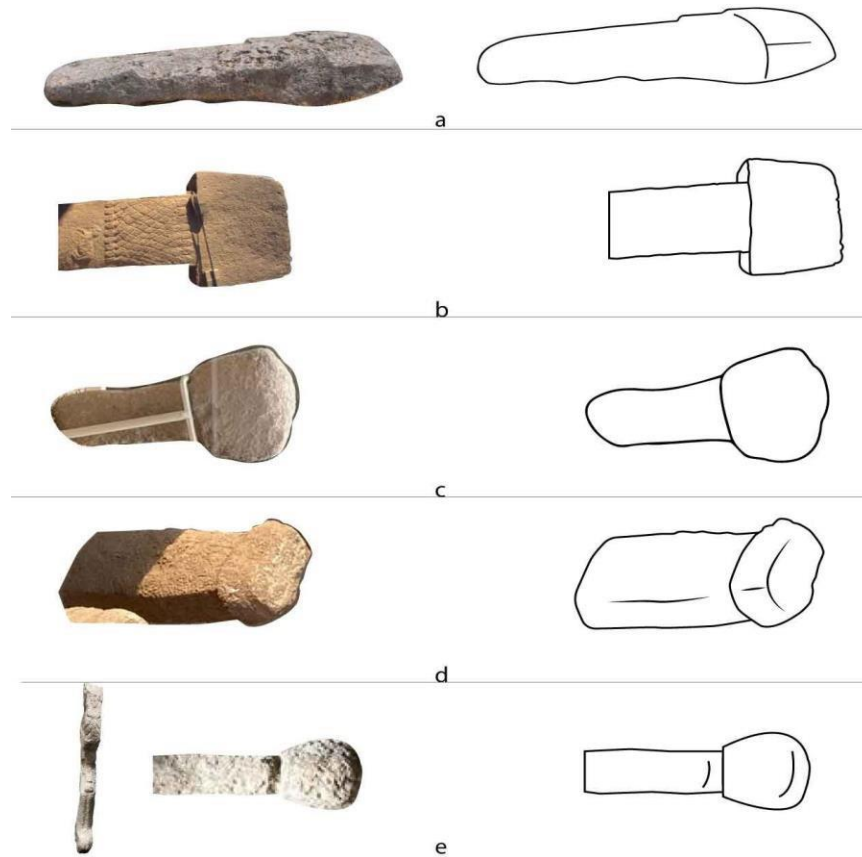


Fig 6. a) unfinished T-shaped pillar at the Karahan Tepe quarry (approximately 4.5 m high) (Çelik, 211, Fig. 6), b) Pillar 1 in Structure A at Göbekli Tepe (tilted over) (Dietrich et al., 2017, Fig. 5.10), c) A portable, small example of T-shaped pillars at Göbekli Tepe (tilted over) (Şanlıurfa Museum) d) realistic phallus about 1.7 m tall, found in the Structure AB at Karahan Tepe (tilted over) (Karul, 2021, Fig. 6), e) human statue with phallus extending almost to the knees, and the phallus depiction from the statue (Şanlıurfa Museum).

The examples in question regarding the shaft-glans relationship give the impression that during the stone-cutting process the very same theme was intended. As a result, it can be argued that the T-shaped pillars represent neither any particular human nor a realistic phallus that can be attributed to humans. This is the case, since when the Neolithic stone-cutters desired so, they represented both in a clear and an elaborate manner. The realistic phalli (Fig. 6/d) that reach the height of 1.7 m inside the Structure AB at Karahan Tepe, and the distinct human facial expressions rendered in reliefs and sculptures (Fig. 3, Fig.9) demonstrate this clearly. In this sense, the T-shaped pillars must have stood for a different category of entities: as a personified form of the ancestor's phallus that in turn represents the ancestor. The "entity" in question (as it will be defined further in the paragraph below) must have been the aspect/part of the ancestor left in this world. As it will be discussed below, in this culture, the personal integrity is fragmented upon death.

Based on symbols, too, we can deduce the interpretation that phalli are important in this culture and that the T-shaped pillars are the phallus of the ancestor, representing the ancestor. There is a symbolic narrative on T-shaped pillar 43 in Structure D of Göbekli Tepe (Fig. 7) (Schmidt, 2006a). In this narrative, there is the depiction of a decapitated body while its phallus is erect, accompanied by certain animal depictions at the body of the pillar; and at the head of the pillar, a head is depicted to be rising upwards above a wing of a vulture. Under natural conditions, a person whose head is separated from his

body should not remain ithyphallic (Clare et al., 2019). In a culture with such an advanced symbolism, the depiction of the penis in this state must have had a symbolic meaning. While Clare et al. (2019, p. 117) associate this landscape with a scene of human sacrifice or take it as a sign of male virility and social dominance, two new interpretations are available when the phallus theme is centralized. First of all, on the basis of ancestral cult, the theme of the head should be representing the aspect of the ancestor/ancestors moving away from themselves, and the phallus, as an organ that is their *raison d'être* and as an organ “born” through their reproduction, should be representing what remains of the ancestor/ancestors. At the same time, the phalli of the ancestor can also be said to represent the embodiment of the social group that descended/gained existence from that ancestor. In other words, the T-shaped pillars (in my view, the personified phalli of the ancestors) also functioned like a cement that provided that group’s unity (Banning, 2011; Clare et al., 2019, p. 105; Jeunesse, 2020), all the while having a critical position in the mythological narrative. Due to the fact that the pillars in question are adorned with necklaces, belts and loincloths (Fig. 2), they must be the expression of the personification of the phallus of the ancestor. While in some pillars the level of personification is high, it is very low in others.⁶

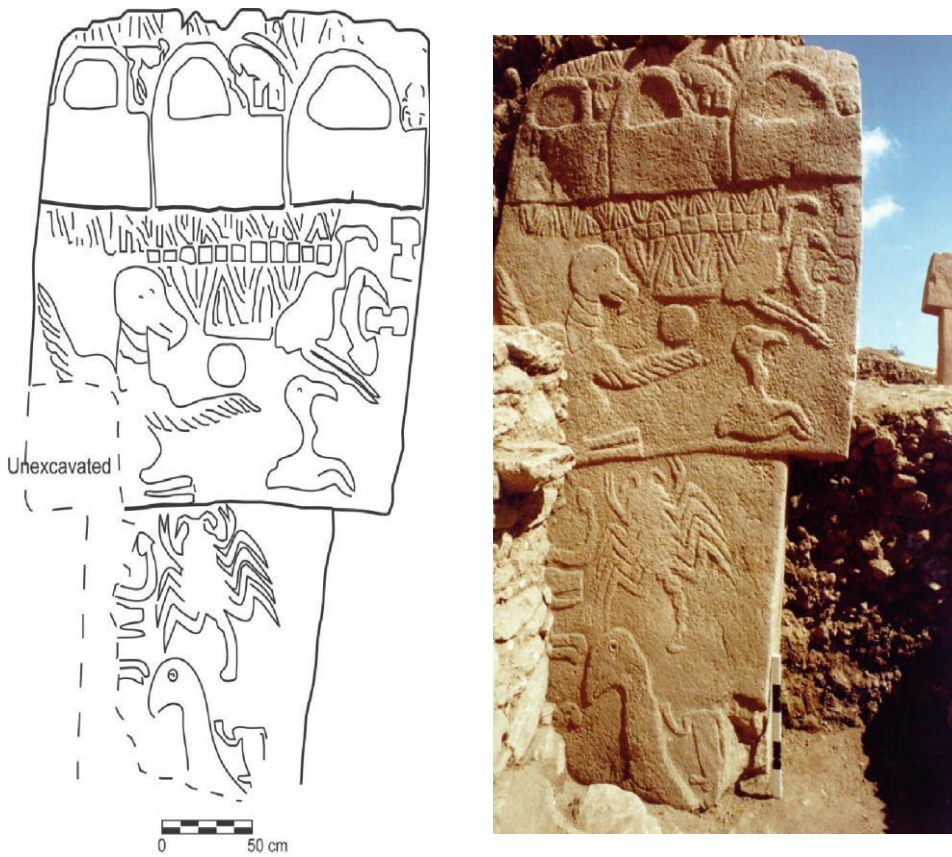


Fig 7. Left: Fig 5. The illustration of relief on pillar 43 in Structure D (Banning, 2011).

Right: (Dietrich et al., 2017, Pillar 43 in Enclosure D, (© DAI, Photo K. Schmidt)

One of the most important proofs that supports this thesis is the pits at Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe. These pits appear to have been opened on the floor of the “special structures” with T-shaped pillars, and then closed with terrazzo plaster (Karul, 2022a). On our last field trip with him, the head of the excavation of Karahan Tepe, Necmi Karul testified that they have recovered a piece of human bone from one of these pits dug during Neolithic period and covered with stone (Necmi Karul, personal interview). It is possible that these special structures represent the ancestor/ancestors of this communal group. Therefore, this/these ancestor/ancestors could have exhumed from time to time for rituals.⁷ The discovery of the sub-floor burials of important people in these “special structures” further sheds light on the issue. This can also be interpreted as the personal integrity of the ancestor/ancestors is fragmented with death, and the parts began to exist in different “worlds”.

⁶ In one example regarding how the mechanism worked in reverse in Neolithic cultures, the male figure is equated with an erect phallus. In this sense, the rock drawings of the Baikal region have a phallic character. Male figures are depicted with an erect phallus (Hoppal, 2021, p. 56).

⁷ The possibility that with time, through certain rituals, some of the persons buried here could have been replaced with others (of higher importance) should not be ruled out.

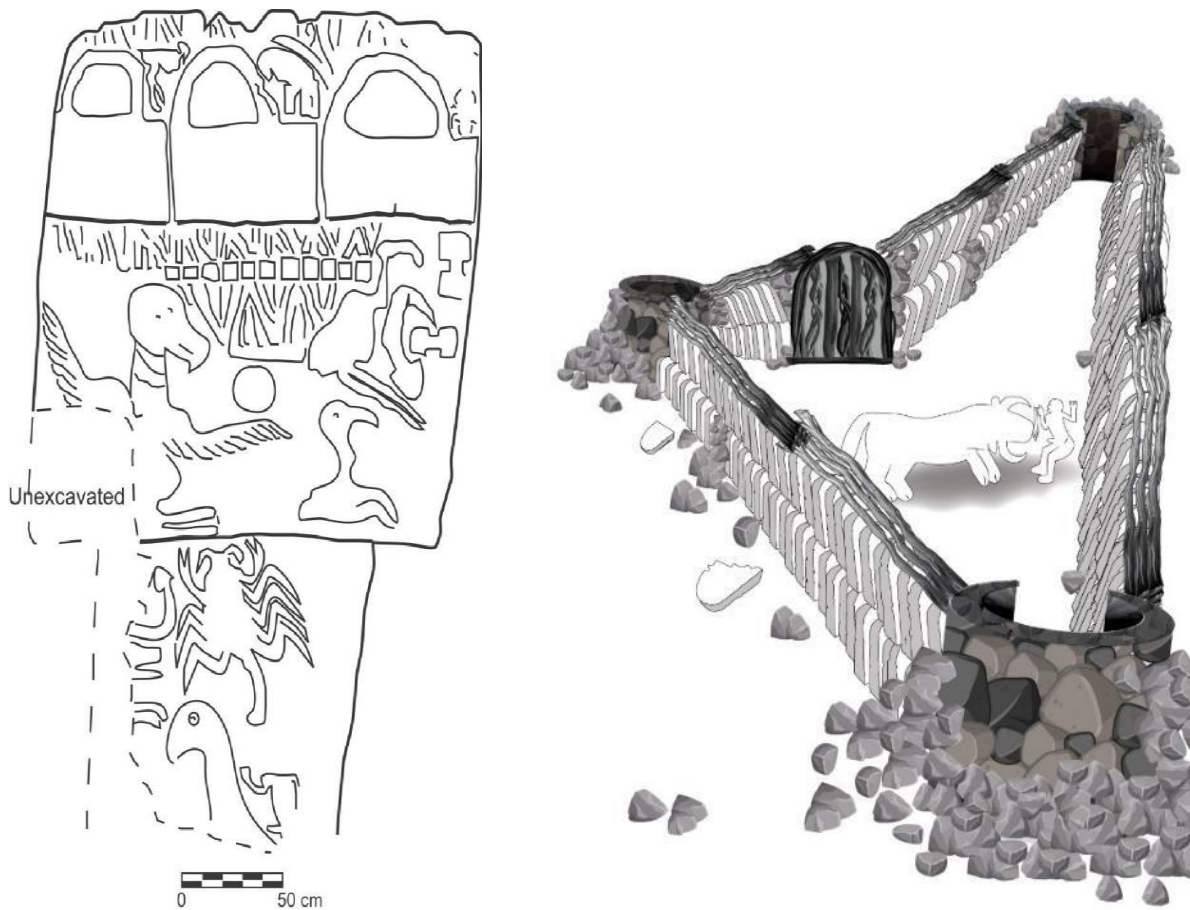


Fig. 8. Left: Fig. 5. The illustration of relief on pillar 43 in structure D (Banning, 2011).

Right: The illustration of the enclosed area of the Sarpdere Entrapment Area to the South of Karahan Tepe (For Map See Çelik & Ayaz, 2022, Picture 1) with added illustration of the relief on the Sayburç wall.

The second interpretation can be based on other data and symbols of this Neolithic cultural area. The dense animal entrapment areas in the vicinity of the Neolithic sites in the Göbekli Tepe Culture area, which have been neglected until now, provide a very critical piece of data for the interpretation of this culture. Judging by the robustness of these entrapment areas, it is possible to assume that powerful animals, such as wild oxen, were trapped there, where some of them were immediately hunted, while others were kept waiting (Çelik & Ayaz, 2022; Ayaz, 2023; Çelik & Tolon, 2018). In this context, the depiction on the wall at Sayburç evokes the image of an adolescent in an initiation rite that demands to fight a wild bull naked (Fig. 8, Fig. 9) (See Hoppal, 2021, p. 85). The narrative on the T-shaped pillar 43 in Structure D also suggests the possibility that the adolescents in such rituals might get killed by animals. Nevertheless, both of these interpretations allow for a narrative in which the personal integrity is fragmented by death. In addition, this can also imply that while a part of the body, the head, is taken to “another world” with psychopomp animals, the parts that remain, the body with a prominent phallus stay in “this world”.

Right next to the above mentioned depiction of the bull-facing human is the high relief of a human with a phallus, whose status seems to have been reinforced by the leopards standing next to that human (Fig. 9). This high relief must have represented the youth of the ancestors when they acquired their status (and thus, their critical place in the origin mythology as their phallus became functional). The reason for this must be related with the victory of the ancestors in the initiation rites that qualified them as important people, as in the examples from ethnography, in which those who are successful following hardships of an initiation rite can rise to leading positions in a society (Hoppal, 2021, p. 87). It is possible to evaluate similar human depictions in this cultural region in this context. The best examples of this can be seen in the Urfa Man at Yeni Mahalle, in the depiction with phallus at Sayburç, and in the statue that is missing a head, but with a phallus, at Harbetsuvan. They are naked except for their V-shaped mantle and their phalli are exaggerated in the depictions.



Fig. 9. The reliefs within the special structure AA at Sayburç (E. Özdoğan & Uludağ, 2022), (Photo: Bekir Köşker, *Journal of Archaeology and Art*, Back Cover Photo).

It is possible to claim that initiation rites that can be associated with phallus sculptures and depictions were performed in different manners in this Neolithic cultural region. However, just based on the scene depicted at Sayburç, it can be argued that these rituals were quite challenging. As in the initiation rites of especially Ancient Mesopotamia, these ordeals not only prepared a person for life and granted new status, but also acted as a purification process in which the evil demons hidden in the body of that person were expelled via blood, sweat and saliva flowing from that person's body during this demanding process (See Demirci, 2013, p. 51). As it will be discussed below, the inhabitants of Göbekli Tepe Culture might have also undergone an ontological transformation through a similar process. Hence, an adolescent who has successfully emerged from this ritual might have revealed that his penis is functional –indicating he has achieved his place in the ontological chain– with his first masturbation, again in accompaniment of rituals (for a similar interpretation of the Kilisik statue, See Hodder & Mesckell, 2011, p. 238). In this context, considering that the only female depiction found in this cultural region possesses a pornographic character (See Schmidt, 2006b; Hodder & Mesckell, 2011), the possibility that these depictions were used in male initiation rites gains weight (Fig. 10).

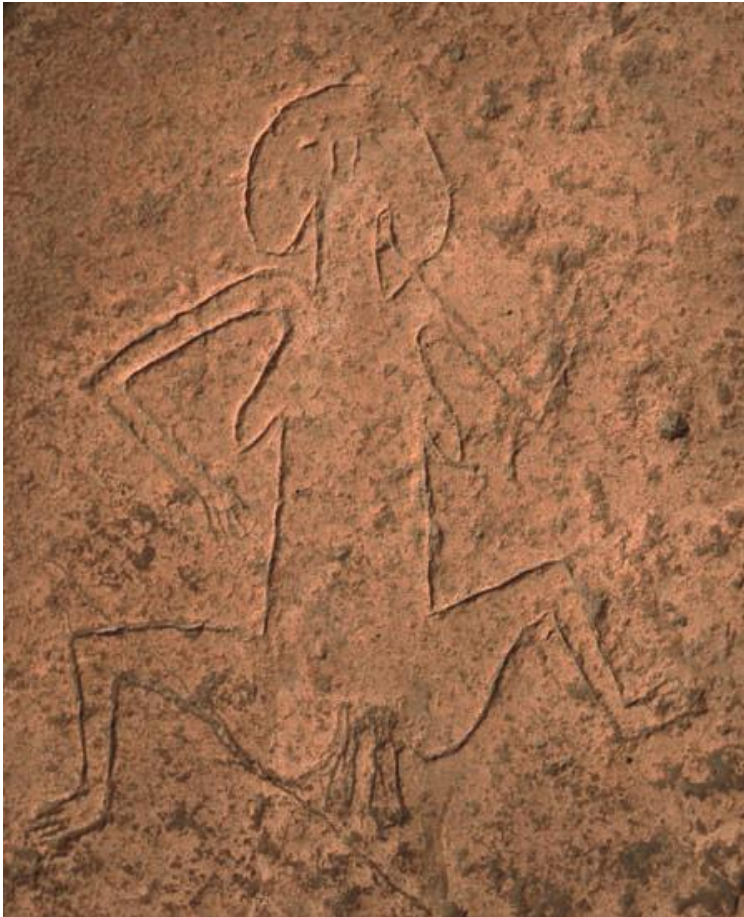


Fig. 10. (Schmidt, 2010, p. 246, Fig. 13. Göbekli Tepe, engraving of a female person from layer II (foto Dieter Johannes, DAI).

As Sütterlin & Eibl-Eibesfeldt (2013) state, cultural memory is the result of a very selective process, “[n]ot everything that happens finds its memorial form in stone or bronze” (p. 42). From this aspect, since the phallus theme in the Göbekli Tepe Culture had infused into a network of significance far beyond sexual motivations and had become one of the most important elements of the mythological narrative, it must have turned out to be such a common and central theme among the material tools for representation (See Milićević-Bradač, 2005, p. 188). Indeed, for Eliade (1991), sexuality (except for modernity) “has everywhere and always been a hierophany” –a manifestation of the sacred (p. 23). However, sexual themes have often interpreted as indicators of a fertility cult and an indication of male power (Hoppal, 2021, p. 56; Kramer, 2014, p. 295; Bottéro, 2020, p. 145). In the culture of Göbekli Tepe, the theme of the phallus can be said to have appeared as an important part of an aetiological myth in order to provide explanations for the existence of the persons themselves, alongside fertility and power.

Conclusion: An Attempt to Construct an Aetiological Mythos

There is a wide repertoire of depictions of humans grasping their phallus, and in this study, they are associated with initiation rites. However, while at some sites only a fraction of these depictions has survived (as at Nevalı Çori), at others they have been partially destroyed or their spatial context has been lost altogether (i.e. Yeni Mahalle statue, the Harbetsuvan statue, the statue with a phallus and a leopard on its back at Göbekli Tepe, and “the Totem Pole” at Göbekli Tepe). Nevertheless, there remains data that allows us to evaluate whether there existed an origin myth. In Ancient Mesopotamia, the special, divine knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. However, only those who were initiated could pass on this knowledge (Toorn, 2007, p. 26; Demirci, 2013, p. 15). In this study, I argue that the initiation rites in the Göbekli Tepe Culture were not just about the transfer/transformation of “knowledge” as it was in Ancient Mesopotamia, but about the transfer/transformation of “being”.

The critical question here is this: Which being was considered the origin while a person was taking their due place in the ontological order through initiation rites? The people of the Göbekli Tepe Culture seem to have have “mitigate[d] [the] shocking logic” by explaining their origins, or more precisely, from whence/how they came from via an origin myth based on an ancestor cult. And thus, a person whose penis became legitimately functional through initiation rites transforms into a link that connects with the chain of “being” formed by the chain of ancestors before that person. As in the case of Sayburç, given the fact that this ritual scene is associated with special structures that contain the phallic T-shaped pillars that possibly represent the remaining part of the ancestor in “this world,” this association must also have some meaning within this context. Based on Sayburç and Karahantepe, whose spatial context is relatively intact, it can be argued that taking due place in the ontological order might have occurred in special structures that hold the representations of the ancestor/ancestors in this world. However, there is also a confusing situation: animals accompany the anthropomorphic beings in these statues and depiction is associated with initiation rites. As a matter of fact, there are only animals in some scenes. This brings to mind the possibility that the ultimate origin, as in the case of “the Totem Pole” at Göbekli Tepe, was an animal –just it was among the Australian aborigines. However, in the wall depiction with a leopard at Sayburç, in the statue with a phallus and a leopard on its back at Göbekli Tepe (Clare et al., 2019, p. 11) and in the composite sculptures with leopards at Karahantepe (Karul, 2022a, p. 5), the leopard seems to have taken on the role of a guardian/psychopomp animal accompanying the transformation, rather than being the originating entity. Nevertheless, as it was in the narratives of the leopard at Çatalhöyük (Hodder, 2006), the leopard is not the sole protagonist of such rituals. Considering the composite sculptures at Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori (Schmidt, 2006b), other animals might have also accompanied this transfer/journey/transformation.

In this narrative, when the animals are placed into a secondary position as guardians/psychopomps, it might be argued that the anthropomorphic being holding a phallus originated/sprung from another anthropomorphic being and that there is a hierarchy of existence among these two anthropomorphic beings. It would be best to repeat that there exists a hierarchy among these anthropomorphic beings (or composite statues that have anthropomorphic themes) that have similar appearances. This hierarchy can be said to extend from the nearest known point of origin to the most obscure and distant fictional origin. The two best examples that give the impression that one thing is born out/product of/descended from the other are the “totem pole” at Göbekli Tepe and the Kilisik statue (Fig.11). The totem pole found at Göbekli Tepe has an animal standing on the very top, above two human heads, one of which is partially destroyed. The bottom-head gives the impression that it is holding the phallus of the body (See also Köksal-Schmidt & Schmidt, 2010) –a recurring theme in the Göbekli Tepe Culture. Similarly, the Kilisik statue is the depiction of a man holding the head of a man who, in turn, is holding the phallus⁸.

Despite the differences between these two findings, it is possible to observe a pattern: the lowest and relatively smallest human depictions seem to be holding their phallus, giving the impression that these persons with phallus are given existence

⁸ According to Hodder and Meskell (2011, 238), the socket on the underside of the Kilisik statue must have been made for a removable phallus.

by those holding these persons' heads. Therefore, it is possible to claim that there is an aetiological link in these human depictions, formed between the beings above and the person below holding phallus. Here, it can be said that the anthropomorphic being that grasps its phallus, through an initiation rite and possibly accompanied by a shamanic experience, is in a process of inheriting the ontological legacy from the previous closest ancestor.

It is possible to claim that when the humans of this period were asked "Where do I come from?", they replied with the answer, "From the phallus of my ancestor." However, it is possible to understand from the totem pole and the Kilisik statue that they did not cut this chain of causality at the first ancestor. It can be inferred from the totem pole that they trace back in mythological order to two anthropomorphic entities: from the head holding phallus, which came from the loins of the head above it, which seemingly descends from the animal holding its head (Köksal-Schmidt & Schmidt, 2010). In this context, the totem pole in question can be considered as a sort of "genealogy tree". Consequently, the figure at the bottom, the head figure holding the phallus must represent the closest generation of ancestors.



Fig. 11. Left: A "totem pole" from Göbekli Tepe, excavated in October 2010 (Photo: Nico Becker, DAI, Schmidt, 2010).

Right: The forefront of the Kilisik statue: A phallus considered to be attached to the socket during certain rituals has not reached the present (Notroff, 2019, Images: Archäologisches Museum der WWU Münster, CC BY-NC-SA 4).

The next question is where this causality ends. In Ancient Mesopotamian mythology, the ultimate source of humans was the divine beings in the sky. As mentioned above, for Australian natives, in most cases, the ultimate source would end up with an animal. For the time being, the chain of causality can be limited to real and/or imaginary persons whose status are enhanced with certain animal motifs, based on the Kilisik statue and the "totem pole" at Göbekli Tepe.

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Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı

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Yazarların Makaleye Katkı Oranları

Makale tek yazarlı olarak hazırlanmıştır.

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