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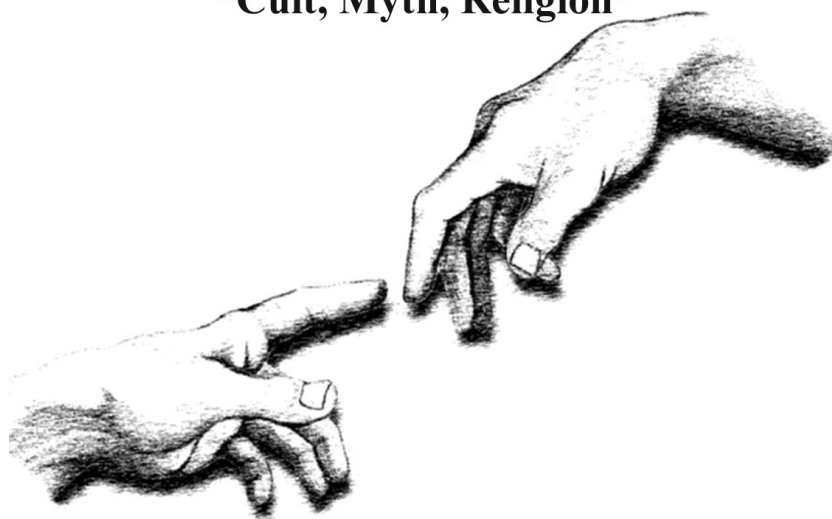
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**V<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Archaeology  
“Cult, Myth, Religion”**



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# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A MYTH: DECODING GÖBEKLI TEPE'S ICONOGRAPHY

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## **Key words:**

PPN; Göbekli Tepe; flood; myth; iconography.

## **Abstract**

Situated in the northern part of the Upper Mesopotamia, Göbekli Tepe represents one of the largest early PPN sites in the region. A reference to the disastrous inundations of the Euphrates River and its tributaries seems to have been recorded in the iconography of Göbekli Tepe's enclosures. The bas-reliefs of Enclosure D show an event similar to the one described in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, illustrating with zoomorphic images the different stages of a flood. By comparing this visual story with the Sumerian text, one can imagine the complexity of the mythology of the PPN populations of the Near East.

## **INTRODUCTION: THE MYTH OF THE FLOOD – AN ARCHETYPE**

Water is one of the archetypal elements of all mythologies, and one of its avatars is the flood. I will try to prove that, for the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) hunter-gatherer populations, water was not only a subsistence element, but also a spiritual one, holding an important place in the mythology of these populations (see also Gheorghiu 2018, p. 37).

The myth of the Flood is also an archetypal phenomenon, one of the humanity's most widespread myths, and attested in many cultures (Eliade 1977). It is a description of a catastrophic event that has happened many times in the history of mankind and has been orally transmitted in the form of stories. The myth "anchors the present in the past" (Merolla and Schipper 2009, p. 3), and this is done by establishing a dramatically significant series of events (Cohen 1969, p. 349-350).

In the Near East it appears in the Sumerian clay tablets of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (3rd

millennium BC), as a catastrophic event that occurred in Western Asia. This text is considered to be one of the earliest versions of the Biblical flood, describing a calamitous inundation, probably related to the overflows of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which has been preserved in the memory of the local populations.

The question is: can the memory of such a pan-cultural event also be identified in the prehistoric period in the absence of written evidence? Can an archaeology of the Flood myth in the prehistory of the Near East societies be possible? This implies the identification of coherent visual narratives, with direct references to the effects of the flood phenomenon.

The present paper attempts to interpret some visual narratives from the PPN phase A period, from the Tigris-Euphrates region, that seem to have the same meaning as the historical texts about the flood mentioned above.



## THE NATURAL CONTEXT OF THE MYTH

It is well known that in the alluvial lowlands of the Tigris - Euphrates region, which is the area of the origins of civilization (Adams 1981), annual overflows with sometimes catastrophic effects were a current risk phenomenon for the extremely large number of prehistoric settlements built on the alluvium (Pournelle 2003, p. 8, 9).

For life in the Tigris Valley during the PPN period, flood was a certainty; to cite only the Sumaki Höyük site, which is a case of repeated flooding, from PPN phase A to the Pottery Neolithic (see Erim-Özdoğan 2011, p. 24-25).

In the PPN phase A Levant, a strategy against flooding seems to have been the development of monumental architecture. As an example, the encircling wall of the PPN phase A Jericho tower (Kenyon 1981, p. 209) "must have contributed to solving problems caused by mud flows and flash floods" (Naveh 2003, p. 92), among performing other functions, such as astronomical (Liran and Barkai 2011; Barkai and Liran 2008) or social (Naveh 2003, p. 90).

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE MYTH

In the Near East, for the populations of hunter-gatherers, PPN represented a period of cultural transformation (Cauvin 2000; Kuijt and Goring-Morris 2002; Matthews 2003), due to a new relationship with their environment (Herva *et al.* 2014), the hunters becoming farmers (Matthews 2004, p. 67 ff). It is possible to deduce the cultural complexity of the period and the sophistication of the material culture from the emergence of a public monumental architecture that represented an index of a high activity of coordination and socialization (Twiss 2008, p. 419-426; Dietrich *et al.* 2017, p. 117), as well as from the use of the science of geometry, and the creation of realistic zoomorphic and anthropomorphic sculptures, which are an index of the existence of a complex spiritual life (see Cauvin 2001).

Living in proximity to the Tigris-Euphrates river system with its irregular flooding events, meant living with a state of risk that certainly influenced local cultures, as demonstrated by the mythology of historical Mesopotamia (Fiala 2005, p. 431). How have these extreme phenomena of nature been perceived in pre-history? Did the People of PPN create a Flood Story?

It is this author's view that the reference to these disastrous inundations seems to have been recorded in the form of a mythical story in the iconography of the PPN phase A Göbekli Tepe's symbolic (Turek 2017) enclosures, dated to the 12th millennium BC.

## GÖBEKLI TEPE: THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2010; 2011a; 2011b) is one of the largest early PPN sites in the region (Çelik 2016, p. 361), located in the northern part of the fertile crescent in Upper Mesopotamia, near the Balich River and the Culat Suyu river in the Euphrates River basin in Southeastern Anatolia.

Compared with the enormous Euphrates-Tigris spring water flow that happens between March and May<sup>1</sup>, the Balikh River flow is smaller during the same period, as well as the Culap Suyu River with "a wider dry period from April to December" (Aksoy 2004, p. 1089), so Göbekli Tepe did not experience hydrological catastrophic events in the past, especially because it is located on a huge hill (Schmidt 2011b, p. 41).

## GÖBEKLI TEPE: THE ENCLOSURES

The early phase of monumental building was dated between PPN phase A (layer III) and early PPN phase B (layer II) (Schmidt 2011b, p. 42).

The enclosures of layer are circular monumental structures with T-shaped monolithic pillars connected to the stone walls, representing "a huge amount of labor" (Schmidt 2011b, p. 42-3).

Osteological remains indicate the use of enclosures for large feasts (Dietrich *et al.*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oocities.org/timesquare/labyrinth/2398/bginfo/geo/euphrates.html>

2012; 2017), probably funerary (Notroff *et al.* 2015), or perhaps in relation to the construction process, which required long-term coordination of a great number of people (see Hayden's [1995] model for domestication).

The largest and better preserved circular structure is Enclosure D, whose T-shaped pillars feature a diverse zoomorphic iconography (see Schmidt 2011b, p. 45-6) in alto-relief on the side and the narrow sides.

Two poles of 5.5 m high, centrally positioned, exhibit anthropomorphic traits, and are fixed to stone slabs. The belts of these anthropomorphic entities have H-shaped buckles that are also found on some of the perimeter T-shaped pillars decorated with zoomorphic images.

### GÖBEKLI TEPE: THE ICONOGRAPHY

This paper will discuss only the iconography of some of the zoomorphic images in Enclosure D that are related to water symbolism.

The animals represented (Peters and Schmidt 2004; Peters *et al.* 2014) belong to both the terrestrial and the aquatic environment. If in the case of some of them the iconographic images and the osteological remains allowed for an easy identification (Peters and Schmidt 2004; Peters *et al.* 2014), in the case of "snake-like creatures" or "spiders" the images require an analysis in the local natural context. Peters and Schmidt (2004, p. 183) consider the elongated animals to be vipers, although they are presented in dense groups, which are specific to fish congregations during the spring spawning, rather than to snakes (Gheorghiu 2015, p. 67; Gheorghiu 2018, p. 26). One can see that two different species of fish were represented, because of the differences in the proportion of the body and the head. The first species, with the serpent-like body "could belong to the family Anguillidae, such as the Mesopotamian spiny eel *Mastacembelus mastacembelus* (common names: Marmahi = snake fish, marmahi-ye khardar, Coad 2015, p. 2), which lives in the south-east of Anatolia (Olgunoğlu 2011;

Gumus *et al.* 2010; Dağlı and Erdemli 2009; Çakmak and Alp 2010), and can reach almost a meter in length" (Gheorghiu 2018, p. 26). Fish groups may suggest schools of fish, or late spring mass migrations (Charvát 2005), specific to the Euphrates River. (fig. 1)

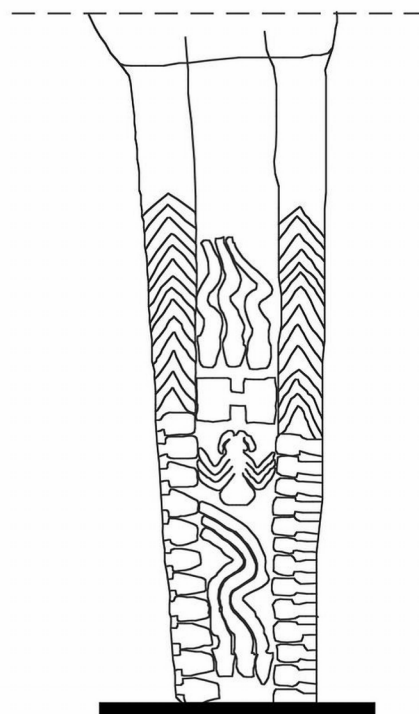


Fig. 1: A group of Anguillidae and a crayfish, Pillar 33. (Gheorghiu 2018)

The second species is represented by "animals with a short body and large triangular heads [that] could represent the catfish *Silurus triostegus* (whose osteological remains were found on the site, see Peters and Schmidt 2004, p. 206) with the cranium triangular in shape (Ünlü *et al.* 2012, p. 121), which lives only in the Euphrates and Tigris basins (Ünlü and Bozkurt 1996; Coad and Holcik 2000), [and] whose dimensions could reach up to 1 m long, too" Gheorghiu 2018, p. 26). (fig. 2)

The fish of the first species are represented swimming in compact groups, while the second species are solitary. Both species are necrophagic.

As for the animal identified by Schmidt (2012, p. 177 ff.) on Pillar 33 as being a spider, "with a short thorax, bent feet turned upward in a V-shape form, and with bowed antennae positioned along the body, walking in the opposite direction to the fish" (Gheorghiu 2018, p. 69; Gheorghiu 2018, p. 27), its posi-

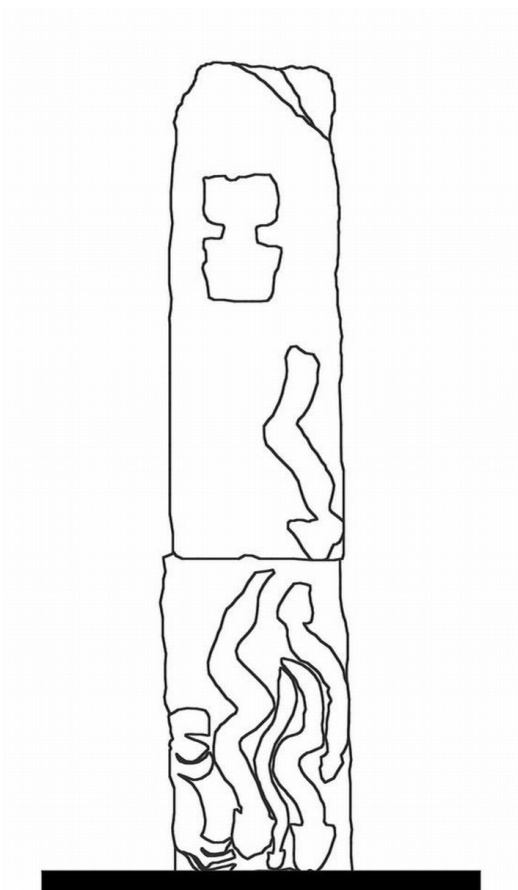


Fig. 2: Catfish and eel swimming along a drowned small mammal, Pillar 30 (Gheorghiu 2018)

tion in relation to the Anguillidae suggests an aquatic animal, probably the “narrow-clawed crayfish” (*Astacus leptodactylus*), a native species in Turkey (Harlioglu and Güner 2006). The undifferentiated length of the chelae and feet could indicate a female *Astacus*, (Romaine *et al.* 1977), or a young crayfish with no developed chelae (Balik *et al.* 2005, p. 298)” (Gheorghiu 2018, p. 27). (fig. 1) These necrophagic arthropods present on Pillars 33 and 43 are represented as solitary animals as well.

The chevron pattern that surrounds the scene with anguilliform fishes, on Pillar 33, can be interpreted as representing the shape of waves produced by the flow of flowing water (Gheorghiu 2015; 2018). (fig. 3)

## INTERPRETATION OF THE ICONOGRAPHY: ILLUSTRATION OF A CATASTROPHIC EVENT

If we accept the idea of topo-semiotics in the Engraving D iconography, respectively that the animals are the indexes of the ecotones



Fig. 3: The shape of waves produced by the flow of flowing water

in which they live, and thus indicate certain types of landscapes of the environment of the hunter-gatherers, in this case three paradoxical situations appear on Pillars 20, 30, and 43, in which aquatic animals are placed in relation to terrestrial animals. Here the terrestrial animals are presented in a lateral position, as if floating on the surface of a water.

So, on Pillar 20, a bovid viewed from the side is facing a catfish (fig. 4), a scene that repeats on Pillar 30, in which a mammal, viewed from the side, is positioned alongside a group of Anguillidae and catfish. (fig. 2) The scene on pillar 43, in which a feline viewed from the side is facing crayfish (fig. 5), has a similar meaning to the ones mentioned previously.

Such situations would have been possible only in the case of catastrophic events, such as those created by floods, when drowning animals were devoured by catfish, eels and crayfish. The iconography of these pillars depicts probably one of the oldest narratives of a flood, in which the natural events were chronologically marked: after the catastrophic period of flooding a period of calm waters follows, allowing for the spawning of the fish and the hatching of the crayfish.

The enclosures' iconography is very complex and encompasses different levels of meaning. An example would be the H-shaped pattern on the belt of the anthropomorphic pillars, which also appears in the zoomorphic compositions (fig. 2). One can infer that the belt pattern could be an index of anthropomorphism for these pillars too, representing the natural events in the form of anthropomorphic entities.





Fig. 4: A drowned bovid facing a catfish, Pillar 20 (Gheorghiu 2018)

## CONCLUSIONS: ILLUSTRATION OF A MYTH

In the Sumerian texts on the Flood, the event is reported as the result of the action of various divinities:

“Just as the dawn began to glow there, it rose from the horizon and the black cloud. Adad rumbled inside of it, before him went Shullat and Hanish, heralds going over the mountain and land.

Erragal pulled out the mooring poles, went Ninurta and made the dikes overflow.

The Anunnaki lifted up the torches, setting the land ablaze with their flare.

Stunned shock over Adad’s deeds overtook the heavens and turned to blackness all that had been light” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* 1989, p. 45).

Without minimizing the shamanic character of the monuments at Göbekli Tepe (see Hauptmann 2011, p. 98; Schmidt 2012, p. 205; Gheorghiu 2018), it can be said that elements of an emerging religion can be identified here, whose characters can be identified in later historical periods. The ritual behaviour of large groups of people, even if of shamanic nature, is an index of the emergence of religious behaviour (see Rappaport 1999) and of

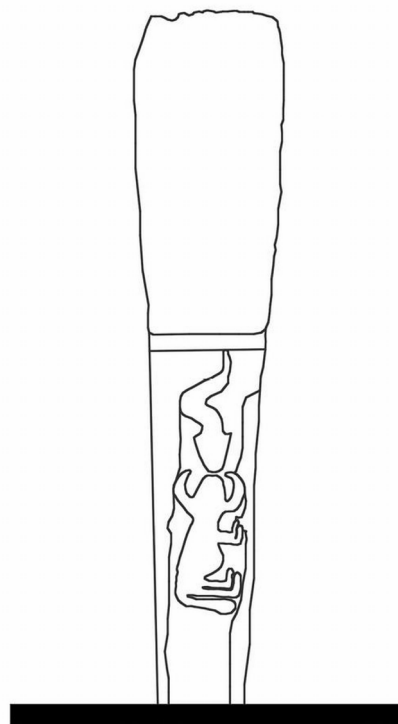


Fig. 5: A drowned feline facing cray fish, Pillar 43 (after Gheorghiu 2015)

a new perception of the sacred (Dietrich and Notroff 2015).

In this perspective, one can perceive the architectural structure of Enclosure D as representing an image of a PPN pantheon with two important divinities, centrally positioned and with a set of minor divinities, positioned around them, on which is displayed the zoomorphic iconography that would explain their sacred function.

The Flood event described in Enclosure D, which may have been the result of a collective trauma, and the anthropomorphic entities, some of which are responsible for the catastrophic aquatic events, seem to be a variant of the Flood story of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and could create an image of the complexity of the mythology of the early Pre-Pottery Neolithic populations of the Near East.

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