

# I **Materializing the Human Body**

## *The Cult of the Ancestors among Ancient Near Eastern Societies*

### INTRODUCTION

At the end of the nineteenth century, one of the fathers of modern anthropology, Edward Tylor, argued that religion is a “belief in spiritual beings” and it is this belief that creates the foundation of religiosity in every single society. This perspective is based on a direct connection between the soul (or spirit) of the deceased and the belief that the human soul survives the physical death and decay of the body in order to become part of a broader spiritual world that is embedded in the natural world surrounding us (i.e., animism) (Kopytoff 1971). According to Tylor’s seminal perspective, among “primitive cultures” it is possible to distinguish between a more basic and general belief in the soul of the deceased that serves the purpose of a “continued existence after the death or destruction of the body” and more complex forms of belief in spiritual beings “upward to the rank of powerful deities” (Tylor 2016, I: 426). For him, spiritual beings are those immaterial entities that “affect or control the events of the material world, and man’s life here and hereafter” (Tylor 2016, I: 426). Thus, animism represents a development of natural religion in which the materiality of dead spirits is reconnected with the natural world through the means of other human beings, animals, plants, or things (Fortes 1987).

Émile Durkheim (1995: 60–61), the father of modern sociology, also understood the fundamental importance of the worship of ancestral spirits in framing human religiosity. In particular, he focused on the association between ancestor cults and the feasts that were regularly celebrated to honor the dead persons who become the object of a cult after they die (i.e., they acquire a divine role within the world of the living).

More recently, the interpretation of the fundamental role played by ancestors among ancient and ethnographically known societies has been increasingly applied in order to search for the “universality of ancestor worship” in framing human religiosity (Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996). Within this epistemological framework, scholars have attempted to define a semantic distinction between “worship” (i.e., linked *strictu sensu* with the religious dimension and beliefs of a given society) and a “cult” (i.e., linked to ritual practices associated with the remembrance of selected dead) of the ancestors (Insoll 2011b: 1043).

Even though it is very difficult to identify such a distinction when dealing with the relics of ancient societies, and we should envision the complex relationship between ancient material culture and a unitary perspective on the spiritual force of the ancestors (i.e., animism), research directed toward identifying ancestor worship has intensified in the field of archaeology over the last decades because it is now easier to identify traces of ancient ritual practices enacted near tombs or ancestral shrines. Also, written texts can lead scholars toward a clear interpretation of the role played by ancestors in ancient religious beliefs. The increasing interest in this type of research has stimulated the production of numerous studies (e.g., Antonaccio 1995; Barrett 1988; Fowler 1996; Insoll 2001, 2004, 2011c; Jonker 1995; Liu 1999; McAnany 1995; Morris 1991) that, in certain cases, have overemphasized the role of ancestors among ancient communities without clarifying when we are entitled to affirm the existence of a cult of the ancestors in archaeological contexts. It is for this reason that James Whitley (2002: 119) stated that “there are too many ancestors in contemporary archaeological investigation, and they are being asked to do too much.” Although this statement is correctly posed and has rightly criticized a recent trend in archaeology, we cannot reduce the active role played by ancestors in framing the social organization of ancient societies. In addition, historical sources are clearly informing us on the existence of such cults and, consequently, scholars interested in the interpretation of ancient societies should

fine-tune research strategies in order to more clearly define traces of ancestor cults among ancient communities (Fowler 2021).

However, scholars should keep in mind the complexity of the term “ancestral veneration” as part of a cognitive process that establishes forms of religious experiences in which human skeleton remains are not the only elements to be taken into consideration. Because, as pointed out by Mithen (2004: 34–35), certain types of ancestor cults (i.e., those linked to the physical remains of the dead) appear to have been embedded on a familial dimension (i.e., genealogical memories); whereas, as mentioned before, a proper *ancestor worship* is part of a more complex system of religiosity that is not necessarily linked to the locale in which selected dead individuals are disposed, but more often is embedded in dogmatic forms of relationships with the numinous.

The transformation of the system of ancestral veneration among ancient societies (i.e., from the cult of the dead to the veneration of a divine figure) complicates the archaeologist’s task of defining ancestral veneration using solely the archaeological record. In numerous ancient societies, scholars face the presence of ancestral figures that transcend the traditional role of ancestors in the *collective memory* of a given community in order to become a fundamental step in the process of framing the *historical memory* and religiosity of the whole society. For example, it is through the creation of sanctuaries dedicated to the “cult of heroic figures” that social structure is framed in ancient Greek societies (Antonaccio 1995). Such a differentiation between types of mnemonic transmission among human groups has already been envisioned by Jan Assmann (2006: 48–56) when he distinguished between a “cultural” (i.e., historical) and a “communicative” (i.e., collective) kind of memory. The second type is a form of memory that was established and passed on within generations of families through the use of oral anecdotes and other forms of social interactions (Jonker 1995: 188). It is within this act of remembrance that ancestors came to play a preeminent role in the religious dimension of the family (Bloch 1994).

MANIPULATING SKULLS AND THE WORSHIP OF ANCESTORS  
IN THE PREHISTORIC NEAR EAST

One of the first steps in defining a link between funerary customs and religious beliefs is clearly related to how, within a given community, the cult of the dead was transformed into a cult of selected deceased, otherwise known as the *cult of the ancestors*. The idea that the spirit continues to live beyond the death of a family member is a defining factor of ancestor worship in the Near East, and this belief explains the need for humans to have an ongoing relationship with the dead through funerary feasts, prayers, and offerings. In this way, the physical death of an individual does not imply a rupture of the relationship between the living and the deceased but rather becomes an opportunity to reinforce family ties through a series of reciprocal obligations. To reach this target, it is through the transformation of the physical remains of the human body of the selected deceased that these ties can be strengthened. In fact, the material dimension of the human body acts as an incredibly powerful tool for connecting the community of the living with their past through a process of embodiment that assigns to the human body a centrality as a projection “onto *elements of nature*” (Connerton 2011: 142). The human body is in fact a quintessential element in connecting the cultural with the natural, and, for example, in Mesopotamian mythology, the human body is partially divine combining clay with divine blood. In most religions humans are in fact created so that they resemble the god. This is the case of the Hebrew Bible that states in Genesis (1:26), “Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Thus, it is clear that the human body is a primeval force in structuring the religiosity of ancient as well as contemporaneous societies, because the dead has an agency that is physically embodied in his/her human relics.

This aspect is recognizable throughout the ancient Near East where, since prehistoric times, the skeletal remains of selected deceased have been used to define the spiritual dimension of



FIGURE 1.1 A cache of plastered skulls from Jericho dated to Pre-pottery Neolithic (photo by Lorenzo Nigro)

communities inhabiting these regions. Moreover, the manipulation of human skulls illustrates that ancestral cults were deeply embedded in the traditions of ancient Near Eastern societies through actions ranging from the removal of skulls from corpses, to their caching, deformation, and, in some cases, decoration (Verhoeven 2011). This tradition was part of the so-called skull cult, a ceremonial practice that started during the Natufian period (ca. 12500–9500 BCE) and was enacted until the Late Neolithic (ca. 6200 BCE) from the Levant and, later, all the way to southeastern and central Anatolia (Figure 1.1).

Even though the manipulation of the human body is recognizable since the Late Natufian period, it is particularly during the Pre-pottery Neolithic (PPN, ca. 9500–7000 BCE) that the custom of decapitating selected deceased and using the skulls isolated or grouped in caches becomes an element of commonality among groups that were slowly moving from a nomadic to a more sedentary form of living (Nigro 2017). This is especially the case of the Levant during the Pre-pottery Neolithic B, when plastered skulls were found in caches either buried in pits at the end of their life history, such as those found

at Jericho, 'Ain-Ghazal, Beisomoun, and Kfar HaHoresh in southern Levant, or displayed above ground, as in the case of the four plastered skulls discovered at Tell Aswad in western Syria (Kuijt 2008: Verhoven 2011). The skulls are of both sexes and a range of ages and were removed after burial of the dead body in order to be displayed rather than kept permanently hidden or stored followed by their use as part of religious cults (probably associated with the memory of the ancestors) in ceremonial practices that served to reinforce ties among early agricultural communities in a transforming (and probably stressful) social and cultural environment (Croucher 2012: 303).

In this process, the skull has been reused after its initial burial in graves both intramurally (the highest number of cases) and extramurally, constituting a form of construction of social memories of the ancestors through the circulation of body parts of the selected individuals. Thus, as mentioned by Kuijt (2008: 183), "Neolithic secondary mortuary practices are a form of bodily recirculation." In so doing, the selection of body parts signified a means of selecting the deceased and introducing their memory in the daily life of the other components of the community. This process of manipulation of the human skulls also included the use of plaster and shells in order to create an iconic product that could have been considered long lasting and, in a broader sense, eternal. The newly produced plastered skull can therefore symbolize a semantic reference to a transformed socio-organization of the communities (i.e., from a subsistence strategy based on hunting and gathering to one based on agriculture; nomadic to sedentary forms of residency) in which the plaster, a primary construction material, can be associated with dwellings, the shell with water and especially with fertility, because shells can be interpreted as symbols of "femininity by virtue of the morphological analogy between the shell and the female genitalia" (Connerton 2011: 165).

Within this framework, the creation of religious dimensions by the Pre-pottery Neolithic communities of southeastern Anatolia is entangled within a broader cosmological construct within which the "dissolution of bodies and the redistribution of body parts may be

vital to the circulation of energy among all living things" (Fowler 2004: 160). The remains of human bodies thus become an active essence in constructing webs of relations among human beings, other-than-human beings, places, objects, and spirits in creating forms of symbolic relations (Ingold 2000: 108) that were pivotal for affirming the power of spirits embodied by natural sources in a view of the cosmos that is essentially naturalistic and animistic.

In Anatolia, the use of human remains in affirming the power of the spirits of the ancestors in constructing the religiosity of prehistoric communities is evident in the collection of skulls within ossuaries placed in ritualized contexts as secondary depositions of human bones at the Pre-pottery Neolithic southeastern Turkish site of Cayönü (8600–7500 BCE), where an entire building, the so-called Skull Building, was dedicated to the burial of the remains of selected deceased. In this building, the skulls were incorporated into walls and especially inside cells (Dietrich and Notroff 2015: 83). However, the importance of displaying decorated skulls in ritualized contexts is also recognizable in later Neolithic contexts (ca. 7000–6200 BCE), as is the case of the recently discovered skull of an adult male, plastered and decorated with red ochre, which was found in an intramural tomb excavated at Çatalhöyük in central Anatolia and buried in the arms of a woman deposited in a pit that was part of the foundation of the house. The numerous layers of plaster and red paint that covered the skull has lead Ian Hodder (2006: 149) to suggest that the plastered skull was circulated prior to its final burial. The skull has been interpreted as the head of a person of prestige status (e.g., a sort of shaman) that was displayed and buried in this particular manner, within the foundation of a new house, in the process of creating genealogies for the people inhabiting the house.

Such examples can help illustrate that the fragmentation of the body served the purpose of embodying the memory of the dead among the living and strengthening the relationship between ancestors and the community of the living (Whitehouse and Hodder 2010). In this way, the body could be transformed into an object useful for

materializing the memory of ancestors among the society of the living. This aspect of material religion in the Near East can be seen in other archaeological contexts in which the display and use of body relics are important elements for constructing community identities (as for example, with the Early Bronze Age II, ca. 2900–2350 BCE, “body libraries” found in charnel houses at Bab-edh Dhra in Jordan, Chesson 2007).

In general, the fragmentation and display of parts of the body in public might have occurred to emphasize commonality versus individual personhood when cooperation was needed or in instances of radical transformation of the social and economic organization that could have increased the level of stress among the community’s members.

#### ANIMISM AND THE FIRST CEREMONIAL BUILDINGS AT GÖBEKLI TEPE AND KARAHAN TEPE IN SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY

The importance of reinforcing communal ties through forms of relations between spiritual forces and material elements among Pre-pottery Neolithic Near Eastern communities was not only related to the creation and display of the relics of selected human skulls, but also thanks to innovative symbolic domains associated with monumental ceremonial architecture and unique iconography (Cauvin 2000) that is clearly recognizable in the creation of “special buildings” during this key period in northern Syria and southeastern Turkey (Dietrich and Notroff 2015: figure 7.5). Regarding these unique buildings, of great interest is the analogy that Dietrich and Notroff (2015: 80–82) made in analyzing these buildings of the Neolithic period in comparison to the “cult-houses” used by the modern people of New Guinea. These New Guinean houses are considered sacred loci within which ancestral veneration is materially entangled with ceremonial architecture, cult images, iconography relating to ancestors, mythological stories, sacrifice, and consumption of food. Moreover, in their analysis of these “cult-houses” they refer to the archaeological correlates for recognizing cult activities brilliantly identified by Colin Renfrew





FIGURE 1.2 Enclosure C, Göbekli Tepe dated to Pre-pottery Neolithic (photo courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), photo by Nico Becker)

(1994: 51–52). Based on this analysis, they then move to the analogy with the extraordinary ceremonial architecture unearthed at the site of Göbekli Tepe located in southeastern Turkey (ca. 9600–8000 BCE) that exemplifies the “special buildings” of the Pre-pottery Neolithic of the ancient Near East (Figure 1.2).

The site is located on the highest point of a hill (ca. 760 meters above sea level) overlooking the plain of Şanlıurfa, which is the

beginning of an alluvial plain located not far from the springs of the Balikh river (i.e., an affluent part of the Euphrates River) (Schmidt 2006). The mound (300 meters in diameter and ca. 15 meters tall) was mostly used during the Pre-pottery Neolithic (ca. 9600–8000 BCE) and has an open-shape similar to an amphitheatre overlooking the alluvial plain, but due to its limestone geological formation and the lack of nearby water sources, it was not suitable for farming. During the earliest phase of occupation (i.e., Göbekli Tepe Level III, Pre-pottery Neolithic A, ca. 9600–8800 BCE), the site was characterized by the presence of numerous circular or oval stone enclosures of ca. 20–30 meters in diameter with stone benches along the perimeter, and monumental limestone T-shaped pillars (ca. 4–5.5 meters tall and weighing ca. 10 tons each) that were obtained from local sources, engraved with bas-reliefs, fitted into sockets on the ground floor, and spatially distributed along the inner perimeter with the two tallest at the center (Figure 1.3); whereas during the following phase (i.e., Göbekli Tepe Level II, Pre-pottery Neolithic B, ca. 8800–8000 BCE) (Dietrich et al. 2019), a reduction in the size of the stone enclosures is noticeable and these new buildings are now rectangular or absidal in shape and with smaller, fewer, or no pillars within but with the presence of an interesting “Totem Pole” decorated with an intermingling of wild animals and human beings (Figure 1.3) (Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2010).

According to excavations and geophysical investigation, the “special buildings” of Level III should have been comprised of at least twenty circular stone enclosures and represented the only type of architecture present at the site (Dietrich and Notroff 2015). As mentioned, they have been interpreted as the first examples of religious architecture associated with forms of animism during a phase when the urge to create a sense of community appears pivotal for a society that was transforming toward new subsistence strategies associated with farming, whereby “the change of the hunter-gatherer societies to the Neolithic way of life” should be interpreted “not only through economic or ecological spheres, but by the impact of a



FIGURE 1.3 T-shaped limestone pillars with bas-reliefs from Göbekli Tepe dated to Pre-pottery Neolithic (courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), photo by Nico Becker)

transcendental sphere” (Schmidt 2000: 49). Such an interpretation is based on the uniqueness of these large, almost underground and probably not roofed, circular buildings spread over the mound, but most importantly by the presence of unique iconographies engraved on the monumental T-shaped limestone pillars (ca. 200 in total). Moreover, the images represented in the bas-reliefs are either a stylized headless human figure<sup>1</sup> with the arms embracing the whole pillar and, usually, a belt and a loincloth in the lower section or, in most of the cases, wild animals (i.e., lions, bulls, boars, foxes, gazelles, donkeys, snakes, other reptiles, insects, arachnids, vultures) portrayed in movement along

with geometric elements. It is interesting to notice that it is usual to find two stylized human figures in the central pillars overlooking the perimetral ones, suggesting a possible construction of mythological stories associated with twins that are typical of numerous myths of ancient as well as ethnographic societies (Schmidt 2010: 244). This mixture of animals and stylized human representation has led to a discussion on the possibility that the enclosures represent locales of spiritual representation of the encounters between the human and natural domains, probably in connection with a belief in the supernatural world. Within this unique ritualistic context, Busacca (2017: 2) adeptly argues that the examples of religious/ritual architecture of Göbekli Tepe represent “precise techniques of visual representation aimed to create illusions of motion and the intentional arrangement of depictions within the ritual space that contributed to the performative *animation* of the animal image and to a ritualized *encounter* between humans and animals” (*italics mine*).

The recent archaeological investigations brought about by Turkish scholars in the region of Şanlıurfa have demonstrated that these enclosures were part of a broader system of similar stone enclosures that had similarities with those excavated at Göbekli Tepe (Karul 2021; Steadman 2023) but also some nuances that make them different, such as those brought to light at the site of Karahan Tepe where the pillars are phallus-shaped and topped with a human head.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of this phase, all of these stone enclosures, both at Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe, were carefully filled in with a layer of dirt and broken stone tools and statues, as well as smashed wild animals, human bones, and the remains of wild flora, giving a clear sense of their ritual function and the important role played by human remains in defining the ceremonial dimension of the enclosures (Karul 2021). In fact, the presence of relics of human bones in these layers of fillings, especially in the case of Göbekli Tepe, where a high density of remains of modified human skulls were found (Gresky, Haelm, and Clare 2017), further testifies to the intermingling of human and natural aspects associated with a possible ancestral veneration similar to the one recognizable in the previously

mentioned ethnographic example of New Guinean ritual houses. Furthermore, it is of great interest to notice that starting with the following phase, in the whole region we witness a transformation in the dimensions and use of these types of ritual enclosures that during the PPNB are rectilinear in shape and with smaller pillars that have a less elaborate decoration. But, most importantly, faunal and botanical analysis support the idea of PPNB communities strongly embracing an agro-pastoral subsistence strategy, thus showing the signs of communities entering the final phase of the long, transformative, economic process that marked the Neolithic revolution starting from about 12,000 years ago. As evident from the analysis of numerous grinding stones found in Level II (and, in less examples, in Level III) at Göbekli Tepe, this lengthy process was marked by feasting activities associated with meetings that occurred at some of these “special buildings” during special calendric events as a way of connecting with the cosmic world as well as the spirits of the ancestors (Dietrich et al. 2012 and 2019).<sup>3</sup>

The creation of “special buildings” together with the manipulation of the human remains of selected deceased marks the whole process of the Neolithic revolution that, as said before, was characterized by a new semantic that combined sacred and profane spheres (Cauvin 2000), whereby new symbols were used to validate the spiritual force of the ancestors embedded in the holy nature, “because they were there before you, and because they guide you through the world” (Ingold 2000: 141).

#### ANCESTOR CULTS IN MESOPOTAMIA DURING THE BRONZE AGE

The importance of ancestral spirits in constructing the religious beliefs of ancient Near Eastern communities is not limited to prehistoric societies; in fact, it is starting from the third millennium BCE that the relevance of the cult of the ancestors becomes even more evident in both the archaeological record and textual sources and, especially, by the presence of residential graves recognizable in both palatial and non-elite private dwellings in archaeological contexts of

Mesopotamian regions. Moreover, it is between the third and first millennia BCE that the ancestors embodied a preeminent role as active agents in supporting the political and economic decisions made by the living, as is clearly evident from the written sources. It is within this perspective that, for example, the use of “the dead as communicators of memory within the family circle” (Jonker 1995: 187) appears as a pivotal statement for a better understanding of the role embodied by family ancestors among Old Babylonian societies during the early second millennium BCE.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of archaeological data, archaeologists have highlighted that the custom of embedding residential graves within private architecture started to be clearly visible in southern Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2350 BCE) (Algaze 1983/1984) when, in some circumstances (for example, at Abu Salabikh), relics of ritual activities associated with an underground tomb were found on the floor (Postgate 1980: 75). During the second half of the third millennium BCE, information regarding the devotion of royal ancestors is also available from the textual sources from the south as well as the north (as is the case of the Ebla archives, Ristvet 2010, 2015). The elements emerging from the available texts narrate that the deceased ancestors are remembered by the living through the periodic performance of ceremonies involving libation offerings (Katz 2007). To offer a specific example, cuneiform texts of this period describe the ritual *ki.sì.ga* in Sumerian (that is similar to the *kispum* in Akkadian), which was used for the remembrance and commemoration of elite ancestors (Jonker 1995; Selz 1997; Tsukimoto 1985, 2010; Winter 1992). This ritual included liquid offerings and the sacrifice of a large number of animals in canals and funerary chapels dedicated to the memory of the deified kings; the term *ki.a.nag* probably designates such a memorial chapel (Selz 1997; Winter 1992). The importance of royal ancestral figures in structuring ancient Mesopotamian societies is further evidenced by the mausolea of the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, which were built near the Royal Cemetery during the late third millennium BCE (cf. Moorey 1984; Woolley 1934), as well as the intramural royal hypogea and funerary monuments found at

numerous northern Mesopotamian sites dated to the third millennium BCE (Porter 2002; Schwartz 2012, 2013).

During the late third and early second millennia BCE, ancestor cults also became a custom used by private families that established the tradition of building funerary crypts embedded within the architecture of their private dwellings (Figure 1.3). This is, for example, the case of Titriş Höyük in southeastern Turkey, which during the Late Early Bronze Age chronological phase (ca. 2400–2100 BCE) is marked by the presence of residential graves ubiquitously associated with private dwellings built as part of newly developed urban planning that enhanced the visibility of private families (Laneri 2007) (Figure 1.4). These graves were used to bury selected deceased and such a custom represents a shift in the funerary tradition of the communities inhabiting the settlements as compared to the previous period (i.e., the Mid-early Bronze Age, ca. 2700–2400 BCE), which is characterized by extramural funerary depositions (Laneri 2004: 137–147). In addition to this, some of the residential funerary chambers of the Late Early Bronze Age are also marked by signs of ritual libations performed after the closing of the graves, as is recognizable in the disposal of cachets of vessels and associated faunal remains at the *dromos* (i.e., the entrance) to the grave. The use of human remains as part of ritual practices at Titriş Höyük is further emphasized by the discovery of a unique deposit found in a dwelling not far from one of the city gates that consisted of a plaster basin, usually used for making wine, that was filled with the disarticulated human bones of nineteen individuals, two thirds of which indicated traces of cranial trauma made by sharp-edged and projectile weapons (i.e., battle-axe and/or spear) indicating individuals who were killed in a battle or a massacre and whose bones were then ritualistically deposited in the basin as a mnemonic reference to the event. The link with wine might have served the purpose of creating a metaphoric and symbolic link between the memory of the dead ancestors (probably glorified in war) with the regenerative power embodied by wine that has been widely used as a symbolic reference to life and blood (Figure 1.5) (Laneri 2004: 151–155; Laneri 2018).



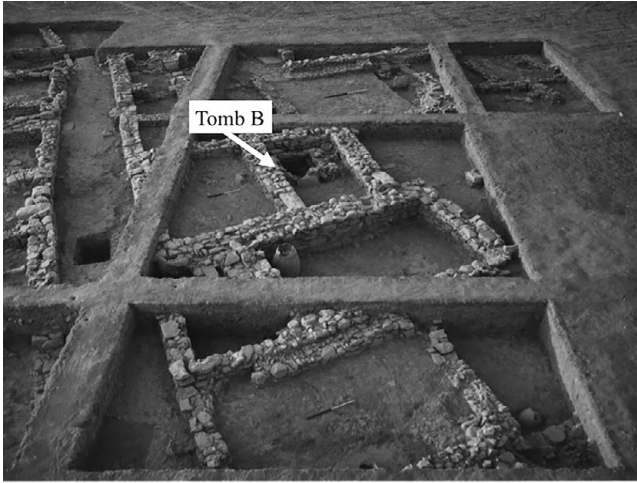


FIGURE 1.4 Private dwellings in the Lower Town of the Late Third Millennium BCE site of Tiriş Höyük highlighting the residential grave B (photo courtesy of the Tiriş Höyük photo archive)

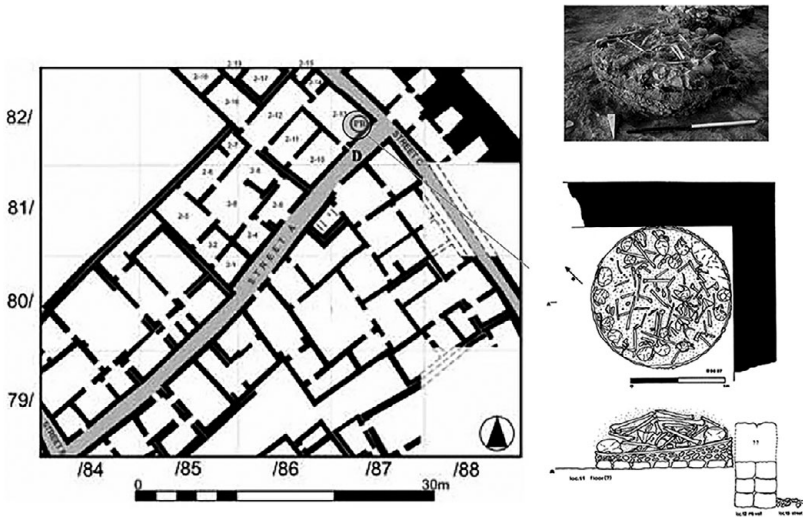


FIGURE 1.5 A ritual plaster basin with a deposit of human bones from the Outer Town of the Late Third Millennium BCE site of Tiriş Höyük (by the author)



It is, however, during the early second millennium BCE that the construction of funerary crypts within private dwellings became a more distinctive marker of Mesopotamian societies as is demonstrated by their presence in numerous settlements of both southern (e.g., Ur, Larsa, Sippar) and northern (e.g., Chagar Bazar, Tell Arbid, T. Mohammed Diyab, T. Mozan, Tell B'ia, Tell Barri) Mesopotamia (Laneri 2011a). These crypts usually consist of brick-vaulted hypogea located underneath the floor of one of the houses' rooms. In some circumstances the crypt was instead built in an open plot next to the house and was clustered with other graves of less relevant architecture (as is the case of Tell Arbid in northeastern Syria, Wygnanska 2019). Elements helpful for interpreting these graves as relics for the cult of the family's ancestors include the presence of relics of food offerings and libations in the entrance to the grave. At Ur, the construction of altars that can be connected to the funerary chamber in some of the rooms located above the graves is further evidence of this type of tradition (Woolley and Mallowan 1976). For Leonard Woolley, these rooms should be interpreted as "private chapels" and, although such an interpretation has been firmly attacked, most scholars are now agreeing with Woolley's interpretation (Peyronel 2000) because it was a common practice in Mesopotamian societies to make libations over the ancestor's grave in order to periodically revive their memory (Postgate 1992: 99).

According to Jonker (1995), it is during this specific historical moment in Mesopotamia (and especially with the emergence of Amorite dynasties) that the recitation of names as part of the religious practice moves from a public context (i.e., the temple), typical of the third millennium BCE, to a more private context (i.e., the throne room and/or the private house). In particular, written documents of this period allow Jonker (1995: 187) to state that "the form this collective memory took became the family ritual for the dead, the *kispum*." The *kispum* is a ceremony for reviving the memory of the dead ancestors through their invocation by name, which also includes libations and offerings of food and drink at the burial locale. These ceremonies were

enacted periodically and served the purpose of framing the memory of the ancestors among the community of the living.

Other written documents dated to a later period (i.e., the Middle Assyrian) inform us of the physical location of the tombs and, more specifically, of baked-brick rooms that were built beneath a house. According to this text, this term was probably used to refer to the “resting place” for the scribe as is interpreted by Robert Ellis (1968: 97), who affirms that “the text may refer more particularly to a scribe’s burial vault than to the house in general.” It is during these later periods that the importance of ancestor cults among Mesopotamian elite and non-elite families is further emphasized by the available written documents and archaeological data at our disposal (Van der Toorn 1994, 1996).

As demonstrated by the data presented here, the pivotal role played by ancestors in framing the religious dimension of Bronze Age Mesopotamian societies is clearly evident from both historical and archaeological sources. In particular, the presence of residential graves, funerary crypts, intramural mausolea, royal hypogea, and funerary monuments, as well as relics of post-funeral libations at the entrance to the grave during this period, is at its highest in the history of ancient Near Eastern societies. This is probably linked to the pre-eminent role played by the household (*oikos*) in the socioeconomic organization of Mesopotamian societies during the Bronze Age and, consequently, the need of the living to keep the physical remains of the ancestors in their vicinity as part of the process of strengthening their lineage and at the same time reinforcing the cohesion of the community’s collective memory.

#### BODY MANIPULATION, PERSONHOOD, AND THE SPIRIT OF THE ANCESTORS

The belief in spiritual beings is the basic common denominator of all religious systems and this animistic framework usually consists of a belief in the ancestors of a family or a broader community. Such a credence is also based on defining selected individuals who had a

charismatic power within the society and thus deserved the right to be remembered after their death. Obviously, it is within the remains of their decayed bodies that the members of the community will first assign these as the repository of their souls, and it is for this reason that since prehistoric times ancient Near Eastern communities have emphasized the importance of body manipulation for keeping the community connected with the spirits of their chosen beloveds. This process serves the purpose of fragmenting and recomposing the different aspects of an individual's personality according to the needs of the society. The biological transition of the body is also an excuse to validate social transformation and strengthen social affirmation. The dead body will thus become a powerful tool, and its fragmentation, manipulation, and display is envisioned as a way to materialize the spirit of the ancestors (Cradic 2021). The fragmentation of the body highlights the essential being of an individual as conceived by the members of a given community (i.e., personhood), including their identities that shifted throughout their life and, during the process of dying and the natural decomposition of the body, are mediated through mortuary practices and, in particular, ancestral ceremonies (Fowler 2004: 155).

Using such an approach, ancestral veneration thus becomes a way for the members of a given community to reconnect the web of relations to a cosmic and spiritual level. This form of religiosity will be based on a simple and straight forward way of conceiving the world in which the cosmic dimension clearly mirrors the social relationship that occurred in life, because "death, punctuates, but does not terminate, life" (Ingold 2000: 143). The use of a relational model will thus allow for interpreting ancient as well as modern forms of primeval religiosity as flowing within the social and economic transformation of a given society. The material use of human remains as part of the process of believing in spiritual beings should not be interpreted as antagonism to a socioeconomic perspective (i.e., symbolic vs. functional) but rather as part of a broader system of interconnection in which each element is part of a whole and cannot

be seen as separate. It is clear from the previously mentioned case studies that the manipulation of the skulls of selected deceased among Neolithic communities had a purpose that was not just religious or cosmic, but rather aimed at connecting the religious and symbolic domain of those decorated human skulls into a more general social network consisting of a transformation in economic subsistence strategies (i.e., from hunting and gathering to agro-pastoral activities) as well as in the process of dwelling (i.e., the creation of villages and sedentarization). The materialization of human remains for religious purposes is part of a larger strategy that assigned to human bones “a vital part of the renewal of relations within the cosmos” (Fowler 2004: 99); relations that have to be renewed through a constant exercise of remembering and revising the memory of the ancestors either through the veneration of their exposed and manipulated human remains (as is the case of the Neolithic skulls) or through the performance of rituals at a specific locale (i.e., a mausoleum, as in the case of the famous *Nenash* mausoleum dedicated to the memory of the royal ancestors at the Syrian mid-third millennium BCE urban center of Ebla, or in residential graves, Laneri 2011b, 2016a). The importance of assigning spirits to the dead ancestors is clearly evident in “spiritualizing” the dead of given members of a community, as documented in the Hebrew Bible and specifically the passage dedicated to the “the valley of dry bones” in which the prophet Ezekiel (Ez. 37: 12–14) receives the following advice from Yahweh:

[M]y people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.

This passage from the Hebrew Bible clearly defines the importance of the relationship between human substance, land, and spirituality that appears as pivotal for the ancient Israelites during the first

millennium BCE in the southern Levant (Smith 1998). Such a perspective reinforces the fundamental importance of the relationship between ancestry, generation, substance, memory, and land using a relational approach in which “both cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings – human and non-human – that dwell therein” (Ingold 2000: 133). This form of relationality is exemplified by the extraordinary Pre-pottery Neolithic stone enclosures unearthed at the southeastern Turkish sites of Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe. These “special buildings” cannot be considered as temples but rather as embodying a new way of defining the role played by ancestors in defining the spiritual forces inhabiting the natural habitat and, most of all, in how these innovative and unique buildings served the purpose of bringing “people together for what was then a novel set of tasks” (Bernbeck 2013: 44). The lengthy process of “neolithization” that moved ancient Near Eastern communities from hunter-gatherer societies into a farming-herding dimension necessitated new spiritual references able to accompany and sustain the complexity of the socioeconomic transformation that they were going through. Within this process, the spirits of the ancestors have that extraordinary power of connecting people with their environment that is populated by other humans but also by other-than-human beings (e.g., animals and plants), objects, places, and, especially, the land in which they dwell. In fact, the extraordinary power of the spirits of the ancestors is such that they can be embodied by different elements (and not just the physical tomb in which they are placed), because they transcend the material, but they still need to be materially validated in order to function as a physical presence of the spiritual forces of nature in reinforcing the histories of the communities (Fowler 2021: 10).

Therefore, the Pre-pottery Neolithic stone enclosures of Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe can be interpreted as cosmic projections of habitual bodily memories in which “cosmic projection operates as a memory schema not by producing a narrative of past events

which can be stored and by association with particular places, but by taking the elements of nature as the leitmotif for encoding the experience of place, for a mode of cognitive mapping" (Connerton 2011: 162). In this innovative process of the materialization of religious beliefs that initiated at the beginning of "neolithization" and will then mark the religiosity of ancient Near Eastern societies at least until the first millennium BCE when a process of dematerialization will emphasize spiritual interiorization vs. materiality, it is important to highlight the difficulty (and almost impossibility) of distinguishing the sacred from the profane domains that appear to be part of Western categorizations (Bernbeck 2013; Dietrich and Notroff 2015).

When interfacing with literate societies, such as those of ancient Mesopotamian contexts dating from the third millennium BCE, the written sources allow us to have a clearer definition of the spiritual force of ancestors and how the relationship between human remains, graves, and performance dedicated to reviving the memory of ancestors were the pillars in the process of consolidating familial ties, especially in moments of socioeconomic and political transformations. In fact, starting from the third millennium BCE, ancestors became a means of communication for the collective memory and traditions of families within their own circles and daily activities (Jonker 1995: 187). Such a mnemonic force is reinforced by the act of reviving ancestors during the performance of the *kispum* ritual at given calendrical dates. This element is easily recognizable in the relics of food offerings and libations left behind at the entrance to graves. Such a continuous act of remembrance can also be part of rituals of religious worship that can be recognized in the "private chapels" associated with the graves discovered at Ur.

Thus, when it is possible and the data are available, archaeologists should seek to overcome the difficult task of reconstructing modes of religiosity among ancient societies by combining relics of elements that can be linked to a specific cognitive process. In the case of ancient Mesopotamian ancestor cults from the Bronze Age, this can be reached by combining the presence of residential graves in the

architecture of ancient settlements, the selection of the deceased among the community of the dead, the presence of relics of post-funeral ritual libations at the entrance of the grave, and, finally, the historical documents mentioning the memorialization of elite and non-elite ancestors. This very rich ensemble of data available from Bronze Age contexts cannot be understated, and all these elements associated with ancestral veneration should be taken into account when the overall social organization of Mesopotamian societies is scrutinized.

In conclusion, among ancient Near Eastern societies, the spirits of ancestors originate in the body of selected deceased members of given communities, but are then transferred and materialized in different “things” that can either be the manipulated parts of the body (e.g., the Neolithic plastered skulls), a locale in which these remains have been interred (e.g., the Mesopotamian Bronze Age residential graves), a place for the community to gather together (e.g., the Pre-pottery Neolithic “special buildings”), or representations of other-than-human entities (e.g., the animals represented in the Pre-pottery Neolithic enclosures). In this process of transfer and materialization of the spirits of ancestors, the famous stele of Katumuwa (i.e., a high official of the eighth century BCE) unearthed in a room in a private dwelling at the southeastern Turkish site of Zincirli (ancient Sam'al) offers an extraordinary support (Hermann and Schloen 2014). In fact, in the written inscription in local Aramaic dialect that decorated the upper section of the stone stele it is stated that the food is “for my ‘soul’ that will be in the stele” (Pardee in Hermann and Schloen 2014: 45). The written words are intermingled with the visual part of the stele in which the image of the deceased sitting in front of a table set with foodstuff is depicted, which is also described in the inscription as part of the mortuary meal to be provided for the soul of Katumuwa. Thus, this stele further testifies how words, images, objects, and ritual performances all come together as a recipient for venerating the spirits of the ancestors.

## NOTES

- 1 The presence of a cross on the upper edge of the pillars representing human figures has suggested that this can be considered a stylized representation of the head (Schmidt 2010: 244).
- 2 It is important to notice that one of the stone bas-reliefs presents the image of a human figure touching the crotch flanked by two specular felines (lions?). As mentioned before, the theme of the twins and of the humans confronting wild animals is already recognizable at Göbekli Tepe, and this bas-relief can further confirm the complex web of symbolic meanings associated with the possible narration of mythological stories associated with these representations.
- 3 It is of great interest to note that stone masks were found at Göbekli Tepe as well as at other Levantine and Anatolian sites of the PPN period and they have been interpreted as part of rituals with the purpose of reenacting mythological narratives that were closely related to death and ancestral veneration that took place at “special buildings” (Dietrich, Notroff and Dietrich 2018).
- 4 A libation prayer from the Old Babylonian period confirms the importance of libations dedicated to the ancestors in the process of “conserving the patrilineal identity and self-consciousness of the group” (Postgate 1992: 99).