

discussion article

Marc Verhoeven **Death, fire and abandonment.**

Ritual practice at late neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria

Abstract

This article offers an interpretation of the structure and meaning of a mortuary ritual at Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria. Remains of this funeral have been uncovered in the 'Burnt Village', a late neolithic settlement largely destroyed by fire. The possibly intentional and ritual burning of the settlement is related to the mortuary ritual; it is suggested that here we have evidence for an extended 'death ritual' ending, but also transforming, human and material life. Death, fire and abandonment, then, seem to have been closely related. Some examples suggest that these relations also existed at other neolithic sites in the Near East.

Keywords

Syria; Tell Sabi Abyad; Neolithic; intentional firing of settlement; death ritual

Introduction

In this article I shall explore the relationships between death, fire and abandonment in a neolithic settlement in Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria. Tell Sabi Abyad is located in the northern part of the Balikh valley, about 30 km from the Syrian-Turkish border (figure 1). The prehistoric occupation at the mound, represented by an uninterrupted sequence of eleven main levels of occupation, can be assigned to the later neolithic period and has been dated at ca 6000-5000 B.C. (6860-5760 cal B.C.).¹ Recent archaeological research has focused on one of these neolithic settlements, the so-called Burnt Village of level 6 (dated at ca 5200/5150 B.C., 5970-5960 cal B.C.). Large parts of this village were reduced to ashes by a violent fire, which has resulted in an extraordinary preservation of architecture and related finds (Akkermans and Verhoeven 1995; Verhoeven 1999; Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996, 38-63).²

One of the most fascinating discoveries in the Burnt Village consisted of two human skeletons associated with a number of large oval clay objects. In this article I shall argue that these finds represent the remains of a mortuary ritual, and I shall attempt to interpret the structure and meaning of this ceremony. I shall also discuss the spatial and social context of the ritual, and relate it to the destruction and abandonment of the Burnt Village, which seems to have been connected with the mortuary ritual.

I would like to stress here that the remains discussed in this article are as yet unique, since contemporary sites are virtually unknown, and other earlier or later neolithic sites in the Near East have yet to produce similar (or comparable) contexts. Therefore, this contribution should not be viewed as a conclusive interpretation, but rather as the first attempt to unravel the meaning of a most intriguing discovery. It can only be hoped that future finds at neolithic sites will provide new information to test the present interpretative study.

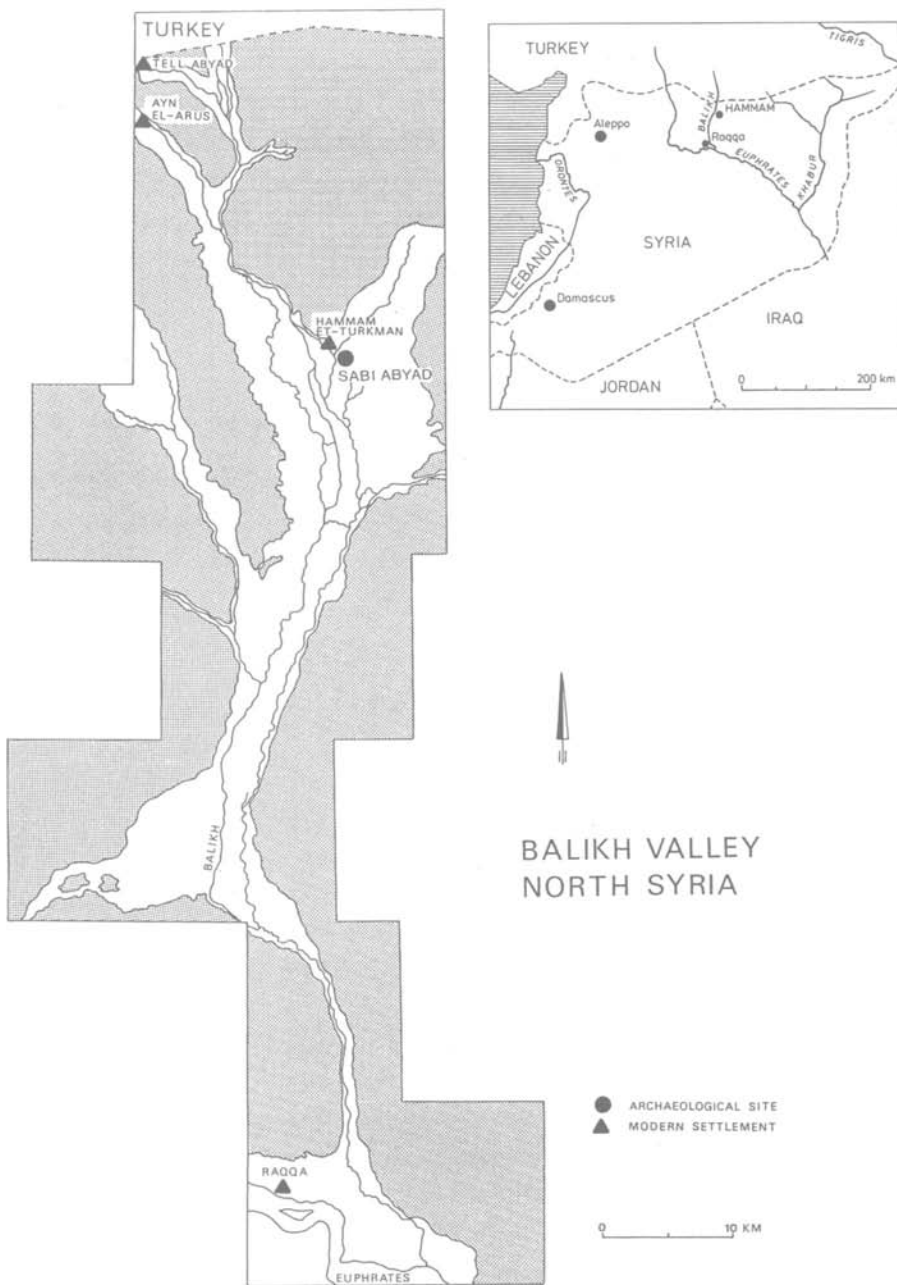


Figure 1. Map of the Balikh valley and the location of Tell Sabi Abyad.

Strange objects and human skeletons

Ten large and rather curiously shaped objects were found in building V of the Burnt Village: in room 3 ($n = 3$), room 4 ($n = 1$), room 6 ($n = 2$), and room 7 ($n = 4$). In addition, one was found in room 11 of building IV (figure 2, table 1). In room 6 of building V two of the

objects were found on the floor, but in the other cases they were situated high above the floor and amidst or above the charred roof beams; in view of this position the objects must originally have been present on the flat roof (see below) along the northern and eastern façades of building V, and along the southern façade of building IV. When the buildings collapsed (due to the fire) the objects must have fallen down. All the objects except one were oval and loaf-shaped; they had a flat base and a rounded, convex body (figures 3 and 4). The objects were rather large: their length measured between 29 and 62 cm, their width between 27 and 41 cm and their height between 10 and 29 cm. All objects had one or two shallow and elongated holes along each of the long sides. Another hole was often found at the top. In addition to these oval objects, another smaller and more or less rectangular clay object with a saddle-like top was found in room 4 of building V (number 4 on figure 3) (Spoor and Collet 1996, 443–444).

The hole at the top of one of the oval objects (O92-363), from room 7 of building V, contained the upper part of the skull of a wild male sheep, the Asiatic mouflon (*Ovis orientalis*), with two horncores. These elements must have been put into the wet clay of the object when it was constructed. One of them was well preserved, but the upper part was missing. The other, wholly hidden within the clay, was preserved to a length of only about 3.3 cm from its base (figure 5, figures 2–5 in Cavallo 1997b). The skull probably belonged to a relatively young animal, between 2 and 5 years old (Cavallo 1997b, 664, 666). The skull was hidden in the clay object, but the upper part of the well-preserved horncore must originally have been visible from the hole at the top (figure 3, number 6). The skull was discovered when one of the clay objects accidentally broke. It is most likely that the other (complete) objects with a hole at the top (table 1) also contained the remains of horns¹ of wild sheep, as this would explain the presence of these holes. Six of the eleven objects, then, would have been marked by this conspicuous feature. Perhaps, as with object O92-363, the top of the included horns have broken off, with the remainder still preserved within the objects. The other clay objects will be examined by means of x-rays in order to determine this.

In another of the oval objects, from room 7 of building V (O92-353: number 5 on figure 3), a proximal part of a bovid femur (*Bos*) and a fragment of a bovid rib were found (figure 6 in Cavallo 1997b). Possibly these remains are also of wild animals.

Between the objects, high in the fill of room 7 of building V, the remains of two human skeletons were found, one male and one female. Their bones were crushed and heavily burnt. Their position high in the fill and the absence of burial pits indicates that they were originally on the roof of building V, situated between the large clay objects.

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The female (SAB92-B3), found along the western wall of room 7, was lying in anatomical order on her left side, the legs tightly flexed and the head facing south. The clearly intentional flexed position must have been fixed, either by a strong *rigor mortis* (which only occurs for a short period of time within the first three days after death) or by bondage (see Knüsel et al. 1996). The remains consist of a partially preserved skeleton. Besides the highly fragmented skull, large parts of the left and right scapulae, the right humerus, the right ulna and radius, the left and right femora, the proximal joint of the right tibia and parts of the hands were found in room 7. The female must have been over 30 years old (Aten 1996, 117).

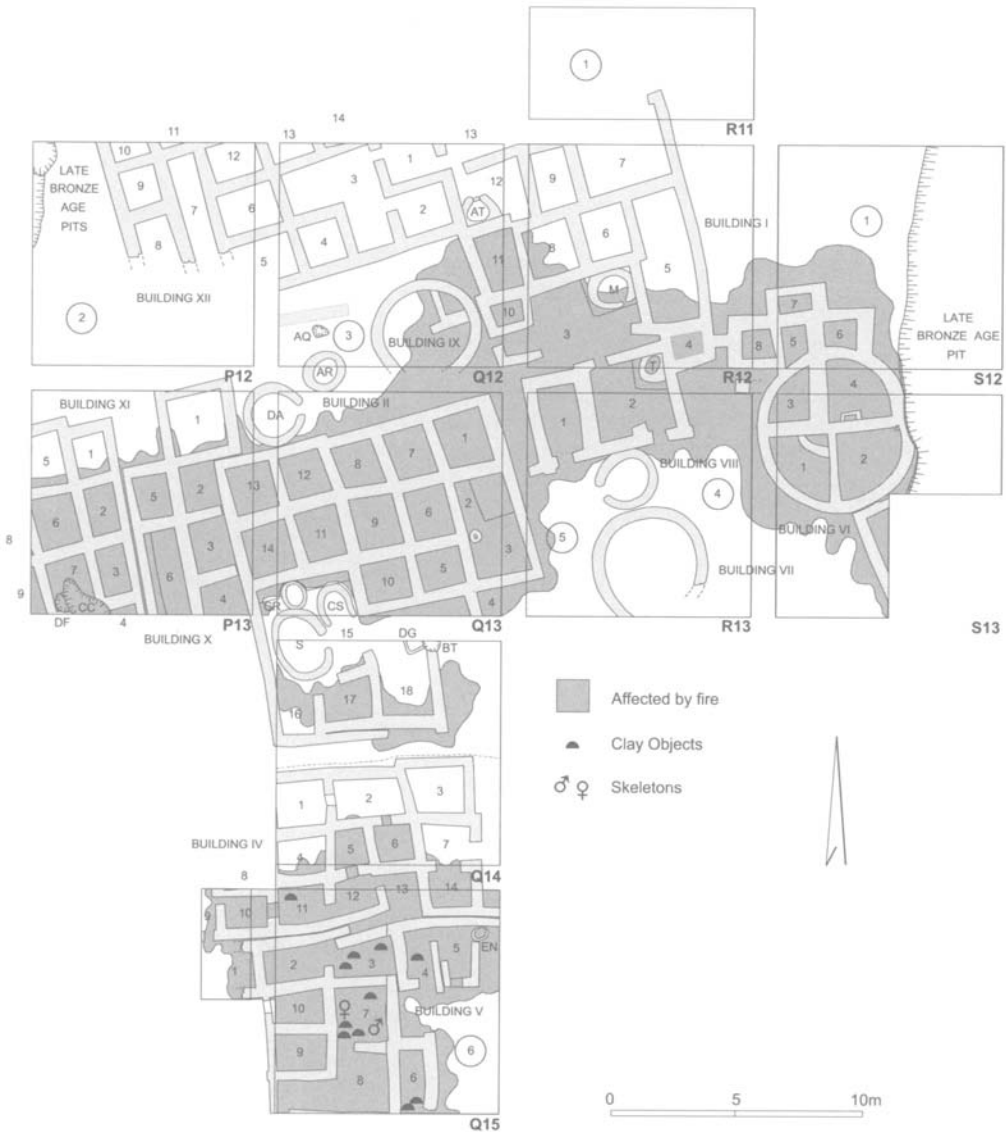


Figure 2. Plan of the Burnt Village indicating the area affected by fire, the location of the clay objects and the skeletons. Open areas outside buildings are indicated by encircled numbers. Ovens are marked by letters.

Of the second, male, skeleton (SAB92-B4) in the southeast of room 7 of building V large parts of the skull, femora, tibiae, fibulae, patellae, humeri, ulnae, feet, hands, pelvis and some ribs were recovered. Most, if not all, of the bones were lying in anatomical order. It was impossible to determine articulation in the case of the upper half of the body, due to the high fragmentation and the circumstances of deposition. Aten notes that ‘in view of the above, any form of regular burial in room 7 can be excluded; this person (as B92-B3) must have fallen from the roof of building V when this structure collapsed’ (Aten 1996, 118). To

No.	Location (building, room)	Position	Preservation	Shape	Dimensions (LxWxH in cm)	Holes	Bones
O92-343	V, 4	fill	complete	rectangular, flat base, saddle-like top	28.5x16x28	1 at 2 sides	?
O92-348	V, 3	fill	partial base, rounded convex body	oval, flat	29x27x10	-	?
O92-349	V, 3	fill	complete	"	37x30x17	-	?
O92-350	V, 3	fill	complete	"	62x41x24	top 2 at each side	?
O92-351	V, 7	fill	complete	"	48x39x23	top 2 at each side	?
O92-352	V, 7	fill	partial	"	40x41x29	1 at 2 sides	?
O92-353	V, 7	fill	complete	"	52x41x24	top 1 at each side	bovid bones
O92-354	IV, 11	fill	complete	"	51x39x25	top 1 at each side	?
O92-355	V, 6	floor	complete	"	51x34.5x21	top 1 at each side	?
O92-356	V, 6	floor	complete	"	52x35x18	1 at each side	?
O92-363	V, 7	fill	complete	"	45x36x24	top 1 at each side	skull with horns of wild sheep

Table 1. Characteristics of the large oval clay objects in the Burnt Village.

this may be added that no evidence for a burial pit has been found. Apart from the oval clay objects, no artefacts could be directly associated with these skeletons on the roof.

It has been proposed that the clay objects may have served as prehistoric seats or, alternatively, as rollers, used for compacting the roofs after rains. Such rollers are still used in the Near East, but they are made not of clay but of stone. In fact, they are heavy stone cylinders fitted with wooden handles for pushing (Watson 1979, 119; Wulff 1966, 114). The suggested functions of seats or rollers seem rather unlikely, particularly when taking into

account the horns and bones inside the objects and their position on the roof around the skeletons. In this report I will argue that they were ritual objects associated with a mortuary ritual.

The skeletons do not seem to be victims or casualties trapped in the fire, because they are spatially associated with the large oval clay objects, which, like the skeletons, were only present on the roof of building V, presenting a very distinctive context. It is unlikely that the only victims would have died precisely between these objects. Moreover in the case of a catastrophe one would expect many more victims. As will be argued below, finally, the fire was most likely not catastrophic but intentional and ritual, and related to a mortuary ritual for the persons as represented by our skeletons.

The archaeological context

The Burnt Village remains, partially standing to a height of 1.40 m, have been excavated over an area of about 1500 m² (figure 2).⁴ The settlement was built in terraces: part of the mound had been dug away along the slope, and the floors, walls, etc., of the structures low on the slope (buildings IV and V) were founded about two metres below those of the buildings somewhat higher on the mound. Consequently, it appears that the floors of the upper buildings must have been more or less on the same level as the roofs of the lower buildings; one could easily walk on these roofs (figure 2.15 in Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996). Actually, we have some evidence that this was indeed the case and that various kinds of activities were carried out on the roof.

The Burnt Village is represented by a series of rectangular, multi-roomed structures and four circular ones (the so-called tholoi). In addition, ovens and platforms, benches and basins of clay were unearthed in and between the building remains. The dimensions of the rectangular buildings seem to have varied between about 90 and 120 m². The interior diameters of the tholoi varied in size from about 3 m to 7 m. Generally speaking, the buildings of the Burnt Village were constructed along regular lines and were closely attached to each other, although all kinds of renovations and reconstructions took place in the course of time. Basically, the rectangular buildings seem to have been divided into three rows or wings, each of which consisted of a series of small rooms (or cells).

The walls of the round and rectangular buildings were simply founded on earth and were all built of loam. Some rooms had a doorway at floor level, but many rooms gave no evidence of doorways, and it seems that these rooms must have been accessible from a higher level, in the case of the rectangular buildings most likely from the roof.

The majority of the Burnt Village structures were heavily affected by an intense fire which penetrated the walls throughout and which caused a considerable accumulation of orange to brown crumbly loam, wall fragments, dark ashes and charred wood in the buildings. The lowest part of these deposits, directly situated on the floors, nearly always consisted of fine and powdery black ash. Most likely, these ashes were the burnt residue of the roof cover (reed mats). The common occurrence of charred beams and hard-burnt loam fragments with impressions of reeds and circular wooden poles in many of the rectangular buildings reveals

that the roofs had been made of wooden rafters placed at regular intervals and covered with reed mats, which in their turn were covered by a thick mud layer. The supposed presence of roof entrances, evidence for activities on the roofs and ethnographic parallels all strongly suggest that the roofs were flat. As yet, there is no evidence for the presence of a second storey on the rectangular buildings. Some of the tholoi seem to have had flat roofs as well, whereas others must have had a domed, beehive-shaped superstructure.

Large quantities of finds have been recovered from the various burnt structures, including ceramic and stone vessels, ground-stone implements, flint and obsidian tools, human and animal figurines of unbaked clay, labrets, axes, jewellery, and hundreds of clay sealings with stamp-seal impressions.

Mainly on the basis of the many well-preserved finds in the Burnt Village, a detailed spatial analysis has been carried out. This analysis aimed at the designation of the functions of the various spaces in the Burnt Village, in order to reconstruct the socio-economic structure of its inhabitants (Verhoeven 1999). The functional reconstructions have shown that the numerous small rooms in the rectangular buildings in the Burnt Village were mainly used for storage. Of the tholoi, the largest ones (nos. VI and VII) seem to have served as houses, the smaller tholoi were probably used for storage of products of the inhabitants of these houses. Tholoi, then, have been regarded as household compounds.

From the analysis it appeared that large parts of the village were, most likely, already abandoned (albeit for a short time only) when the fire broke out: a large number of the objects found were broken (for example, approximately 95% of the ceramics) and some buildings were in a dilapidated state.

Fire and abandonment The death of the village

Due to the absence of clear evidence we can only speculate as to the cause of the fire. First, an accident, possibly with one of the ovens, may have resulted in the conflagration. Secondly, it can be proposed that the destruction of the Burnt Village by fire was the result of hostilities between the inhabitants of this settlement and other groups. Warfare at Sabi Abyad, however, seems unlikely since no bodies or victims were found inside the buildings of the Burnt Village (and as should be clear by now, it is highly unlikely that our two skeletons represent victims). If indeed hostilities resulted in the fire, people seem to have escaped from the village. Finally, it can be suggested that the settlement, or part of it, was purposely set on fire by its inhabitants.

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Actually, the latter idea is not as strange as it may at first seem. In fact, the deliberate destruction of the settlement seems to fit the evidence best: the temperatures of burning at Sabi Abyad (up to 800 °C: Aten 1996, 117) seem to have been much too high to have been caused only by the fire of construction materials (mud, wood and reeds). Due to this high temperature many of the walls in the Burnt Village were completely and heavily burnt. Of the loam buildings, the wooden poles and the reeds represented the inflammable materials. It is well known that clay structures are difficult to ignite and burn slowly (Seymour and Schiffer 1987). In an experiment with burning a reproduced Anasazi pit house Glennie and Lipe discovered that the mud-covered wooden roofing materials kept stopping the fire. To burn the structure they first had to

remove the mud and then add combustible materials such as pine needles (Glennie and Lipe 1984). With regard to Sabi Abyad, in the case of an exterior fire (due to an accident or conflict) only the roofs would have burnt: since '... the nature of fire is such that it always burns upwards, either the entire roof or some portions of it would be caught in fire but the burn would not go under the roof' (Stevanović 1997, 378). Taking the heavily burnt walls into account, this would indicate that the fire started within the buildings. As to how the fire spread unaided from one room to the other (in most instances not connected by doorways), it can be suggested that several buildings were burnt due to intentionally started interior fires. As already mentioned, no bodies (victims of hostilities) have been found inside the buildings (apart from the two skeletons). The spatial analysis has indicated a gradual abandonment of the Burnt Village. In fact large parts of the village must already have been abandoned when the fire started (making it unattractive for looting enemies, and reducing the possibilities for a domestic accident). Moreover, an intentional 'closing' of the village fits well with its abandoned nature.⁵

The deliberate burning of structures may be explained as a measure to eradicate pests, insects or disease. In this respect, Akkermans (1989a, 66) has argued that the hard-burnt interior wall and floor plaster of some of the Halafian tholoi at Tell Sabi Abyad (levels 3-1) was the result of the burning-out of the interior in order to fumigate these buildings before refilling them with grain. Of these tholoi, only a thin layer of plaster was hard-burnt, and clearly these buildings were, in contrast to those in the Burnt Village, not destroyed by the fire. In view of their destruction and abandonment it is improbable that the fire that affected the buildings in this village was due to a process of fumigation or an accident related to it. I think that it is more likely that cultural factors were involved in the intentional conflagration in the Burnt Village, and that it was connected with the abandonment of the settlement.

Several authors have found archaeological evidence that the burning of buildings may have taken place as a ritual associated with abandonment of buildings or settlements. I shall present a number of examples or parallels here, starting with a most interesting and detailed study about deliberate firing of Vinča culture buildings. Following this are examples from the Near East, gradually widening in chronological and geographical range.

Recently, Stevanović (1997) has discussed the social dynamics of house destruction at settlements of the later neolithic Vinča culture in the central Balkans (ca 5500-3800 B.C., 6230-4580 cal B.C.), especially at the Opovo site. So far, this region has not yielded a single later neolithic site with architectural remains that are completely unburnt (Stevanović 1997; Tringham 1994; 1995, 87-88; Tringham and Stevanović 1990). On the basis of ample evidence and a most detailed technical analysis of the burnt wattle-and-daub houses, Stevanović (1997) maintains that they were intentionally set on fire (and not destroyed in an accidental fire or a fire due to warfare). This has been argued on the basis of:

- the temperatures of house burning, which were too high (up to 1200 °C) to have resulted from the burning of the construction wood;
- the fire path, indicating ignition points on the floors;
- the stratigraphy of the houses, indicating that they were pulled down so as to bring them to a closure;
- the fact that there was no secondary use of the houses;
- the absence of bodies from the houses;

- the fact that complete house inventories, normally taken away at abandonment, were recovered (Stevanović 1997, 363-364).

It will have been noticed that most of Stevanović's arguments also apply to the Burnt Village. Clear fire paths and ignition points have not been distinguished, but I feel that this is mainly due to the fact that a detailed technical analysis specially aimed at identifying these marks has not been carried out.

Let us now turn to the Near East. First, at late neolithic (Halafian) Tell Arpachiyah (ca 4500 B.C., 5380-5340 cal B.C.) in northern Iraq, there are indications for deliberate ritual destruc-

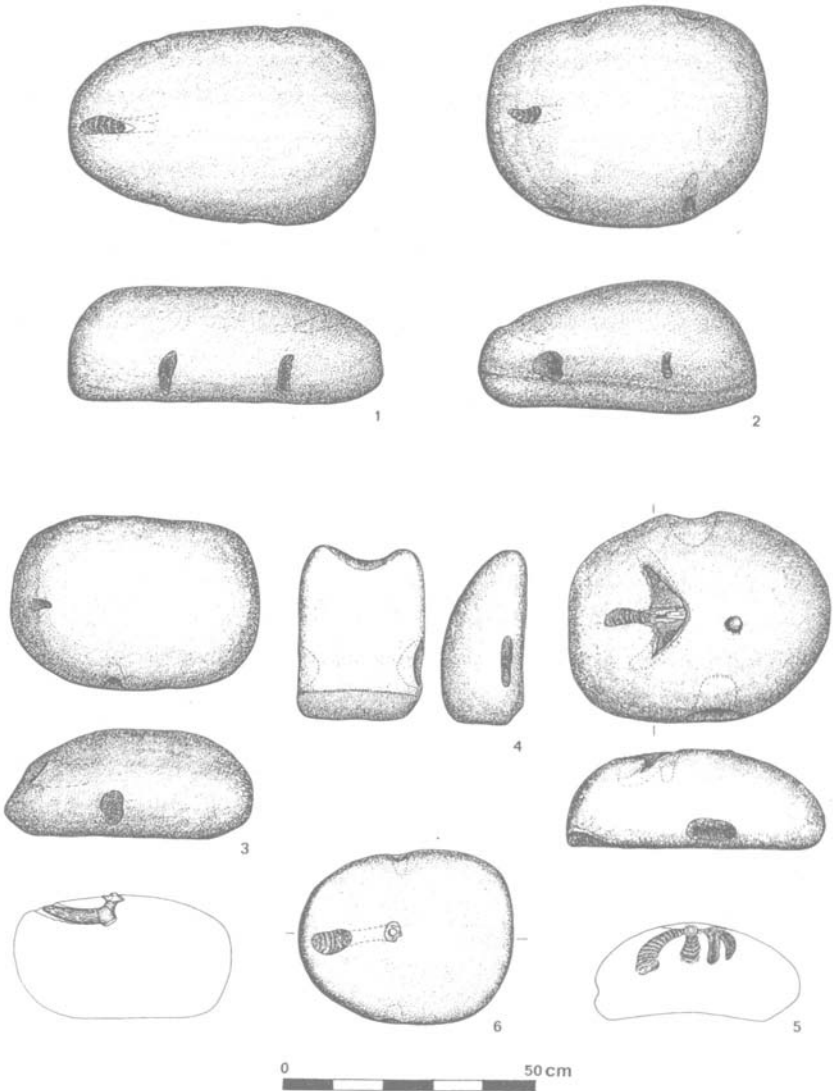


Figure 3. Selection of large clay objects from building V. No. 1, O92-350 (top and side view): room 3; no. 2, O92-351 (top and side view): room 7; no. 3, O92-355 (top and side view): room 6; no. 4, O92-343 (top and side view): room 4; no. 5, O92-353 (top and side view, section): room 7; no. 6, O92-363 (top view, section): room 7 (source: Spoor and Collet 1996, figure 8.7).

tion of architecture. Here I refer to the famous Burnt House of level TT6 at the tell (Mallowan and Rose 1935, 16, figure 3). The rather large irregular and rectangular loam building, measuring ca 20x10 m, and consisting of at least 11 rooms, was prominently situated on the prehistoric summit of the mound. Large parts of the building have been destroyed by fire, and it contained many *in situ* objects, especially on the floor of the two northern rooms. Jewellery, stone vessels, seals and sealings, stone axes, figurines, spindle whorls, and other objects were recovered. The best known type of find, however, is the pottery, especially the extremely fine polychrome plates.

Mallowan and Rose (1935, 106) attributed the destruction of the building to invading peoples of the Ubaid culture, an idea which has nowadays been rejected. Others have proposed that the burning was a ritual cremation, and it is this suggestion that led Campbell to re-examine the Burnt House (Campbell 1992, chapter 10). He argues that the famous Burnt House of level TT6 at Arpachiyah was intentionally destroyed and set on fire, since some of the finest Halaf plates seem to have been deliberately smashed and scattered (conjoining pieces were found at opposite ends of the Long Room). This practice most likely was part of the deliberate destruction of the building. There is also no evidence of looting or attempted recovery of the fine and valuable objects.

The renewed archaeological work at neolithic Çatalhöyük in Anatolia has also given possible evidence of the deliberate burning of structures in abandonment rituals. Discrete areas of burning in many buildings were discovered in the scraped North Area (tentatively dated at ca 5850 B.C., 6600 cal B.C.). There is no convincing evidence for any extensive destruction by fire across the whole building complex (the sparse occurrence of artefacts agrees with this), and the impression is that of a strictly controlled use of fire within coherent and discrete architectural contexts. 'Ritual cleansing' or 'closing-off' of these buildings has been suggested (Matthews 1996, 85-86). Other types of possible abandonment rituals at Çatalhöyük that are mentioned are apparently deliberate acts of depositing mineral sediments and figurines.

These examples (and many more could be given) suggest that the intentional firing of buildings and/or the sealing of building inventories seem to have taken place at various times and in various places. We have to find more contemporary settlements in order to verify whether intentional house conflagration was, as in the Vinča culture, indeed common practice in the late Neolithic of Syria and surrounding areas. In time and space the Burnt Village of Tell Sabi Abyad still stands alone.

After having dealt with the archaeological/depositional context of our enigmatic discovery, the remainder of this paper shall focus on the structure and meaning of the find itself, and on its relation to the fire and abandonment of the site.

Death in the Burnt Village

As has already been said, the association of the clay objects with two human skeletons, or corpses, on the roof of building V in the Burnt Village seems to indicate that we are dealing with the remains of a mortuary ritual, and not with a 'normal' burial. As yet, no neolithic cemetery has been recovered at or near Sabi Abyad. However, several infant and child graves

have been recovered from the Burnt Village (Aten 1996, 114–116, 118; Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996, 52–53, 70–72). One infant had been buried in an oven, other child burials were found below floors and along walls of the rectangular buildings, but also in open areas. They were all in a flexed position, but without standardisation in orientation. Some of the children were accompanied by grave goods, whereas others were not.

The burials reveal an interesting pattern: first, they have so far not been found in the round buildings; second, adult skeletons have so far not appeared in the Burnt Village. In view of the large area of exposure (including the most recent excavations, well over 1500 m²) this pattern may be regarded as representative.

It therefore seems that adults were buried outside the settlement, perhaps even outside the tell. Apparently, mortuary rituals related to children/infants were different from those related to adults. It may be the case that through burial children were symbolically related to rectangular buildings (and storage) and the settlement, whereas adults were related to the landscape. Our case of the two corpses surrounded by clay creatures seems to indicate that not only adults and children were treated differently, but also adults themselves. It is highly unlikely that all deceased adult persons were treated like our two persons on the roof of building V, especially since their 'burial' seems to have been linked to the intentional firing and abandonment of the settlement (see below). It therefore seems that the two persons had a special social status. In this regard it is conspicuous that they both died at a relatively old age, that is over 30 years old, making ascribed status certainly possible. As has already been remarked, the material culture from the village does not indicate status differences, but maybe the mortuary ritual should, among other things, be regarded as a special context in which important social figures were honoured in a specific way.

DEAD BODIES With regard to the mortuary ritual in the Burnt Village, I suggest that two decomposing human corpses were surrounded by loaf-shaped creatures of clay.⁶

With regard to decomposition of the corpses, the famous murals in the so-called Vulture Shrine (number VII 21) at late neolithic Çatalhöyük (ca 6200 B.C., 7130 cal B.C.) should be mentioned. In this building, murals indicate vultures with outspread wings and open beaks above headless human beings (Klotz 1997, figures 23–27). The scenes have been interpreted as representations of the ritual scavenging of human corpses by vultures (Mellaart 1967, 167–168, figure 47). According to Mellaart another wall painting (in structure VI B.1) depicts a charnel house of reeds and matting, in which the dead were laid out for excarnation (Mellaart 1967, plate 8). Moreover, many of the dead of Çatalhöyük have provided evidence of secondary treatment: sometimes bones were missing, traces of paint were occasionally applied after the flesh had decayed, and in one skull a piece of textile was found.

Evidently, at Çatalhöyük secondary treatment has been practised. At Sabi Abyad, however, final burial in the ground of the two dead persons never took place; it is as if they were left behind, as if the fire 'buried' them on the roof. It could be argued that in the Burnt Village we have the remains of a primary cremation ceremonial, that is a cremation pyre with corpses on it. Indeed cremations took place in the late Neolithic in the Near East, as evidenced by cremation pits and graves from Halafian Yarim Tepe II in northern Iraq and a mass cremation at Mersin in Anatolia (Akkermans 1989b, 85–86). However, cremations most often result in the

virtually complete disintegration of the body and skeleton, something that did not happen in the Burnt Village. Moreover, remains of the pyre have not been found (although it is admitted that these would be very difficult to recognise); the corpses seem to have been deposited directly on the roof. In a sense, however, it may still be argued that the dead were cremated, and in the final sections of this essay such a view will indeed be put forward.

LOCATION All clay objects except one were found in rooms 3, 4, 6 and 7 of building V (figure 2). The corpses were found in room 7. As has been argued, both the objects and the corpses must have been present on the flat roof of the building. A roof may in the first place have been chosen because it represented a location that could easily be seen from various directions. The objects and associated skeletons were literally raised above the ground. If they had been deposited on the ground, between the closely attached buildings, they would have been much less visible and imposing.

SHAPE One wonders why the clay objects surrounding the corpses had an undiagnostic oval shape. From the material culture from the Burnt Village we know that its inhabitants were skilled artisans in several ways. Undoubtedly, if they had wanted to they could have produced naturalistic clay animals, with heads and legs, for example. Nevertheless, in the case of the clay objects they chose to make rather coarse and undiagnostic objects, most likely just because these objects were meant to be ambiguous, and were meant to represent strange creatures.

MONSTERS The clay objects may have represented stylised animals or mythical creatures. Possibly the holes along the sides may have carried wooden sticks or the like, representing legs, or perhaps they served as grips to allow transport (Spoor and Collet 1996, 444). Furthermore, part of the horns inside at least one of the objects must have been visible from the hole at the top (Cavallo 1997b, 667).

Strange creatures or monsters are typical liminal objects, having different contrasting qualities (Schieffelin 1985, 722; Turner 1969, 95). In this respect Douglas' analysis of the role of animals in the religious thought of the *Lele* of central Africa is illuminating: 'the pangolin' (the scaly ant-eater, *M.V.*) is described by the *Lele* in terms in which there is no mistaking its anomalous character. They say: 'in our forest there is an animal with the body and tail of a fish, covered in scales. It has four little legs and it climbs in the trees' (Douglas 1967, 237). This animal, then, plays a central role in the so-called pangolin ritual of the *Lele*, which is an initiation rite. The size, appearance, liminal characteristics and location of the Burnt Village 'monsters' may suggest that they also played a central ritual role.

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HORNS Most interestingly, the horns inside at least one (but perhaps six) of the clay objects were of *wild* sheep. As Cavallo (1997a, 1997b) has noted, wild sheep is only sporadically found in the faunal spectrum of Sabi Abyad. Domesticated sheep, on the other hand, has been found in large quantities. Wild sheep may have had a special meaning, and horns of this species were probably deliberately chosen as a metonymic symbol to be used in a ritual context. Besides being a symbol for wildness, wild sheep may also be regarded as a transitional element, referring to and mediating between wild and domesticated animals, as an 'undomesticated domes-

ticate' (in etic terms), as a liminal being. Moreover, horns, like hair and nails, can be interpreted as impure, dirty and liminal elements, physically marginal, but symbolically central. Apart from being betwixt and between wild and domestic animals, they were also marginal and liminal with regard to the animal body.

Horns had, and still have, an important ritual function in near eastern societies. A most remarkable instance of the possible use of horns in a liminal and possibly ritual context has been found in Tell Aswad, located in the Balikh valley at a distance of only 15 km northwest of Sabi Abyad. Tell Aswad is a neolithic mound dating from the later seventh and early sixth millennium B.C. In Mallowan's initial excavations at the mound (Mallowan 1946, 123-126) parts of a small rectangular building consisting of several narrow and oblong rooms were unearthed. Across the threshold of the doorway to one of the rooms the skull of an ox with the horns still attached was found (Mallowan 1946, figure 2). It is possible that the skull was deposited when the building was abandoned. On the basis of this discovery Mallowan suggested that the building served as a shrine. Two low mud pedestals were interpreted as offering tables (see also Oates 1978, 118). The skull with horns would then have represented a liminal object *par excellence*, as it was literally upon a threshold, possibly dividing sacred and profane areas.

Of course the use of the *bucrania* of aurochs in neolithic Çatalhöyük (ca 6500-5750 B.C., 7490-6470 cal B.C.) should also be mentioned here. In the early levels X to V the wild bull is the most commonly represented animal among the plastered animal heads (otherwise of rams and stags) in a number of buildings. Mellaart (1967) called these buildings 'shrines', but the recent archaeological work at Çatalhöyük has indicated that we should rather regard them as houses with a strong emphasis on symbolism and domestic cults (Hodder 1999, 179; Hodder 1996; Last 1998, 361). Many of these fascinating buildings are marked by beautiful murals (depicting animals, people and geometric designs), reliefs, cut-out figures, statuettes and bulls' horns (Mellaart 1967, 97; Rice 1998, 72-84).⁷ In the early levels the *bucrania* are mostly of clay and plaster, while in the later levels VII-VI actual skulls and horns were used extensively. Furthermore, horned pillars and benches are commonly found in the buildings (of levels VII-II). In most cases the benches are located near the south end of the buildings, and set against the east wall. In a number of instances opposing pairs (sometimes as many as seven) of bulls' horns were mounted on either side of the bench (Mellaart 1967, figure 4). The horned pillars, consisting of a rectangular mud-brick pillar approximately 50 cm high with a pair of bulls' horns set at the top, occurred more frequently. They were found individually as well as in groups (Mellaart 1967, figure 9).

58 In other less known neolithic sites the horns of animals seem to have figured in ritual contexts as well. For example, in Ganj Dareh in the central Zagros of western Iran, level D (late eighth and early seventh millennium B.C.), two skulls with horns of wild sheep were attached to the walls of a small niche in a sub-floor cubicle (Smith 1976, figure 5; 1990, figure 1). In the late seventh to early sixth millennium B.C. site Zaghe, located in the Qazvin plain in northern Iran, numerous mountain goat skulls and horns were originally attached to the walls of the so-called painted building. This building is an unmistakable ritual structure with richly decorated walls not unlike more or less contemporaneous Çatalhöyük (Negahban 1979; see also Malek-Shahmirzadi 1977).



Figure 4. Selection of large clay objects from building V (modern setting, source: Spoor and Collet 1996, figure 8.6).

The example of Çatalhöyük suggests that, apart from their liminal nature, horns were also used in rituals because of their materiality and visual effect. Horns are generally perceived as impressive and powerful and visually attractive objects. Moreover, they often refer to concepts such as strength and dominance (see also Bloch 1989, 170). Through their high visibility and their power to arouse feelings (much more than, say, a rib) they are symbols that are very appropriate in rituals. The powerful visual image of horns (for Çatalhöyük: see figures 8–11, 20–22 in Klotz 1997), therefore, may have been especially used to evoke referential meanings that were transmitted in the ritual. Perhaps the oval clay objects with included horns should be regarded as ‘dominant symbols’ (Turner 1967); symbols which are compelling because they are represented in emotionally arousing imagery and contexts.

On the surface these dominant symbols, then, probably represented horned monsters or stylised wild sheep. A second, deeper, level of meaning, however, has been suggested, more hidden and cryptic and marked by liminality. By linking or separating various concepts these liminal categories would largely unconsciously have opened up ‘webs of association’, dealing with rules, norms and values about social life and death.

In the next section the mortuary ritual will be further contextualised; it will be discussed in relation to the destruction and abandonment of the Burnt Village.



Figure 5. Skull with horns of a wild sheep placed in the centre of one of the large clay objects from building V, room 7 (source: Spoor and Collet 1996, figure 8.8).

Death, fire, and abandonment The Burnt Village as a pyre

There are two main arguments for relating *death, fire and abandonment* in the village. First, the dead persons were not buried in a normal way; they were not deposited in a burial pit. If a normal funeral ritual had accidentally been disturbed by a fire, one would expect that some time after the fire the people would have come back to retrieve the corpses from the ashes in order to bury them in the ground. The fact that this never happened suggests that the bodies were cremated on the roof on purpose, most likely as part of the above suggested death ritual. Second, it seems logical to link the suggested intentional conflagration of the Burnt Village and the mortuary ritual, as these two practices must have been at least partly contemporaneous, and it is unlikely that they were not related. Moreover, it has to be taken into account that both rituals are related in the sense that they relate to death and destruction.

60 If at Sabi Abyad the death of two persons and the abandonment or 'death' of the village, due to (intentional) fire, were indeed related, we seem to be dealing with an extended 'death ritual'. Hertz (1960, 46) has argued that things must be destroyed in this world in order to enable entrance into another world. Thus, on the one hand death, fire and abandonment signify termination, but on the other hand they also denote transition: in the case of death, transition from the world of the living to the world (or afterworld) of the ancestors; in the case of fire, the unbaked clay of the buildings was transformed into baked clay. Relating transformation to abandonment is somewhat more difficult, but in a sense the village, already partially abandoned, was transformed into ruins. Moreover, as an effect of abandonment, the

dwelling place of people was re-located or transformed. As Stevanović (1997, 385) has argued, the transformed buildings may have served as foundations for new buildings as well as foundations for society, securing social and material continuity. Fire as a process for transformation, then, represents an appropriate medium and symbol to be used in a rite of passage related to death. Fire changes a substance from one state to another, and once it has been changed it does not revert to its original state. This irreversible transformation mediated by heat (cf. Collett 1993, 505–506) can be seen as a metaphor for the dramatic change from life to death.

Some tentative ‘parallels’

Archaeological and ethnographical data indicate that relations between the death of people, intentional conflagrations and abandonment are not as uncommon as one might think at first. Here I would like to mention two examples from neolithic Syria: the sites of Bouqras and Jerf el Ahmar. Traditionally the destructive conflagration of buildings in these settlements has not been explained, or has been viewed as accidental. In the following, however, I tentatively suggest (as I have argued for Sabi Abyad) that the fire in both settlements may have been intentional rather than accidental and that here, too, we may have links between death, fire and abandonment.

In the late 1970s, archaeological work at Tell Bouqras, located near the west bank of the Euphrates in eastern Syria, resulted in the discovery of neolithic architecture representing a series of rather uniform multi-roomed buildings (Akkermans et al. 1983). The mound has been dated at between 6400 and 5900 B.C. (7430–6610 cal B.C.). It is the phase III settlement of the site, which has been extensively excavated, that concerns us here.⁸ Interestingly, one of the houses in the phase III village had been destroyed by fire, and contained the remains of six human skeletons, including two, and possibly three, isolated skulls. This house 12 measured about 132 m² and consisted, like most of the other buildings, of four large oblong rooms and three smaller square rooms. The structure yielded a great deal of noteworthy small finds, such as intact stoneware and animal-shaped gypsum vessels (Akkermans et al. 1983, 344). The remains of the neighbouring house 13 had also been touched by the fire, but the other buildings were unaffected, making the fire a very localised phenomenon. The context and characteristics of the human remains in house 12 (Akkermans et al. 1983, 365–370), all affected by the fire, have been summarised in table 2.

It has been argued that the human remains were the result of a catastrophic fire, (Akkermans et al. 1983, 369), perhaps due to an accident, or an attack by hostile invaders. That, however, leaves a number of things unexplained (see below). Therefore I would like to offer a new hypothesis, and suggest that, as at Tell Sabi Abyad, at Bouqras we have the remains of the ritual closure of a building by intentional conflagration, which was, moreover, associated with the death of people. This might explain:

- why only house 12 was affected: the fire was the result of controlled and intentional fire, instead of uncontrolled and totally catastrophic fire;
- why some of the remains were recovered from fills (and not from floors as one would

expect in a systemic context): as at Sabi Abyad, some persons may have been lying on the roof during the fire, and subsequently fell down in the burnt fill;

- why there is a patterning in age (all remains are of immature or young adult persons): clear cultural choices (and not some accident) affected who was to be 'buried' in the house;
- why skulls were present (indicating that not all the remains were the result of a single accident): nothing can be said about the disturbed skull in room 6, but both skulls in the entrance room 1 were located in corners and in close proximity to entrances. This indicates that these crania were deliberately deposited in these places, indicating the symbolic importance of the building, the only structure in which skulls have been found.

Concerning the relationship between death, fire and abandonment I would also like to draw attention to the recent (1998) excavations at the pre-pottery neolithic A site Jerf el Ahmar (late tenth to early ninth millennium B.C.) on the east bank of the Euphrates in north-western Syria (Parker Pearson 1999b, 161; Stordeur 1998). Here a most fascinating discovery was made. In a large and multi-roomed circular house that had been dug into the ground a partially burnt human skeleton of an adult person was found on the floor with its arms and legs stretched out wide, and without a skull. The skeleton was covered with burnt (roof) debris. Apparently, a dead person had been deposited on the floor of a circular building (pers. comm. D. Stordeur). The burnt debris covering the body indicates that the building was set on fire after the deposition, most likely as part of a death ritual. The position of the arms and legs is very conspicuous and most peculiar, and may have had an important symbolic meaning. "The absence of the skull may indicate that the person had been decapitated, that he/she was subsequently laid down on the floor, after which the house was set on fire. Alternatively, the individual may have been buried with the head attached, which, however, was removed after the fire. Interestingly, a deposit of three human skulls was found in the remains of an exterior oven, and the presence of traces of burning suggests that they were burnt in this oven (Stordeur 1998, 18). Alternatively, it could be suggested that these skulls were taken from burnt skeletons, such as the one described above, and subsequently deposited in an oven. In any case, these skulls indicate an interrelationship between death and fire, and more generally, the evidence at Jerf el Ahmar strongly suggests a link between burial, destruction by fire and abandonment."¹⁰

Conclusions

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In this contribution I have put forward three interpretations concerning ritual practice in the Burnt Village of Tell Sabi Abyad. First, it has been argued that our 'strange objects' and human skeletons should be regarded as the remains of a funeral ceremony. It has been proposed that this ritual was marked by a number of liminal dimensions and symbols, the most important being the ambiguous character of the sheep's horns included in one of the large oval clay objects. Secondly, I have suggested that the Burnt Village was intentionally set on fire by its inhabitants. Finally, it has been suggested that the funeral ceremony (related to two persons with presumably some special status) and the intentional conflagration were linked. Fire as a

No.	Remains	Context	Sex	Age
TA/1977	skull, vertebral remains	room 1, fill	female	young adult
TB/1977	partial skeleton	room 1, floor	male?	young adolescent
TC/1977	fragmentary skeleton	room 3, fill	?	child
TD/1977	largely complete skeleton with associated foetus	room 2, floor	female	young adult
TE/1978	skull	room 1, fill	?	ca 8 years
TF/1978	skull fragments	room 6, dist.	?	?

Table 2. The skeletal remains in house 12 at Bouqras.

process of transformation may have acted as a medium and symbol for the transformation from life to death and from abandonment to settling or resettling. Consequently, death, fire and abandonment may have been elements of an extended death ritual, with the Burnt Village acting as a pyre. Transformation, then, seems to be a key concept for understanding the ritual practices. Two examples served to indicate that the suggested relations between death, fire and abandonment may also be found at other neolithic sites in the Near East. In fact, world-wide there seem to be many archaeological and contemporary examples of this linking (e.g. Allen 1891; Parker Pearson 1999a; Walker 1999).

As to the meaning of the practice of setting fire to buildings Stevanović suggests that the intentional house burning served to secure ‘... its postutilitarian visibility in order to show social and material continuity of the neolithic society’ (Stevanović 1997, 334). The fire destroyed the buildings, but at the same time transformed them into baked clay and thereby preserved them as foundations for new buildings. At Tell Sabi Abyad the remains of the walls of the level 6 Burnt Village were partially used as foundations for subsequent level 5 structures. Stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates indicate that the period between the abandonment of the level 6 settlement (ca 5200 B.C.) and the construction of level 5 features (ca 5150 B.C.) structures was not long. The material culture seems to indicate that the villagers of both levels shared the same cultural traditions. As yet, however, only level 6 gave evidence of having been destroyed by fire, thus leaving the suggested practice of ritually destroying one’s village in isolation.

As Jamous (1992, 68) has noted, ‘stressing an interpretation in terms of rites of passage means not only analysing the ritual mechanisms but also associating them with purposes beyond the rites themselves’. How, then, do we link the Sabi Abyad death ritual to the social structure? It is fair to suppose that the death of two individuals and an associated abandonment ritual were major occasions in a relatively small neolithic community. This especially holds if the two persons did indeed have a special status (see above): ‘the passing of an influential person, on whom many people depend for leadership or livelihood, is a momentous event and perhaps a calamity. It leaves a large rent in the fabric of society’ (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 80).

It has been suggested that the population related to the Burnt Village was not composed entirely of permanent residents, but had a considerable mobile or transhumant component which made use of the site for specific purposes at specific times (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997). It is tempting to argue that both the ‘nomads’ and the residents were pre-

sent during the suggested death ritual and that the destruction in a special ritual setting captured an important moment of interaction between nomads and residents. As has been proposed, that which was physically marginal or transitional (the clay 'monsters', the dead bodies, the dead settlement, the fire) was symbolically central. By linking and separating various concepts these liminal categories would, largely unconsciously, have opened up 'webs of association', dealing with rules, norms and values about social life and death. The death ritual, then, may have had an important integrative function, providing a framework for community cohesion. However, we have no way of knowing what the composition of the group of ritual participants actually was, and moreover, the integrative function of the ritual (as a theoretical concept) should not be overstated.

A number of other aspects of the death ritual remain as yet difficult to interpret. For example: if the fire in the level 6 village was indeed intentional and part of a death ritual, why have the remains of such a practice not been found in the other prehistoric levels at Sabi Abyad? How do the supposed liminal dimensions of some material elements of the ritual relate to fire as a medium of transition? And, in more detail, what was the association between the male and the female who were supposedly being burnt? Why were bovid bones included in the large clay objects? What is the symbolic relationship of these bones with the horns? Perhaps the results of future excavations will shed some light on our discovery and these questions. It is hoped that for now the interpretations presented here will contribute to a better understanding of the relations between death, fire and abandonment in the Burnt Village of late neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad.

Notes

¹ In order to adjust the dates to existing chronological frameworks, uncalibrated (B.C.) as well as calibrated dates (cal. B.C.) are mentioned, according to Stuiver et al. 1993, and Plicht 1993. The calibrated dates are according to the 1 sigma confidence level and have been rounded off, using intervals of 10 years.

² The excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, which were begun in 1986, are conducted under the auspices of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Netherlands National Museum of Antiquities), under the direction of Peter M.M.G. Akkermans. The present article has been based on my Ph.D. research concerning the functions and meanings of space in the Burnt Village (Verhoeven 1999, based on the 1991 to 1993 campaigns at Tell Sabi Abyad). That research was supported by the

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³ For the sake of convenience, horncores and horns will generally be referred to as 'horns'

(horns are almost never preserved in the archaeological record).

- ⁴ The most recently excavated areas of the Burnt Village have not been indicated on figure 2, which represents an area of about 800 m².
- ⁵ There are no indications of special (ritual) deposits or practices like the ritual breaking/smashing of ceramic vessels (Campbell 1992, chapter 10).
- ⁶ It should be noted here that rotting need not always have the wholly negative connotations that it does for us. In this regard Hertz has argued that the horror inspired by the corpse is due to its liminal nature with a wandering and potentially dangerous soul (Hertz 1960, 46).
- ⁷ Rice (1998, 72-84) speaks of 'the cult of the bull', but this is a rather simplistic view given the very rich, complex and varied symbolism at Çatalhöyük, which is marked by many elements other than wild bulls, e.g. vultures, leopards, rams, human figures, corpulent women, and an erupting volcano. Moreover, contrary to Rice's contention, following Mellaart, that

Çatalhöyük was marked by a priestly quarter, the new excavations at the site have shown that buildings with elaborate symbolism occurred in a different part of the site in high density.

- ⁸ Mainly on the basis of radiocarbon dates and the lithic industry, phase III of Bouqras has been tentatively dated in the final pre-pottery neolithic B period, but the regular occurrence of ceramic sherds in the excavations indicates that the phase is more likely to be considered as early pottery Neolithic.
- ⁹ Actually, one is reminded of the strangely bent right leg of individual TD in room 2 of house 12 at Bouqras (see figure 11 in Akkermans et al. 1983).
- ¹⁰ Interestingly, round as well as rectangular houses at Natufian/pre-pottery neolithic Mureybet (respectively phases I and III) were also destroyed by fire, but a connection with human skeletons has not been noted. Jerf el Ahmar is situated about 35 km north of Mureybet (both located on the east bank of the Euphrates), and seems to be more or less contemporary with Mureybet III.

discussion

INTERPRETING THE UNIQUE¹

Jonathan Last

Presumably it is because I work at Çatalhöyük, a site referred to in just about every publication on ritual in the prehistoric Near East, that I have been asked to respond to Verhoeven's stimulating and thoughtful paper. It is certainly welcome to see an approach to ritual practice in the prehistoric Near East from a comparative and anthropological perspective rather than one in thrall to the search for origins of much later religious practices - as the discoverer of Çatalhöyük, James Mellaart (1965a, 77) puts it, 'a cult of the Mother Goddess, the basis of our civilization'. At Çatalhöyük the debate has been dominated by the discourse of the goddess to the extent that other interpretations have been excluded, often subconsciously, so strong is this metanarrative (Meskell 1995). For instance, recent virtual reality reconstructions still depict the buildings as austere, atmospheric shrines rather than busy, smoky, dirty places of domestic work and (often rather restricted) movement. In a paper cited by Verhoeven I suggested that in order to counter this we should concentrate less on the iconography of the Çatalhöyük images and more on the mode of their experience and consumption (Last 1998). It is the need for an explicitly contextual consideration of meaning that forms my main criticism of the present paper. While a lot of detail is presented about the deposits found in the Burnt Village, the citing of various parallels from sites not necessarily greatly connected in time and space ultimately leaves a sense of vagueness, particularly in attempting to assimilate the fascinating clay 'monsters' to a widespread Near Eastern ritual interest in horns. In this contribution I wish to discuss the problems of interpreting the unique, offer some thoughts on how to get at the meaning and significance of these objects, and conclude by mentioning a recently discovered deposit from Çatalhöyük which raises similar issues.

Verhoeven stresses the uniqueness of the remains discussed at Tell Sabi Abyad and the difficulty of their interpretation, before concluding with a number of questions. In being asked to respond to a paper that does not claim closure it would be churlish to criticize its absence. Perhaps it is more appropriate to address some of the questions posed by Verhoeven - or the general issue that appears to underlie them: how can we attribute meaning to some of these practices without other, comparable discoveries?

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Archaeology in whatever guise (empirical, processual, post-processual) is based on a search for pattern. In recognizing recurrent groups of artefacts cultures were defined; in recognizing similarities between different aspects of the archaeological record meanings can be suggested (e.g. Hodder's explanation of the link between long houses and long mounds in the Neolithic of Europe: Hodder 1990, 149-155). When, however, unique objects are found, interpretation becomes more difficult, particularly since ritual is frequently defined as stereotyped or formalized behaviour, that should by definition recur. At Tell Sabi Abyad the burning, the burials and the clay objects are interpreted as elements of ritual practice but all are apparently unique at the site and in the region. If comparable deposits are not forthcoming, then we must look for contextual links with other areas of social life.

Analogies with sites more distant in time or space can be illuminating but are also dangerous if used as pigeonholes in which to slot interpretations of new discoveries. They can then, like the goddess discourse at Çatalhöyük, close down interpretation and obscure differences. *Bricolage* and the imperfections of memory were no doubt key elements of ritual in simple societies and the recurrence of ideas in different communities may simply reflect the inventiveness of the (different) traditions they drew on. Animals, as Verhoeven reminds us through Mary Douglas's study of the pangolin, are good to think with – but that thinking is immediately characterized by diversity. The ethnographer Frederik Barth (1989) has shown how ritual performances vary in configuration as they are reconstituted from the imperfections of memory and oral tradition. Following this insight, J.D. Hill (1995, 116) emphasizes how archaeological manifestations of particular symbols in different communities, even those linked by culture or kinship, could have had very different meanings, especially when rituals were irregularly spaced in time. Symbolic meanings are constructed through historical traditions, articulated contextually and reproduced only in practice. In short, we should not assume that similarities in form imply similarities in meaning.

In particular, parallels between Tell Sabi Abyad and neolithic Çatalhöyük, more than 500 years older (ca 7800 B.P.) and a great distance away, should not be drawn too closely. There is little evidence that people's relationships with houses or with the dead were conceived in the same way. Architecture at Çatalhöyük is rather stereotyped – houses have similar groundplans and orientations (there is no mixing of round and rectilinear structures as at Tell Sabi Abyad) and there is an emphasis on the separation of rooms and the structural independence of the house, with no party walls between buildings. There are also usually burials within houses, though numbers vary considerably. Combined with the elaboration of walls and benches referred to by Verhoeven, one gets the sense of a close symbolic linkage between the personnel and architecture of the household. Each house at Çatalhöyük, though perhaps constructed to a blueprint, acquired its own identity over time, through sequences of burials or decoration. And the material house appears to stand in a metaphorical relationship to the household which inhabited it. *The picture I get of Tell Sabi Abyad is rather different.*

Similarly, closure rituals were apparently practised at Çatalhöyük but burning was not necessarily a major part of them; recovery or removal of structural posts (perhaps simply for re-use) and of mouldings or bucrania attached to the walls are also seen: a kind of decommissioning. The large quantities of finds reported from the Burnt Village are not usually found in Çatalhöyük houses, where floors and fills are generally rather clean. One level excavated by Mellaart was severely burnt in a manner akin to the Burnt Village but elsewhere structures could be patched up and continue in use after partial destruction by burning.

While diversity between sites and regions is to be expected and emphasized, rather than subsumed in comparative analysis, structure may emerge from long-term historical narratives within a region because of the nature of social reproduction. Distinctions like those between Çatalhöyük and Tell Sabi Abyad are evident elsewhere in the Near East too. For instance, in the Neolithic of Cyprus the aceramic site at Khirokitia, with its stereotyped circular architecture and burials under floors, contrasts with the greater architectural freedom and extra-mural burials of late neolithic sites like Ayios Epiktitos Vrysi and Sotira Teppes. These patterns may denote long-term changes in the symbolic elaboration of the individual household *vis-à-vis* the com-

munity. It can be argued that this problem, the paradox of household or lineage independence and simultaneous interdependence, was a universal concern of neolithic societies, representing, as they do, a series of experiments in communal living.

However, even if widespread neolithic societies did share a common set of problems it would be wrong to assume a common symbolic discourse. Complex meanings attached to houses and domestic space are widely attested both ethnographically and archaeologically, unsurprisingly because the house is ideally suited to express symbolically the relationships between humans (as both social beings and physical bodies) and the cosmos. At Tell Sabi Abyad, the architectural context of the bodies and clay objects is not explicitly considered. Why are the burials associated with the small rectangular cells, which are seen as storage spaces, and not with the supposed dwellings? Why are the clay objects spread more widely through these rooms than the burials? I would like to see more on the evidence for how these particular spaces were used. It seems, however, that the bodies were not placed in the most significant architectural space, nor are the clay 'monsters' mere grave goods. Could it be that this is not simply a mortuary ritual to honour dead leaders; even that the humans are not the most significant element of the deposit? For my own interest, at least, I wish to focus mainly on the significance of these 'monsters'.

Looking a little more closely at these clay objects might lead us to further question the parallels cited with Çatalhöyük and elsewhere, because of both the context and form of the objects. At Çatalhöyük, installations fixed on architectural elements looked inward to the household,

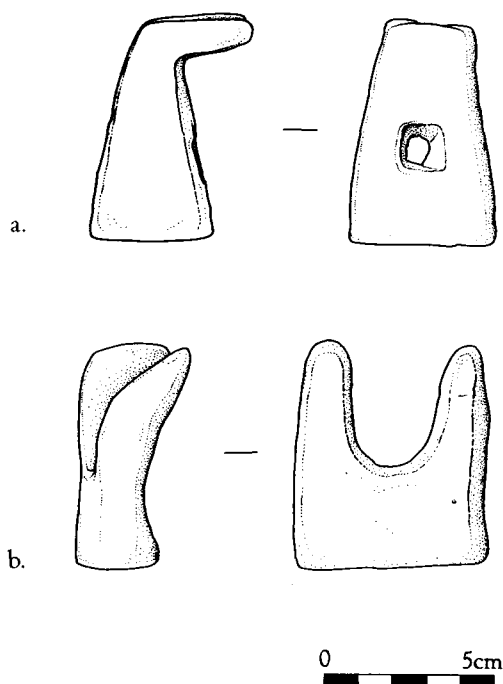


Figure 1. Fired clay objects from deposit 2952, Çatalhöyük West. (a) potstand-shaped object with two prongs and square perforation; (b) horned object (drawings by Jon Swogger).

whereas the Tell Sabi Abyad monsters were portable and ended up on a roof. Moreover, many of the Çatalhöyük decorations visibly emphasize striking elements like horns, while here this 'powerful visual image' seems to be hidden and actively denied by the clay 'monsters' (though it is not clear to me whether the horns would originally have projected through the holes). This combination of ambiguity and concealment may be the key to understanding these objects.

At one level they appear to be items whose meaning was restricted to those allowed to pick up and handle them. Elements of clear symbolic importance – for instance the distinction between bovid and sheep inclusions or wild versus domestic, as well as the choice of particular body parts, are not visible to the uninitiated observer. Hence the purpose of these objects appears to transcend a mortuary display. Hidden knowledge of important ritual items can be an important source of power in simple societies, often linked to initiation rituals and exchange strategies (Weiner 1992).

On the other hand their smooth, rounded external form may evoke meaning by recalling, perhaps, human crania. Symbolic manipulation of skulls is another common feature of near eastern ritual but crucially it has antecedents in this region at pre-pottery neolithic sites like Jerf el Ahmar, and Qermez Dere in northern Iraq (Watkins 1990). Maybe the secret knowledge at Tell Sabi Abyad is that inside these 'crania' is found not human bone but animal – and wild animal at that: the paradox of the nature-culture opposition.

These objects may therefore have held various levels of meaning. On another level their neutral shape also left them open to the contextual ascription of meaning through participation in particular rituals. They appear like stylized, formless bodies, with smooth clay 'flesh' and internal bones, waiting for meaning to be constructed through performance.

This complex range of possibilities suggests to me that the objects and their depositional context imply more than a simple mortuary rite. I have proposed that apparently 'unique' rituals may reflect the diversity of symbolic thought in pre-literate societies, that meanings are constructed through historically situated practice and that the hidden characteristics of the clay objects from Tell Sabi Abyad may imply differential access to their meanings. For some reason this hidden knowledge was ritually destroyed. Knowing too little to interpret these objects further, I wish instead to offer a comparative example that shows how superficially strange combinations of features can acquire a kind of logic when situated historically, without requiring a retreat to generalized comparisons or concepts like liminality and transformation.

My example concerns the discovery of a deliberately placed deposit of 'horned' clay objects at the early chalcolithic site of Çatalhöyük West in 1998. These had been placed in the top part of the fill of a building likely to be a few hundred years later than the Burnt Village. Only the extreme south-west corner of the structure was exposed during this work so conclusions about the role of these objects in a closure ritual remain tentative.

The *in situ* finds and those from the layers above include more than 20 clay objects which can loosely be termed 'potstands', some animal bone fragments, two miniature unfired clay vessels, a complete, small lugged bowl and a large part of a finely burnished carinated vessel.

Potstands are relatively common at Çatalhöyük West, particularly in the later phase (Mellaart 1965b, fig. 10), but all those recorded previously are large, coarse and decorated with incised geometric designs. None of this type was included in our group of objects, which were much smaller and mostly (80%) have two prongs rather than the single lip seen on the large potstands.

The objects represent a series of forms, varying from those resembling the potstand form (figure 1a) to others with low bodies and widely spaced vertical 'horns' (figure 1b), clearly useless as potstands. Two of the objects are true miniatures, no more than 25 mm high. There is a wide diversity of form but nevertheless also a logic in the development from a copy of a functional artefact to a stylized pair of horns.

That these variations in form are not random is clear from the pairing of many of the objects and the deliberate nature of their placement, seen in some of the other items too. For instance, the two unfired pots were paired, one inverted and the other the right way up. In the active symbolic construction of oppositions and linkages, perhaps we see people marking a liminal point between the 'death' of one house and the 'birth' of another, or constructing in the diversity of these objects an analogy of the relationships between the human inhabitants of the household. The performance involved in the placed deposition of so many objects was clearly important.

The 'horned' form of these objects recalls the bucrania of the neolithic houses at Çatalhöyük and later 'horns of consecration', such as that from an EBA shrine at Beycesultan (Lloyd and Mellaart 1962). However, in comprehending their meaning we need to consider how they fit the broader context of early chalcolithic material culture and the transformations that occurred after the Neolithic. Most notable is a decrease in the elaboration of the house (through multiple plasterings, wall paintings, mouldings, burials, etc.) and a corresponding increased elaboration of pottery (in terms of forms, functions and decoration). I have suggested elsewhere (Last 1998) that this new focus on portable objects reflects a concern with the communication of meaning and establishment of relationships beyond the household, and even between different communities. Yet the change from the inward-focussed neolithic household does not seem to have involved great rupture and upheaval; architectural traditions, for instance, appear to show a good deal of continuity. Objects like our horned 'potstands', despite their outwardly weird appearance, display a certain logic when placed in this historical context. Potstands were household objects, often placed around the fire, a central part of domestic life. At the same time they were portable and functionally associated with the new symbolic medium, pottery. Linking model potstands (and miniature vessels) with the form of the old household symbol, the bucranium, may have been a means of making new practice acceptable, creating something new and striking yet explicitly linked to the traditions of the past.

So perhaps the Tell Sabi Abyad 'monsters' might also result from the playing out of a similar symbolic logic over the long term, even stretching back to the pre-pottery Neolithic. Through the performance of periodic rituals in the context of a diversity of symbolic thought the Çatalhöyük objects were created within the web of associations between the material categories of 'potstand' and 'bucranium', initially puzzling in form and function but comprehensible within a historically situated analysis of long-term change. It is perhaps through understanding the articulation of such material traditions in practice that Verhoeven's intriguing discussion could be fleshed out.

Note

I am grateful to Catriona Gibson for a number of helpful suggestions.

Stuart Campbell

Because of the climate and the nature of the sites, most archaeological material in the Near East has survived the passage of time in a reasonably well preserved state (at least, until recent decades). It remains true, however, that occasional deposits with exceptional preservation provide a level of detail that opens up new areas of interpretation to archaeologists. The classic examples are, perhaps, Çatalhöyük and Nahal Hemar. The 'Burnt Village' at Sabi Abyad is proving to be another where the new evidence is leading to a series of publications offering interpretations of the settlement which will have profound implications for our perception of the late Neolithic in northern Mesopotamia. This stimulating article amplifies one area of discussion, attempting to bring some of the most striking features of the 'Burnt Village' into a single, unified interpretation. Importantly, this unified interpretation draws on a range of contemporary approaches to understanding the past and, given the tendency of near eastern archaeologists to function in a degree of isolation from wider archaeological trends, this article is to be particularly welcomed. Inevitably it can be criticised in certain areas and it might have gone further in others but these comments start from the basis of welcoming, enjoying and being stimulated by this piece of work.

There is an encouraging emphasis on understanding processes of deposition and site formation as providing the foundation for the interpretation. There are still some questions left unanswered, however, even in the larger publication that complements this study (Verhoeven 1999). It would have been useful to have more detail on the pattern of burning which might have helped to support the argument of deliberate firing – for example, were there concentrations of ash or charcoal where fuel might have been placed within the houses? It would have been very useful to see more comparison with the abandonment of other levels of the site. Are entire levels of the site being abandoned at once or gradually? Indeed, since the concept of 'architectural levels' is largely an artificial archaeological construct that over-simplifies the process of settlement development, is the 'Burnt Village' a completely different type of abandonment to any other at the site, in which the entire settlement was abandoned at once? There is also a degree of ambiguity about the exact position of the skeletons that it might have been useful to see clarified. On p.51 'the high fragmentation and the circumstances of deposition' make it difficult to see articulation of the upper body. It would have been useful to have a much clearer picture of what exactly these circumstances of deposition were. Can they be related to the exact position of the body in the sequence of building collapse or to post-depositional disturbance? Although rather specific and pedantic, these are exactly the sort of details that need to be documented to provide full backing for interpretation.

The clay objects on the roof are fascinating and the interpretation given here, that they are stylised animals, is attractive and intriguing. In a society as rich in visual symbolism (seen especially through the pottery) one should not be surprised at the presence of stylised representational objects. The concealed bones within the clay objects, although in one case visible to the outside, are suggestive and the use of the term 'monster' both evocative and something that I shall make use of. It is difficult, however, to follow the argument made that they invoke the liminality of horns and of wild sheep. This *may* be true, and the parallels made

elsewhere in the Near East are correct, but there is only a single example to support it. Why not base the interpretation on the bovid bones that are present in the only other example of a clay object which is known to contain bones?

The discussion of the bodies in the 'Burnt Village' in the wider context of Near Eastern prehistory is sensible and makes some previously under-emphasised suggestions, particularly on Bouqras. There are a few supplementary comments. To Bouqras and Jerf el Ahmar, the example from Nemriq in north Iraq should be added. There a skeleton was found within a burnt round house, apparently holding a finely carved bird figurine (Kozłowski 1997). Previously interpreted as an attempt to save a ritual object from a burning building, it might make better sense to see it as another example of the association of death and burning. On a different note, it is true that generally in the late 6th and early 5th millennia adult skeletons are not found buried within settlements. It is worth adding that where they do occur, they are very frequently in unusual contexts and often not in graves. Thus at in the level XI of Yarim Tepe, probably only slightly earlier than the 'Burnt Village', there are partially articulated bodies within buildings with unusual architectural traits (Munchaev and Merpert 1981, 84; Merpert and Munchaev 1987, 9). Similarly at Tell Hassuna, in level III, there are two adult skeletons, one lacking a skull, thrown into a grain bin and two groups of human bones, lacking a skull between them, in wall cavities in opposite corners of a room in level IV (Lloyd and Safar 1945, 267 and 274). These examples do not involve burning but they do fit into a pattern of disposal of adult remains by means other than burial in a conventional grave. One aspect of this seems to relate the dead to buildings within a settlement. At Yarim Tepe and Hassuna this may also be as part of an abandonment phase and it may be a broader mechanism of embedding aspects of individuals directly into the history of a settlement. Whether, as is suggested in this article, these individuals had special status is harder to argue. If they held specific important social positions, was the formal abandonment of the settlement triggered by their deaths? Or were they sacrificed? Instead, it may be that the formal abandonment (and renewal) of the village determined the timing and the dead were simply the most recently deceased who represented a broader, perhaps generic, category of 'ancestor'.

This brings me to the more major problem I have with this article. This is that it is a rather static interpretation, largely considering a specific set of events that led to a specific set of archaeological deposits. It deals interestingly with relationships between cultural categories and comments usefully on the presence of liminal objects and symbols. There is much less said, even in the final section, in a broader perspective of process and change. The event reconstructed was the product of the past of the village and something that would become part of its history. This is especially important in terms of the succeeding settlement sequence. Was the settlement immediately reoccupied or was there a significant gap? The burning of the village must have been very visible at the time and must have modified the social meanings and associations of that place – especially in the context of any personal relations with the deceased that burnt with it. It is not just that, as suggested in the article, this may have integrated permanent residents and an inferred transhumant component. The event may have reconfigured in a profound way a landscape that was socially as well as physically constructed. This is a period when settlement was still sparse and where the man-made imprint on the landscape was relatively slight. Events such as the burning of the level 6 village would res-

onate with subsequent occupants of the site to a greater or lesser degree and alter their perceptions of the locality in which they lived.

There are perhaps two very general challenges an article such as this one sets out. The first challenge is the detail of the reconstruction. Is the argument logical? Does it make too many assumptions? There are quibbles that can be made on these grounds where it is unclear whether the formation processes have been fully integrated into the argument or where individual details, such as the presence of a single wild sheep skull, are used to construct arguments which then underpin later conclusions. I don't have any great difficulty in going along with the conclusions presented despite these quibbles, because they move the discussion in interesting directions and should stimulate the reassessment of other, less well preserved evidence. The second challenge is broader, and is one that this article on its own can pose but cannot address. Near Eastern prehistory has, over the past decades, produced increasing quantities of evidence relating to the Neolithic. Much of the interpretation of the evidence, however, has addressed subsistence, economic and technological developments. It is only relatively recently that social developments are starting to be accorded the same focus that they have for the past two decades in other parts of the world. Small pockets of more intense social interpretation are starting to emerge but the challenge is to fit them together into a new understanding of a Near Eastern Neolithic and articles such as this one are beginning to make significant moves in that direction.

STRUCTURE, DIVERSITY AND CONTEXT IN NEOLITHIC RITUAL PRACTICE: A REPLY TO STUART CAMPBELL AND JONATHAN LAST¹

Marc Verhoeven

I am most grateful for the critical, yet on the whole positive and inspiring reactions of Stuart Campbell and Jonathan Last, who offer ample opportunities for an archaeological dialogue. Besides specific questions, they raise a number of important issues which have a general theoretical significance. Last, moreover, presents some new and most interesting data on horned objects from Çatalhöyük West, whereas Campbell comes up with some additional and intriguing examples of the relations between death, fire and abandonment in the late Neolithic of the Near East. In my reply I wish to start with the specific issues before I move on to more general topics.

Fire and abandonment Both Campbell and Last would have liked to see more detailed contextual data about the death ritual in the level 6 Burnt Village. This gives me the opportunity to add some extra detail to the paper. The questions about context of Campbell and Last concern three subjects: fire and abandonment; the position of the skeletons and the large clay objects or 'monsters'; and the function of building V. In the following I will deal with each of these topics separately.

As yet, the violent fire which largely destroyed the level 6 village remains an isolated feature at prehistoric Tell Sabi Abyad. An analysis of the processes of abandonment of one of the later villages at Sabi Abyad (level 3) has indicated gradual abandonment in a 'normal' man-

ner (Verhoeven 1999, 198–202). Most likely this also holds for the other excavated prehistoric levels at the tell. In level 6, the lowest, ca. 10 cm thick part of the deposits in the various burnt rooms were typically directly situated on the floors and consisted nearly always of fine and powdery black ashes. It has been suggested that these ashes were the burnt residue of the roof cover, but it cannot be ruled out that they represent the remains of fuel that was placed in the rooms. As yet this remains obscure, but if this suggestion is correct it would considerably strengthen the arguments for a deliberate fire. Anyway, I do think that such ignition points must have been present (not necessarily in every room), as it is hard to conceive how the fire spread unaided from one room to the other, and for other reasons mentioned in the paper.

Campbell wonders about the fate of the level 6 villagers, and about the relations between levels 6 and 5. As indicated in the paper, level 5 was stratigraphically and chronologically closely related to level 6 and the material culture of both levels was related. However, there were differences too. For instance, with regard to level 6, the level 5 architecture is of a more irregular and domestic nature, with many ovens in and around small rooms (Verhoeven and Kranendonk 1996, figure 2.17). What do these relations and differences between both levels (which are indeed artificial archaeological constructs as Campbell argues) suggest about the relationships between the social groups inhabiting these small villages? As yet, this question cannot be answered on the basis of our data, but a number of possibilities regarding the fate of the level 6 people can be suggested: the level 6 people left the tell and settled somewhere else; they left the tell and became true ‘nomads’; they left the tell, but returned; or they stayed at the tell and built the level 5 village.

Skeletons and monsters Concerning the exact position of the skeletons some additional remarks can be made. With regard to the female skeleton Aten (1996, 116), who studied the human remains, notes that the fact that the remains were lying in anatomical order ‘... makes it impossible for the bones to have been deposited after the fire, since at the temperatures concerned (see below) most if not all connection between the various bones would have been lost. In this respect it seems that either the body had already been deposited in the debris before the onset of the fire that devastated building V (which is highly unlikely in view of the stratigraphic and contextual evidence) or that this person fell down from the roof when building V collapsed in the fire. In the latter case, however, the clearly intentionally flexed position of the legs must have been fixed, either by a strong rigor mortis (which only occurs within a short period of time within the first three days after death) or by a bondage. Merely macerated corpses would be likely to have been broken into parts during the collapse of the building’.

As indicated in the paper, the male remains were also lying in anatomical order, and like the female, this person must have fallen from the roof of building V when this structure collapsed (Aten 1996, 118).

The context of the skeletons thus seems to indicate that two human bodies were situated on the roof above room 7. Like the skeletons, the ‘monsters’ surrounding these bodies, in view of their position high in the fill and amidst or above charred roof beams, must have been located above rooms 7 and 3. The ‘monsters’ found in room 4 of building V and in room

11 of building IV are located somewhat peripherally (see figure 2); it can be suggested that they originally stood above room 3 of building V, and that due to the collapse of the roof they fell respectively to the East and North of this room. Interestingly, both 'monsters' found in room 6 were not found high in the fill; they were situated on the floor, beneath the burnt remains of roof beams (see table 1). These objects were not directly associated with the 'burial', although they were found in its immediate vicinity. Were they stored there for some other reason, or were they in another way linked to the ritual?

Last suggests that the 'monsters' may have represented human crania, and points out that in the pre-pottery Neolithic of the Near East human skulls must have had a special meaning, given their regular manipulation in ritual contexts (e.g. plastering and deposition in pits: Bienert 1991). This suggestion and the proposal that the Sabi Abyad clay skulls referred to a nature : culture opposition is interesting, but as yet there is no evidence for such a view. Moreover, it should be noted that the nature : culture *opposition*, a favourite of many western researchers, may have made no sense in a non-western and presumably holistic society like that at Sabi Abyad (see e.g. Descola and Palsson 1996). Rather, we should discuss *differences* between nature and culture, or between domesticated and undomesticated animals.

Last moreover wonders if the horns included in the 'monsters' would have projected through the holes. When one examines figure 3, object no. 6, and figure 5, it becomes clear that this horn must have been partially visible. Interestingly though, the people making these objects chose a '... combination of ambiguity and concealment...', as Last elegantly puts it, instead of simply fitting the horn on top. In fact, and as has been argued, this ambiguity seems to be one of the main characteristics of the Burnt Village ritual.

Campbell, however, finds the argument about the liminality of the sheep's horn difficult to follow, and asks why the interpretation has not been based on the hidden bovid bones. Liminality has been suggested on the basis of the ambiguous nature of the horn, which is twofold. First, as has been argued, the *material* horn is of a liminal nature (belonging to the body, but also external to it: it can fall off). Second, the animal represented seems to be of a transitional nature, as it is a *wild* sheep, an 'undomesticated domesticate'. These arguments, thus, are based on 'internal data'.

As regards the bovid bones in one of the 'monsters', Last may be right in arguing that secrecy and hidden knowledge were of importance during the Burnt Village ritual. This is an interesting suggestion, as it raises the issue of differential access to knowledge, i.e. power. On the basis of the material culture, including architecture, status differences or the presence of social hierarchy in the Burnt Village community cannot be postulated. However, the absence of such evidence does not mean that differences in social position were not present.

First, I expect that the performance/orchestration of the death ritual, presumably while the whole community was present, was carried out by a few members of the community only. These 'ritual specialists' or 'priests' may have been persons with secret liturgical knowledge, and they may have had a special status within the Burnt Village community.

Second, as has been suggested, our two skeletons may have been persons of some social importance. Campbell questions this, and suggests that the death of these two persons may have been incidental to the abandonment of the Burnt Village. This possibility can not be

ruled out, but I rather think that, the other way round, the death of the two persons triggered the conflagration. The fact that there were two bodies of different sexes and of more or less the same age may not be coincidental. As Campbell suggests, they were perhaps sacrificed. Or perhaps one important person had died and another related important person was sacrificed?

A third possible indication for status differences may be implied by the economic system. Obviously, there must have been mechanisms for dealing with the storage and redistribution of the stored products in the rectangular buildings (see 'The archaeological context') and I would expect that only some persons, perhaps the 'priests' referred to above, controlled this system.

Building V Spatial analysis has demonstrated that building V was mainly used for storage of pottery and baskets, domestic implements and administrative items. Rooms 1-4, 6-7 and 9-10 have been designated storage rooms. Rooms 5 and 8 seem to have served as multifunctional activity areas, mainly used for the preparation of food, bone and wood and for stone working and spinning. Room 7, in which the 'burials' were found, was a rather special room in the Burnt Village. In this room, besides pottery and other domestic objects, tokens (small and simple geometric clay objects, most likely acting as counting devices: Schmandt-Besserat 1992) and clay sealings with stamp seal impressions seem to have been stored. On the basis of these administrative items room 7 has been reconstructed as an 'archive'. Rooms 3 and 6, above and in which some of our 'monsters' must have been situated, also contained such items, be it in smaller numbers, and also seem to have functioned as archives. Only one other building in the Burnt Village, building II, contained similar archives (room 6, and possibly rooms 1 and 7).

On the basis of the above it could be argued that the presence of the 'burial' above room 7 and of the 'monsters' in room 6 and above rooms 3 and 7 of building V may have had something to do with the special character of these rooms. As indicated in the 'Conclusions', it has been suggested that the population related to the Burnt Village consisted of a considerable transhumant component. Indeed, the existence of this component has been postulated mainly on the basis of an analysis of the function of the clay sealings found in the archives (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997). The social structure of the Burnt Village community, then, seems to have consisted of 'nomads' and residents, forming *one* social group, related through kinship and closely interacting on several levels. It has been argued that the rectangular storage buildings and the circular dwellings were functionally and symbolically related to respectively the nomads and the residents (Verhoeven 1999). According to this model the residents were mainly living in the circular houses, whereas the nomads were linked to the rectangular storage buildings, where their (sealed) belongings were stored and looked after by the residents. The location of our 'burial' and 'monsters' above archives, then, can perhaps be explained as a symbolic act of relating nomads and residents by referring to the spaces and objects therein which tied them together economically, i.e. archives with sealings and tokens. Rather than the roofs of the circular dwellings, the roof of building V above the archives would have provided a means for establishing such a link.

General themes Now I want to turn to some more general points. First, to Campbell's taste the interpretation of the ritual in the Burnt Village is somewhat too static; he would have liked a broader perspective. In an earlier study I have presented such a broader perspective, in which I explicitly related the ritual to social structure, and in which I compared level 6 with the later level 3 at Sabi Abyad (Verhoeven 1999, 201–232). In that study, I suggested that there might be relationships between death, fire and abandonment (Verhoeven 1999, 61–64), but I did not analyze them in detail. In the paper discussed here, I have taken up this issue again, as I wanted to examine these links in more detail but it was not my intention to provide a broader perspective as well. Campbell's suggestions about the modifications of social meanings due to the burning of our level 6 village, however, are most useful and should indeed be part of such a broader perspective. To his suggestions (and to my previous work) I would like to add that apart from social functions and meanings the death ritual must have had other and perhaps more important cosmological dimensions. Obviously, the ritual in the Burnt Village was not only an interaction between people, but most likely also (in a more holistic perspective) an interaction between people and transcendental beings, such as ancestors, spirits and gods (e.g. Barraud and Platenkamp 1990; de Coppet and Iteanu 1995).

Last argues that the '... range of possibilities...' with regard to function and meaning of the 'monsters' and their context implies '... more than a simple mortuary rite'. My reaction to this remark is twofold. First, 'possibilities': it is not difficult to sum up numerous possibilities with regard to the ritual. However, the fact that there are such possibilities does not mean that they existed in the past. What I have tried to do is to argue for *some* possibilities, based on the archaeological evidence. Second, I do not think that the Sabi Abyad death ritual was a 'simple mortuary rite'. On the contrary, I view the ritual as an intricate cultural performance in which not only death, but also aspects of life (e.g. identity) and the supernatural (e.g. ancestors and gods) were at stake. Moreover, not only the death of two persons was dealt with, but also the destruction and transformation of an entire village. The ritual was far from simple; rather it must have been highly complex in all its linkages: e.g. between nomads and residents, between round and rectangular architecture, and between death, fire and abandonment.

Last furthermore finds general concepts like liminality and transformation too general, and opts for an historically and contextually informed analysis. I agree that concepts like liminality and transformation are general, but this is exactly their usefulness (the same goes for Last's secrecy theme). To me, they offer a 'frame of reference', as Binford would nowadays say: a theoretical body of knowledge with which to *start* to interpret the past. For example: Douglas' and Turner's work about liminality has helped me to interpret the Burnt Village ritual. Obviously, such concepts need to be contextualized, but this is what I tried to do in my paper.

A very important point raised by Last regards that of interpreting the unique and the use of 'parallels'. As he suggests, I have had great difficulties with interpreting the unique and strange phenomenon now labelled a death ritual at Sabi Abyad. As yet, no similar context of skeletons and 'monsters' has been reported for the Neolithic of the Near East, and as stated in the 'Introduction', my paper is a first attempt to unravel the meaning of an intriguing discovery. Last's main criticisms are a supposed lack of an explicitly contextual consideration of

meaning and the use of parallels not necessarily greatly connected in time and space. Campbell, however, writes that my discussion of the ritual '... in the wider context of near eastern prehistory is sensible'. I like to think that too, but I understand Last's objections and as they have a general theoretical significance, I wish to deal with them in some detail.

First of all let me make clear how I look upon the use of parallels (or comparisons, or analogies). Evidently, parallels prove nothing in themselves, and arguments have to be based on 'internal data'. The ethnographic and archaeological 'parallels' used in the paper should be regarded as 'media for thought' rather than as models to be either fitted to, or tested against, the archaeological data (Tilley 1996, 2). With regard to the use of analogy in the archaeological study of death, Parker Pearson (1999, 21) rightly notes that 'by looking at the diversity of the human response to death, archaeologists trying to interpret the past can attempt to slough off ethnocentric presuppositions'. I have used anthropological and archaeological sources not as true parallels, but rather as the already mentioned frames of reference. As no excavated sites contemporary to the Burnt Village are known I have chosen to make comparisons with neolithic sites from other areas and of different dates. Let me explain why.

I do not assume that '... similarities in form imply similarities in meaning', but I do feel that there was an underlying structure in late neolithic ritual practices in the Near East. Within such a general structure various practices occurred. To use a metaphor: within a language there are dialects. For instance: for the earlier pre-pottery neolithic B period there is a large body of evidence which seems to indicate the existence of a ritual system over a vast region, i.e. from Israel to southern Anatolia to northwest Iraq. Here I mainly refer to the occurrence of relatively large and elaborated communal and ritual buildings or 'temples', anthropomorphic statues, and special post mortem treatment of human skulls (see e.g. Bienert in press). These elements appear in different parts of the Near East, but in different fashions. For instance, cult buildings in the Levant lack the elaborate decoration as seen in such buildings in Anatolia, where large pillars were beautifully decorated with geometric patterns, animals and stylized human features (Hauptmann 1993; Schmidt 1999). These rather spectacular ritual features largely disappear in the late (pottery) Neolithic, when a different set of material culture emerges. I would argue that the ideological system changed, too, and that this can be observed in the different ritual repertoire. Some ritual practices (e.g. the 'skull cult') largely disappeared, whereas it seems that others continued, albeit in a different form. The ritual use of horns, for instance, seems to have become more popular.

Last is left with a sense of vagueness concerning my discussion of the ritual use of horns in various parts of the late Neolithic (i.e. in Aswad, Çatalhöyük, Ganj Dareh and Zaghe). It will be clear by now that I believe that on a structural/general level horns played an important symbolic role in late neolithic rituals.³ Within the ritual repertoire they may perhaps be regarded as 'dominant symbols' (maybe like the skulls and statues in the preceding pre-pottery neolithic period). However, this is not to say that they had the same meaning everywhere. In fact, I fully agree with Last when he writes that 'symbolic meanings are constructed through historical traditions, articulated contextually and reproduced only in practice'. I use 'parallels' like Çatalhöyük, then, to get access to the general/structural level, in order to open up (and not to close down!) interpretations in a contextual analysis. The comparisons that I have used have helped me to get a better grip on the Sabi Abyad material. For exam-

ple, my arguments for intentional firing would have been less structured if I had not included Stevanović's work about fire and abandonment in Vinča sites. Furthermore, and the other way round, by comparing Sabi Abyad with for example Jerf el Ahmar and Bouqras, new hypotheses about ritual practices at these sites could be formulated.³

I disagree with Last when he suggests that I have not dealt with the Burnt Village ritual in an explicitly contextual way. I do not use context in a narrow sense, i.e. as a 'micro-level analysis', as Last seems to do, but as a concept that has various levels, from micro (e.g. a site) to macro (e.g. a region). Throughout the paper I have explicitly paid attention to context and formation processes. Moreover, I have tried to interpret the unique at Tell Sabi Abyad by using general concepts like liminality and transformation and by extending the context to include other neolithic sites, thus moving from a micro to a macro level and back again.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Eugene Ball for a number of useful corrections.

² It is interesting to note that in all the investigated cases these horns are of domesticated or to be domesticated animals (i.e. aurochs, wild sheep, wild goat), and not of undomesticated or wild animals like the gazelle.

³ Evidence for artificial cranial deformation of all of the skulls found in house 12 at Bouqras seems to be yet another indication of the ritual significance of this burnt building (Meiklejohn et al. 1992).

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