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Research Article

# A Queer Feminist Perspective on the Early Neolithic Urfa Region: The Ecstatic Agency of the Phallus

Emre Deniz Yurttaş
Koç University, Archaeology and History of Art, Rumeli Feneri Yolu 34450 Sarıyer, Istanbul 34450, Türkiye

## Abstract

The archaeological settlements of the Early Neolithic Urfa region in Türkiye have garnered academic and public interest since the 1990s due to their large-scale stone architecture and rich iconography, particularly featuring phallic imagery. While mainstream narratives suggest a male-centred society in the region, feminist and queer theory approach such interpretations with a critical eye. By challenging traditional 'male-centred society' narratives through the lens of queer and feminist theories, this study offers a critique of existing methodologies that fail to historicize archaeological data. By recontextualizing the phallic iconography through the lens of sexuality, this study proposes a new interpretation: the phallus was not a symbol of male power, but an agent facilitating spiritual transcendence, enabling ecstatic experiences and serving as a conduit between the material and spiritual realms.

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## Introduction

Archaeology, being a male-dominated discipline (Heath-Stout *et al.* 2023, 157; Moser 2007, 259), has traditionally centred around a heteronormative core that privileges heterosexual identities while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Dowson 2000, 162–3; 2007, 102). Inspired by feminist approaches (Dowson 2007, 90), queer archaeology has emerged as a pivotal tool for challenging the normative structures embedded in the practice (Croucher 2005, 611). As a matter of fact, queer archaeology aims not to uncover the origins of homosexuality (Dowson 1998, 84), but to provide a non-normative setting with a strong critique of essentialized and ahistorical identities (Blackmore 2011, 76–7). In other words, queer archaeology broadens the scope of possible interpretations by asking questions from marginalized groups' perspectives while reinterpreting existing data within a non-normative context. This approach not only aims to protect individuals and activities that deviate from contemporary gender and sexuality norms from structural political violence, but also enriches historical perspectives by incorporating marginalized experiences (Weismantel 2013a, 320–21). In the archaeological literature, themes such as sexuality often do not constitute primary subjects of study, largely due to the pervasive sex-negativity within the discipline (Voss & Schmidt 2001, 4). In the studies of the Neolithic period in the southwest Asia, the phenomenon that most effectively exemplifies this situation is the archaeological discourse concerning the iconography of the Early Neolithic Urfa region.

Since the 1990s, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA, 9700–8500 cal. BCE), Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (EPPNB, 8500–8100 cal. BCE) and Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (MPPNB, 8100–7250 cal. BCE) periods in the Urfa region primarily due to the settlements, which display an extensive iconographic repertoire and large-scale stone architecture (for chronology, see Kuijt & Goring-Morris 2002, table I). A significant focus within the scholarly examination of symbolism has been phallic iconography, which is frequently interpreted as an archaeological proxy for a male-centric society, often detached from its sexual connotations. In this article, focusing on the data recovered from Nevalı Çori (Early–Middle PPNB; Hauptmann 2011, 103), Göbeklitepe (PPNA–Middle PPNB; Schmidt 2012, 920–21), Karahantepe (Late PPNA–Early PPNB; Karul 2021, 22–3) and Sayburç (Early PPNB; Özdoğan 2024, 47), I will employ a queer feminist perspective to examine critically and deconstruct the biological essentialism that is deeply embedded in the archaeology of the region. This will then enable me to present an alternative narrative of phallic iconography through highlighting its non-normative, thus, queer dimensions within the broader ritual context (Fig. 1).

**Corresponding author:** Emre Deniz Yurttaş; Email: ey2406@columbia.edu
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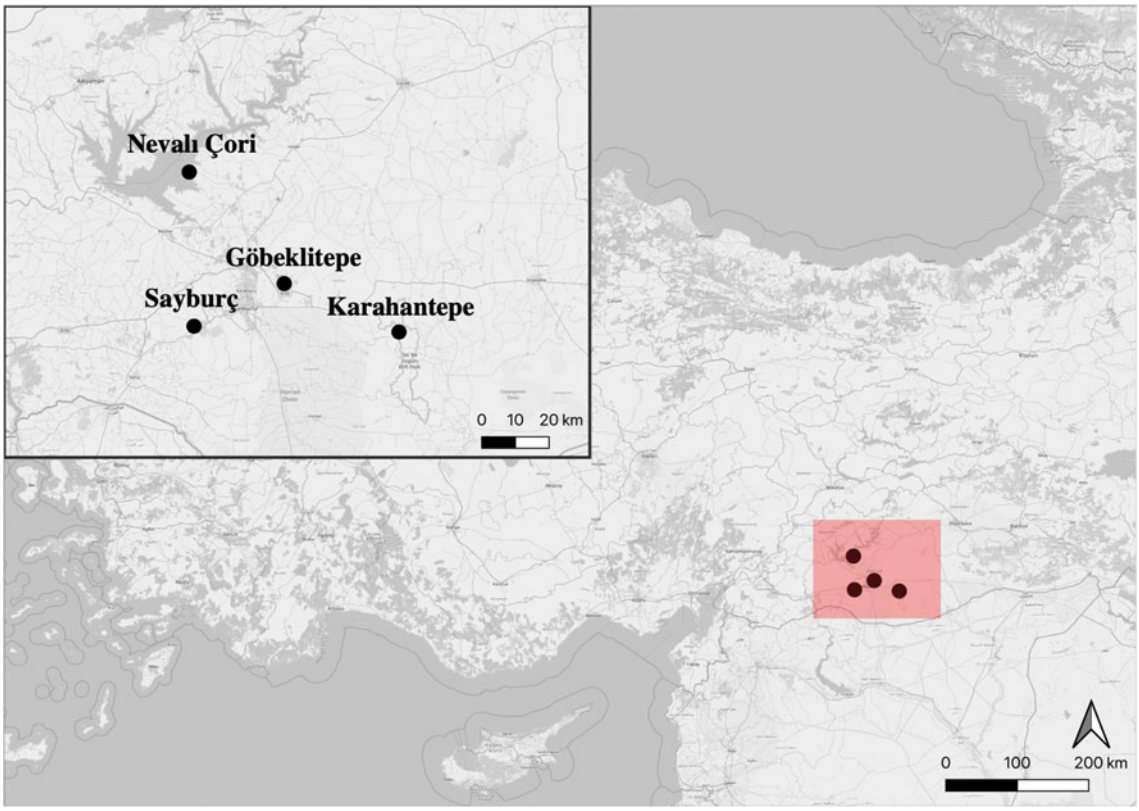


**Figure 1.** Sites studied in the text. (Map: Emre Deniz Yurttaş.)

## Social patterns of Urfa and beyond: Epipalaeolithic–Neolithic transition

The Urfa Province, situated in southeastern Anatolia within the Upper Euphrates Basin, serves as a crossroad between the Syro-Mesopotamian lowlands and the Anatolian highlands (Hauptmann 2011, 85). Lacking an Epipalaeolithic origin (Borić 2013, 44; Hauptmann 2011, 106; Mithen *et al.* 2023, 844), the condition of the Early Neolithic settled hunter-gatherer societies in the Urfa region is closely intertwined with the broader social scenery of Upper Mesopotamia. As the population in the region started to grow during the Epipalaeolithic, evidenced by the increasing number of households (Watkins 2012, 24; 2016, 93), an inevitable economic pressure to access resources emerged, which presumably provided the motivation to manipulate the environment to increase economic production (Coward 2016, 85). Faced with the challenges of resource scarcity, these settled hunter-gatherer communities did not resort to competition (cf. Hayden 1990); rather, they adopted a cooperative ideology that became a defining feature of their social structure (Asouti & Fuller 2013, 321; Benz *et al.* 2018, 138; Finlayson 2020, 39; Hodder 2022, 634). It is important to note that this cooperative and egalitarian behaviour was not naturally inherited in PPNA communities, but rather emerged as a strategic response to social challenges, functioning as a mechanism for conflict resolution (Finlayson 2020, 32). According to Zeder (2024, 50), this integrative social approach is most clearly illustrated in the construction of communal large-scale structures, often referred to as temples (Hauptmann 1993; Özdoğan 1997; Özdoğan & Erim-Özdoğan 1998), meeting centres (Schmidt 2002; 2005), or domestic complexes enriched with ritual paraphernalia (Banning 2011), as well as in the symbolic lexicon associated with these structures.

The close resemblance between the settlements in the Urfa region and those in other areas of the Upper Mesopotamia (e.g. Jerf el Ahmar & Qermez Dere: Stordeur 1998; Watkins 1995) also points to an extended collective identity materialized through architecture and iconography (Watkins 2015, 155). These common features were most likely functional in reducing differences and promoting social cohesion, keeping the integrative consciousness together while levelling out societal differences through a visual display of shared identity (Dietrich & Wagner 2023, 13; Watkins 2012, 26; see Kuijt 1996 for the Levantine context). While bringing together a society for a common purpose can foster collective action and mitigate disparities, the economic and social benefits generated by collective activities often remained inaccessible to foreign groups (Coward & Dunbar 2014, 390–91). The exclusion could have created a push factor for foreign groups to seek inclusion and establish their own identity within the broader social network (Coward & Dunbar 2014, 391). In this sense, it is not incorrect to consider that the visuality of the large-scale structures, their iconography and activities which took place in them not only functioned to unify the society but also attracted external groups into their production economy.


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Although this 'functional' narrative explains the social and economic implications of the built environment and iconography, it undermines a more refined understanding of the culture-specific significance of ritual performances. Although we can identify the economic and social consequences of iconography and architecture, we lack a comprehensive understanding of their significance within cultural dynamics. Instead, we tend to perceive them primarily as pragmatic components that fit into a contemporary framework of purposiveness. Conceiving cultural dynamics of ritual, however, requires an in-depth examination of the iconography (the phallic themes in particular for the extent of this study), unravelling its contemporary repercussions, prehistoric significance, and agency in relation to other material actors.

## The Early Neolithic (or timeless) his-stories of patriarchy

When the reception of phallic iconography within contemporary scholarship is considered, a dominant reference to maleness catches attention. Mehmet Özdoğan (2001, 316) identifies a prevalent Father God imagery at Göbeklitepe, suggesting that its male priests held dominance over society. Benz and Bauer (2013, 19) argue that increasing competition necessitated an authority asserting its power through male elites, who often exhibit more dominant behaviour due to testosterone, establishing socio-religious practices with extensive symbolism. Verhoeven (2002, 251–2) proposes a dualistic interpretation in the regional context, associating male dominance with power and vitality. In their comparative analysis of Çatalhöyük and Göbeklitepe imagery, Hodder and Meskell (2011, 240) emphasize the centrality of maleness, noting a 'focus on male sexuality as denoted by penis' and the 'privileging of maleness', viewing masculinity as 'a source of power and authority'. Both Borić (2013, 57) and Peters and Schmidt (2004, 215) describe the T-shaped pillars as exclusively representing male animals. Clare *et al.* (2019, 117) interpret the ithyphallic representation of a decapitated figure on Pillar 43 in Enclosure D at Göbeklitepe as 'a sign of male virility and social dominance'. Schmidt, in multiple works (e.g. 2006; 2010; 2012), highlights the absence of female imagery and the prevalence of male symbolism. Sütterlin and Eibl-Eibesfeldt (2013, 42–6) argue that phallic symbolism, whether human or animal, signifies masculinity's central role in authority and power. Despite her rejection of the social and economic vertical hierarchy narrative for the region, Çilingiroğlu (2023, 95) suggests that the cosmology of Early Neolithic Urfa society is male-centred, with buildings possibly used for male initiation rituals, akin to men's houses. While there is significant interest in visualizing the Early Neolithic in the Urfa region with male power at its core, two questions remain: can a body be sexed based on iconographic data, and can an iconographically sexed body be gendered without solid evidence about the social and cultural context?

### *Sexing the image*

Sexing bodies in the Urfa region relies on iconographic assessment rather than bioarchaeological investigation. Due to the scarcity of funerary records in the area (Banning 2023, 9; Gresky *et al.* 2017, 1; Özdoğan & Karul 2020, 20–21), the bioarchaeological dimension cannot be fully explored. Instead, interpretations have been drawn from the prevalent phallic imagery discovered in the Urfa region, suggesting a societal emphasis on male representation in prehistoric art because of a cultural reverence to the male members of the society. Even if sufficient funerary evidence were available to support bioarchaeological analysis, queer theory cautions against rigid binary definitions of sex identity, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that transcends traditional categorizations (Geller 2017). While archaeology has delved into understanding gender identities in past communities since the 1980s, biological sex has often been presumed rather than questioned, grounded in various biological features used in determining sex (Fausto-Sterling 2005, 1493). However, akin to gender identities, biology, as a natural science, is also socially constructed (Latour & Woolgar 1979, 152; Nordbladh *et al.* 1990, 224). The prevalence of a binary sex system is not inherent to biology, but is rather a product of social constructs, favouring a dualist understanding of sex over systems accommodating *n* number of sexes (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 278).

Although sex has often been perceived as a straightforward biological attribute readily determined by examining genitalia, this perspective is far more nuanced (Blackless *et al.* 2000). Sex identities do not adhere to an all-encompassing binary framework but represent two extremes on a spectrum (Ainsworth 2015, 290). Judith Butler argues that biological sex should not be viewed as an inherent physical trait onto which gender is merely imposed; instead, it is a cultural expectation that influences how bodies are physically manifested (Butler 1993, 2–3). Sex is not a fixed or objective state, but a dynamic process shaped by regulatory norms that continually define and materialize the concept of 'sex' through repetitive enforcement (Butler 1990, 73; 1993, 13). Consequently, the body should not be regarded as a timeless biological entity, but as a complex construct interwoven with systems of meaning and representation (Geller 2017, 17; Grosz 1994, 18).

In addition to social and cultural influences, numerous biological variables contribute to the definition of sex, highlighting that a binary sex system is inadequate for classification. Anatomy, hormones, cells, or chromosomes may all be utilized in determining sex, yet each can lead to different conclusions individually (Ainsworth 2015, 291; Fausto-Sterling 2012, 4–5). It remains unclear which physical variable past communities referenced when assigning sex (Joyce 2008, 45), and one cannot assume that biological sex was culturally classified into two categories, namely male and female (Meskell 2000, 175). Thus, rather than viewing sex as binary, it is more accurate to contextualize it as a spectrum shaped by a series of societal and cultural performances, which would rescue the concept of sex from the claws of biological essentialism. Considering this perspective, assigning sex to an iconographic element solely based on its overtly represented genitalia disregards the complexity of human experience and the existence of diverse prehistoric identities.


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**Figure 2.** The Sayburç Relief. (Özdoğan 2022, fig. 4; photograph: Bekir Köşker.)

*Gendering the image*

In framing third-wave feminist theory, Rubin (1975, 165) introduced gender as 'a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be'. The term 'gender' was used not to describe but to theorize the social and cultural relationality between sexes, as the term allows for abstraction which helped to construct narratives that do not directly concern biological sex (Des Jardins 2011, 150). By so doing, gender promises a space free from deeply rooted beliefs and modes of association with a particular sex (Scott 1986, 1055).

As gender norms are time-specific and ever-changing, historical bodies do deviate from contemporary norms (Geller 2017, 17). Although it is a fairly widespread practice in archaeology to establish gender identity using a framework built on binaries, there is research proving that binary interpretations, man/woman, remains limiting and a universal explanation of gender identities unbounded from time and space is not possible (e.g. McCafferty & McCafferty 1994; 2003; Stratton 2016).

In the archaeological narratives of Early Neolithic Urfa region, the male image is not only a male image, but a strong man that controls the society, a member of the elite class, a priest having divine connections, or the god himself. In these narratives, it is visible that the male sex is culturally adorned, and through that, gendered, with contemporary connotations of masculinity. The practice of attributing masculinity to male-assigned bodies and femininity to female-assigned bodies based on gender dimorphism, which has roots in colonialism and slavery (Butler 2024, 213), is the most prevalent means through which patriarchy is reinforced (Butler 2004, 209), ultimately essentializing gender identity (Koyama 2003, 5). This problem is not unique to the archaeology practised in this region. According to Hamilton (2000, 17), archaeological figurine studies predominantly focus on determining the sex of the figurines and assigning gender roles to them within a Western context. I believe the same argument can also be done for iconographic studies. In the Early Neolithic Urfa context, 'man' is identified as having control over society, although there is an egalitarian ethos evidenced in both the Urfa region and in the greater Upper Mesopotamia and the Levant, reducing the possibility of the hierarchical superiority of a selected section/class of society within the timeframe of the settlements in question (Atakuman 2015, 774; Benz *et al.* 2016, 161; Çilingiroğlu 2023, 94–5; Erdal 2015, 3; Finlayson 2020, 38; Hodder 2022, 636; Kuijt 1996, 331–2; Peterson 2010, 260; Zeder 2024, 50). Portraying the so-called male body as the embodiment of power in alignment with contemporary ideals of masculinity lacks support from archaeological evidence, which does not indicate differences in burial customs, wealth distribution, household structure and diet. This suggests a gender bias in the interpretation of the data. Thus, I find it valuable to detach the phallus from its contemporary symbolism and cultural affiliation and scrutinize its role as a bodily organ having certain sexual capacities.

## Phallus in play: the queer action

Along with connecting phallic imagery exclusively with maleness and masculinity, the literature on the Early Neolithic Urfa region overlooks the fact that iconographic elements are in a state of sexual stimulation, denoted by the presence of erection where the phallus is visually apparent. A prominent example of this theme is the relief programme unearthed at the site of Sayburç. Although Eylem Özdoğan, the director of Sayburç excavations, has not commented on the action and only proposed a static reading that the figure holding its phallus represents rising human power against wild nature (Özdoğan & Uludağ 2022, 22), the relief can also be seen as a human figure holding its erect phallus, masturbating with one hand and placing its other forearm around its belly while probably sitting since the knees are slightly bent (Fig. 2. The figure is interpreted as masturbating only in two articles, which associate masturbation with male and hunter initiation rituals, respectively: see Ayaz 2023; Clare 2024). A life-size limestone human statue measuring 2.3 m in height with a similar theme was unearthed in 2023 at Karahantepe (Karul 2023). Similar to the relief scene at Sayburç, the statue depicts a figure with its hands positioned around its erect phallus while seated on a bench within an enclosure. From my perspective, in both examples, physical stimulation of the phallus causes friction and should allow for an orgasmic experience as the result of masturbation. The figures in this view refer to the performative ontology of the phallus and demonstrate how it was used in ritual action. The contextual function of the phallus was not to reproduce, as the images depict a singular figure, or to urinate, as the phalli in the iconographical *koiné* are all erect, but to engage in an autoerotic activity (Fig. 3).


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**Figure 3.** The high-relief figure from Sayburç. (Özdoğan 2022, fig. 5; photograph: Kubilay Akdemir.)

Upon closer examination, the queerness inherent in the practice may reveal why phallic iconography has never been a subject of sexuality but almost always taken as a precursor of masculinity and power. To note, the queerness behind the practice relates to contemporary normative interpretations, rather than prehistoric social norms. According to Jack Halberstam (2005, 6), the term 'queer' encompasses non-normative ways of thinking and organizing communities, sexual identities, physical experiences, and the concept of movement within specific periods and locations. For Sara Ahmed (2006; 2019), for a thing to be considered 'queer', the contributor's relationship to it must be unconventional and must disrupt the very foundation of knowledge attested to it. Instructions are provided to ensure the proper (normative) maintenance of both physical and social boundaries at the time of use, and improper use of something is queer use which deviates from the 'correct' path (Ahmed 2019, 199–201). In this sense, the historical narrative surrounding masturbation illustrates how it has been a non-normative sexual performance for centuries.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, particularly following the publication of the seminal text *Onania*, masturbation became increasingly stigmatized and associated with various forms of mental and physical deviance (Hunt 1998, 579). Despite the advances in nineteenth-century medicine that moved away from these non-scientific views, the prevailing social-purity movements of the same era perpetuated a negative perception of masturbation, implying that it was deleterious not only for the individual but for the whole nation (Herzog 2011, 29; Hunt 1998, 579–80). It was perceived as a detrimental loss of semen, equated with a decline in virility and male power, ultimately framed as an act of emasculation (Duffy 2001, 332–3) and moral failure (Laqueur 2003, 374–5).

Although the sexual liberation movements of second-wave feminism in the 1960s began to challenge these notions in the Western public consciousness (Albury 2001, 202), negative perceptions towards masturbation still persist globally. This highlights a broader issue: sexuality is often deemed acceptable only when it serves reproductive purposes, while non-reproductive sexual practices are frequently marginalized (Elia 2003, 63–4; Rubin 1984, 150–51). The dominant historical narrative tends to be oppressive, portraying traditional gender roles leading to nuclear family structures focused on reproduction (Weismantel 2013a, 321), while marginalizing alternative expressions as non-normative.

The queer stance gained through positioning against the normative extends beyond LGBTQ+ themes. For instance, a marriage between a post-menopausal heterosexual woman and a young heterosexual man, while conforming to the traditional heteronormative script, is considered non-normative and thus queer due to the reproductive ethos underpinning the marital institution (Buckle *et al.* 1996, 364). Consequently, reproduction, as a heteronormative social norm, serves as the most potent justification for sexual activity, while diverse sexual expressions are homogenized to align with universal reproductive imperatives (Joyce 2008, 18). This explains why sexual themes are often linked to reproduction in archaeology (Voss & Schmidt 2001, 4) or, when not possible, stripped of their sexual characteristics altogether.

Conversely, the phallic iconography in the Early Neolithic Urfa region can be contextualized as a material representation of autoerotic activity, a queer action that disrupts normative notions of sexuality and its public display due to its non-reproductive and historically non-normative qualities. The fact that this queer action is rarely articulated, and when it is, is often defined solely as an expression of masculinity, highlights how the ghost of sexuality continues to haunt archaeologists. The sexual themes underlying the iconography have never been explicitly discussed within mainstream narratives due to a queer embarrassment that permeates these discussions.

Considering this, seeing the phallic imagery not as proxy for a male-centred society but directly as iconographic elements engaging in sexual acts through a queer lens offers an alternative view to traditional male-focused archaeological


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**Figure 4.** Totem Pole from Göbeklitepe. (Photograph: © German Archaeological Institute/Nico Becker.)

interpretations and promises to reveal the ritualistic significance of phallic iconography within the broader ritual framework. To understand the phallic iconography in this context better, it is valuable to examine the broader ritual framework of Early Neolithic southwest Asia.

## Animism in the Early Neolithic Urfa region

In the Early Neolithic of southwest Asia, while many communities continued to intensify their efforts in domestication, they generally maintained a hunter-gatherer lifestyle throughout the PPNA and most of the PPNB (Ibáñez *et al.* 2018, 231). In the region, Nevalı Çori is notable for being the only site where a limited range of animals were under human control (Peters *et al.* 2017, 256), while there is no evidence of domesticated plants or animals in other sites in question (Clare 2024, 7; Schmidt 2010, 242). According to Ingold (1994, 18), there is no conceptual distance between humans and non-humans in the hunting communities compared to the Western world, where humanity is essentially separated from nature. In other words, the ontological separation between humans and animals is less pronounced in hunting communities, reflecting a more holistic and interdependent existence.

Both Busacca (2017) and Borić (2013) build on this idea in their analysis of the ontological relationship between humans and non-humans at Göbeklitepe to argue that the arrangement of animal depictions within the site's enclosures illustrates dynamic motion and supports an animist model. This model suggests that humans and non-humans are situated within a relational ontology (Busacca 2017, 314), where they are in continuous dialogue with each other (Borić 2013, 52). Rather than being static totemic symbols, the images in the enclosures function as dynamic animistic agents embodying animal spirits (Borić 2013, 54). Within the ritual context of these enclosures, the physical separation between humans and animals is dissolved, leading to the coalescence of human and animal spirits (Busacca 2017, 324, 326).

Concluding that the Early Neolithic Urfa people positioned themselves in an animist model, though this constitutes an important statement regarding human/non-human relations, does not particularly elaborate on the essence of these relations (Busacca 2017, 327). If the Early Neolithic Urfa community engaged in an animist way of life, were there people who undertook the duty to act as mediators between humans and non-humans? If so, how and under what conditions did this mediation take place?

### *Altered states of consciousness and sexual ecstasy*

Numerous studies on Neolithic cults of southwest Asia underscore the significance of mediators who were bridging the spiritual and material realms, often referred to as shamans or similar titles (e.g. Benz & Bauer 2015, 13; Borić 2013, 58–9; Hodder & Meskell 2010, 61, 63; Mithen 2022, 163–75). In various shamanic contexts, the encounter with the spiritual realm often manifests through representing the human form with elements of the non-human (e.g. Johnson 1979; Lewis-Williams 1981; Pager 1971). In these practices, trance states serve as gateways to the spiritual realm for the mediator, with ecstatic techniques playing a pivotal role in inducing such states to offer services to the community (Eliade 1964, 5; Winkelman 2019, 137). According to Lewis-Williams (1981), San shamans achieve a trance state through ecstatic practices, during which they merge with their chosen animal spirit, known as the animal of power. This ritualistic bond enables the shaman to transcend into the spiritual realm, experiencing ecstatic out-of-body journeys empowered by the animal spirit. Transversing between corporeal boundaries is also attested in the Early Neolithic Urfa context. Composite statues displaying therianthropic hybridization in the same sculptural programme have been recovered from Nevalı Çori, Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe, which serve as potent material manifestations of intermediaries between the spiritual and material realms (Yakar 2009, 311–13).

The limestone sculpture measuring 1.92 m in height and commonly referred to as the 'totem pole' was excavated from a rectangular chamber within Layer II of Göbeklitepe (Fig. 4). This piece represents a stylized human figure, intricately combined with various non-human elements (Köksal-Schmidt & Schmidt 2010, 74). The representation is not isolated; rather, it exhibits a complex interplay between the human and non-human components, highlighting the intertwined nature of the bodies. The boundaries between the human and animal figures are ambiguous and the identification of the central figure is complicated by the multiplicity of bodies, necessitating a conscious and slow visualization that prolongs the recognition process (Weismantel 2013b, 27). Numerous additional examples


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**Figure 5.** (A) Human-snake statue from Nevalı Çori, Urfa Museum. (Photograph: Dick Osseman. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urfa_museum_Head_with_snake_Nevalı_Çori_-_Neolithic_age_-_4859.jpg); (B) Human-headed bird statue from Nevalı Çori, Urfa Museum (Photograph: Dick Osseman. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/Urfa_museum_Human_Statuette_Neval%C4%B1_%C3%87ori_-_Neolithic_age_4783.jpg)

can be identified. The human head sculpture with a snake on top from Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 2007, 142–4), alongside the colossal human-headed snake in Building AB (Karul 2021, 24) and human-leopard statue from Karahantepe (Karul *et al.* 2021, 45), as well as the human-headed bird statue from Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 2007, 145), offer compelling examples of the complex interplay between corporeal boundaries in the Early Neolithic Urfa context (Fig. 5).

According to an array of ethnographic studies, a variety of ecstatic mediums are employed for achieving the spiritual transcendence, ranging from rhythmic drumming to the use of hallucinogens (Block 1979, 206–7; Lewis 2003, 34; Vaitl *et al.* 2005; von Gernet 1995, 67; Winkelman 2000; 2002, 73). When these ecstatic techniques are pursued within the Urfa context, certain features attract attention. According to Porter (2022), Early Neolithic subterranean buildings, such as those at Göbeklitepe, Jerf al Ahmar and WF16, were designed to evoke ecstatic sensations with their underground spaces, creating distinct sensory experiences from above-ground structures (Porter 2022, 194–196). A limestone bowl from Nevalı Çori may offer the evidence for dancing (Garfinkel 2003, 114), depicting two figures with raised arms, with a bipedal, turtle-like figure in between (Yakar 2009, 320), possibly a therianthrope due to its bipedalism (Jolly 2002, 86) (Fig. 6). Dietrich *et al.* (2012) identify calcium oxalate, a by-product of beer production, on a stone container from Göbeklitepe dating to the PPNB period, suggesting the presence of brewing activities and thus intoxicating beverages. All these elements play a significant role in the distortion of perception, thereby facilitating the onset of an ecstatic state.

Although sexuality possesses the potential to serve as a profound element in spiritual transcendence, offering individuals an avenue for ecstatic experiences through rhythmic stimulation (Costa *et al.* 2016; Elfers & Offringa 2019; Safron 2016; Vaitl *et al.* 2005, 104; Wade 2001, 107), it has rarely been a subject of discussion for the Early Neolithic Urfa region (but see Mithen 2022, 172; Porter 2022, 203; Verit *et al.* 2005). According to Stanislav Grof, the pioneer of transpersonal psychology, individuals often perceive that they have transcended their identity and ego boundaries during sexual experiences that incorporate altered states of consciousness (Grof 1985, 221). This phenomenon may manifest as experiencing oneself in alternative historical, ethnic, or geographical contexts, or as forming deep connections with other individuals or archetypal figures (Grof 1985, 221). A particularly intriguing category of transpersonal sexual experience involves complete identification with various animal forms, including mammals, reptiles, birds, fish and insects (Grof 1985, 222).

Drawing upon these studies on transcendental aspects of sexuality, I propose that masturbation played a crucial role in the mediator's spiritual transcendence and connection with the animal spirit in the ritual context of the Early Neolithic Urfa region, which can be shown through several illustrative examples from Sayburç and Göbeklitepe.

## Phallus in spiritual action

The Sayburç Relief is composed of low- and high-relief techniques and the relief scene can be divided into two, as part A and part B (Fig. 7). In part B, a masturbating figure with flanking feline predators in low relief at its sides welcomes the audience. In part A, a human figure who faces a distorted bull, whose body is represented from the side and head from the top (Özdoğan 2024, 52), catches attention. The masturbating human constitutes the only figure that is crafted in high-relief technique in the full scene. When the imagery itself is questioned, I argue that the difference in relief technique was neither a coincidence nor an action that was taken out of an aesthetic concern. The high-relief human figure corresponds to the mediator in the material world, while the low-relief human figure, accompanied by non-human entities, reflects the mediator's presence in the spiritual world. The high-relief figure indeed stays materially solid and presents a clear and sharp outer aspect,


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**Figure 6.** Limestone bowl with engravings from Nevalı Çori, Urfa Museum. (Photograph: Dick Osseman. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urfa_museum_Fragment_of_stone_vessel_Neval%C4%B1_%C3%87ori_-_Neolithic_age_4795.jpg)


**Figure 7.** The Sayburç Relief, annotated by Emre Deniz Yurttaş. (Özdoğan 2022, fig. 4; photograph: Bekir Köşker.)

especially when compared to other figures situated in the same visual context. Through masturbating, thus using the ecstatic element of sexuality, the mediator transcends into the spiritual world and interacts with non-human spirits. It is, thus, natural that all the other visual elements in the relief are depicted in low-relief technique, which is more schematic, vaporous and indefinite. Instead of a linear narrative (cf. Özdoğan 2024, 51), in which the narrative is told through a horizontal visual plan, the relief scene shows both worlds, material and spiritual, at the same time within a single relief programme.

Moving away from the iconography itself, there is a dynamic interplay of perspectives within the relief. Both the prominently visible high relief and partly obscured low relief are combined within the same composition, thereby presenting the audience with multiple viewpoints to acknowledge simultaneously. The perspectival multiplicity extends beyond the technological aspects of the relief. The distortion of the bull figure introduces a layer of performativity as the image encapsulates different potential appearances of the bull across various moments of time within a single composition. In real life, one is not exposed to such a diverse range of perspectives all at once, but this variety typically unfolds over time and is perceived sequentially (Weismantel 2013b, 29). The relief itself represents a distorted image of reality within an uncertain concept of time, which is in stark contrast to normative seeing in the continuous flow of life. In this sense, it can be argued that the stonework is staged within a queer play, even when considering its manufacture stage.

The visual landscape of Göbeklitepe features both phallic imagery and enduring bodily elements like ribs, horns and tusks, which are slow to decompose over time (Clare *et al.* 2019, 115). In Siberian and North American shamanism, the skin and skeleton are regarded as enduring aspects of the human body, symbolizing the seat of the soul and life rather than death (Anawalt 2014, 80, as cited in Mithen 2022, 170). Similarly, Inuit and Siberian shamans symbolically reduced themselves to skeletal forms to facilitate soul flights and act as intermediaries between the material and spiritual worlds (Sutherland 2001, 140). Even though the mainstream narrative posits that aggressive animal imagery was used as symbols of fear to consolidate political power (e.g. Benz & Bauer 2013, 19) or as representations of power centred around masculinity (e.g. Hodder & Meskell 2011, 237), these interpretations remain unfounded because concepts such as hierarchy, social centralism and masculinity are not supported by archaeological evidence.

I assert that the numerous animal images at Göbeklitepe refer to a fusion of human intermediaries and their non-human spiritual counterparts, as these depictions feature animal bodies with human phalli. This assertion can be illustrated through an examination of reliefs found on Pillar 38 within Enclosure D (Fig. 8) and on Pillar 12 within Enclosure C in Layer III at Göbeklitepe (Fig. 9). A boar is depicted prominently in both scenes, characterized by its distinctive tusks and erect penis—an element consistent with the broader visual motifs present at Göbeklitepe. However, a closer inspection of boar sexual anatomy reveals a notable distinction: the positioning of the penis and testicles.


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**Figure 8.** Boar on Pillar 38 within Enclosure D from Göbeklitepe. (Photograph: © German Archaeological Institute/Joris Peters.)


**Figure 9.** Boar on Pillar 12 within Enclosure C from Göbeklitepe. (Photograph A: © German Archaeological Institute/Dieter Johannes; photograph B: © German Archaeological Institute/Lee Clare.)

Unlike the boar depiction on Pillar 38 within Enclosure D, anatomically, a boar's penis and testicles are not placed side by side but there is a gap between the two. Testicles are located beneath the tail at the rear of the animal, while the penis rests under the abdomen (Fig. 10). Although the testicles are not quite visible on the relief scene on Pillar 12 within Enclosure C, a real boar's penis is significantly longer, thinner, and has a curly tip (Fig. 11). In contrast, the depiction in the stonework displays the penis in a different form, resembling that of a human penis.

A similar theme is also apparent in the fox relief on Pillar 10 within Enclosure B (Fig. 12) in Layer III. In the scene, the testicles of the fox are shown adjacent to the penis. However, in real fox anatomy, there is a gap between the penis and the testicles (Halıgür & Özkadif 2019, 93). In real foxes, testicles are positioned just under the anus, at the back of the hindleg, not in front of them as they are depicted in the relief scene (Fig. 13).

Given the intimate coexistence of humans with the surrounding wildlife at the time, it is inconceivable that the inhabitants of Göbeklitepe were unaware of or misrepresented the physical characteristics of these animals. Instead, the imagery suggests a deliberate fusion, portraying a human penis attached to an animal's body—a representation of the therianthropic union between humans and non-human spirits. This interpretation offers insight into the visual cosmology of Göbeklitepe, wherein representations of


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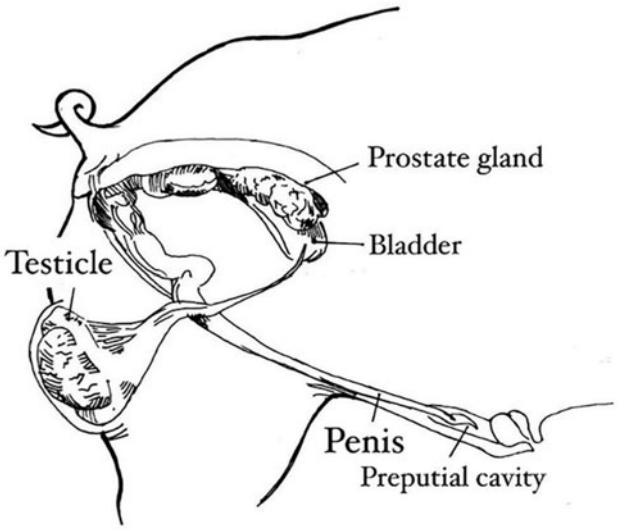


**Figure 10.** Boar sexual anatomy. (Adapted from https://veteriankey.com/reproductive-physiology-and-endocrinology-of-boars, redrawn by Bülent Yurttaş.)

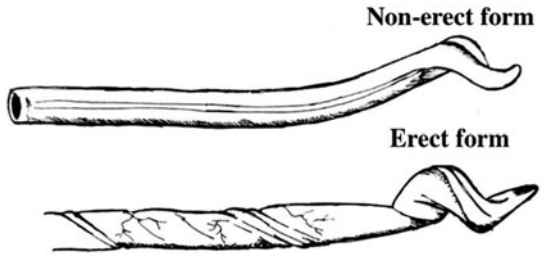


**Figure 11.** Boar penis. (Adapted from https://www.minipiginfo.com/pig-anatomy-and-terminology.html, redrawn by Bülent Yurttaş.)

**Figure 12.** Fox relief on Pillar 10 within Enclosure B from Göbeklitepe. (Photograph: Alex Wang. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Göbekli_Tepe_Pillar.jpg)

erect animals with non-decaying physical attributes serve as windows into the animated spiritual realm perceived by the spiritual mediators of the era, rather than mere depictions of the wildlife with which they coexisted (Peters & Schmidt 2004, 212).

After thoroughly examining the array of visual evidence mentioned above, it becomes apparent that what one observes is local variations of a shared theme, manifested by different communities residing within the same cultural sphere. Contrary to interpretations that focus on violence or masculinity, the overarching motif appears to be the transcendence of the mediator and their encounter with non-human spirits within a non-material realm. In this context, the physical stimulation of the phallus emerges as merely one component contributing to an individual's overall ecstatic experience within a ritualistic framework. Rather than advocating for the existence of a phallocentric culture (cf. Hodder & Meskell 2011, 237–41), in the light of this new reading of the visual data, it is more plausible to assert that the phallus served as an ecstatic agent within the ritual network. Moving out of the ritual aspects of these visual themes, it is also possible to assert that auto-erotic activities and ecstatic experiences might also have served as festive means of binding society together and attracting foreign groups into the social network in order to sustain the benefits of communal production.

## Ontic reality of the stonework

Although my exploration has focused on the physical phallus and its material capacities, it is notable that phallic imagery is prevalent in the stonework. This raises questions about the necessity of such iconography, if the human phallus, by itself, was cultic paraphernalia and had an agency in the ritual. Rather than mere symbols of social organization or reflections of the surrounding environment, I propose that objects adorned with phallic imagery had an ontic reality. I argue that these representations embody the functions and agency of the actual phallus, serving as ongoing sources of sexual power.

Though not incorporated into the Early Neolithic narratives of Urfa, various ethnographic examples exist that can exemplify and recontextualize the ontic reality of stonework with phallic imagery in the region. One of them is the Yanesha people of the Amazon. In Yanesha society, most things have an animacy that transcends their agency as objects (Santos-Granero 2009, 106–9). Santos-Granero narrates a story of a shaman cleaning a pipe with certain 'detersives'. Cleaning is a part of the ritual actions to awaken the

soul inside the pipes and manioc beer, tobacco and coca leaves are substances used in the awakening ritual. This practice demonstrates how an object is perceived as an entity that bears a soul, which can be awakened through a series of actions (Santos-Granero 2009, 112–14). In his account of San shamanic rock art, Lewis-Williams (2001, 28) contextualizes rock art as 'long-term "reservoirs" that could be tapped for power and insight'. Moving from the light of these examples, it is sensible to envisage the phallic scenes on T-shaped pillars and wall reliefs as 'reservoirs' or 'hubs', amalgamated with the sexual capacities of the phallus.

The presence of stones adorned with phallic notions prompts speculation about ritual participation. If phallic objects or reliefs hold power capable of inducing ecstatic states, it challenges the idea that only individuals possessing physical phalli could partake in such rituals. Instead, this perspective implies that the ritual's efficacy could be accessed through the symbolic powers of the objects themselves, rather than through the physical conditions of the participants. Not only does the ontic reality of the stonework shift our understanding, but a unique image at Göbeklitepe also has the potential to provoke further speculation regarding ritual participation.

## A diverging image?

As previously stated, the depictions of the phallus in the visual repertoire are consistently represented in a singular, sexually aroused state. However, a distinctive scene at Göbeklitepe has the potential to diverge from this established convention. The image discovered on a stone slab between the so-called Lion Pillars from Layer II has been identified as the only 'female' representation at the site (Schmidt 2010, 246) (Fig. 14). The scene includes a figure with sagging breasts on either side. One arm is positioned nearly parallel to the head, while the other is bent near the waist. The legs are shown spread apart, which exposes the genitalia; however, the genital organ itself is obscured by another visual feature.

Either childbirth or penetration arise as possible interpretations regarding the depicted activity (Hodder & Meskell 2011, 239; Verhoeven 2002, 251). Given the depiction of the drooping breasts and the arm positioning, it seems plausible that the figure is lying down. Since giving birth while lying as a medical practice was initiated with the use of forceps in the seventeenth century CE and is generally considered a more difficult method of labour (DiFranco & Curl 2014, 207–8; Kitzinger 1980, 204), it is unlikely that this image represents a childbirth scene. If the intent were to depict childbirth, the figure would likely have been shown in a squatting position, which would have necessitated a different arrangement of the arms and breasts.

Following the interpretation proposed by Hodder and Meskell, I concur that the figure appears to be penetrated by a detached penis with the lines likely denoting the motion of penetration (Hodder & Meskell 2011, 239). However, there is a notable scale discrepancy between the penis and the engraved human body, with the penis being proportionally larger than the body, especially when considering the head, arms and legs. The disproportionality attracts the central attention to the action taking place in the scene. Although the activity depicted here does not align with other autoerotic examples, it essentially produces a similar outcome in terms of sexual sensation. The absence of a penetrative body also precludes a simplistic interpretation of the scene as a commentary on male virility, as the 'male' in the scene is not visible. According to Bolger (2010, 517), the head of the figure either depicts an elaborate hairstyle or the head of an animal. If the latter interpretation is accepted, then it becomes possible to observe a therianthropic union between human and non-human in the image, demonstrated through a unique sexual theme.

**Figure 13.** Fox testicles. (Photograph: Roy Battell & Mary Battell. http://www.moorhen.me.uk)

With its unique presence and evasive application, the image was presumably a later addition to the existing architectural complex (Schmidt 2010, 246). It should be borne in mind that the image was placed in Layer II (Early PPNB–Middle PPNB), which succeeds Layer III (PPNA–Early PPNB) that accommodates most of the animal and phallic imagery (Schmidt 2010, 920–21; Peters & Schmidt 2004, 182–3). This may reflect a transformation in ritual practices over time, where individuals with no physical phalli began to engage actively in the rituals with their fleshly bodies. Ultimately, the image was neither discarded nor destroyed. Instead, it maintained its position within the enclosure, despite being a later addition rather than an original component of the construction project, which indicates an acceptance of the image and what it represents.


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**Figure 14.** Engraving on a stone slab from Göbeklitepe, Urfa Museum. (Photograph: Emre Deniz Yurttaş.)

## Conclusion

The dominant archaeological narrative surrounding these settlements, notable for their impressive architecture and extensive iconographic repertoire, is troubling in that it is constructed on a biologically essentialist foundation, independent of gender theories. The use of phallic iconography as an archaeological proxy, with the assumption that it exclusively signifies a male-centred society through an essentialist male role, is particularly concerning. The fact that many of these writings were provided by senior archaeologists may allow misogynistic circles in the scholarship to express their views without hesitation. By referencing these established scholars, proponents of such views feel emboldened to articulate their opinions more openly, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes and biases within the field.

Studies on iconography in the Early Neolithic Urfa region clearly reflect a strong normative bias, often overlooking alternative narratives that might be seen as non-normative. In this context, reinterpreting phallic iconography through a queer feminist lens, and thus challenging contemporary sexual norms, provides an opportunity to rethink the practices related to these settlements, as well as prehistoric gender relations and power dynamics more broadly. In this sense, the auto-erotic activity manifesting in iconography and interpreted as part of a series of ecstatic experiences, while disrupting the essentialist paradigm within which phallic iconography is constrained, reconstructs the phallic iconography through a queer perspective in an animistic ritual context.

As stated by Sara Ahmed (2023, 148), to think of preconceived assumptions is a *feminist killjoy* practice. Moving forward, it is imperative for archaeologists to embrace multiple, theoretically informed approaches for interpretation, thereby enriching our understanding of past societies and challenging entrenched narratives of power and identity. By doing so, I believe, we can strive towards a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of our shared human history.

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**Emre Deniz Yurttaş** holds an MA in Archaeology and History of Art from Koç University and is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. Emre's current research and writing focus on the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic societies of southwest Asia, with a particular emphasis on visual culture.