Ritual, Change, and the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Figurines of the Central-Southern Levant

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Introduction

The central-southern Levant consists of a small area of southwestern Asia located on the eastern side of the Mediterranean. It covers coastal lowlands, mountains, and desert areas in the modern countries of Israel, Jordan, southern Lebanon, and the Sinai. This region provided the setting for the beginnings of Western agriculture. Plant agriculture arose with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) period, circa 10,300/10,100 B.P. Animal husbandry followed approximately 1,500 years later during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) period. These developments necessarily involved not only an alteration of subsistence strategies but also cultural modifications, political innovations and ideological developments. This paper addresses ritual development across the PPNA-PPNB boundary as reflected in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines.

This paper presumes that the figurines of the Levantine Neolithic periods had a fundamentally ritual role in society. Other interpretations of their function have been offered, but none seem as plausible as those for religious-ritual usage. Archaeological writing has used so many definitions of ritual, both implicit and explicit, that it is necessary to specify which approach to ritual is being used here before one can explain why the figurines are considered to be ritual objects.

Arriving at a clear and archaeologically helpful approach to ritual is a true challenge since ethnographic evidence shows that the theoretically differentiated spheres of practice within cultures, such as ritual, economics and social interaction, are in fact intertwined to the point of being inextricable and indistinguishable. The multiple areas of cultural activity behave as a single, integrated realm. In practice, therefore, “the notion of ritual is a mere tool for analysis” (Bell 1992:13) not an objectively determinable aspect of life. Thus, there is no single acceptable definition of ritual; rather, each investigator must decide what conception of ritual is most analytically useful to the context being considered.

This paper adopts Bell’s (1992) conception of ritual action as culturally specific, strategic, and value-laden. Ritual behavior may be quite variable and on the surface difficult to distinguish from more quotidian activities, but conceptually it is qualitatively differentiated from mundane behavior. Ritual activity is privileged and
ideologically dominant over non-ritual behavior (Bell 1992). Ritual is not necessarily synonymous with religion, but it is likely to encompass much of the expression of religious beliefs and worldviews. How does one identify ritual behavior in the archaeological record? In the case of the southern-central Levantine Neolithic, this is difficult due to the limited archaeological data and lack of an historical record. For instance, although it has been noted that informality and spontaneity characterize some ritual behavior (Bell 1992), such practices are invisible in the archaeological record of deep prehistory. On the other hand, the repetitious, formalized behavior which is a “frequent, [if not] universal strategy for producing ritual acts” (Bell 1992:92) may be archaeologically visible and, therefore, can constitute a useful tool for identifying probable ritual acts in the Neolithic.

In sum, ritual is viewed here as a conceptually differentiated sphere of behavior within the greater realm of cultural practice. It is considered to be archaeologically visible as a variety of formalized and repetitive practices. The figurines of the southern-central Levantine Neolithic are held to represent remnants of ritual practices because their stylization, imagery, and contexts, although variable, suggest a degree of repetition and formal patterning in their creators’ behavior.

The Neolithic of the South-Central Levant

The chronology of the Levantine Neolithic is the subject of continuing debate. Nonetheless, archaeologists generally accept its division into two phases, the Pre-Pottery Neolithic and the Pottery Neolithic, based on the presence or absence of pottery. The Pottery Neolithic is beyond the scope of this paper. The Pre-Pottery Neolithic is subdivided into the following periods: the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) (10,300/10,100 - 9,500/9,300 B.P.); the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) (9,500/9,300 - 8000 B.P.); and either the Final PPNB or the Pre-Pottery Neolithic C (PPNC). Within the PPNA archaeologists identify the Khiamian and the Sultanian cultures. The relation between the two cultures is unclear. Some scholars argue that they were roughly contemporary (e.g., Gebel 1987) while others believe that the Khiamian preceded the Sultanian (e.g., Bar-Yosef 1991). Most archaeologists divide the PPNB into the Early PPNB (c. 9300-9000 B.P.), the Middle PPNB (c. 9000-8500 B.P.), the Late PPNB (c. 8500-8000 B.P.), and the Final PPNB (or PPNC). However, Gebel (1987) concluded that there was a high degree of continuity between the early and late PPNB and that there is not enough information to determine whether an Early-Middle-Late subdivision of the PPNB is useful.

The PPNA (10,300/10,100 - 9,500/9,300 B.P.)

There are strong elements of continuity between the Natufian (the last Levantine Epipaleolithic culture) and the PPNA; for example, tools such as shaft straighteners continue directly from the Natufian. Yet there is also innovation, as in
the change from Natufian lunates to shaped arrowheads. Several artifacts display both continuity with and discontinuity from the Natufian, as in the case of grinding stones with many pestles and cup-holes on each slab (Bar-Yosef 1981).

As mentioned previously, the Levantine PPNA is divided into the Khiamian and the Sultanian cultures. The Khiamian, whose flint industry is defined by the tiny site of Salibiya IX, is characterized by el-Khiam points, burins, medium-sized blades, fewer bladelets and microliths, many perforators, some sickle blades, and no axes-adzes (Bar-Yosef 1981, 1991; Kuijt 1994). The Sultanian, defined by Jericho, is a flint industry characterized by single platform blade cores, large sickle blades, multitudes of burins and perforators, large numbers of finely retouched tools, small quantities of microliths, tranchet (or Tahunian) axes-adzes, el-Khiam points, and polished celts (Bar-Yosef 1991; Kuijt, Mabry and Palumbo 1991).

Arrowhead distributions reveal a large cultural horizon during the PPNA ranging from Sinai to the Taurus. Khiam points are also very common in the PPNA and may show the level of communication between hunters throughout the region (Bar-Yosef 1991). Conversely, lithics also reveal distinct regional ties. The closer together the sites are, the more their lithic assemblages resemble each other (Bar-Yosef 1991). Various non-lithic artifacts also characterize PPNA assemblages. Bone objects include awls, points and spatulas. Greenstone beads, Anatolian obsidian, and marine shells have also been found. In addition, there is a varied ground-stone industry (Kuijt 1994).

There was great diversity in site size during the PPNA. Small sites outside of the very fertile zones are the remains of hunter-gatherer bands’ seasonal camps. Small sites within the better-watered areas were bands’ gathering camps, and larger sites in the most agriculturally fertile areas were farming villages. It appears that most large sites were occupied year-round (Kuijt 1994). However, even if the inhabitants practiced short-term mobility, the investment in building and storing shows that they meant to use the sites many times over many years (Bar-Yosef 1991). Such investments can also be found at smaller sites such as Iraq ed-Dubb, which raises questions as to whether they were indeed used only seasonally (Kuijt, Mabry, and Palumbo 1991).

Archaeologists have discovered both domestic and communal architecture dating to the PPNA. However, the domestic architecture is much better known since the only communal architecture discovered thus far consists of a large stone tower and wall (probably built as defense against flooding, not enemies) found by Kenyon at Jericho (Bar-Yosef 1986). The domestic architecture is characterized by semi-subterranean oval or rounded structures, usually with stone foundations and upper walls of adobe, mudbrick or wattle-and-daub. The roofs, though not preserved, were probably flat. The increasing amount of open space between such houses has been
interpreted as reflective of a decreasing emphasis on kinship relations (Bar-Yosef 1991).

**The PPNB (9,500/9,300 - 7,800/7,500 B.P.)**

The PPNB was a climatically lush time, wetter and warmer than either the PPNA or the Natufian. Some sites sprang up outside the core Mediterranean vegetational belt in Sinai and the northeast. But around 8000 B.P., the vegetational belts moved farther north, and the southern desert began to press in on Neolithic territory. PPNB architectural variability reflects these environmental zones; for instance, rectangular houses were common in the Mediterranean zone, while desertic groups continued to build rounded homes (Bar-Yosef 1981). Anatolian obsidian, Red Sea shells, and jadeite axes attest to long-distance contacts (Bar-Yosef 1981). Low and medium altitude sites contain well-built structures, locally produced flint assemblages, and relatively few milling stones. Highland sites possess flimsy structures, silos, imported lithics, and comparatively high numbers of grinding stones (Bar-Yosef 1981).

PPNB sites vary widely in size, from small pastoralist camps to large villages (Byrd 1994). Characteristic PPNB architecture takes various forms in these sites. Sizable rectangular buildings with thick white plaster floors (which are often also painted) and roofs supported by posts are found at sites including ‘Ain Ghazal and Jericho (Banning and Byrd 1987). At Beidha, the surviving lower floors of what were once two-story houses feature tiny, cellular rooms flanking central passages (Byrd and Banning 1988). Throughout the region, rectilinear structures replaced curvilinear ones midway through the period in the large agricultural villages; however, rounded construction persisted in the arid zones until the 2nd millennium BCE. (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989).

Apart from the inter-site differentiation, there was clearly some form of community-level organization during the PPNB. This organization included multi-level social and economic differentiation. Evidence for this differentiation comes from architecture such as the unusually large building at Beidha, which may well have been a public structure (Byrd 1994). It appears that as communities grew and multiplied throughout the early Neolithic, social differentiation also grew. The advent of specialized treatment for certain individuals in the form of plastering their skulls after death also supports this theory. However, there seems to have been a common belief system throughout much of the Levant, as is demonstrated by the plastered skulls which have been found at several sites (Rollefson 1985).

The economic basis of PPNB society was a combination of plant agriculture (cereals, legumes, and flax) and, beginning around 9,000 B.P., animal herding. Farmers lived in the central, lush areas, while hunter-gatherers and herders inhabited
the steppes and deserts (Rollefson 1989). Undoubtedly farmers and hunter-gatherers exchanged food. Farmers traded carbohydrates in the form of vegetable foods, legumes, and cereals for meat procured by hunter-gatherers (Byrd 1992). This interchange presumably lasted until pastoralists replaced hunter-gatherers in the steppes and deserts sometime during the PPNB (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1992).

The beginning of animal domestication was certainly the most important economic development of the PPNB. Four animals dominate the discussion of animal domestication in the Levant: the goat, sheep, pig, and cow. The Fertile Crescent had the wild ancestors of all four: wild goat (*Capra aegagrus*), wild sheep (*Ovis orientalis*), boar (*Sus scrofa*), and aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) (Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995). The domestication of each animal took place separately. Animal husbandry advanced at different paces in different areas of the Near East (Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995).

A substantial amount of information is available concerning Pre-Pottery Neolithic ritual (especially PPNB ritual) in the form of burials, sacred spaces and art objects. Burials, which are common at most sites, contain adults who lack their skulls and children who retain theirs (Bar-Yosef 1991). Apart from one collective grave, burials were single. No grave goods have been found, and burials lie in a variety of contexts (Bar-Yosef 1991). Probable ritual areas have been discovered in larger sites such as ‘Ain Ghazal and Jericho. Reed and plaster statues from ‘Ain Ghazal and other sites “are generally interpreted as representing deities” (Bar-Yosef 1997:172).

**The Neolithic Figurines**

**Manufacture**

The overwhelming majority of Pre-Pottery Neolithic animal images were made of clay (Figs. 1, 3). The lone stone figurine, a bird from PPNA Gilgal I, is displayed in Fig. 1:1. Most of the clay zoomorphic figurines come from the PPNB rather than the PPNA. Holland (1982) assigns some of these figurines to the PPNA but, as argued below, he may have been wrong.

A high level of homogeneity in the manufacture of animal figurines is clearly apparent in the central Levantine PPNB. All of them are made of clay and both buff and drab ware were used. As a rule, the figurines were hardened through drying, rather than baking. Wet-smoothing is visible on several of the images (Holland 1982). On most figurines, the stubby thickness of all bodily protrusions (legs, tails, horns, ears) indicates that each figurine was formed as a single piece. None of the attributes were formed separately and then attached to the body. However, this was not necessarily the case with all of the figurines. A spectacular ibex from Beidha was clearly formed from a single piece from the skull on down, but also has a pair of
huge, curving horns that have been broken off (Fig. 3:10). Ceramic fragments resembling detached horns have also been found at sites such as Basta and Munhata (Bienert 1995). Perhaps the separation of these fragments from the rest of the bodies indicates that there was a weak point in the figurine where the horns and the ears met the skulls. This might indicate that these portions of the animals were affixed to the figurines after having been formed as separate pieces. Of course, such delicate parts are always particularly vulnerable to breakage, so this theory about their separate manufacture remains a matter of speculation. Clearly the body, head, and legs of each piece were formed as a single unit.

A large majority of the anthropomorphic figurines are also made of clay (Figs. 2, 4). Stone and bone images were created as well, but they were few in number. The clay figurines were all made by hand from wares of different colors and with different inclusions. One figurine from Jericho is made of relatively smooth pale buff ware, while another is of a reddish-buff ware with white grits (Holland 1982). Some figurines were shaped all as one piece, while others were assembled from multiple pre-shaped parts.

Once formed into human shape, a variety of methods of decoration were used on the clay figurines (Fig. 4). For example, the unbaked clay figurine of a woman from PPNB Jericho has a wet-smoothed finish (Holland 1982), while the so-called “Mother Goddess” from PPNB ‘Ain Ghazal is stippled from rocker-stamping (Rollefson 1983), and an asexual image from PPNA Gilgal I was adorned with fingernail impressions arranged in vertical rows (Noy 1989). Incisions were often cut into the clay to indicate features such as eyes, eyebrows, nipples, buttocks, or legs. The incisions on the head of a Netiv Hagud figurine, which resembled the pattern on the asphalt-modeled skulls from PPNB Nahal Hemar Cave, may also betoken net-like headgear (Bar-Yosef 1991; Bar-Yosef et al. 1991).

The manufacture of stone figurines of humans during the Neolithic did not always require detailed realism or even particularly careful work. In the case of the female figurine from Salibiya IX, a rough outline of a human was coaxed from the soft, calcareous rock, but so little detail was added that no real arms are depicted, and it is unclear whether the figurine is supposed to be kneeling or standing (Fig. 2:1). Deep slashes were used to indicate the eyes and the legs. No extra effort was expended in manufacturing this figurine; once a roughly human shape had been achieved, the image was completed (Bar-Yosef 1980, 1997).

All of the bone anthropomorphic images from the Neolithic come from the PPNB; no bone images have been found in PPNA levels. They are unlike anything else in the Neolithic. They invariably represent only heads, never the entire body. One of the pieces, a small bone bead from Jericho that represents either a human face or a mask, would have been quite easy to manufacture. It was produced by carving down a
chunk of bone until it rather resembled an almond with an elongated ridge for a nose and two little bowl-shaped depressions for eyes. The eyes are neither the exact same size nor perfectly symmetrical. The bone looks as if it was polished after it was shaped.

More effort went into the manufacture of the other four Neolithic bone figurines of humans. These figurines come from Nahal Hemar Cave and they all represent human males. They were carved on the tips of relatively long bones such as ribs and fibulae; it is unknown what animal the bones came from. The artist(s) took the natural features of the bones into account. For example, a natural protuberance on the fibula indicates the man’s nose. The carved heads are round, without clearly delineated mouths or chins. Shallow sockets were drilled into the bones to represent the eyes. On at least one of the figurines, narrow incisions were scratched into the back of the head and the lower face, probably indicating hair. Although the actual carving of these bones does not look to have been either elaborate or difficult, the surface decoration of these four figurines must have been remarkably time-consuming, for it is quite complex. After carving, the Nahal Hemar bone heads were painted with red ochre, black asphalt, green diopside, and white plaster. These colors were applied in several coats. The general sequence seems to have begun with an initial application of either red ochre or white plaster, covering the entire face of each figure. Then black asphalt was applied to the backs and crowns of the heads, the chins, and the temples. Actual hair may also have been stuck to the heads with the asphalt; a tuft of it is preserved on the back of one figure’s head. Eyes were colored with either white plaster or black asphalt. At least one of the figures also had green pigment painted over the asphalt on the eyes. White plaster was then applied over the black asphalt on the cheeks, chins, and heads. This sequence may mimic the stages of male aging: first the smooth face of a youth, then the dark hair and beard of a mature man, and finally the white hair and beard of an elder.

Even after the complete sequence of aging was completed, layers of color continued to be added to the little bone heads. On one figurine, the white-bearded face was covered with asphalt, repainted red, and finally re-bearded with more white plaster. A reapplication of plaster may also have occurred on a second example, and an asphalt layer separated two layers of red ochre on a third. It is unknown how much time passed between the original application and the final coat of color, however. This process of painting and repainting may have taken place over months or even years or decades.

**Stylization and Homogeneity**

Both local and regional resemblances become remarkably strong among early Neolithic zoomorphic figurines (Fig. 3). In her analysis of the animal figurines from ‘Ain Ghazal, Schmandt-Besserat (1995:6) has concluded that “the most remarkable
feature of the animal figurine collection is its homogeneity.” The animals from ‘Ain Ghazal were modeled in clay, in the same position, and with the same stylization (Schmandt-Besserat 1995). There are two main types of figurines: bovids, “with a sweeping dorsal curve suggesting the withers,” and caprids, “identifiable by the (broken) horns as goats, sheep, and gazelles” (Schmandt-Besserat 1995:6). The foreparts of the animals are generally exaggerated, while the rear ends are slimmed down into near nonexistence. As a result, the head and the shoulders comprise approximately one third of the total length of each animal figurine (Schmandt-Besserat 1995).

A fundamentally similar style exists among the animal figurines from other PPNB sites. While the dorsal curve is frequently less pronounced on the figurines from sites other than ‘Ain Ghazal, and the rumps on the figurines from elsewhere are usually somewhat more proportional, plumply solid bodies, smooth curves, and nubbin-like extremities characterize figurines from a variety of sites. Figurines from Jericho in particular bear a strong resemblance to those from ‘Ain Ghazal, with their short, tapered legs, sloping backs, thick necks, often vestigial tails, and pointed muzzles. Furthermore, no zoomorphic figurine is depicted seated or lying down; all are positioned standing with their heads facing directly forward. This common style of animal imagery in the PPNB suggests that the two wet-smoothed clay figurines indicated by Holland (1982) as possibly belonging to the PPNA probably actually belong to the PPNB (Fig. 1:2). One of these figurines was actually attributed to the PPNB in 1957, and only in 1982 was it reassigned to the PPNA. The other was listed under both the PPNA and the PPNB (Holland 1982). Both have the above-mentioned typical heavy bodies, thick necks, tiny tails, and short and tapered legs. One of the two animals was also identified as a gazelle (Holland 1982), which seems extraordinarily improbable when its shape and resemblance to other figurines identified as either bovids or caprids are taken into account.

In contrast, however, there are also animal images that are thoroughly different from all other images (Fig. 3:7, 10). For example, the figurine from Jericho that has been interpreted as the head of an animal bears minimal resemblance to all of the full-body depictions. Its broad cylindrical muzzle and short and wide ears or horns indicate a head separated from a pillar-like neck by only a slight narrowing above a gentle hump. The Beidha ibex with its beautifully arching, knobby horns and lumpy dorsal surface is likewise unique, although elements of its form (the short legs, thick neck, and tapered muzzle) echo those of the figurines from Jericho and ‘Ain Ghazal. Therefore, despite the presence of important inter-site stylistic characteristics during the PPNB, animal imagery had not been standardized to the point where individualistic depictions of animals died out.

In contrast, while some stylistic continuity did exist among the PPNA anthropomorphic figurines on a regional scale, the level of variety remained high,
even within a single site (Fig. 2). For instance, each of the Gilgal I human figurines has a different style (Noy 1989). There are elements of continuity between them: they all are roughly the same size (5-8 cm) (Noy 1989), and none is clearly male or female (although one's hourglass shape may mean it is female), but the resemblance does not go much farther than that. One is a so-called “pillared” figurine representing a human of indeterminate gender. Its column-like shape features no body elements, only several vertical rows of incised nail pattern that appear to have been added on without great care (Fig. 2:11). Its simple facial features were molded separately and then applied to its face. Its head is very rounded and broad and may have been intended to represent a hat (Noy 1989). Another also has a cylindrical body with no indication of any organ, but its face is fully detailed by incisions, and its head, which sits at an oblique angle to its body, is quite pointed at the top (Fig. 2:7). A third, of which only the head survives, possesses a long nose indicated by incisions and rounded eyes painted in black, probably with asphalt, along with a wide groove atop its head, which may also indicate a hat (Fig. 2:6) (Noy 1989). Finally, a fourth, which is broken at the neck, reverses the featureless body/adorned head pattern set by the others and has a roughly hourglass-shaped body with an incised abstract pattern and a completely featureless upper portion (Fig. 2:10). These human figurines from Gilgal are not even all made of the same material; the first three are of burnt clay, while the final one is limestone (Noy 1989).

Despite the extreme intra-site variability between the Gilgal anthropomorphic figurines, one of them bears a very strong resemblance to the figurines from Netiv Hagdud (Fig. 2:6, 4). The head-only clay figurine from Gilgal I and the clay figurines from Netiv Hagdud possess flat, semi-triangular heads, roughly almond-shaped eyes, and columnar necks. Some also have long noses made by incisions, more lines incised beneath their mouths, eyes painted on in black, and long grooves atop their heads (Noy 1989). Although only one of these figurines is complete, it is entirely possible that the others also all possessed similar bodies whose only explicit features were small breasts and large haunches. All were seated with their short legs stretched out in front of them (Bar-Yosef et al. 1991).

There are stylistic continuities that range even farther abroad between figurines from Gilgal I, Salibiya IX, and Nahal Oren (Fig. 2:1, 2, 3). The figurine from Salibiya IX has been interpreted as female, which means that the other two may be female as well, although this cannot be discerned based on their anatomy. All three are made of stone. All three have distinctly squarish heads, schematic lower bodies with two perpendicular incisions that may represent kneeling legs (or just short ones), and vestigial arms. When upended, they also all resemble circumcised penises (Bar-Yosef 1980). The Salibiya IX and Gilgal I images also share horizontally incised eyes, but the Nahal Oren figure is faceless. The Nahal Oren figurine is very schematized, but the incisions that define its shape are in positions like those on Salibiya IX's and Gilgal's images, and the overall resemblance is clear.
None of the PPNA anthropomorphic figurines is overly naturalistic, but these stone figurines are even less so than the clay ones were. This might be related to the gap in difficulty of manufacture between clay and stone figurines. The limestone image from El Khiam (Fig. 2:5) is not especially naturalistic, either. On the other hand, perhaps the schematization visible in the stone figurines from Salibiya IX, Nahal Oren, Gilgal I, and El Khiam is deliberate. Three of these figurines bear such a strong resemblance to each other that a common schematization is hardly surprising, whereas the fourth, from El Khiam, is badly enough broken that its degree of naturalism cannot be fairly judged. Cauvin (1972) has suggested that its style recalls the realism of local Epipaleolithic art, and that it is a very early PPNA figurine, even though its subject, a woman, is part of a broad Pre-Pottery Neolithic thematic tradition.

Some of the PPNA clay anthropomorphic figurines display more continuity through time than they do through space. For example, while the PPNA human figurines from Jericho resemble the PPNB figurines from the same site very strongly, they resemble little else in the PPNA (Fig. 2:8, 9). No heads have survived on these PPNA Jericho figurines. Based solely on the torsos, the sexes of two of the three PPNA figurines cannot be determined, while the third is clearly female. The torsos are quite stylized, with either a flattened cylindrical shape or exaggeratedly broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Similar statistics are applicable to the three PPNB figurines that resemble the PPNA three; two questionable, one female (Fig. 4:1, 2, 4). Again, none has a head, or legs. (With both the PPNA and PPNB Jericho figurines, some of the absent heads appear to have been accidentally broken off, while others were intentionally never added. However, Holland (1982) claimed that at least one of the figurines which tapers to a point above its torso has a stylized head rather than a missing one. Roughly cylindrical bodies with rather long torsos also continue. One PPNB figurine features incised nipples rather than the three-dimensional breasts of two other PPNA and PPNB figurines (Holland 1982).

Stylistic continuity between the figurines from a single site was very common within the PPNB as well. The anthropomorphic images from Munhata, for example, all resemble each other very strongly, despite their differences in subject, but they bear little resemblance to figurines from other PPNB sites (Fig. 4). Three human images in clay from the site (one man with extremely pronounced genitalia, one woman with breasts and nipples, and one with asexual features) all have rounded heads with applied clay buttons for eyes and noses atop elongated torsos that lack even the hints of arms (Fig. 4:6). All of the rocker-stamped mother goddesses from ‘Ain Ghazal also display remarkable stylistic continuity: breasts centered in the chest, wide hips, and the extremely distinctive “tattooing” all over their bodies (Rollefson 1983).
Again, stylistic variability did exist among the figurines from individual PPNB sites. Despite the apparent continuity in style among certain figurines from the PPNA and PPNB at Jericho, other figurines from Jericho did not fit into this mold. While the head may be missing on the so-called “mother goddess” (Holland 1982), this distinctly female clay figurine lacks the slim torso of the ones described above. Its hourglass figure indicates that its subject either has very wide hips or is wearing a skirt. Kenyon (1957) claimed that the figurine is wearing a long skirt, but Cauvin (1972) claims that her steatopygian schematicization was what caused this misreading, and that she is in fact nude. The figurine does bear some resemblance to the female figurines from Beidha, which also lack legs but have heavy hips. The cleft between the buttocks on the image from Beidha makes it very clear that the figure is not wearing a skirt, but appears to lack legs because it is sitting down (Fig. 4:5). Cauvin (1972) claims this to be the first example in the Levant of an Anatolian-style seated mother goddess figure. The nudity of this Beidha figurine and its resemblance to the Jericho figure increase the likelihood that Cauvin is correct that the Jericho woman is nude. The five anthropomorphic images on bone from the PPNB are quite unlike anything else from the Neolithic. As mentioned above, none represents an entire body; they all depict only heads. One small bead from Jericho depicts either a human face or a mask, and is quite unique (Kenyon 1957). It bears a strong resemblance to larger stone masks, but none to anything smaller.

The other four bone images, the little men’s heads from Nahal Hemar, may also have stronger connections to imagery used in masks than to the world of figurines. Their plastic form resembles that of some small clay heads from Munhata, but this shared simplicity of shape may merely reflect a common economy of effort and not deliberate stylization. A stronger resemblance is found between these small bone images and a schematic limestone mask from the same site. These finds are all characterized by a generally rounded shape with ridges for noses and by painting on their surfaces. In addition, while at least one of the bone figurines had narrow incisions suggesting hair on the back of its head, human hair was found attached to the mask by asphalt smudges. Perhaps the bone heads were intended as representations of ritual figures who actually wore the masks. There may also be a link between the bone heads and plastered skulls, which have asphalt and glue netting over the backs of their heads, although this connection is less clear than that with the mask.

Overall, the anthropomorphic figurines from the early Neolithic are remarkably heterogeneous (Figs. 2, 4). Although the majority of Neolithic figurines were of baked clay (Cauvin 1994), images were also created in both bone and stone. The quality of manufacture is widely variable. While sexed figurines became quite common during this period, depiction of humans of unidentifiable sex persisted. There is a very wide range of topics among the figurines; men, women, and asexuals, slim and obese people, heads, torsos, and entire bodies were all depicted. Some
figurines are nearly unidentifiable, while others are relatively anatomically accurate. Decoration is apparent on only a selected number of the figurines, although it is always possible that surface adornments on others have eroded or been washed away. Some commonality of posture may be apparent among the PPNA figurines—the Salibiya IX, Gilgal I, and Nahal Oren images could all be kneeling, for instance—but that disappears in the PPNB. Even figurines whose stylization is exactly alike may be in completely different positions; witness two of the ‘Ain Ghazal rocker-stamped female images, one of whom is standing and the other of whom is clearly seated. Stylistic qualities differed from site to site (Cauvin 1994) and even within sites.

Archaeological Contexts of the Figurines

Unfortunately, data on the original contexts in which the figurines were found is extremely limited. Many were excavated several decades ago, and most simply have not been published with any information about their location in situ. Nonetheless, it is clear that the PPN figurines come from domestic contexts rather than from burials or clearly public spaces. They also come from both the inside and outside of buildings. Many have been found in caches of multiple figurines, while others have been uncovered together with other objects with ritual associations such as masks and statues. Still others are found alone (Rollefson 1986; Rollefson et al. 1992; Goren et al. 1993).

Interpretation

There is a consensus among scholars that PPN figurines, both human and animal, were used in the realm of the household rather than in the greater public sphere. Bar-Yosef (1997) bases this belief on the contexts in which the objects were found, whereas Schmandt-Besserat (1995:6) holds that “the small size of the [animal figurines], the common material in which they were made, and their casual modeling denote a domestic use.”

The relative scarcity of figurines must be taken into account when one is attempting to settle upon an interpretation of them. Either one must choose an interpretation in which numerous figurines are not expected (because their use is restricted to specific members of the community, or because they were used only infrequently), or else one needs another explanation for their absence. It is always possible that many figurines were made of perishable materials—but why not all, then? What made some figurines special enough to have effort invested in them so that they would endure, whether in clay, stone, or bone? It must further be emphasized that there is no reason to assume that all of the figurines shared a common function or purpose, which may or may not have been reflected in their materials or imagery.
Zoomorphic Figurines

"Animal figurines . . . proliferate during the PPNB probably due to the advent of domestication" (Bar-Yosef 1997:180). Whether or not domestication was in fact responsible for the sudden multiplication of zoomorphic figurines at this time is unknowable, but it is plausible. Either way, with the advent of the PPNB there arises the possibility of representations of domesticated animals rather than wild ones. Clearly all of the animal figurines from the PPNA depict wild animals, for no species had yet been domesticated.

Even among PPNB figurines, however, Schmandt-Besserat has concluded that although the species represented in the figurines are generally those which would have been in the process of domestication when the figurines were being shaped, the preference for adult males and "the emphasis on dynamism conveyed by the exaggerated foreparts imply that the animals depicted were wild" (Schmandt-Besserat 1995:6). Rollefson (1983) agrees, stating that no domesticates can be confidently identified among the images at 'Ain Ghazal. Therefore, Schmandt-Besserat (1995) argues that the figurines continue a regional tradition of animal symbolism which dates back to the Paleolithic, although the people of the Neolithic contributed the idea of depicting the animals in clay, which gave them three-dimensionality and autonomy. Alternatively, the shaping in clay might have constituted a metaphorical domestication of animals that at the time were in the midst of the complicated process of real-life domestication.

The Neolithic zoomorphic figurines depict animals of relatively low subsistence value. The PPNA figurines represent birds, which were not a chief food resource for the central Levant, while a startlingly high percentage of the PPNB figurines represent bovids, which likewise were not a major contributor to the human diet (Cauvin 1994). Ovicaprids, which did play an important part in the diet of the PPN, are underrepresented proportional to their nutritional value. Only at PPNB Dhuweila, a desert hunting site in the Azraq Basin, does economic value seem related to symbolic value. There, where the gazelle was the most important meat animal, archaeologists have found both rock art depicting gazelles and a single small limestone figurine showing what is probably a crouching gazelle (Betts 1988). This small, non-central site thus provides the strongest exception to the lack of correlation between subsistence and symbols in the PPN.

Hunting Rituals

One commonly promoted idea about the animal figurines is that their functions resembled those of the dough figurines of the modern Kalasha, which act as participants in hunting rituals and contributors to "the maintenance of the ecological balance" (Süger et al. 1991:59). The Kalasha are an agricultural people who irrigate
their fields and herd livestock in three small mountain valleys in the western Hindu Kush. They model figurines made of a dough consisting of locally grown wheat, barley, and beans, ground up and mixed with water (Süger et al. 1991).

These figurines are used during Chaumos, the Kalasha winter solstice festival that marks the beginning of a new year. A boy is chosen, and he carries out a ritual hunt by throwing pebbles at figurines of wild markhor. If his aim is good and he hits his target on the first try, it is considered a good omen for hunting in the mountains (Süger et al. 1991). Once the figurines have been hit, boys run through the village calling to figurines left in the houses and asking them to depart for the mountains and to change into real animals (Süger et al. 1991). In addition, men in the houses blow at cow, goat, and sheep figurines, thereby blowing the souls out of them. The men herd the figurines together with sticks and guide them towards the open door, and thence on to the otherworld (Süger et al. 1991). After the rites are concluded, the used figurines are given to the children as play things (Süger et al. 1991).

Perhaps Neolithic zoomorphic figurines were used in a similar fashion, as ritual paraphernalia in hunting and herding ceremonies. One might argue that the choice of baked clay, a rather more permanent material than dough, indicates that the Neolithic figurines were intended to outlive short rituals such as Chaumos. However, given the ease of clay modeling and our ignorance of how long Neolithic festivals continued, such an argument is invalid. Moreover, ideological considerations may have played into the selection of particular materials for figurines. It is very possible that clay, stone, and bone had symbolic meanings as materials beyond their mere physical attributes. Furthermore, we do not know if figurines made of perishable materials were also used in the Neolithic. Finally, the identification of the Neolithic animal figurines as accessories used in rituals involving hunting is supported by the fact that flint blades have been found buried in the sides of several animal figurines (Rollefson 1983, 1986). Perhaps the portion of the ritual accomplished by the Kalasha by having a boy throw pebbles at the figurines was performed by Neolithic people somewhat more graphically.

**Offerings and ritual deposits**

Alternatively, the blades embedded in the figurines could indicate ritual slaughter of the figurines as offerings to the deities. Several scholars maintain that both animal and human figurines were used in such religious offerings during the early Neolithic. Kuijt (1994) proposes that during the PPNB, ritual responses to new social pressures included the placement of human figurines in inter-mural contexts as votive offerings, and the development of other, probably household-based, forms of ritual involving the caching of animal figurines.
Bar-Yosef (1997) has offered the possibility that while the figurines were used on the level of the family, they were intended as public donations. The use or figurines as public offerings is not a new idea; Garstang and Garstang (1940:49) referred to several clay depictions of supposed cows, goat, sheep, pigs, dogs, and fertility figurines outside of the entrance to a building at Jericho identified as a temple as “votive figurines.” They believed that the presence of these figurines, along with pen-like constructions at the building, meant that it was a temple associated with a pastoral cult and the Moon God (Garstang and Garstang 1940). There is no supporting evidence for the latter portion of this idea, but caches found elsewhere support the theory that Neolithic figurines were used in ritual deposits.

The use of Neolithic figurines in ritual deposits is supported further by the contexts in which some figurines have been found. Contextual information suggests, for example, that at PPNB ‘Ain Ghazal the laying down of plaster floors was probably accompanied by ritual preparation. Foundation deposits including a cache of flint blades and two clay animal figurines pierced with blade fragments have been found (Banning and Byrd 1987). Ethnographic documentation provides even more support for ritual associated with home building; in modern vernacular architecture, house construction typically begins with some ritual or community consultation (Banning and Byrd 1987). It is very plausible that both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines were used in ritual caches or deposits as part of offerings associated with the construction of houses. However, the burials of plaster statues are considered “interment[s] of used paraphernalia” (Bar-Yosef 1997:172). Why are burials of figurines not viewed similarly? Stylistic resemblances between figurines and the plaster statues have been noted (Rollefson 1983). Might there also have been resemblances in meaning and even treatment? Perhaps figurine caches had a dual function: offerings to the divine and interments of aging religious paraphernalia.

**Anthropomorphic Figurines**

As Bar-Yosef (1997:171) has noted, “the female figure seems to occupy a particular place in PPNA imagery.” However, female figurines are in no way limited to the PPNA. They persist into the PPNB, and even into the Pottery Neolithic (Bar-Yosef 1997). Furthermore, even simple pebbles with a single slash across them have been interpreted as images of women’s genitalia (Bar-Yosef 1997). When this prevalence of female imagery is added to “[the] idea that a prehistoric art about women will always be about their reproductive, procreative function” (Handsman 1991:334), the result is the popular theory of the Neolithic Mother Goddess.

Yet there are also many male and asexual figurines in the PPN. It is of course possible that several of the sexually unidentifiable Neolithic figures are simply the result of hasty or careless construction; it is likewise possible that sexuality played no role in their use. However, we cannot merely assume that either is the case. In light of
the accurate portrayal of sex on many of the figurines, the asexuality of several of them might have been deliberate, and may therefore be meaningful. In addition, interpreters of the figurines ought to keep in mind the fact that sex and gender are culturally constructed concepts, and that it is entirely possible that the Neolithic conceptions of sex and gender were very different from ours.

**The Mother Goddess**

Nonetheless, one of the most popular interpretations of these female anthropomorphic figurines remains that of the cult of the mother goddess. In 1968, Ucko noted that:

> with very few exceptions the prehistoric figurines of the Near East... have been interpreted either as Mother Goddesses, as amulets connected with her, or as 'images of fecundity.' Secondary literature also has, with very few exceptions, accepted and continued the interpretation in terms of Fertility and the Mother Goddess, although many different goddesses have been specifically named. (Ucko 1968:416)

Admittedly, Ucko was referring to post-PPN figurines from throughout the Near East, but nonetheless his statement remains generally true about early scholarship concerning figurines. “The astonishing unity of Neolithic art is based on a very real community of religious belief. The mainspring of these beliefs is to be found in the almost universal cult of the Mother Goddess, the incarnations of fertility” (Praeger Publishers 1971:1456).

The characteristic of figurines from all time periods that has most often been used to support the hypothesis of a mother goddess religion is the supposedly exaggerated nature of the secondary sexual attributes on the female images. Large breasts, overemphasized hips and thighs, and stomachs protruding as if in pregnancy have been considered arguments for the identification of the figurines of women as fertility goddesses. Furthermore, the above-mentioned frequency of the seated position among female figurines has also often been used to support the mother goddess hypothesis, as many scholars have argued that the stance is that of a woman giving birth (Bar-Yosef 1997). The domestic contexts in which figurines have been found have also been linked to the domestic nature of the mother goddess (Ucko 1968).

Cauvin (1972, 1994) claims that the style of the Neolithic female figurines, with their oversized thighs and prominent breasts, emphasizes their femininity and symbolizes abundance. Kenyon (1957) also proposed that a stance with arms akimbo and hands on breasts is typical of later Mother Goddess images in the Near East, and
that this posture is apparent on the figurine of a woman from Jericho. However, neither statement holds true for all or even for most of the Neolithic female figurines. At Munhata, feminine figures are hipless. Several of the figurines from Jericho, identified by Kenyon as female, nonetheless lack breasts or hips (Holland 1982). And while some remarkably fertile-looking female figurines do come from ‘Ain Ghazal, most of the site’s human figurines are simple heads or torsos of unidentifiable sex (Rollefson et al. 1992). There are also male figurines as well as female ones. At Munhata, there are roughly equivalent numbers of both (Cauvin 1972). Various scholars have postulated that these male images represent a consort or servant of the supreme goddess (Ucko 1968), but the main virtue of this theory seems to be its ability to explain away data that do not support the goddess hypothesis. Moreover, the numerous figures of unidentifiable gender are even more difficult to explain. Most supporters of the mother goddess theory classify these sexless images as either male or female (Ucko 1968). Yet this reclassification requires corrupting the data to save a cherished theory. If one retains the identification of many figurines as either male or sexless, then other gods besides the central mother goddess may have existed (Ucko 1968).

The sheer variety of the human imagery present during the Neolithic also does not support the mother goddess interpretation of the figurines (Ucko 1968). Nilsson (1950) has noted that there is no reason to assume that all the different figurines depict one subject, and that there is even less reason to assume that they all depict the same mother goddess. There is not even any proof that the figurines represent deities at all: no clear indications of divinity exist about the figurines of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (Cauvin 1972). Finally, several scholars have noted that the very concept of a mother goddess cult is dubious because supporters of the theory have not considered the possibility of changes in belief between different time periods. Instead, the mother goddess interpretation has developed a “temporal homogeneity” (Ucko 1968:419) reaching through millennia from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic and sometimes even later (Conkey and Tringham 1995). The cult idea also denies the existence of varying or ambiguous meanings and the fact that “there are certain to have been multiple perceptions and interpretations of the figurines by the prehistoric social actors themselves” (Conkey and Tringham 1995:224).

**Figurines as Individuals**

Another theory proposes that anthropomorphic figurines may have been images of individual prehistoric humans. Bailey argues that whereas “traditionally archaeologists have read prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines as images of gods, goddesses or ritual supplicants, [such] readings have neither philosophical nor archaeological support. It is more accurate to read figurines as representations of prehistoric individuals” (Bailey 1994:321). He suggests that, assuming figurines are representations of personal identities, if they are analyzed in conjunction with burials
(which also reflect individual lives), they may produce the best information available about individuals in prehistory.

Possible support for the theory that the figurines represent individuals comes from the odd shapes of the Gilgal I figurines’ heads. These shapes could indicate not headgear or stylistic oddities, but rather the importance of cranial deformation at the site, a practice present at other Neolithic sites in the Near East (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989; Meiklejohn et al. 1992). Furthermore, the exact oddities in head shape depicted in the Gilgal figurines, i.e. the peak of the skull on one, and the extreme flatness of the skull on others, are known styles of deformation. The flattened-head figurines resemble extreme versions of skulls with post-coronal depression, whereas the image with the pointy head resembles a victim of lambdoid flattening (Meiklejohn et al. 1992). The groove atop the skull of one of the Gilgal figurines also echoes what Meiklejohn et al. (1992:89) term an occipital groove, “a depression or concavity running across the posterior of the occipital at right angles to the sagittal plane,” which probably resulted from having one’s skull bandaged in such a way as to cause deformation. Unfortunately, there are no human burials known from Gilgal (Bar-Yosef et al. 1991), so no direct evidence either supports or refutes the actual practice of cranial deformation at the site. Moreover, cranial deformation at the site could be ideologically important yet rarely if ever practiced. Ultimately we do not know whether the figurines depict deformations, let alone actual individuals.

In addition, Bailey’s (1994) interpretation of the Neolithic human figurines as representations of individuals at first glance seems to be supported by the Nahal Hemar human heads carved in bone. It is appealing to think of each head as that of an individual man, whose aging was carefully recorded on the figurine. When he hit puberty, an artist added a beard to the figurine’s smooth face, and as he grew old, another artist turned the figurine’s hair white. However, when one considers that the aging pattern was depicted more than once on each bone piece, a direct association between individual humans and the Nahal Hemar heads becomes unlikely. One could counter this argument by proposing that the heads were perhaps inherited objects and that the seeming rejuvenation of some pieces through the addition of new layers of plaster and ochre merely represents the passage of a role such as lineage head from an older to a younger man. Yet the infrequency of these replasterings weakens this explanation. Finally, the common stylization of Neolithic figurines badly weakens Bailey’s argument. It is not credible that several depictions of the same woman might exist at a single site, let alone that portrayals of her existed at other sites as well. Traditional stylization might account for strong resemblances between figurines, but pan-Levantine commonalities in topics as well as in styles render unlikely the hypothesis that anthropomorphic figurines represent prehistoric individuals.
Ancestor Cult

If the anthropomorphic figurines do not represent everyday individuals, they might be representations of the ancestors. Figurines as ancestors are certainly attested to ethnographically: Kjersmeier (1934:59) reports that the Hebbe have clay images of males, females, and hermaphrodites, which they call “small parents.” Furthermore, as ancestors are traditionally semi-mythical beings as opposed to the recently dead, the commonalities of style and topics among the Neolithic figurines need not be problematic. Archaeologists have long perceived a Neolithic ancestor cult, which is held to be particularly visible in the practice of removing, plastering, and saving the skulls of some corpses (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989). It is thought that this cult could easily have originated in a desire to preserve extended family cohesion in order to protect family property (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989). It would have been linked to ownership and ties to particular localities, and its existence is held to imply the presence of defined territories in the Neolithic (Belfer-Cohen 1991). In addition, an admiration and according of prestige to the old, which may well have existed during the early Neolithic, would correspond well with arguments for the existence of an ancestor cult (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989). Perhaps postmortem facial modifications (artificial deformation and dental avulsion) “were primarily performed in order to attain gerontomorphic characteristics, perhaps relating to a concept of rule and seniority of the elder person” (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989:129). Such a concept would explain the aging processes carried out on the figurines from Nahal Hemar. Furthermore, the semi-legendary nature of ancestors would allow the repetition of the aging procedure, as periodic rituals might celebrate the stories associated with them.

Creation Myths

The PPNB was a key formative era for the cult and mythology of the ancient Near East (Garfinkel 1994). Amiran (1962) and Margalit (1983) have both proposed that the cosmology of the Neolithic was the basis from which the religious ideas of the Ugaritic and Mesopotamian texts of several thousand years later evolved. Moreover, according to Bar-Yosef, “oral traditions lasted in the pre-literate world for a very long time, and therefore the proposed relations between Holocene archaeological remains and documented mythologies are plausible” (1997:172). Amiran (1962) has suggested that these deep-time traditions are visible in the human statues from ‘Ain Ghazal, Jericho, Nahal Hemar, and other sites, which may represent the creation of either humans or deities, as told in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The same might be true of certain of the Neolithic figurines, such as the small bone heads from Nahal Hemar. Perhaps even repeated “creations” were carried out upon each figurine, as each new layer of color was laid down. This is an intriguing hypothesis, but the several thousand years between the creation of these figurines and the composition of
the Epic of Gilgamesh render the cultic links between the two times tenuous enough that it can remain no more than an interesting idea.

Sympathetic Magic

It is not uncommon for archaeological figurines to be interpreted as vehicles for various types of sympathetic magic. It seems unlikely that the zoomorphic images represent sorcerers' animal familiars, since sheep, goats, and cows are neither mysterious nor exotic animals, but several scholars have proposed that both human and animal figurines were used as charms for desiderata such as safety, health, wealth, and fecundity (Broman 1958). The figurines are taken either as symbols of what is desired, or as agents for its acquisition, such as when sickness might be driven into an anthropomorphic figurine from a human's body. Both forms of use are ethnographically documented (Ucko 1968). This interpretation offers an explanation for the scarcity of figurines, as their use would have been restricted to sorcerers, shamans, priests, or other possessors of magical capabilities. The sudden proliferation of zoomorphic figurines accompanying the domestication of animals in the PPNB is also easily explained: once animals had become the possessions of humans, animal images could have been appeals for herd increases. Unfortunately, as noted above, economic utility was not generally reflected in the selection of imagery. The PPNB bird figurine and the PPNB figurines of bovids (which remained undomesticated) remain thoroughly puzzling in this interpretation.

Figurines might also have been vehicles of harmful magic, like the famous voodoo dolls of the Caribbean. Anthropomorphic images may have been used to attack people, while zoomorphic figurines might have been used to wish economic failure on them. If this interpretation is correct, the prevalence of human figurines over animals may be related to the fact that it is generally more satisfying to wound one's enemy directly rather than merely to damage him economically. Different forms of stylization can be taken to mean that the various figurines represent different kinds of magic. Broman (1958), discussing figurines from Jarmo, proposed that realistic images were modeled to express individuals' desires and discarded when the accompanying goals were accomplished. Female figurines with pronounced stomachs and breasts were intended to aid conception and pregnancy, whereas figurines of slimmer women acted, in effect, as birth control. In addition, relatively unrealistic pieces were charms representing less concrete aspirations, while extremely stylized ones represented abstract ideas such as Humanity or Femininity (Broman 1958). These specific claims are completely impossible to substantiate. As Ucko (1968) has noted, the equation of swollen-bellied female images with pregnancy, if carried to a logical conclusion, classes such images as fifteenth century paintings of Eve prior to the apple as fertility charms. Yet Broman's underlying idea is sound—that varying imagery may have reflected varying meanings. Varying imagery might also be attributed to varying artistic motives (Ucko 1968). While a figurine lacking gender
identification may have been deliberately denied sexual distinction, it may also simply have been made by an artist in a hurry. We do not know whether artists intended to depict a specific, asexual individual, whether they assumed that the audience would understand which gender the figurines was supposed to have, or whether they were merely depicting an abstract human whose gender was completely irrelevant.

**Disposal of the Figurines**

Whatever the functions of figurines were, the materials chosen for their manufacture indicate that the small animals and humans may have been in use for significant lengths of time. If people simply wanted figurines for ritual paraphernalia for single-night ceremonies, easily molded materials such as dough would have sufficed. While we cannot tell whether or not such perishable materials were also used, we do know that people in the Neolithic chose to use stone, bone and clay. Whether or not these choices of material had meanings above and beyond their durability (as seems very probable), it cannot be denied that these materials are capable of lasting for millennia. It follows then that figurines in the Neolithic may have been used either repeatedly or constantly.

Nonetheless, even ritual paraphernalia intended to last forever may need to be replaced from time to time. The old object breaks a leg, or it becomes too worn, or it loses its sacred quality in one way or another. However long the functional life spans of the Neolithic figurines might have been, at some point people may have had to discard them. If this is the case, were there special procedures for their disposal?

Garfinkel has suggested that beginning in at least the PPNB sacred items were given burials when they were deemed no longer adequate for use. He argues that Mediterranean zone inhabitants buried their items within their sites, whereas the peoples of the desert preferred to use caves (Garfinkel 1994). The buried items were not grave goods, but were themselves deliberately buried on account of their own special religious significance. All forms of cultic apparatus, be they anthropomorphic statues, skulls, or figurines, were given burials similar to those afforded human beings. Once items began to show signs of overuse they were considered unsuitable for ritual uses and were ritually interred (Garfinkel 1994). The burials were necessary because sacred items could never be desanctified and so regular disposal was unacceptable. The burial was thus both a final act of homage to the sacred items and a way of disposing of them without risk (Garfinkel 1994).

In contrast, Bar-Yosef (1997) has suggested that once figurines were no longer ritually useful, they were simply abandoned or passed on to children for use as toys. Such a fate has been ethnographically documented for ritual figurines (Süger et al. 1991). Obviously, this model of disposal does not suit findings such as caches of
figurines beneath house floors, but it does provide a good explanation for scattered individual figurines. It is also quite possible that while certain groups or types of figurines were interred as offerings or as burials of sacred paraphernalia, others did not require such treatment and were casually discarded or made into children's playthings.

Many questions remain concerning the final fate of ritually valuable figurines. If many sacred items were buried after they had gone out of use, what does this mean for the groups of buried figurines and sacred paraphernalia that have been interpreted as ritual depositions? Is it still plausible that defunct figurines were passed along to children for use as toys? If so, how did the people of the Neolithic choose which ritual items received what treatment? The answers to these questions are not known. Perhaps figurines were not intended for use over finite periods of time but only went out of use when they were lost or abandoned accidentally.

Integration of Ritual and Economics

As noted above, ritual is integrated with the rest of life: economics, social interaction, and negotiations of power. Thus it is only logical to expect that disturbances or innovations in any of these other realms would also affect ritual practices. This expectation is borne out by the evidence of the Neolithic figurines. Although it must be remembered that "PPNA" and "PPNB" are modern designations of archaeological periods and that in the past there existed no chronological line between the two, the sets of archaeological characteristics associated with each period dominate at different times, and it is possible to distinguish approximately when the shift between the two occurred. It is at this time of transition that we perceive the advent of not only the traditional PPNB social and economic strategies but also the arrival of the new symbolic repertoire that will characterize the period. In other words, the PPNB socioeconomic change arrived together with the ritual change. It is both futile and meaningless to try and determine whether the functional or the ideological aspects of the change acted as the prime movers.

The idea that economic strategies and ritual practices are intertwined receives further support from the geographic distribution of the new imagery in the PPNB. The gazelle had been the single most important animal both economically and artistically throughout the Levant in the terminal Epipaleolithic. But in the Neolithic gazelles had been eclipsed as both food and symbols in the farming zone by other, mostly domesticated, animals. Only in the desert where hunters continued to lead an essentially mobile way of life did they retain their dual importance. Reflecting these realities, taurine imagery rapidly gained prominence within the central agricultural zone at sites such as Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal, while at Dhuweila, a small desert hunting site in the Azraq Basin, gazelles continued to dominate the artistic assemblage (Betts 1988).
Other changes in imagery, in particular the emphasis on bovids, ties the ritual change to increasing levels of contact and trade with Anatolia and the northern Levant. Anatolian obsidian is common at central Levantine sites such as Jericho and ‘Ain Ghazal, and it has been found even at southern sites such as Basta (Bar-Yosef 1981; Rollefson 1983; Nissen et al. 1987). This PPNB cultural contact with Anatolia affected the imagery of the Levant, as the PPNB focus on bovids in particular clearly spread down into the region from Anatolia. Evidence for the centrality of cattle in Anatolian ritual is plentiful. Aurochs’ horns, bacraria, frescoes, and cattle figurines all testify to the vital role played by bovids in the religion of Anatolia (Bar-Yosef 1997; Cauvin 1994; Voigt 1991). However, ovicaprids supplied the majority of the region’s meat (Voigt 1991). Cattle also attained great symbolic importance in the PPNB central Levant, where they were no more economically important than they had been in Anatolia. It is fortunate for archaeologists that the evidence for aurochs worship is older in Anatolia than it is in the Levant, for the direction of spread cannot be doubted.

Further evidence for religious syncretism in the Levant comes from the stylization of the figurines themselves. There are easily visible stylistic similarities between some of the Anatolian representations of bovids and those from the Levant. To wit: the pointed legs are present on images from both areas, although the legs on the Anatolian version are longer. The short, tapering muzzles and vestigial tails are also present on bovid figurines from each region. And finally, thick bodies and downward-sloping backs are also shared characteristics.

This Anatolian symbolism spread rapidly throughout the Levant in the PPNB (Cauvin 1994). Although the ovicaprid was the most economically valuable animal at PPNB ‘Ain Ghazal, depictions of bovids (which were rarely hunted) dominate the figurine assemblages (Cauvin 1994). Twenty-three cattle figurines were found in a single Middle PPNB locus (Rollefson et al. 1992). In addition, a sub-floor pit yielded two cattle images with flints in their sides (Rollefson et al. 1992). Cauvin (1994) suggests that these images of gravely wounded bulls are closely related to the slightly later bull hunts painted on the walls of Catalhoyuk and are ancestors of the tauromachy in the region. Several cattle figurines from ‘Ain Ghazal also have depressions behind their heads which come from twisted fiber cords, which implies that the figurines may have been meant to show tamed, haltered animals (Rollefson et al. 1992). All of this supports the presence of a “cattle cult” (Rollefson et al. 1992:466). Some scholars even believe that the domestication of cattle was prompted by their ritual value. As Hole (1984:57) explains, “most authors believe that cattle, the least tractable of the early domesticates, were acquired initially for ritual purposes.”

The Levantines may well have adopted only the imagery of the Anatolian religion and not the belief system or practices which originally accompanied it.
Rollefson (1983) states that the resemblance of imagery from ‘Ain Ghazal to Anatolian iconography probably represents an artistic convergence rather than direct transmission of artistic and religious values. This is very likely, as material expressions of ritual behavior such as plastered skulls exist in the Levant but not in Anatolia (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989). Conversely, wall paintings, bucrania, and horn cores embedded in benches have been found in Anatolia but not in the Levant (Mellaart 1975). Yet whether or not the original practices associated with the taurine symbolism accompanied the imagery to the Levant is irrelevant here. What is significant is the fact that the Levantines chose to adopt a symbol system from an area that appears to have been an increasingly important trade partner.

**Conclusion**

As the evidence now stands, it is impossible for us to determine either the precise uses of Neolithic figurines or whether changes in their imagery reflect alterations in the practices surrounding their use or merely innovation in the symbolic repertoire. As excavations proceed, however, and particularly as more information about the figurines’ contexts becomes available, we should increasingly be able to address these questions. Even now we can see that socioeconomic and ritual change occurred together at the transition between the PPNA and PPNB. Additionally, we can discuss the evidence for and against various theories about the function and treatment of human and animal figurines during these periods. No explanation for or interpretation of the PPN figurines can be considered conclusive. It is only to be expected that the many different figurines of the Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic had many different functions and received many different treatments from their owners. Perhaps a general change in ritual behaviors was associated with the symbolic shift in figurine imagery that occurred between the PPNA and PPNB, but this cannot yet be proven. Nevertheless, this should not deter archaeologists from discussing the meaning of the figurines. Despite their many frustrations they constitute a marvelous data set for the investigation of ritual practice in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the central-southern Levant.
Figure 1: PPNA Zoomorphic Figurines. 1: Gilgal (Noy 1989). 2: Jericho (possibly PPNB) (Holland 1982).
Figure 4: PPNB Anthropomorphic Figurines. 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 16: Jericho (Holland 1982). 5: Beidha (Kirkbride 1966). 6, 8, 10, 14, 15: Munhata (Cauvin 1972, 1994). 7: 'Ain Ghazal (Cauvin 1994). 11, 12, 13: Nahal Hemar (Cauvin 1994).
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