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Symbolic Behaviour from the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic of the Near East: Preliminary Observations on Continuity and Change

**A. Nigel Goring-Morris
and Anna Belfer-Cohen¹**

"Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend. This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic language or images." Jung 1964: 20

Abstract: Beginning with the Late Epipalaeolithic Natufian Complex widespread evidence for symbolic behaviour is documented in various material culture realms in the Levant. Considerable continuity, yet with some changes in emphasis, can be documented in the subsequent Aceramic Neolithic (and even Late Neolithic) cultures. This sometimes takes the form of more obvious symbolic evidence, found in the domains of architecture, burial practices and specific artefact categories. However, there is also contextual evidence to indicate that seemingly everyday architectural elements, utilitarian items, manuports, and even faunal remains, and their settings, were imbued with symbolic significance. We thus argue that many, if not most, of the dominant themes of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic symbolic world actually represent the culmination of earlier shamanistic Palaeolithic belief systems.

Introduction

Systematic symbolic behaviour is crucial for the existence and function of human societies. Thus exploring such conduct entails focusing on its magnitude rather than merely ascertaining its presence or absence². There is a consensus that such activities had already become a world-wide phenomenon by at least the appearance of Upper Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* following earlier

¹ We wish to dedicate this paper to Jacques Cauvin, who has been a seminal pioneer in the study of the emergence of cult and ritual practices in the Ancient Near East.

² We follow here the definition of Jung for the term 'symbol': "What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us... Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason" (Jung 1964: 20).

From the above it is clear that, while we may be able to identify symbols through contextual evidence, we will never be able to decipher their 'absolute' significance.

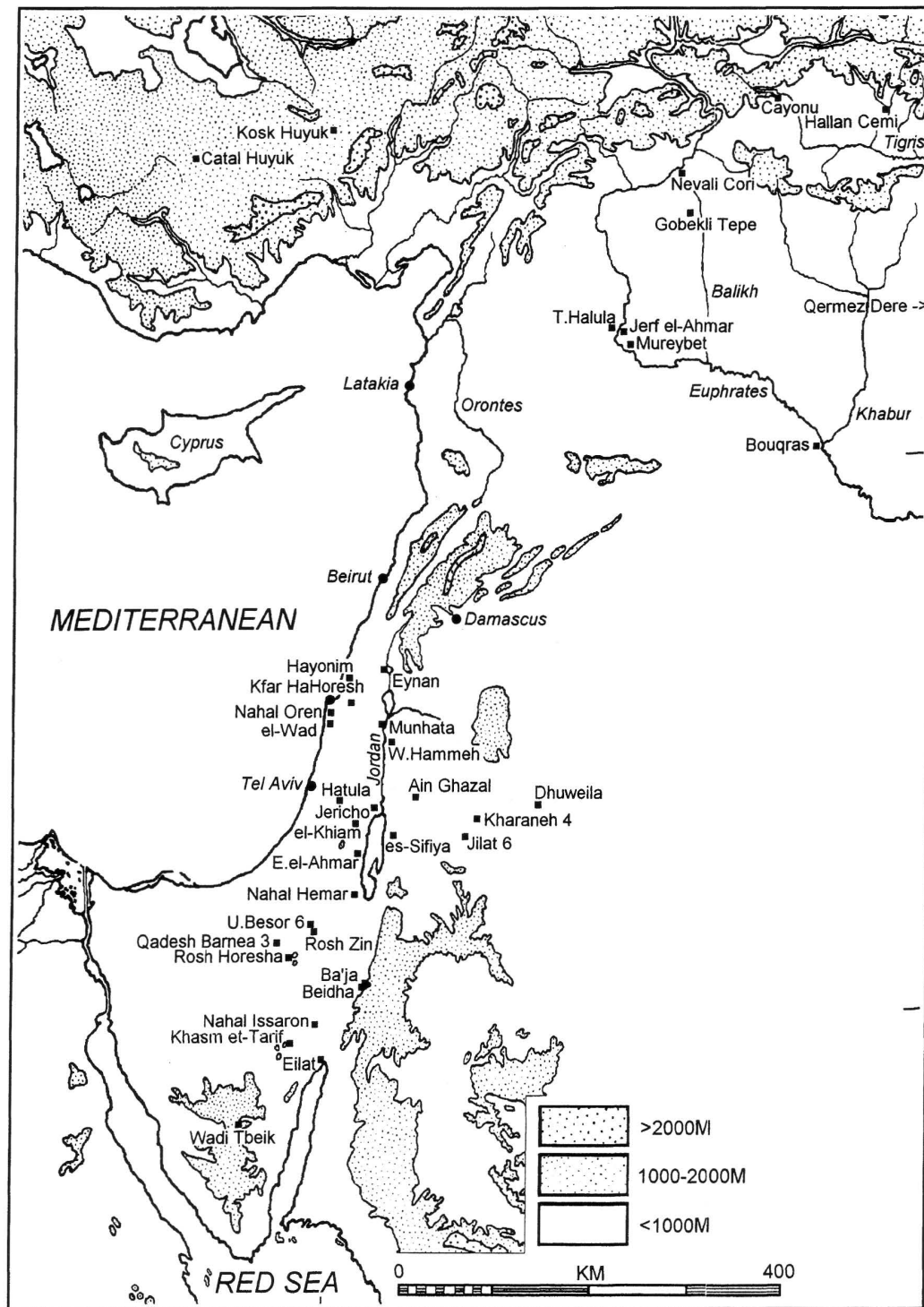


Fig. 1. Map of the Levant showing the location of sites mentioned in the text.

sporadic occurrences (Klein 2000). Starting with Upper Palaeolithic manifestations of symbolic behaviour, there are clearly universal icons that are time transgressive (Leroi-Gourhan 1965). Motifs such as the female in childbirth depicted at both the Solutrean rock-shelter of Laussel in France (Bahn and Vertut 1988) and at the Near Eastern Neolithic open-air site of Göbekli Tepe (Hauptmann 1999), immediately bring to mind the association between "females" and "fecundity". This "mother /goddess" theme thus courses from the Upper Palaeolithic European art occurrences right through Late Neolithic Çatal Hüyük, and beyond (Leroi-Gourhan 1982).

Even though many such themes were superficially absent in the Near East prior to the Late Epipalaeolithic/Neolithic, we can nevertheless take it for granted that they probably were present earlier, even if they are not always apparent in the preserved archaeological record. Because of our frequent lack of hard data "on the ground", contentions to the effect that fertility motifs are rare prior to the very Late Neolithic during the course of the Çatal Hüyük sequence (Voigt 2000), should be viewed with some caution. This apparent absence may sometimes be more imagined than real, as indicated by the use of different media in its portrayal. Here we can cite examples such as wood replacing stone 'monoliths' (Avner in press b), or the possibility of Late Epipalaeolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) burials in sacks or baskets versus Late Neolithic ceramics (Goring-Morris in press).

In the following pages, we shall endeavour to illustrate the degree of continuity present from the Late Epipalaeolithic hunter-gatherer societies of the Natufian, to the symbolic genres of more sedentary Neolithic communities. While the quantitative manifestations of symbolic behaviour increased dramatically during the Neolithic, not all are particularly innovative, and in certain respects should be viewed as ideologically conservative in outlook, i.e. their precursors can be traced directly back to Epipalaeolithic phenomena, especially to the Natufian. In this we differ to a degree with the views expressed by Cauvin (Cauvin 2000b) who contends that there is a marked break between the Natufian and the Neolithic.

Intensification of Symbolic Behaviour

Ethnographic evidence implies that, among others, a hidden agenda behind the phenomenon of aggregation sites is the strengthening of group cohesion, which is achieved through various activities incorporating symbolic behaviours (Conkey 1980). We can assume that many prehistoric occurrences considered to represent aggregation sites/localities served similar functions. It is of particular interest to note that such sites are recognised in the Levant already by at least the Epipalaeolithic period¹. Although it is most unfortunate that we miss much of the crucial evidence as regards detailed data to support such interpretations, the mere fact of the existence of aggregation sites probably reflects a rise in the scope and intensity of symbolic practices. Cohesion and social identity increases in importance as is demonstrated by the more obvious evidence for territoriality during the Epipalaeolithic – and it can be assumed that mating networks were likely more complex than during preceding periods (Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef 2000, Henry 1989, Kosse 1990). In the Near East a continuum of this tendency towards social complexity ultimately culminated in the emergence of city-states (Adams 1981, Aurenche and Cauvin 1989, Diakonoff 1991, Flannery 1995, Huot 1994, Johnson and Earle 1987, Yoffee 1993).

Universal and Particularistic Symbols

Neolithic societies in the Near East were still relatively small-scale in scope and outlook, in spite of the major increase in at least some communities' sizes (Hole 2000). In these communities the

¹ For example, likely candidates for aggregation sites, based on their sizes and other criteria, include the huge Early-Middle Epipalaeolithic sites of Kharaneh IV and Jilat 6 on the Transjordan plateau, and Late Natufian Rosh Horeshe in the Negev Highlands (Byrd 1988, Goring-Morris 1987, Marks and Larson 1977, Muheisen 1988). The presence of notational devices in the small test pit at Kharaneh IV is especially intriguing.

'natural', wild element continues to play a dominant role, notwithstanding the introduction of domesticates, whether animals or plants (Jung 1964, Valla 1996).

Even if some changes in the Near East superficially appear quite suddenly, there was probably little actual population movement from one region to another, and the changes occurred amongst the same local, endemic stock (Hershkovitz and Gopher 1990)¹. There was thus likely to be a tendency to incorporate the new ways of life within the overall framework of the 'old', long established, localised traditional systems. Nevertheless, the introduction of symbols reflecting new ideas and ways of life can be observed over the whole of the Levant. Indeed, we can trace a loose system of new symbols extending over a vast area encompassing the entire Levant south of the Taurus (Bar-Yosef 1996, Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989, Kozłowski and Gebel 1994, Özdoğan and Başgelen 1999).

The Early and Middle Epipalaeolithic foraging world was one of small mobile band societies (though perhaps with occasional aggregation) functioning as part of broad techno-complexes (Henry 1989). Based on the stylistic attributes of the lithics the restricted material realm that is preserved portrays considerable localisation². Thereafter sedentism and the changes in subsistence during the Natufian and the PPN led to increasingly marked disparities between the settled 'core' areas and the peripheries. These changes both cross-cut and united greater aggregates of people than in the preceding Epipalaeolithic archaeological entities. This may explain on the one hand pan-regional phenomena, such as the widespread geographical distributions of the same projectile points, the use of plaster, and other elements more obviously pertaining to belief systems, such as post-mortem skull removal³. At the same time there are also more circumscribed local variations of these general phenomena. Examples include the use of plaster statues, stone masks, production of clay animal figurines, stone bracelets, and differences in the dimensions and stylistic attributes of the common projectile points, etc. (Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris in preparation; Goring-Morris in press). Thus, by the Late Neolithic there is a greater degree of regional localisation, as if the old establishment had managed to incorporate and consolidate the new symbolic elements, as reflected, for example, in the figurines of the Yarmukian which have a restricted geographic distribution (Garfinkel 1993, Stekelis 1972).

Totemism can be considered as a traditional universal system, recognized to exist independently over huge geographical distances, the common denominator being that it occurs primarily amongst hunter-gather societies (Campbell 1969, Freud 1918, Friedman and Rowlands 1978, Spencer 1928, Spencer and Gillen 1904). Since both the Natufian and the PPN populations were probably still mostly hunter-gatherers (notwithstanding varying degrees of reliance on domesticates), it is logical to assume the existence of major totemic components within their cosmological frameworks at that time. This may be valid for both the Natufian and the PPN, even if the pretext changed through time.

Looking further at the symbolic realm of the Natufian-PPN, we can find evidence for certain animal species and themes filling prominent roles within contexts far beyond their mundane value as meat or other obvious economic considerations. Such a case can be made for a

¹ We are, of course aware that, in the northern Levant at least, some actual population budding off movements are documented during the Neolithic as, for example, the PPN colonization of Cyprus (McCartney and Peltenburg 2000).

² For a detailed discussion of the dominant viewpoint, see Bar-Yosef 1991b, Goring-Morris 1996, Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 1997, Henry 1996, Phillips 1996.

³ And see the idea of a PPNB *koine* or interaction sphere (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989, Cauvin 1972, Gopher 1989, Gopher 1990, Gopher 1994, Kuijt in press, Rollefson 1990).

⁴ Fox (*Vulpes* sp.) teeth are widely used by certain Natufian communities as raw material for pendants as found, for example, at Hayonim Cave and Erq el-Ahmar (Belfer-Cohen 1991, Neuville 1951). At the LPPNA/EPPNB site of Göbekli Tepe, in the northern Levant, the fox figures prominently as a totemic motif (Schmidt 1999). In Middle PPNB Kfar HaHoresh there are several examples of fox mandibles in grave contexts, which here at least appears to represent an instance of *pars per toto* (Goring-Morris in press, Valla 1996). Whether or not the dog,

number of different species such as the fox¹, the aurochs², wild boar³, and birds of prey⁴, amongst others. Of course, it is also possible that some of these finds, when recovered from grave contexts can sometimes simply represent treasured items, charms, or indications of personal valour, etc.

Continuity in ideological/ritual themes spanning different economic systems in the Near East is perhaps most notably displayed by the tradition of post-mortem skull removal. This tradition is first observed during the Natufian, is elaborated upon (by plastering) during the PPNB Neolithic, and continues sporadically even thereafter (Avner in press a, Belfer-Cohen 1988a, Bienert 1991, Silistrelu 1989).

The Natufian is the first instance where we can clearly observe the allocation and organization of space for symbolic practices, evident in cemeteries, domestic dwellings and special structures⁵. However, by the Early Neolithic the delineation and separation of space for different activities became more obvious as symbolic activities became institutionalised. Special structures for ritual activities became much more obvious during the PPNA and PPNB⁶. Indeed, the similarity of the PPNA-B examples to the (much later) *Kivas* of the American Southwest is quite astounding (Cordell 1994).

During the Epipalaeolithic, symbolic practices probably occurred within loose and flexible frameworks⁷. Such cultic and ritual behaviours are likely to intensify when communities face changes in configurations of political, social, and economic power, such as during the PPNA and, especially, PPNB. The intensification of artistic and ceremonial activities is closely related to the problem of organising large communities in the absence of social stratification (Hays 1993). The overall result was thus greater than the sum of the individual parts. This in turn led to more specialisation in cultic/shamanistic behaviours, which later culminated, by codification, within a religious (and political) hierarchy during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages (Levy 1995). In due course, not only new practices and symbols emerge, but the old ones were also imbued with new meanings. This is a universal practice, a much later example of which occurred when many Christian symbols were adopted from earlier pagan themes, *e.g.* Jung 1964.

which is domesticated during the Natufian and is found directly associated with human burials at Eynan and Hayonim Terrace, should be included here is unclear (Davis and Valla 1978, Tchernov and Valla 1997).

² The aurochs - wild cattle - *Bos* sp. can be considered a similar motif (see especially Cauvin 1994). Cattle skulls, associated either with human graves or what are purported to be communal structures, were recovered from PPNA and other sites right through the Late Neolithic (Becker in press, Mellaart 1967, Stordeur 1999). At 'Ain Ghazal clay bull figurines are disproportionately represented amongst animal figurines, in contrast to their actual frequency among the faunal remains of the PPNB levels (Rollefson 1986: 47), a pattern seemingly also present at other contemporary sites.

³ During the PPNB the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) is depicted at Göbekli Tepe, while remains of teeth and tusks are found in Middle PPNB Wadi Ghwair and in Late PPNB burials at 'Ain Ghazal (Rollefson 2000, Schmidt 1999, Simmons and Najjar 2000).

⁴ There is a marked rise in the numbers of raptor talons in the Natufian (Campana and Crabtree 1990). The exploitation of birds of prey may also have included the use of feathers. In the northern Levant and Anatolia, stylised statues of birds of prey figure prominently at Hallan Çemi and Nemrik, while vultures are depicted at PPNA Jerf el-Ahmar and in Late PPNB and later wall paintings at Bouqras and Catal Huyuk (Akkermans *et al.* 1983, Kozłowski 1990, Kozłowski 1992, Mellaart 1967, Mellaart 1984, Rosenberg and Redding 2000, Stordeur *et al.* 1996).

⁵ During the Early Natufian one can cite structures such as Eynan Locus 131 and Habitation 1, as well as Structure 2 at Wadi Hammeh 27 (note the large decorated slab). In the Late Natufian examples include the structures within Hayonim Cave and at Rosh Hoesha, as well as the cemetery site of Nahal Oren (Bar-Yosef 1991a, Belfer-Cohen 1988b, Boyd 1995, Edwards 1991, Edwards 1993, Goring-Morris 2000, Valla 1989 and references therein).

⁶ Striking examples include Jerf el-Ahmar, Göbekli Tepe, Hallan Çemi, Jericho, 'Ain Ghazal and Beidha (Edwards 1991, 1993; Kirkbride 1967; Marks and Larson 1977; Rollefson 1998; Rollefson 2000; Stordeur 2000).

⁷ It is quite apparent that during the Natufian rituals and cultic ceremonies were practised repeatedly: the rise in the number of basecamps and the evidence for more social complexity implies intensification in ritual behaviours.

Installations that pertain to cultic activities include monoliths and basins. Typical examples are either found in separate areas, or in and around the communal *Kiva*-like structures, from the beginning of the Natufian through the entire PPNB and even later. We can thus cite the presence of 'monoliths' at Natufian, through Aceramic Neolithic, Late Neolithic (and even later) sites¹. Large rock-cut basins and mortars have similar chronological and geographical spreads². These are usually much too large and/or shallow to be considered as mere utilitarian food processing equipment.

The appearance of "game boards" during the PPNB is also of some interest³. These are usually interpreted as mundane, entertainment items, yet alternatively they could represent divination or fatidic devices, especially since there is a later long history of divination in the Near East (Oppenheim 1964).

The various types of installations and features described above are semantic tools, with continuity of use from the Natufian right through the PPNB (and much later). But it should be noted that it is not always possible to be certain whether their contextual uses actually remained constant⁴.

Discussion

Human societies tend to be inherently conservative and backward looking (Leroi-Gourhan 1965, and see Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef 2000). Indeed, there is a fear of the unknown future, and new developments, such as changes in subsistence (domestication), threaten the 'old canon'. In order to cope with new phenomena 'old tricks' were coupled with new ones, but the entire package was still all wrapped up or orchestrated through the older framework. It is too thematic to assume that everything changed at once by decree, in the form of "new ways of subsistence" equals a new set of symbolic behaviours. Rather, it is more reasonable to assume that the old established conceptual framework was desperately trying to cope with the new and bewildering challenges, stemming from external and internal changes.

Jacques Cauvin has for many years brought attention to the 'divine couple' motif of the "bull god" and the "mother goddess" appearing in the Near Eastern Neolithic. He tentatively

¹ Examples of monoliths include those from Natufian contexts in Structure 2 at Wadi Hammeh 27 and Locus 4 at Rosh Zin, and at Göbekli Tepe and Qermez Dere during the PPNA. During the PPNB they are found at Çayönü, Jericho, es-Sifriya (Mahasneh pers. comm.), Kfar HaHoresh, 'Ain Ghazal, Beidha and at Wadi Tbeik. Final PPNB Atlit Yam and Late Neolithic Eilat can also be cited as other examples (see references above, and Avner in press b, Galili *et al.* 1999, Henry 1976, Kenyon 1979, Kirkbride 1966, Özdoğan 1995, Özdoğan 1999, Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1995, Rollefson 2000, Stekelis and Yizraely 1963, Watkins 1990, Watkins *et al.* 1989). While some are elaborately carved, others are hardly, if at all, modified. Some are truly monumental, especially in the northern Levant at Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and Çayönü. Others, such as those at PPNB Jericho, es-Sifriya and Wadi Tbeik Locus 25, are much more modest in size. In the southern Levant, at least, there may also be a tradition of wooden posts having served equivalent functions, as at Natufian Nahal Oren, Middle PPNB Kfar HaHoresh, and LN Eilat (Avner in press b, Stekelis and Yizraely 1963, personal observations). Stone monoliths subsequently have a long and intensive history in the Near East (*e.g.* Korber 1994).

² Elaborately carved rock-cut basins are found in the Natufian and later, at el-Wad, Nahal Oren, Upper Besor 6, Saflulim, Beidha, Munhata, Atlit Yam and Qadesh Barnea 3 (Avner in press-b, Bar-Yosef 1981a, Galili *et al.* 1999, Garrod and Bate 1937, Goring-Morris 1995, Kirkbride 1966, Perrot 1966, Stekelis and Yizraely 1963).

³ Gameboards are known from Beidha, 'Ain Ghazal, Wadi Tbeik and Kfar HaHoresh (Bar-Yosef 1981b and personal observation, Kirkbride 1966, Rollefson 1992).

⁴ Another element to be considered is graphic art, whether by painting or incising. Sometimes this is naturalistic, as at Bouqras, Ba'ja, 'Ain Ghazal, Tel Halula, Çatal Hüyük and Dhuweila (see Gebel this volume; Akkermans *et al.* 1983, Betts 1998, Molist 1998). The earlier absence of painting is perhaps in part due to lack of preservation or even the unavailability of media, *e.g.* plastered walls, and see Bar-Yosef 1997. More abstract motifs are also widespread and long lasting, such as the ladder and meander designs. These already appear in the early Epipalaeolithic at Urkan e-Rubb, and later at Hayonim and Öküzini (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1999, Hovers 1990, Otte *et al.* 1995).

associates their appearance with possible subsistence stress and environmental aridity appearing *prior* to the emergence of an agricultural economy (Cauvin 1994, 2000a, 2000b). In this context it is of interest to note that such symbolic themes may be incorporated within the ebb and flow of a much wider, universal framework of belief systems. Precisely such motifs were identified in Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic art, a time also characterised by environmental stress (Bahn and Vertut 1988; Bahn 1998; Jochim 1983, 1987; Leroi-Gourhan 1982). The Natufian and Early Neolithic in the Near East may have faced stresses similar to those of the Upper Palaeolithic in Franco-Cantabria, which were caused by extraneous (environmental) factors (see Belfer-Cohen 1988a).

There was no total replacement of the cosmological and ritual system, but rather additions, embellishments and intensifications to the 'secure' and familiar existing framework. During the Natufian and, for sure, during the PPN, the system had the structure of a quilt - a patchwork of the old and new combined. The conservative traditions died out slowly, gradually and sporadically being replaced by new ideas.

In summary, Near Eastern phenomena such as those most spectacularly demonstrated at Göbekli Tepe should thus most likely be viewed as the *culmination* of final Palaeolithic developments rather than as the initiation and emergence of new ideas. We should bear in mind that, even given the scale of some of the structures at Göbekli Tepe, these are not really "temples" in the sense of the organised, hierarchical religions of later periods. Rather, they should be viewed as the culmination of (Palaeolithic) shamanistic practices, perhaps paralleling the opaque socio-religious functions of *Kivas*/lodges in the American Southwest. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Göbekli Tepe was abandoned at the end of the Middle PPNB, without continuity into the Late PPNB, a period which probably coincides with the entrenchment of the "new order" of fully fledged sedentary agricultural life.

Yet, before it all ended, we witness an unprecedented fluorescence and explosion of new ideas, new media of expression, an expansion of the old beliefs and the introduction and incorporation of new ones. Some consider all this activity as the opening of a new page, in tandem with the revolutionary changes in the other domains of human existence, such as subsistence, lifeways, etc. (Watkins in press). Yet it is possible to turn all this on its head, and rather interpret it as the last throws of an old system refusing to die. While trying to cope with the new ways of life both by 'turning on' all of its resources, it attempted to placate new demands by old means. It can thus be said that the demands of the new ways of life required frantic actions in order to sustain the familiar way of living.... "desperate times require desperate remedies..."

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A. Nigel Goring-Morris
Anna Belfer-Cohen
 Department of Prehistory
 Institute of Archaeology
 Hebrew University
 Jerusalem 91905

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