

Assignment 1 - HPAH7014 - R.Thomas 2007350

by Rose Teresa Thomas

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A critical review of A. Nigel Goring-Morris and Anna Belfer-Cohen's chapter entitled "*Symbolic Behaviour from the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic of the Near East: Preliminary Observations on Continuity and Change*" (2002).

explain why you have chosen this article, how it relates to your research topic

In regards to the possible continuity of iconographic culture and symbolic behaviour the authors Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen look at cultural expression from peoples living in the Late Epipalaeolithic period through to the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), and further into more recent cultural practices (2002: 69, 73). The authors theorise that the symbolism found at PPN sites such as Göbekli Tepe could be a culmination of shamanic practices which might have been performed in Palaeolithic societies before humans began to live a more sedentary lifestyle and came to domesticate plants and animals. Göbekli Tepe is a site situated on a natural jutting plateau of bedrock, on the highest point of an extended ridge of the Germus mountain range in southeast Anatolia, a region which is now modern day Turkey (Schmidt 2010: 239). The authors theorise on why the PPN site of Göbekli Tepe eventually came to be backfilled, hiding it, possibly in an act of metaphorical 'killing' of the space. Having been recently uncovered in 1994, the site has been hidden from observation, investigation and general knowledge for approximately 9000 years (Schmidt 2010: 242). As Göbekli Tepe is a relatively new site in terms of the archaeological excavation and academic study, discoveries are being unearthed yearly, and additional evidence to a theory of continued symbolic practice in PPN is often changeable.

Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen express that academic discourse on semiotics is an important ontological approach to better understand belief systems in societies, yet they state that it is neither the presence or absence of the symbol which is important, but rather it is to what "magnitude" the systematic symbolic behaviour holds in regards to authority and socio-religious organisation (2002: 67). However, it could be argued that it is the very presence or absence of a certain symbol that can give us insight to a message which felt needed to be conveyed. For example, at Göbekli Tepe the inclusion of male figures and animals is prevalent over the female form (Hodder and Meskell 2011: 239). This would also contradict Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen's highlighting of Jacques Cauvin's theory, in which he states that predominantly a "bull god" and the "mother goddess" hold most agency in symbolic gesture throughout aggregation / sedentism societies of the Near Eastern Neolithic (2002: 72). The authors include a paragraph on a female symbol found in Layer II at Göbekli Tepe, which shows a woman either in birth, being penetrated or menstruating. The woman is thin and in a

defenceless position. Other female figure stone carvings, found at Neolithic site Çatalhöyük at a later date during the Upper Neolithic, are plump and authoritatively matriarchal (Rountree 2007: 9). As this graffiti etch at Göbekli Tepe has been attributed to PPNB Layer II of the excavations, it is unlikely to have been scratched in by someone of the PPNA or even the by the peoples who were using the site for its original intended purpose. If there are female symbolic 'goddesses' to be found in PPNA Göbekli Tepe, to suggest a continuation of a revered female into PPNB, they are still to be uncovered.

Untameable characters in the landscape such as, the fox, birds of prey, the snake and felid animals are given a particular attention in Natufian PPN sites and at Göbekli Tepe (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2002: 70; Peters and Schmidt 2004: 185). The authors write that the wild animals are "filling prominent roles" which are beyond their mundane value and economic considerations (2002: 70). Indeed, where we might expect domestic animals to hold the most attention during this time, it is the wild beasts which are the focal point at Göbekli Tepe. Peters and Schmidt count snakes, as well as foxes, to be the most dominant symbolic form to be present at the Göbekli Tepe site (2004: 39). It is notable that it is beings with silent, illusive characteristics who are represented here, these animal shapes could potentially signify an enigma or a serious danger to an individual, and possibly would have held associations of 'threat' within the individual and collective unconscious. It might then be beneficial to further research snake symbolism in Upper Palaeolithic cultural behaviour, or more specifically; the Levantine Viper, which is found often in the Anatolian ecosystem (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 183). Another aspect of 'danger' inherent to the snake symbols found at Göbekli Tepe is the incorporation of a downward moving gesture, indicating "towards" instead of "away". The phenomenon of special attention placed onto wild animals is seen to correlate into the PPNB where archaeological evidence of wild animal bones and teeth have been found in burial contexts (2002: 70).

The authors suggest that symbolism and iconography comes from a need for group cohesion and societal structuring. An example of this are the anthropomorphic stone figures created in PPN which might have served in lieu when dominant members of society were not present. Signifiers such as the belt and pelts on T-shaped figures at Göbekli Tepe might have been added to signify social cues, messages and remembrances of how to act in a certain space, or perhaps how to feel towards a particular phenomenon. Boivin's notion of material agency further supports this theory; "things can act as agents independently of people" (2008: 129). Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen state that "the mere fact of the existence of aggregation sites probably reflects a rise in the scope and intensity of symbolic practices" (2002: 69). An *axis mundi* might have been vital for societal structuring, hence the creation of Göbekli Tepe. The enormity of the central anthropomorphic T-shaped

pillars standing in the enclosures of Göbekli Tepe might have been used as focus points for ritual. It is possible these figures could be recognised as the central self, an archetype prominent in the vast majority of religious and spiritual practices (Jung 1969; Edinger 1992). The site of Göbekli Tepe was likely to have become a place embedded in social memory as a set apart, special place. It is possible that generations of peoples, who were custodians of memory, came here to experience the elevated position in the landscape and perhaps felt unconsciously pulled there due to engrained social customs (Connerton 1989). If the original 'reason' of the site became lost, it is likely the society would have rejected space. Thought systems in favour of more contemporary observances might have overwhelmed earlier practices that came before. This is suggested in the conclusion of Goring-Morris and Belfer Cohen's discussion; they theorise that perhaps the peoples of the PPN who originally created Göbekli Tepe created it in "the last throws of an old system refusing to die" (2002: 73). This is further supported by Nakamura who states "A tradition becomes superstitious when there is no legitimate basis for belief in it anymore. Or rather, the basis for belief has fallen out of favour or is thought to stem from a distant past or remote place." (2012: 304).

On a more contemporary note of symbolic cultural continuation, the authors suggest a similarity between Natufian material culture and Kiva structures of the American Southwest (2002: 73). The comparison, at surface level, does appear to be visually uncanny. The authors could expand on this comparative theory by looking into ritual practice of Native American spirituality, in particular, the Navajo Nation's cultural pilgrimage practice, which entails a journey to a high place to view and identify the sacred locales of the surrounding "four corners" sacred mountains (Lane, 1988: 76). This ritual, it could be argued, could support theories of supposed practices associated to Göbekli Tepe, as a visitor to the site would similarly have had to travel or pilgrimage to the space. This symbolic 'trial' could bond a person to the landscape in a feeling of responsibility for the territory, perhaps initiate a new transformative perception in individual conscious, it might even be considered a journey in which one might experience a phenomenon similar to the numinous (Campbell 1949). However, due to the large amount of years and variable influences separating these two cultures, it is capricious to suggest that the sites were used in the same way in regards to socio-religious function; "the possible criteria seem[s] infinite" (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2002: 73; Lewis-Williams 2004: 37).

Examining the agency that a symbol might have, possibly a symbol which is important in collective cultural memory, could allow us to understand a continuation of cultural practice, or even religious belief systems. It is suggested, by the authors critiqued throughout, that these continuations are influence to societal change (Neolithic settling and aggregation), yet on occasion could expand throughout the entire duration of

human history (American Southwest Kivas) (2002: 67). The authors bring forth provocative theories on continuation of Palaeolithic shamanic practice within symbolic behaviours into the Neolithic, however on more than one occasion throughout the paper the examples do not always correlate exactly how they intended, such as, the 'goddess' example at Göbekli Tepe. This being said, due to the relatively recent discovery of this site, new discoveries are being unearthed often, sometimes discounting the academic discourse which came before. Subsequently since the writing of this paper in 2002, further evidence has come forward to add to the theories of PPN ritual practice, the majority of which is focusing on the symbolic forms of wild animals, the phallus and death (Hodder and Meskell 2011; Dietrich and Notroff 2015). As there are different 'goddess' female and 'bull god' forms found in the later dated PPNB Çatalhöyük site, it could be argued that the authors are correct when suggesting Göbekli Tepe was a culminative monumentalising of an old socio-religious system coming to an end, with more primordial female figures and bovine representation about to become central to the next phase of Neolithic Near Eastern iconography.

Could be phrased better

good observation

This ends a little bit abruptly, which is a shame as it is so well written otherwise. You need a brief conclusion to reiterate how useful, convincing this article is and how it might inform your research in the site of Gobekli Tepe

Bibliography

excellent background reading

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The title of an article does not need to be italicised

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

72/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This is very nearly an excellent piece of work. It is very well written and very well researched. Not only do you situate the article against a wider (and very diverse) literature, but also you highlight how our knowledge and understanding of the site has been transformed through ongoing excavations.

I like the way in which you seamlessly interweave the theory and the archaeological evidence as well as the fluid contextualisation of Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen's arguments in the wider literature.

You should indicate in your introduction why you have chosen this article and how it will help you with your wider research project on Gobekli Tepe..

You end rather abruptly: tin about a conclusion which draws together your overall evaluation of the paper. This would improve your work greatly.

Also be a bit bolder in putting Rose into the argument!

PAGE 1

Text Comment. explain why you have chosen this article, how it relates to your research topic



Comment 1

which are?

PAGE 2



Could be phrased better

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Text Comment. good observation

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