

SNAKES IN THE PLAIN! – CONTEXTUALIZING PREHISTORIC NEAR EASTERN SNAKE SYMBOLISM AND EARLY HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

The article attempts an alternative and anthropological-based hypothesis to explain the abundance of snake motives in the Earliest Near Eastern Neolithic, contrasted with their relative scarcity in later times. The focus is mainly, but not exclusively, on the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) of Southeast Turkey, with sites like Göbekli Tepe and Körtik Tepe having produced a huge number of snake motives applied to a variety of materials and items. The predominance of the snake motive is then related to venomous serpents being a cardinal threat to hominids and humans throughout their evolutionary history, and particularly to early farmers, where snakes were a notorious hidden danger for semi-sedentary, crop-cultivating communities.

INTRODUCTION – VERMICULATING THE TOPIC

The *anguis* or *serpens*, whether labelled as a venomous creature, or embodiment of evil spirits, or as a coiled reptile radiating magical powers, or by way of complete contradiction, as a healing agent, is an ever-recurrent symbol in the human narrative, present and potent from early prehistory through to modern times. That said, a serpent or dragon-like creature biting its own tail, eventually understood as a cipher for -surely positive- concepts like self-reflexion, cyclicity, or eternal renewal, represents one of the most prominent symbols in Gnostic or Hermetic traditions (Sheppard 1962; Eire 2010: 29; Roob 2011: 329-347) (**Fig. 1**).

In prehistoric archaeology, serpents are a well documented phenomenon the recurrently hisses in archaeological debates, since artistic renderings of snakes are well known from having been shaped from or applied to a variety of materials. Rightly so, an ever-growing number of publications are devoted to put the occurrence of serpents in prehistoric art in better perspective (see especially Lurker 1983; Moretz 2013 with further literature). However, the common approaches consider, generally speaking, ritualistic or shamanistic activities as the most plausible explanation for their presence (cf. Hodder & Meskell 2011; Schmidt 2013), embedded in a mythological universe occupied by “heavenly” creatures (for example eagles), opposed to “chthonic” beasts like snakes that are populating the underworld (Schmidt 2013: 149).

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The following contribution will not completely dismiss these explanations, but dare a more “earthbound” approach to snake symbolism in the early Near Eastern Neolithic.

SNAKE SYMBOLISM IN EARLY NEOLITHIC ANATOLIA

Serpents carved in bone, hewn in stone or incised on lithic vessels are a well-documented facet of the rich Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) iconography in Anatolia (**Fig. 2**), appearing, for example, as an ever-recurring motive at Göbekli Tepe, the well-known yet much debated ritual focus near modern Şanlıurfa, southeast Turkey (Schmidt 1998; Schmidt 2011a; Schmidt 2011b). Prominently located on a limestone plateau, Göbekli Tepe proves to be a fascinating locus for studying the transitional period to sedentiarism at the beginning of the Holocene. The circular and ovoid megalithic structures with their T-shaped uprights popularized in different media belong actually to the early phase of Göbekli, Phase III, dated to the 10th millennium BCE. In the succeeding Phase II era (approximately the earliest 8th millennium BCE), these round “temples” were superseded by smaller, rectangular structures with considerably smaller pillars hewn in a similar T-shape (Schmidt 2011a).

While it is true that sculptured T-shaped pillars from the PPN A period are known from several locations in Upper Mesopotamia, those at Göbekli Tepe currently surpass those other examples by far in their size, their sculptural accomplishments and their pictorial representations. Moreover, the earlier phase of sculpted lithic elements at Göbekli Tepe displays a stunning range of execution. The pillars are meticulously decorated in low and high relief with an astounding range of motifs, the animal-based iconography extending from familiar local mammals such as wild boars, rams, foxes, and lions, via water-based birds as with cranes and ducks, to predatory arachnids including scorpions and, once again, – snakes (**Fig. 3**) (Peters and Schmidt 2004; Schmidt 2013). Even more noticeable is how statistically serpents are by far the most abundant animal depicted in different shapes and combinations, outnumbering the second most frequent and securely identifiable being – the fox- by about 14% (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 185 table 2). They are sculptured as single thick specimens with triangular heads, in small groups of three to five, or as larger composite patterns resembling waves or a net-like structure (**Fig. 4a**). With two exceptions only, these serpents are carved on the broad lateral side of the pillars, and generally moving downwards to the pillar’s foot (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 184).

With regard to snakes carved on T-shaped pillars analogous to those Göbekli Tepe the only certain examples are reported from Karahan Tepe, about 63kms east of modern Şanlıurfa. On one larger fragment, a single snake with a broad triangular is depicted winding upwards towards the horizontal top section (**Fig. 4b**) (Çelik 2000: 6 Fig. 1; Çelik 2011: 243; 250 Figs. 8-10). A second T-shaped pillar fragment found there in 2011 displays a faint relief of the very same motive (Çelik 2011: 243; 250 Fig. 11).

On the other hand, snakes or snake-like motifs are found represented on other artefacts of the Earliest Neolithic in the general region. For example, at Nevavlı Çori, a

now inundated PPN-B site located in the Hilvan district northwest of Göbekli Tepe. This site has produced a larger-than-lifesize head with pronounced ears, unfortunately missing its face, but with on the back of the bald skull, a snake with triangular head identical to those of Göbekli Tepe curling upwards (**Fig. 5a**) (Hauptmann 2011: 127 fig. 11a/b). This remarkable piece, found in secondary position in the so-called square-shaped “cult building” together with other carefully placed fragments of large-scale figural art, was obviously part of a huge anthropomorphic statue, placed in a recess belonging to the building’s 2nd construction phase (Hauptmann 2011: 98). Dated mid to late 9th millennium BCE, this serpent sculpture thus postdates the monumental snake-adorned architecture at Göbekli Tepe by a few hundred years.

Snake motifs, in this case carved on stone vessels, occur also in very early PPN-A contexts at Körtik Tepe. Located near Bismil in the province of Diyarbakır, round domestic structures with limestone rubble foundations and compressed mud floors testify to a very early date within the Near Eastern Neolithic sequence, with calibrated ¹⁴C dates clustering at about 9800-9600 BCE (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: 89-93; 103). Much attention has naturally been focussed on the treatment of the human remains found at this site as they provide a fascinating insight into complex funeral stagings attested in 10th millennium BCE Upper Mesopotamia (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: 93-4; Erdal 2015). So, for example, recent research has revealed that the bodies were de-fleshed at the decomposition stage, plastered and painted, interred and carefully covered with shards of crushed stone vessels (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: 93-100; Erdal 2015: 4-23). Here, however, we draw attention to the equally intriguing if re-assembled stone containers found at the site. These show a considerable variety of incised and encrusted geometrical and animal-shaped motifs, including wild goats, but most especially snakes appear on several vessels with their bodies rendered vertically in wavy line, and with triangular heads similar to their sculptured counterparts from Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori (Özkaya and San 2003: 433 Fig. 3; Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: 121 Fig. 23) (**Fig. 5f**).

While zig-zag motives on Chloride containers allegedly depicting snakes are likewise reported from previously mentioned Karahan Tepe (Çelik 2011: 246; 253 Fig. 24,7.8), they seem to be absent from stone vessels found at Hallan Çemi, a small PPNA hamlet close to modern Batman in Southeast Turkey, which was occupied for a few centuries towards the mid 10th millennium BCE (Rosenberg 2011: 61). On the other hand, that site has reportedly produced two carved bone items in the shape of snakes reminiscent of those adorning vessels and pillars at Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori and Körtük Tepe (Rosenberg 2011: 66; 78 Fig. 16).

A glimpse beyond Anatolia proper into Upper Mesopotamia confirms the presence of snake symbolism amongst Northern Syrian PPN communities also. At Tel Qaramel, whetstones retrieved from a secondary context, but associated with the PPN A phase, yielded both carved and scribbled snake designs (Mazurowsky and Jamous 2001: 340 Fig. 8). Then there are incised stone plaquettes showing several variations of our characteristic winding, arrow pointed or triangular headed snake from PPN A contexts at Jerf-el Ahmar in Northern Syria (**Fig. 5b-e**) (Cauvin 1997: 71 fig. 19,1.2.3a.4a;

Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 89 Fig. 3.18; Helmer, Gourichon and Stordeur 2004: 155 Fig. 5B).

Be that as it may, the evidence from Anatolia hints strongly at a decline in snake symbolism with the dawn and early period of the pottery-producing Neolithic. For example although Çatalhöyük –a site occupied on the threshold of this epoch - stands as an iconic place famous for its richness in figural designs, the eastern mound, inhabited from ca. 7400-6000 BCE (Hodder 2012: 245), has not produced any bone or stone objects, carvings, paintings or plastered decoration involving serpents except for a single artefact (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 214; Hodder and Meskell 2011: 250) (**Fig. 6b**). That is the extraordinary fine flint dagger with a bone handle carved in shape of a coiled snake, from a burial context associated with level VI and dated to about 6750 BCE (Hodder and Meskell 2011: 249; Zimmermann 2015: 11; 15 Fig. 1.4.1). True, finely modelled single- and double-headed snakes appear on recently excavated relief pottery from Köşk Höyük (province of Niğde, Central Turkey), a site of mid to late 7th millennium BC date (Öztan 2012: 38; 62 Fig. 31), but otherwise snakes as decorative applications seem to have largely lost their artistic appeal and impact when compared to their plentiful occurrence in the preceding periods (**Fig 6a**).

The preliminary impression, then, is that of an abundant serpent symbolism especially in the earliest Neolithic PPNA phases which tails off towards and during the beginning of the Pottery-Neolithic period. Currently Göbekli Tepe appears to be a focal point for their representation – indeed, one might say over-representation - but other items such as stone plaquettes and containers from various PPN sites testify to their special place within the post-Pleistocene bestiary. Their frequency in artistic rendering seems to drop harshly in the PPN B period. And with the end of the Aceramic Neolithic cultural setup and the advent of regular pottery-making in the late 8th and early 7th millennium BCE, then despite the potential of a new medium for their artistic expression, snake motifs occur only very sporadically in the archaeological record.

Whatever the reason for this lack of snake motifs in site of the proto- and the ceramic-phase Neolithic, what is noteworthy is that despite the frequency of serpent decorations in Early Neolithic Anatolia, very few, if any snake species are recorded in the faunal remains of the known sites. On one level, this is probably not that surprising, really, at all, as snakes would not have necessarily been on a regular diet of late foragers and early farmers, while, as observed by Schmidt and Peters, taphonomic processes might add to the scarcity of smaller faunal remains (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 209). Nonetheless the Urfa region is known, if not actually notorious, for harbouring several dangerous serpent species - some of them now extinct - (Wallach, Williams and Boundy 2014: 242; 257-259; 423; 466; 481), amongst them the highly venomous Levantine viper (*vipera Lebetina*) (cf. Ščerbak and Böhme 2005) whose characteristic triangular head shape could be the model for our PPN(A) snake depictions at Göbekli Tepe and its environs (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 183) (**Fig. 7**).

The absence of snake remains in the faunal assemblages of the Aceramic Neolithic aside it is nonetheless clear that the snake was a familiar if not common feature of contemporary symbolism. Insofar as their representation is concerned on sites of the period, it will probably come as no surprise to see how archaeologists have generally tended by way of explanation to embrace the historical, ethnographical, social and psychological concepts that center on serpent symbolism and symbolic actions related to snakes as sketched out at the beginning of this article. Which means that the sexual dimension of snake representations is eventually summoned upon to explain the serpent motifs at Göbekli Tepe, linking them to a “phallogocentric” approach to ritual (Hodder and Meskell 2011: 239). There again, an alternative approach considers the snake motifs there as the “grounded” part of a dualistic dichotomy, which involves interpreting the eagle depictions at Göbekli Tepe as symbolizing the “heavenly”, light-full aspect of life, whereas snakes are once again condemned to represent the “earthbound”, “dark” side (Schmidt 2013: 149). That aside; their presumed inedibility makes them, together with related species like scorpions or spiders, not good candidates for feasting ceremonies – leaving them with a vague “totemic” function as a possible explanation for their abundant depiction (Hodder and Meskell 2011: 244).

Other discussions on serpents in pre- and early historic societies embrace their likewise arbitrary connotation with matters of life, death and physical or spiritual recurrence. Thus even the overarching, yet highly speculative concept of a cross-cultural Neolithic female deity bearing bird and snake attributes contemplated (see Robbins Dexter 2011: 185-186). A more positive, female-based “life-affirming” (but still somewhat menacing) symbolic meaning of the snake in prehistory has even been juxtaposed with a mostly negatively connoted aspect of the snake/serpent in artworks of later times, rooted in a probable fear-fuelled rejection and finally ban of such concepts in patriarchal regimes (Robbins Dexter 2011: 199). Yet, whatever myths and miracles our ancestors associated with serpents, the fact remains that snake motifs are ever-present in the earliest Pre-Pottery Neolithic, clearly outnumbering the artistic snake rendering of succeeding periods.

WATCH OUT! – A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO EXPLAIN ABUNDANT SNAKE DEPICTIONS IN EARLY NEOLITHIC UPPER MESOPOTAMIA

Akin to the complex evolution of the human physios, the development of habits, phobia and gestures over time is sure enough intertwined with the response to environmental challenges. Power-players in the modern Premier League of human abhorrence as with widespread arachnophobia are generally linked to behavioural patterns in early human history. So, for example, guaranteeing higher life-expectancy through avoiding (venomous) spiders and other poisonous creatures (Davey 1994: 17-18; Gerdes, Uhl and Alpers 2009; Russell, Maslej and Andrews 2015), although more recent cultural aspects in being pathologically repelled by our eight legged roommates are likewise taken into consideration (Davey 1994: 20-4). The point here being that akin to the potential danger of multilegged arthropods, snakes are in general considered to be a grave hazard

to humans, despite the fact that only few species are venomous enough to harm lethally a human being (Kasturiratne et al. 2008; Chippaux 2012). Still, without the appropriate antidote, a bite by even a less-venomous variety can lead to symptoms as nasty as oedemas, necrosis and kidney malfunction (Warrell 2010). And whatever their potential or actual lethality, snakes of one kind or another seemingly accumulated in numbers enough in the Upper Mesopotamian region, the modern Southeast of Turkey, in Aceramic times so as to make their appearance known to contemporary observers (see above).

At the dawn of mankind, on the long and winding road from primates to hominids, our physical abilities eventually evolved alongside with our fears, reflexes and gestures, as so our responses to a slow but ever-changing environment. In a bold and both praised and debated (cf. Kamilar 2010; Ruse 2012), but nevertheless inspiring hypothesis, anthropologist L. Isbell has argued for snakes being the key reason for the development of the exceptional vision shared by humans – to detect and to avoid them (Isbell 2009: 125-148). Moreover, a gesture such as declarative pointing that is exclusive and peculiar to our species (and not understood by other higher developed mammals) might be the result of a selective process with the sizzling snake hidden in the grass as the prime motivator for this all too human behaviour (Isbell 2009: 148-53).

At the upper end of the evolutionary timeline, *Homo sapiens*, who had developed for about 200,000 years alongside his closer and remote Pleistocene hominid relatives as a successful mobile species of hunters, fishers and gatherers, abandoned this way of life merely 12,000 years ago – with profound consequences for human history ever since. At the turn to the Holocene climatic period, the Near East, or more precisely the region known as the “Fertile Crescent” becomes the focus for the first tribal bands experimenting with new building materials and the taming of plants and animals, forever changing the course of humankind’s cultural history. In this transitional period, early farming communities exposed themselves to high risk in applying a whole set of new and previously untested technologies that were basically revolving around successfully producing and storing food to bring a village community safe and sound through the coming winter.

The deeper intellectual reasons for this radical change in human survival strategies, especially the role of ideology, authority and organized belief systems, and the right methodological approach to identify them, are still hotly debated (for example Wunn 2001; Wunn 2003; Watkins 2004; Rowan 2012). On a practical level, the transition from mobile to sedentary, intertwined with the necessary transformation of the landscape to make lands arable, presented the communities with a variety of challenges. In this emerging subsistence mode based on reduced mobility and the arbitrary subdivision of food resources, probably attempted in vain since the Epipalaeolithic for several thousand years (Watkins 2004), venomous snakes were surely enough considered as a, probably *the* major threat to this still largely untested, risky and sensible new way of life[†]. In this pioneering period, the overwhelming presence of triangular-headed adder-like and related

[†] In Europe, snakebites were considered a major threat to farming communities even as late as the advanced 19th century AD, before agriculture became increasingly automatized with heavy farming machinery, profoundly reducing the risk of eventually lethal snakebite injuries (Chippaux 2012: 94).

venomous snake representations at Göbekli Tepe and neighbouring sites eventually reflects the –ritually charged- respect and fear of this hideous creature, lurking in the brushwoods and grasslands made ready for planting crops.

That said, the argument developed here naturally does not claim universality when it comes to artistic renderings of serpents –or their absence- in early prehistory. For a start, a similar phenomenon cannot be observed with early farming communities in Europe (Whittle 1996; Tresset and Vigne 2007; Milisauskas 2011). However, the case of the Upper Mesopotamian Pre-Pottery Neolithic, with its abundance of snake depictions and Göbekli Tepe as an early centre of worship on the threshold to agriculture and sedentary life, is still tempting enough to dare a less transcendental but more experience-of-life based hypothesis.

With rural economies further evolving, however, we also witness a paradigm shift in belief systems. That is to say, from a rather egalitarian animist approach that puts man on equal terms when communicating with mammals and other creatures populating the shared ecosystem, to a steep hierarchic concept with *Homo sapiens* as the sole champion of creation. The snake, once a much feared yet respected equal amongst others, might then have lost not necessarily its menacing aura, but probably its post-Pleistocene label of being enemy number one to early food-producing communities.

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