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Discussions

The Sky's the Topic

A Reply to Hodder and Meskell

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The thesis offered by Hodder and Meskell (2011), that the symbolism at Çatalhöyük—usually of the wild animals auroch, sheep, goat, leopard, and bear—was to represent nature's wildness and dangerousness, cannot be the whole story. Wild sheep and goat crania and horn cores were frequent in the “history houses” at Çatalhöyük (Hodder and Meskell 2011), yet unless provoked, wild goat and sheep are not dangerous or frightening. To the contrary, John Mionczynski (1992) wrote of their engaging behavior:

“Stories of wild goats and caprids in general, walking right up to people in the wild who are behaving somehow abnormally, are common around the globe. . . It becomes clear after the first encounter of this kind why goats and sheep were the first domesticated herbivores.” (132)

In contrast, the gray wolf, inspirer of terror, admiration, and folklore throughout the ages (Fritts et. al 2003), was the auroch's primary predator in Anatolia (Van Vuure 2005:263–264) and is present in faunal remains at Çatalhöyük (Çatalhöyük Archive Reports, passim; http://www.catalhoyuk.com/archive_reports/), though not in the art. Tepe Göbekli's pillars' iconography, which Hodder and Meskell (2011) believed was symbolically analogous to Çatalhöyük's, also does not conform to the “dangerousness” hypothesis: according to Peters and Schmidt (2004, Table 2), foxes, second only to snakes, outnumbered boar, auroch, wild sheep, leopards/lions, bears, and wolves (which were not depicted) on Tepe Göbekli's pillars.

An alternative to the “dangerousness” hypothesis is that at Göbekli, the depicted animals' behaviors were related to seasonal cycles and the weather and so were instructive of celestial (divine?) events. Indeed, Tepe Göbekli's magnificent T-shaped pillars, which stand in a circle on the top of the highest mountain for miles around (reviewed in Mann 2011), suggest that they served an astronomical function, such as fixed points by which to discern the movement of the sun, moon, and stars similar to the way the Incas used pillars to note the sun's movements (Aveni 2008). That sometimes the pillars were “miniatures” could have been due to their function as baetylic stones, given that the large T-shaped pillars were used to

explore divine unfoldings. Hodder and Meskell (2011) theorized that the T-shaped pillar was symbolic of the penis; however, the long horizontal at the top of the pillar would have increased the pillar's value for star-sighting. Per the theorizing of Eliade (2005 [1954]:4), the prescientific people at Göbekli might have regarded the T-shaped pillar and the penis, because of their similar geometric forms, as equivalent expressions—hierophanies—of a transcendent reality.

Hodder and Meskell (2011) suggested that the focus at Göbekli and Çatalhöyük was on the man rather than the woman. Yet, this thesis is not upheld by Çatalhöyük's figurines. The 245 pictures of anthropomorphic figurines in Stanford's Figurines Inventory (<http://figurines.stanford.edu/>) indicate that figurines having female sexual characteristics outnumber those having male characteristics by more than 10 : 1. An outstanding feature of the figurines is their geometric abstraction. Pure geometric form was a common artistic element at Çatalhöyük and Göbekli, and the sun, moon, and stars were absent themes. Could it be that the sun and the moon, by virtue of the pure geometry they impart, were represented by arcane symbolism? Triangles or cones might have signified the sun, and the right angle, the cardinal directions given by the sun and the stars. At Çatalhöyük, the ritual use of crescent-shaped horns, claws, talons, and tusks might have signified the crescent moon. Virility and dangerousness probably did serve as religious themes, but it is hard to believe that the sky was not the greatest cause of wonderment and symbol-making.

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