

**T.V. Kornienko**

Voronezh State Pedagogical University,  
Lenina 86, Voronezh, 394043, Russia  
E-mail: zigzina@rambler.ru

## ON THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN SACRIFICE IN NORTHERN MESOPOTAMIA IN THE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC\*

*Paleoanthropological materials, along with the art and architectural evidence, are analyzed. Data on the general trend of ritual practices in Northern Mesopotamia and adjacent regions of the Fertile Crescent area in the period of transition to the sedentary way of life, and the new subsistence strategies in the Early Holocene, are considered. Ethnographic data on the stadially related cultures are used as supplemental material.*

**Keywords:** *Epipaleolithic, Pre-Pottery Neolithic, Northern Mesopotamia, Levant, Fertile Crescent area, cult practices, human sacrifice.*

### Introduction

Since the end of the last century, the “revolution of symbols” theory by French archaeologist J. Cauvin has gained widespread scientific recognition. According to this theory, the leading part in the neolithization of the Near East is assigned not to economic or technological mechanisms, but to the changes in public consciousness associated with new environmental conditions (biotope) and with sedentarization during the period of Pleistocene–Holocene transition, which has been embodied in abundant material evidence of the symbolic content. In general, sedentism and, respectively, establishment of human settlements, changes in social relations, and growth of population during this period preceded domestication of plants and animals and manufacture of ceramics. The traits of new religious beliefs and

worldview attitudes were formed under conditions of the general upsurge in symbolic activities in Southwestern Asia during the Proto-Neolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic stages (Cauvin, 1994).

At present, not only the most recent materials obtained from Epipaleolithic and Early Paleolithic sites of the Fertile Crescent area are introduced into scientific use, but also many manifestations of the ritual practices of the said epoch are becoming objects of special research (Aleksin, 1994; Kuijt, 2000; Magic practices..., 2002; Dialogue..., 2005; Kuijt, 2008; Kornienko, 2009; Orrelle, 2011; Santana et al., 2012, 2015; Kanjou et al., 2013; Erdal, 2015; and others). Several reviews of the complicated system of beliefs and the cultural unity of Early Paleolithic communities in certain regions of the Near East have been published. In particular, on the basis of analysis of various evidence, Dutch archaeologist M. Verhoeven has identified four fundamental principles in the ritual practices and associated human perceptions in the Levant, Syria, and Southeastern Anatolia during

\*Supported by the Russian Foundation for the Humanities, Project No. 15-51-00019a(φ).

the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB): collectivism; dominating symbolism; vitality including the idea of domestication, domesticity, fertility/reproductive ability, vital force; and the human-animal bond (Verhoeven, 2002a, b). Generally, it can be noted that the initial steps have already been taken towards understanding of the spiritual and ideological foundations of the Southwestern Asian societies of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic and those ritual activities that strengthened and inspired these communities during the period of transition to a new way of life.

However, the probability of human sacrifice in the Near East during the Early Neolithic (about 12–10 ka BP, the dates are calibrated) still remains one of the understudied issues. Certain details, including indirect data, can be discovered by studying materials of specific sites. Nevertheless, neither the established views nor special summary investigations on this subject exist thus far\*. This article aims at filling this gap to some extent by starting our consideration with the analysis of the available data on Northern Mesopotamia and the adjacent Levant.

### **Analysis of paleoanthropological data and associated materials**

Identification of the remains of human sacrifice among the materials of common burials and other cult complexes is a rather challenging task, since the period and region under consideration are characterized by a great variety of burial rites, including the use of secondary burials, disarticulation of skeletons, and separate burial of their parts, and display of skulls and other manipulations with them (Kurth, Röhrer-Ertl, 1981; Bar-Yosef, Alon, 1988; Bienert, 1991; Alekshin, 1994; Kornienko, 2012; Santana et al., 2012, 2015; Erdal, 2015; and others). Specifically, the tradition of displaying groups of human skulls modeled in a particular way, and/or their placement in special storage, is recorded in the Southern and Central Levant. The Near Eastern sites of this period are also characterized by accumulations of skulls without clay coating, stored either separately or together with other human remains, within housings. In rare instances, single skulls are encountered. Burials of beheaded bodies were commonly arranged under the floors of buildings. In all likelihood, skulls intended for subsequent treatment and use in ritual activities were recovered, at least in most cases, from these graves.

---

\*A recent collection of scientific articles “Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East” (Sacred Killing..., 2012) addresses individual subjects in the materials which are rather extensive in terms of chronology, geography, and content, and, at the same time, this publication shows a considerable current interest in this topic.

The practice of making individual and communal graves in the residential zone of a settlement, often directly under the floors of dwellings, which was spread during the Proto-Neolithic and Early Neolithic period, is noted by the majority of researchers as a characteristic feature of societies that had recently made the transition to sedentism. The awareness of their permanent residence at the same place was established and “consecrated” through relationships with the people who lived and were buried here (Rollefson, 1986; Antonova, Litvinsky, 1998; Kanjou et al., 2013; and others). Complicated multistage funeral rites and other joint cult activities were intended to strengthen social relations and to form communal identities.

Turning to the topic of the Cult of the Head, owing to a high percentage of remains of children and young people and a special shape of modeled skulls, K. Schmidt, excavation director in Göbekli Tepe, raises the question as to whether Early Neolithic societies could practice human sacrifice (Schmidt, 2006b: 41–42, 245–246; Schmidt, 2011: 40–41, 240). In the Levant, single and grouped human skulls, which in certain cases (with the availability of preserved cervical vertebrae) provide rather convincing evidence of decapitation, have been found beneath the floor (under the foundation or at the threshold) of a number of buildings attributed to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (Kornienko, 2014). Skulls with cervical vertebrae separated from the skeleton have been found, in particular, at the sites of Ain Mallaha (Bienert, 1991) and Jericho (Kurth, Röhrer-Ertl, 1981). Some specimens dated to the PPNB bear cut-marks on the skull-bones. Traces of cuts have been detected on the left mandibular ramus of the jawbones from Kfar HaHoresh and Basta. A row of small cuts has also been noted on the rear surface of the mandibular ramus from Tell Qarassa. In the specialists’ opinion, these data point to the practice of decapitation (Santana et al., 2012; Erdal, 2015). Recent examination of materials obtained in Southwestern Asia has given the first systematized evidence of beheading, with the use of stone tools, in the period of transition to the Neolithic (Kanjou et al., 2013).

Of no less interest are the data obtained in the synchronous sites containing the related material remains in Northern Mesopotamia, adjacent to the Levant. Among the public buildings of the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNA), EA 30 at Jerf el-Ahmar (Syria, the Middle Euphrates) is one of the well-preserved structures (Fig. 1, 1). It was destroyed by fire in a very short time. An apparent difference between EA 30 and the remains of other structures at the settlement can be observed on the plan and the photograph of the excavated site, level II/W at Jerf el-Ahmar (Stordeur et al., 2001: Fig. 12; Stordeur, 2000: Fig. 4; Kornienko, 2006: 32–44, fig. 7–9). This difference is reflected not only in the dimensions, solidity, and detached position

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1034242>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1034242>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)