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FROM THE TREASURES OF SYRIA

ESSAYS ON ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN HONOUR OF STEFANIA MAZZONI

edited by

Paola Ciafardoni and Deborah Giannessi

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9,000 Years of Cultic Traditions in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria? Thoughts about the Crescent, the Bull and the Pole with Human Heads

Adelheid Otto

This note is dedicated to Stefania Mazzoni as a small token of gratitude for her outstanding contributions to Syrian archaeology and art.

Abstract

Secure representations of deities in the Syrian and Northmesopotamian region are testified for the first time around the mid 3rd millennium. At least this was the state of our knowledge, before the monumental pillars in Göbekli Tepe came to light, which represent supernatural and at least partly anthropomorphic beeings already in the 9th millennium. The largest two pillars excavated so far, placed in the center of circle D, wear necklaces with a bucranium and a disc-and crescent pendant respectively – motifs, that are generally interpreted as the symbols of the storm god and the moon god. This is especially striking, since these two are known to be the major gods in the same region with important cult centers in Halab, Harran and others, well attested from the late third millennium onwards. Another striking cult object, later called the semeion, mainly venerated in Northern Syria, might have antecedents as well in the PPN. This article discusses if iconographic traditions may have indeed survived in Northern Mesopotamian and Syria over millennia, and how the gap in the documentation may be explained.

A remarkable stele fragment (Fig. 1) has been excavated by Stefania Mazzoni in the Iron Age III Temple A at Tell Afis (Mazzoni 2013, 210-11). The depiction on the pillar-like stele presumably showed an adoration scene in front of the "ruler with the peaked cap", dating back to the Middle Bronze Age I. Extraordinary are the objects which are depicted above this scene: a crouching bull and the remains of a crescent and a disc. They probably formed the upper ending of the stele, where there used to be depicted the most important scenes, deities or divine symbols. On account of "the presence of the bull, the animal sacred to the storm god", Mazzoni presumes that the stele may have been dedicated to this god, who was "at the time, ... the major god venerated in northern Syria, in Aleppo, and in Ugarit" (Mazzoni 2013, 211).

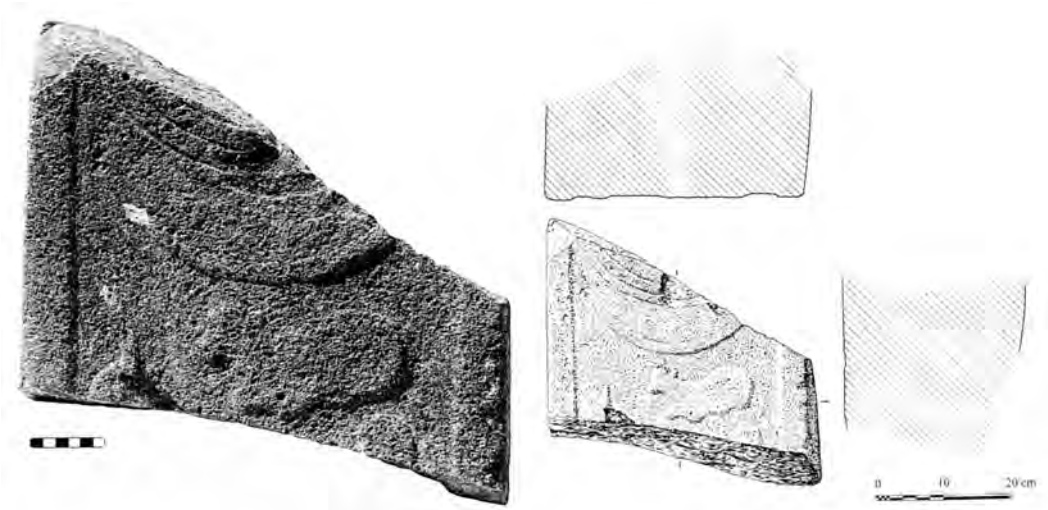

Fig. 1: Fragmentary Old Syrian basalt stele from Tell Afis, depicting at the uppermost end a crouching bull and a crescent and disc (Mazzoni 2013, 210, Fig. 11 a-b).

In this short note I will discuss, how far the origin of these motifs can be traced back, and if iconographic traditions may have survived in Northern Mesopotamian and Syria over millennia.

The Moon and the Bull as Symbols of Major Deities of Syria and Northern Mesopotamia

The earliest attestations of the storm god in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria can be found already in the texts from Palace G in Ebla, where the Semitic storm god Adad/Hadda/u is mentioned as one of the most prominent gods of the region.[1] However, since the beneficial consequences of the rain and the dangerous forces of storm, thunder and lightning were – quite naturally – of prime importance in the rain fed zone of the fertile crescent and Anatolia, we can assume that the concept of the rain storm as a consequence of supernatural powers had originated much earlier. Numerous attempts have therefore been made to trace the existence of the storm god back in time. Because the bull was attested as the attribute animal of this deity since the Akkadian period and also became his symbol, J. Cauvin and others wanted to interpret the numerous representations of bulls already in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period B (PPNB), i.e. as early as the 9th millennium BC, as a sign of early belief in the storm god.[2]

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[1] For the purpose of this article it is irrelevant that the Sumerian storm god Iškur was mentioned earlier (in archaic texts of Uruk) than the Semitic storm god, since the two gods were merged only much later.

[2] Jacques Cauvin has always stressed the immense importance of the bull in the PPNB period: "We could call the PPNB people the 'people of the bull', so clearly has the importance of this animal in their world of imagination become to us" (Cauvin 2000, 123). On the basis of the iconography and written

This thesis is methodically problematic in many ways: it is neither known from which time onwards the concept of deities, in which natural phenomena manifested themselves, had existed, nor can the meaning of a sign been inferred from much later representations. A bull in the 9th millennium did not necessarily symbolize the same – if it was a symbol at all – as in the second millennium. However, there are arguments to trace back the weather god into prehistoric times. According to D. Schwemer, the name *Adad* is a proof of the establishment of the god's name by speakers of a Semitic language in the Syrian-Upper Mesopotamian region in prehistoric times, since the name's Semitic root **hdd* was no longer productive in Akkadian (Schwemer 2001, 34–58). Furthermore, it is certain that the storm god in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia was one of the most important gods in the region between the Mediterranean coast and Upper Mesopotamia – at least in the historic period, i.e. since the middle of the 3rd millennium – and had his main sanctuaries there: under the name of *Addu* in Halab, the capital of the kingdom of Yamhad, which extended from the Mediterranean coast to the Euphrates;[3] as the supreme Hurrian god Teššob in Kumme, which presumably was located in the eastern Habur region beyond the Tigris,[4] and in the form of Jupiter Dolichenus until Roman times in Doliche near today's Gaziantep (see map Fig. 10).[5]

The crescent is securely testified as the symbol of the moon god, who was already mentioned as Su'en in the god lists from Fara, since the mid third millennium.[6] The main sanctuaries of the moon god were located in Ur in South Mesopotamia and in Harran in North Mesopotamia. Harran was deemed the sacred city of the moon god still in the 9th century A.D., when – according to Arabic sources – many inhabitants of Harran were neither Christians nor Muslims, but "unbelievers, the slaves of idols, 'Adherents of the Head' (Aṣḥab al-Ra's)" (Green 1992, 4). For at least 2,500 years, Sîn had acted as the divine ruler of Harran, and as the giver of oracles (Green 1992, 215). However, it is being

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texts from the period of the 3rd - 1st millennium, Cauvin concludes that the storm god had manifested himself in the bull already back in the PPNB: "Only one god, whether he was Phoenician Baal, Hittite Hadad, or earlier the Neolithic male God of Çatalhöyük, could ride the storm-clouds and the celestial Bull..." (Cauvin 2000, 124–5). As tempting as this idea may be, and as often as early manifestations of a weather god had been inferred from the numerous bull figurines and bucrania already in the Neolithic era, as little evidence for this thesis there is.

[3] At the times of the texts from Mari, the kingdom of Yamhad may be simply called "land of the storm god" (*māt* ^{d}*Addu*): A. 4251+, a letter to Zimri-Lim; see Schwemer 2001, 212-13.

[4] Schwemer 2001, 456f.

[5] Until late Antique times, Jupiter Dolichenus was venerated in Doliche, today's Dülük Baba Tepesi near Gaziantep. The finds give evidence of the existence of the sanctuary at least since the early first millennium B.C.; see Michael Blömer, Engelbert Winter (ed.).: Iuppiter Dolichenus. Vom Lokalkult zur Reichsreligion (= Orientalische Religionen in der Antike. Band 8). Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2012.

[6] Some Early Dynastic II/III cylinder seals, two among which were found in Nippur and Ur respectively, show a crescent on a standard: Braun-Holzinger 1993, 120; Colbow 1997, 29, Fig. 1. At least from the Akkadian period onwards the moon god had been represented in an anthropomorphic form, but it is possible that already the motive of the "boat god" on ED seals also depicts the moon god's journey, as was argued by Collon 1997 and accepted by Braun-Holzinger 2013.

debated whether the temple of Sîn has indeed to be sought below the Great Mosque, since the Islamic remains lay directly on levels from the 3rd millennium (Postgate 1972-75, 123). The earliest texts mentioning a temple of Sîn in Harran, where a treaty was concluded, come from Mari at the time of Zimri-Lim (ibid.). Since Classical and Islamic reports indicate that there was more than one moon temple in the neighbourhood of Harran (Saggs 1969), it is well possible that an earlier sanctuary of a deity in correlation with the moon was located in one of the numerous sites in the Harran plain.

More difficult is the interpretation of the disc, which is often depicted above the crescent. The most common interpretation as the sun disc is based on a highly theoretical combination of celestial bodies, which has never been observable in this way. It is more logical to interpret also the disk as the moon, since the whole moon disc is always visible above the horizontal crescent in dark Near Eastern nights. Also in Egypt the moon is usually rendered as a disc with a crescent, and as well the hieroglyph, which is used as a determinative for the moon and moon gods, depicts a disc in a crescent. Indeed, there seems to be evidence of both the sun disc in a crescent and the moon disc in a crescent in ancient Near Eastern depictions (Collon 1993-1997). A good example of the crescent and disc as a symbol of the moon is given by votive stone discs resembling the full moon, which name the two Akkadian princesses Enheduana and Enmena as the high-priestesses of the moon god at Ur (Collon 1993-1997, 356).

While there is common agreement about the fact that in the Middle Bronze Age the bull was associated with the storm god and his companions (e.g. the rain goddess), and that the crescent (perhaps with the disc) represented the celestial bodies of the moon and served as the symbols of the moon god, the question remains how far in time these symbols can be traced back. This is, of course, closely correlated with the question of when the concept of deities was established.

The belief in supernatural powers can be found in almost all cultures, but can basically manifest itself in different ways: either in rituals, in words or in pictorial representations. Since the first cuneiform texts were found in Syria and Northwestern Mesopotamia not before around 2450 B.C., and since rituals can be reconstructed on the basis of archaeological relicts, but the nature of the venerated being – deity or not – cannot be identified – we mainly have to rely on pictorial representations in our search for the earliest evidence of deities in Syria.

Braun-Holzinger (2013) demonstrated that pictorial representations of deities had been rare until the mid 3rd millennium even in South Mesopotamia. After a few depictions from the Late Uruk period, there seems to have been a period without images of deities, while in the later Early Dynastic period only these representations increased and saw quite a boom in the Akkadian period.

In Northern Mesopotamia and Syria, pictorial representations of anthropomorphic deities – which can be identified as such on the basis of distinct features such as the horned

crown, special garments or attributes – were shown for the first time on seals from Tell Beydar, Tell Brak and Mari, dating to the EJ IIIb period.[7] Interestingly, the earliest deity, represented on these seals, is the moon god, who is sitting in his crescent shaped boat, which is distinguished as a divine being, too. Deities became frequently depicted on slightly later Akkadian cylinder seals, but the motives of these seem to have been primarily borrowed from the Akkadian / Central Mesopotamian region. According to the present state of knowledge, the earliest depictions of deities in genuine Syrian art date from the early second millennium, that third phase of urbanization which took place in the course of the establishment of Amorite kingdoms. Quite suddenly, the depictions of anthropomorphic goddesses and gods became numerous on stelae, wall paintings, cylinder seals, pieces of minor art and as statues.[8] In Syria and Anatolia, however, deities were not always clearly distinguished as such by a horned crown – as it used to be the case in Mesopotamia – but apparently, their divine identity was also obvious without this specific attribute. This means also that deities possibly could have been depicted already much earlier, but that we just cannot recognize them for want of distinct characteristics.[9]

The Bucranium, the Crescent and the Disc on T-shaped Pillars from PPN Göbekli Tepe

In view of this state of knowledge, we can imagine what a shock it was when the monumental pillars in Nevalı Çori, Göbekli Tepe and other sites at the northern end of Upper Mesopotamia came to light (Figs. 2-3). Some of the so-called T-shaped pillars exhibit bent arms with hands, girdles, and necklaces in shallow relief, which indicate that they were supposed to represent anthropomorphic beings. The wide upper end of the pillars had apparently been modelled on an oversized head, as is substantiated by an only 80

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[7] For numerous examples of locally made seals from EJ IIIb levels at Tell Beydar, depicting boat god scenes, see Jans, Bretschneider 2011, Pl. 15.

[8] Some earlier examples are attested, such as the Jebelet el-Beda stelae, the statue of a mountain god from Mari and nude female figurines made of ivory and bronze from various sites, but their divine nature is debatable. A further exception is the above-mentioned boat god on Early Syrian seals, but this motive is clearly derived from Southern Mesopotamian models.

[9] This Northern Mesopotamian and Syrian habit makes it difficult to interpret the terracotta figurines that were so popular in this region. Since the late 3rd millennium, there had been evidence of various forms: female and male ones, with different headgears and positions of their hands, the female ones often holding their breasts, the male ones with weapons in their hands. Despite long lasting discussions, it is still controversial whether they should be denominated deities. The fact that they obviously were always broken and thrown away on purpose could speak for them having embodied demonical or apotropaic beings, but no real deities. Their supraregional occurrence in iconographically determined types, however, suggests that the figurines might have been the images of deities, whose existence in Syria is documented in the earliest Syrian cuneiform texts from Ebla. It is even less possible to interpret the nature of the small but numerous figurines of the Pre-Pottery and Pottery Neolithic periods, or even to deduce from them the belief in gods.

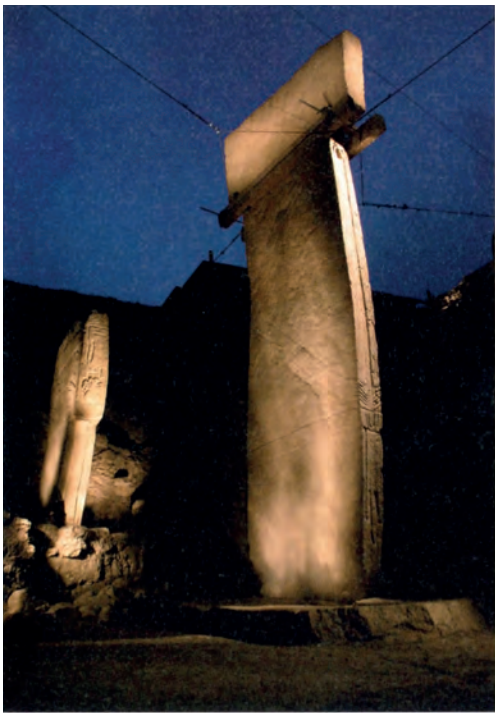

Fig. 2a: The T-shaped Pillar 31 of enclosure D at PPN Göbekli Tepe; height: 5.5 m (Becker et al. 2012, 20, Fig. 8).

Fig. 2b: Detail of Pillar 31: the necklace with a bucranium as pendant (Schmidt 2007, 173, Fig. 81).

Fig. 3a: The T-shaped Pillar 18 of enclosure D at PPN Göbekli Tepe; height: 5.5 m (Schmidt 2011, 82, Fig. 34).

Fig. 3b: Detail of the necklace of Pillar 18: pendants in the form of enigmatic objects, a crescent and a disc (Schmidt 2011, 81, Fig. 32).

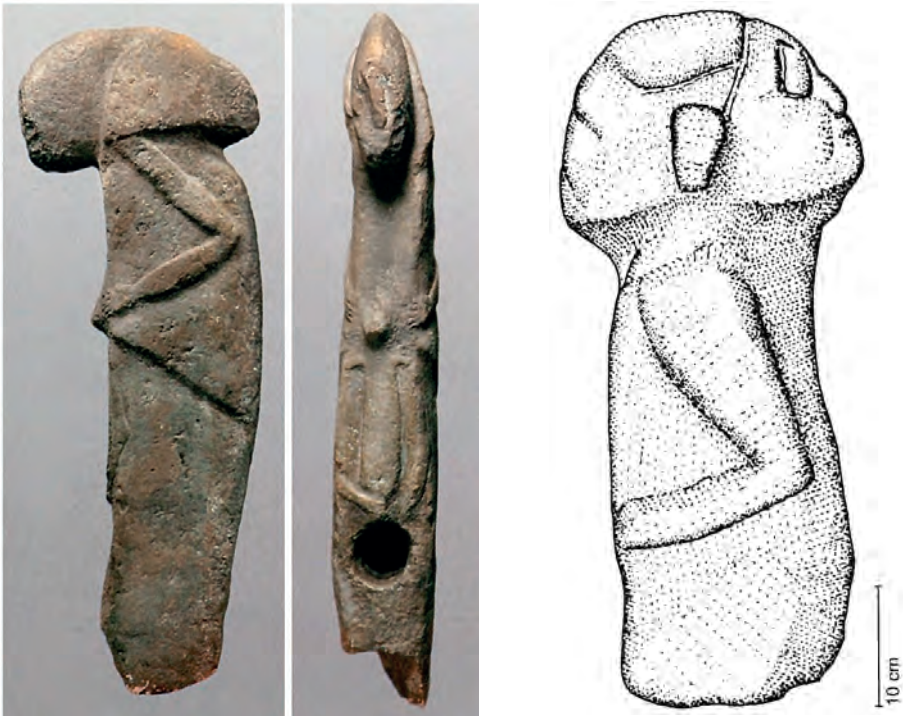

Fig. 4: Two anthropomorphic PPN statuettes, which corroborate the interpretation of the T-shaped pillars as anthropomorphic beings; a: Statuette from Adyaman-Kilisik (Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe 2007, 276, Fig. 32); b: Janus-faced statuette in the Gaziantep Museum, provenience unknown (Becker et al. 2012, 31, Fig. 22).

cm high, but morphologically very similar statuette from Adyaman-Kilisik (Fig. 4a)[10], or on two juxtaposed heads, as is shown by a Janus-faced sculpture in the Gaziantep Museum (Fig. 4b)[11]. The concept on which these T- shaped pillars are based, is thus indeed the strongly stylized and monumentally oversized representation of anthropomorphic beings. There are always two especially large anthropomorphic beings in the center of the round or rectangular buildings. They are much taller than the other pillars, which were integrated in the wall and decorated in a different way.

Ever since these T-shaped pillars came to light, there has been a lively discussion whether these pillars represented supernatural powers or deities (Becker et al. 2012), or whether they were "images of ancestors and demons" and "refer to a shamanistic back-

[10] Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe 2007, 276, Fig. 32.

[11] The hitherto best example of a Janus-faced figure is the sculpture in the Gaziantep Museum, the provenience of which is unknown, but which clearly stems from the same period and region: Becker et al. 2012, 31, Fig. 22. Among the live-sized stone heads, which were found in the circular buildings at Göbekli Tepe, one consisted of two juxtaposed heads: Becker et al. 2012, 27, Fig. 17e.

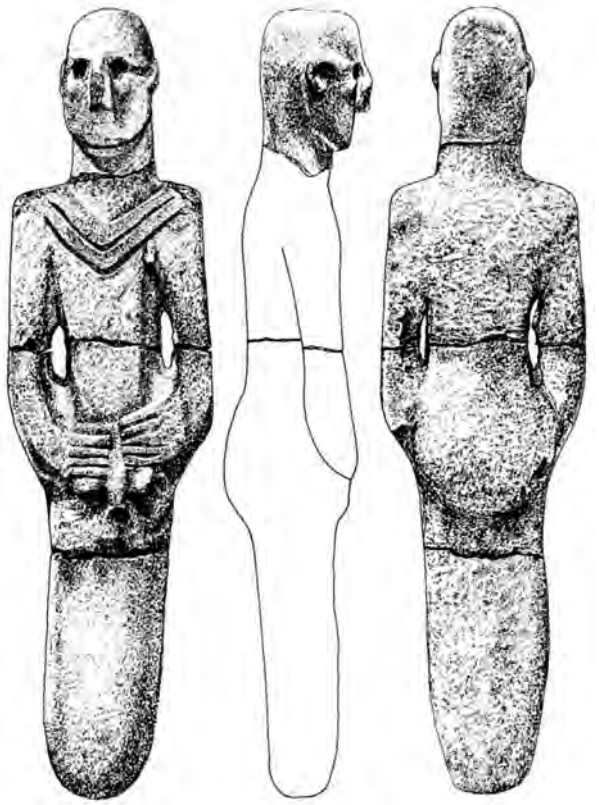

Fig. 5a: Anthropomorphic male statue from Urfa, Yeni Mahalle (Hauptmann 2011, 138, Fig. 36).

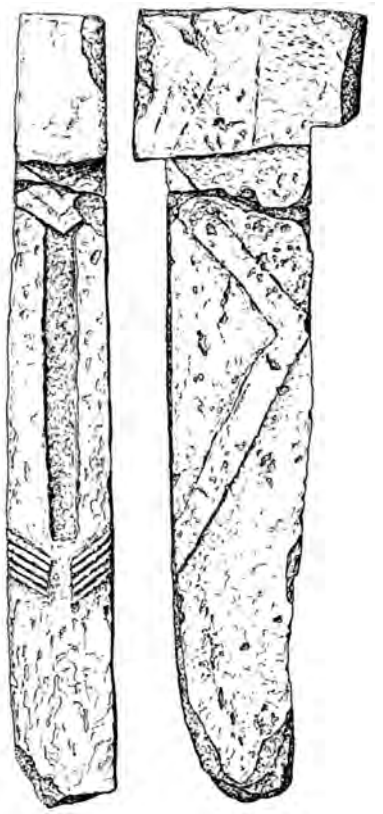

Fig. 5b: T-shaped pillar 2 from Nevalı Çori, limestone, 2.5 m high (Hauptmann 2011, 138, Fig. 37).

ground for the ceremonies... not... to the worship of a distinct deity or of different deities" (Hauptmann 2011, 96, 98).

The two largest pillars excavated so far, Pillars 18 and 31 in the center of circle D at Göbekli (Figs. 2 and 3), are – in my opinion – crucial in the discussion about ancient beliefs. The two T-shaped pillars are located in the center of the circular room and with their height of 5.5 m tower over the other pillars, which form an integral part of the circular wall. Especially remarkable is in which detail pillars 18 and 31 are distinguished as anthropomorphic beings (Schmidt 2011, Figs. 32-34): the long arms reach diagonally over the sides of the pillars and the hands are placed on the waists so that the fingers almost touch themselves. They wear a decorated belt with a fur-loincloth hanging from it.

Especially important is the fact that the pillar figures wear a necklace on their front sides, directly below the T-shaped widening, i.e. below their heads. This is rendered as two parallel bands, hanging down from the neck in a V-shape – similar to the necklace of the anthropomorphic statue from Urfa (Fig. 5a), and to the T-shaped pillar 2 from Nevalı

Çori (Fig. 5b). But in marked contrast to these, pillars 18 and 31 are distinguished by pendants attached to the necklaces, which were obviously meant to identify these colosses.

The pendant of pillar 18 (Fig. 3b) consists of two oppositely arranged oblong motives with diagonal extensions, and a semicircular band and a donut-like disc with a central cavity below (Schmidt 2011, 81, Fig. 32). The upper pair of motives is difficult to interpret, the one below can easily be recognized as crescent and disc.

The pendant of pillar 31 has rightly been identified by Schmidt as a bucranium, since the bulls on pillar 2 (Schmidt 2011, 68, Fig. 14) and pillar 20 (Schmidt 2011, 73, Fig. 22) exhibit a similar head.[12] However, the motives of these "pendants" differ distinctly from other images found on the T-pillars. The numerous depicted animals so far known from Göbekli Tepe – Schmidt (2007, 165) vividly talks of a "stone age zoo" – used to be rendered as complete animals and shown in side view. The isolated bull's head or bucranium, depicted frontally and perfectly symmetrically, clearly was an abbreviated rendering, and served as a sign or symbol. The crescent and disc are also exceptional, since they seem to have been the earliest renderings of celestial bodies so far.

In view of the monumental dimensions of the anthropomorphic pillars 18 and 31 – they are more than three times human live size – it is difficult not to imagine the concept of supernatural powers behind these earliest "colossal statues". And – since the symbolic value of the bucranium and the crescent with the disc seems evident to all people dealing with the Near Eastern Bronze and Iron Age cultures, where these motives were distinct symbols of certain deities, it is equally difficult not to associate them with these gods. This is all the more so, because the region where the "communal buildings" of the PPN period were prevalent, corresponds almost exactly to the region where the moon god and the storm god had been venerated in their main sanctuaries at Halab, Harran, Doliche and others for millennia (map Fig. 10).

PPN Poles, Adorned with a Human Head and a Bird

A slightly different pole (Fig. 6) has come to light in the PPNB settlement at Nevalı Çori, in the extraordinary terrazzo building, which is rightly interpreted as a "Sondergebäude". Three fragments were separately integrated in the eastern bench of the medium phase of the building, which allows the conclusion that in the previous phase the pole had been standing in the terrazzo building. This pole shows two anthropomorphic beings back to back. They embrace each other in a way that the arms of each person

[12] Not only pillar 31, but also pillar 2 shows a similar bucranium on its narrow side, i.e. below its head.

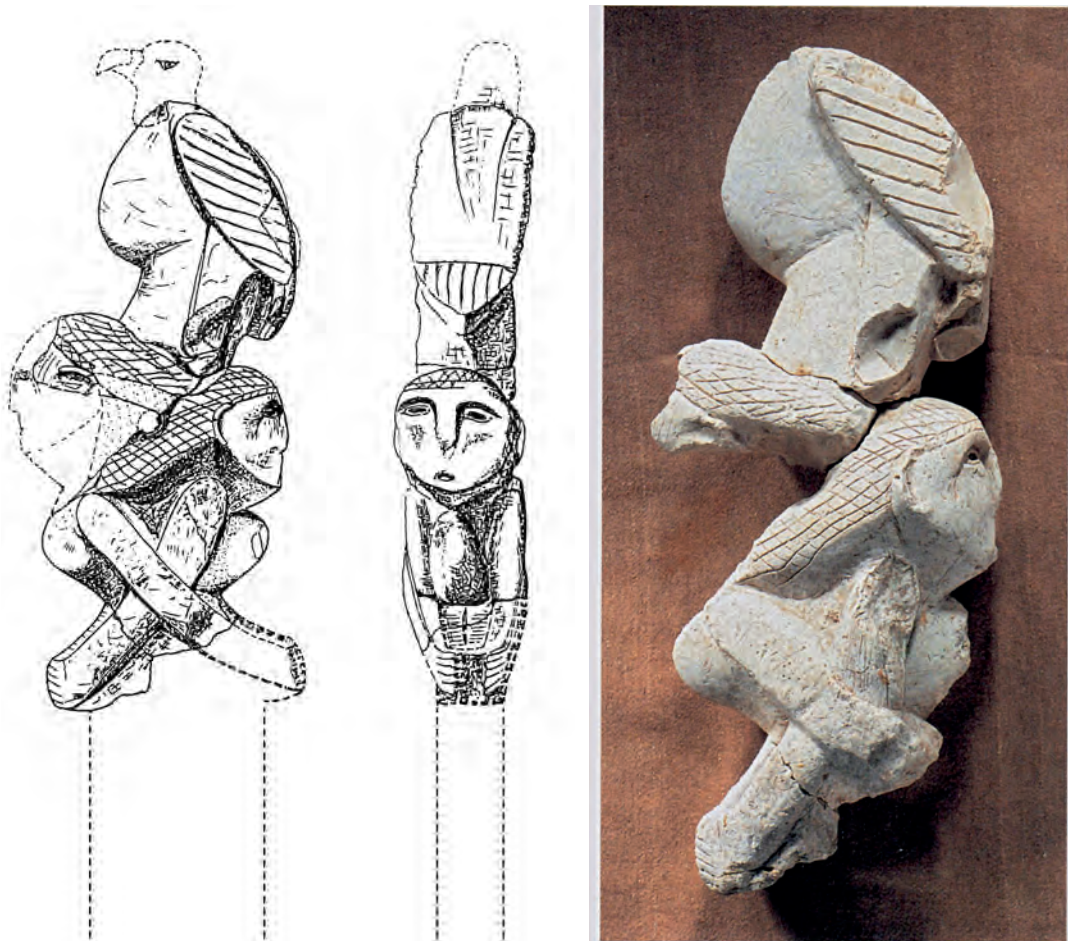

Fig. 6a/b: Composite pole, adorned with two human figures, topped by a bird; Nevalı Çori. H. appr. 1 m (Hauptmann 2011, 134, Figs. 24a/b).

embrace the other person from the back. Their hands with the five fingers rest on the narrow sides of the pole (Hauptmann 2011, 99, 134, Fig. 24a/b). One face shows elaborate features with almond-shaped eyes, nose, mouth and ears. The face of the second figure has almost completely dropped off. Both wear a head garment or long hair, which has been engraved in the soft clay as a meshed structure. One figure's hair reaches down to its back. The hair of the other figure seems to be somewhat shorter, which could be also due to its hair ending at the beginning of the hair line of the other figure. A bird is sitting on top of the upper head. Its legs and body with flight feathers and tail have been preserved, whereas its head has broken off. Nevertheless, it is certain that the bird formed the upper ending of the pole, for the small place of fracture does not allow to carry heavy weight.

Such as it is, the stone pole with two human heads and topped by a bird is 1 m high, with the heads being live-sized. Adding the broken-off bird's head and assuming that the

Fig. 7a/b: Stone pole with one human head, topped by a bird; from the podium in House 3 at Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 2011, 129, Figs. 14a/b).

pole extended below the figures, it must have measured at least 1.20 m, but may also have been much taller.[13]

Another stone pole with a human head and topped by a bird was found at Nevalı Çori (Fig. 7ab).[14] The human face is rendered in a similar elaborate way, with almond-shaped eyes, a strong nose and a mouth. At 29 cm height, the head is slightly over life-sized. The head is crowned with a kind of cap with vertically engraved lines, which is supposed to be either the scalp hair or a head garment. Above and behind the head, the remains of a bird's convex breast and its acute wings, pointing back downwards, have been preserved. In contrast to the other one, this pole has a clear exhibition side. The existence of a second figure on the other side of the pole can be excluded, but the pole might have extended below the head.

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[13] Schmidt once proposed two birds juxtaposed, face to face and the feet shown laterally, at the lower end of the pole (Schmidt 2007, 79, Fig. 16), but apparently there is less evidence for this reconstruction.

[14] Hauptmann 2011, 98, 129, Fig. 14a/b. It was found reused in the podium of House 3, which was situated 70 m east of the Terrazzo building, but the excavator assumes that it originates from that building, Hauptmann, Schmidt 2007, 68.

A fragmentary sculpture of a bird, which presumably was holding a human head between its claws, was found reused in a wall at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2007 100, Fig. 30).

So far, no standards with human heads and birds have come to light further south in the Euphrates valley, but two decorated stone poles, each ending in a bird's head, were found in situ in the large communal building EA 100 in Jerf al-Ahmar (Fig. 8). The only furniture of this round, semi-subterranean building was a bench along the inner side, which was elaborately adorned with decorated stone slabs. Therefore, the excavators interpret this building as "bâtiment collectif" for reunions (Stordeur, Abbès 2002, 586). The two poles with bird's heads were placed to the right and left of the largest vertical stone slab in such a way that the heads projected above the bench. The embellishment of the slabs not only consisted of a zigzag decor on the front side, but also of two engraved human headless corpses (Stordeur / Abbès 2002, 587, Fig. 15): another proof of the association of birds with headless humans.[15] Many more stick-like objects ending in a bird's head are attested from PPN sites in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria, from Qaramel in the West to Nemrik in the East (Kozlowski, Aurenche 2005, 206).

Fig. 8: Decorated pole ending in a bird's head, found in situ between the decorated stone slabs of the bench in the communal building EA 100 in Jerf al-Ahmar (Stordeur, Abbès 2002, 598, Fig. 17.4).

In all these cases, the meaning of the human-headed pole topped by a bird, and the pole ending in a bird's head, escapes us. Since headless bodies and birds are frequently depicted together in the Neolithic period (e.g. on wall paintings at Çatal Höyük or on pillar 43 from Göbekli Tepe), and since the skull cult is a striking phenomenon of the Early Neolithic period in many Near Eastern sites,[16] the association of the remarkable pole with human heads and a bird (Fig. 6) with the skull cult is tempting at first sight. However, the

[15] A real headless skeleton lay on the floor of the nearby "bâtiment collectif" EA 30, and the skull of another person next to it (Stordeur, Abbès 2002, 583).

[16] For a summary of skull cults in the various religions of the world, see Bonogofsky 2006. There she argues convincingly that the skull cult has little to do with the ancestor cult, since the skulls of minors received the same treatment as the skulls of adults.

open eyes and the hair or head garment as well as the arms speak against it. Without understanding the meaning, we have to agree to Hauptmann and Schmidt, who recognized "bird and human head" as one of the main themes of PPN monumental art (Hauptmann, Schmidt 2007, 69).

Having assembled these examples of a pole topped by human heads and/or birds, it is impossible not to think of a very peculiar object that was to be venerated in precisely the same region, but some 6000 years later.

The Pole topped by two Human Heads and a Bird on Old Syrian Seals

Old Syrian cylinder seals of the early second millennium BC show a strange motive: a vertical pole which is topped by two human heads or – less frequently – by only one head (Figs. 9 a-h). A bird is often, but not always, depicted sitting on top of the upper head. The pole is always depicted socketed, either emerging from a rectangular base, or standing on a quadruped, most often a lion, but sometimes a gazelle.[17]

This strange object is unparalleled in the whole Near Eastern imagery. Nevertheless, it must have been an important object, since it received veneration. Many seals show a female person standing in front of it, lifting one hand. Already in 1960, Henry Seyrig proposed to identify this object as the famous *semeion*, which in the 2nd century AD had been described by Lukian of Samosate as an age-old ritual object that was venerated in the famous sanctuary at Hierapolis, modern Menbij in Northern Syria. According to Lukian, the *semeion* had no body of its own, but bore the images of other gods and a golden dove on top. Paolo Matthiae has recently collected all the hitherto known depictions of the 'standard with heads' and summarized the state of knowledge.[18] Matthiae (in press) stated that the motif was especially common on Syrian seals between 1900 and 1750 BC. Dated and provenienced examples are attested on tablets from Kültepe *kārum* II, from MB I and MB II contexts at Ebla, Hammam et-Turkman, Ugarit and Alalakh (Matthiae in press; Marchetti 2003). The iconography and style of the more than 40 seals known so far vary considerably (Fig. 9 a-h). Therefore it is reasonable to conclude, that these seals were not cut at one place only, but at several places, and that the pole was a frequently used motif on seals in the Syrian and North Mesopotamian area roughly between the Mediterranean coast and the Balih valley. The varying number of heads, the fact, that the bird is sometimes missing, and the different shapes of the pole's socle (rectangular or theriomorphic as lion or gazelle) do – in my opinion – strongly speak in favor of different 'real' poles with human heads, which served as models for these renderings.

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[17] It is extremely tempting to associate this socket or animal base also with the large "porthole stones" in Göbekli Tepe, which served most probably as the socket of pillars or poles and were sometimes adorned with quadrupeds at their base: Schmidt 2011, 79, Fig. 30.

[18] My sincere thanks go to Paolo Matthiae, who was so kind as to send me the manuscript of his article, before it would be published in RA.

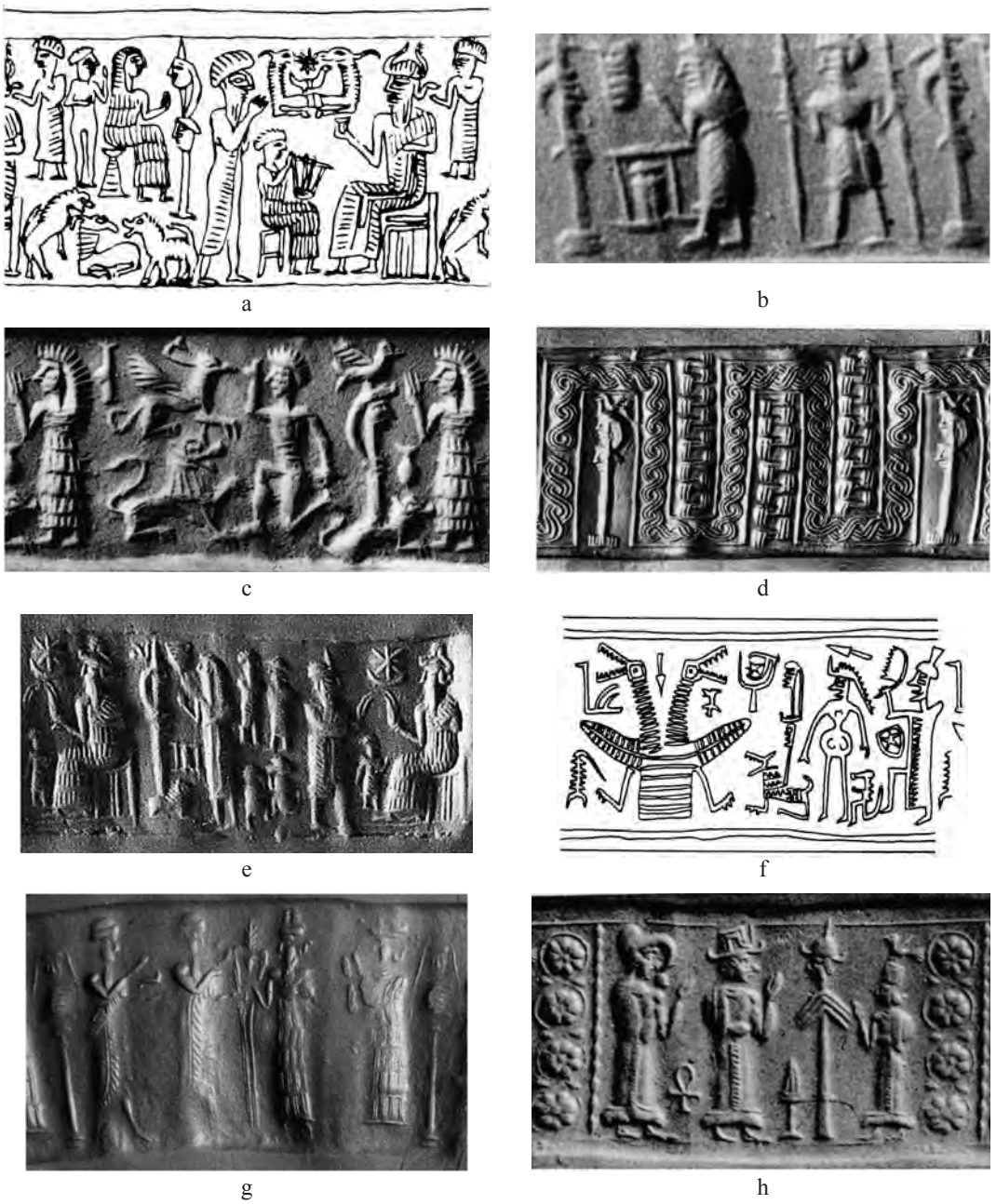

Fig. 9: Old Syrian cylinder seals, depicting the pole with human heads and a bird; a: seal impression on Tablet from Kültepe kārum II (Seyrig 1960: 234, Fig. 1); b: Cylinder seal from Ebla TM.92.P.800 (Matthiae 1994, 335, Fig. 3); c: Moore Collection (Seyrig 1960: Pl. IX. No. 3); d: Cylinder from Khan Sheikhoun, north of Hama (Seyrig 1960, Pl. IX. No. 12); e: Cylinder from Hammam et-Turkman HMM 01-Z1 (Meijer 2010, 204, Fig. 4); f: Cylinder seal from Alalakh VI(?) (Collon 1982, no. 9); g: High Classical Cylinder seal from Amman (Otto 2000, Pl. 27, no. 342); h: Late Classical Cylinder seal (Porada 1948, no. 956).

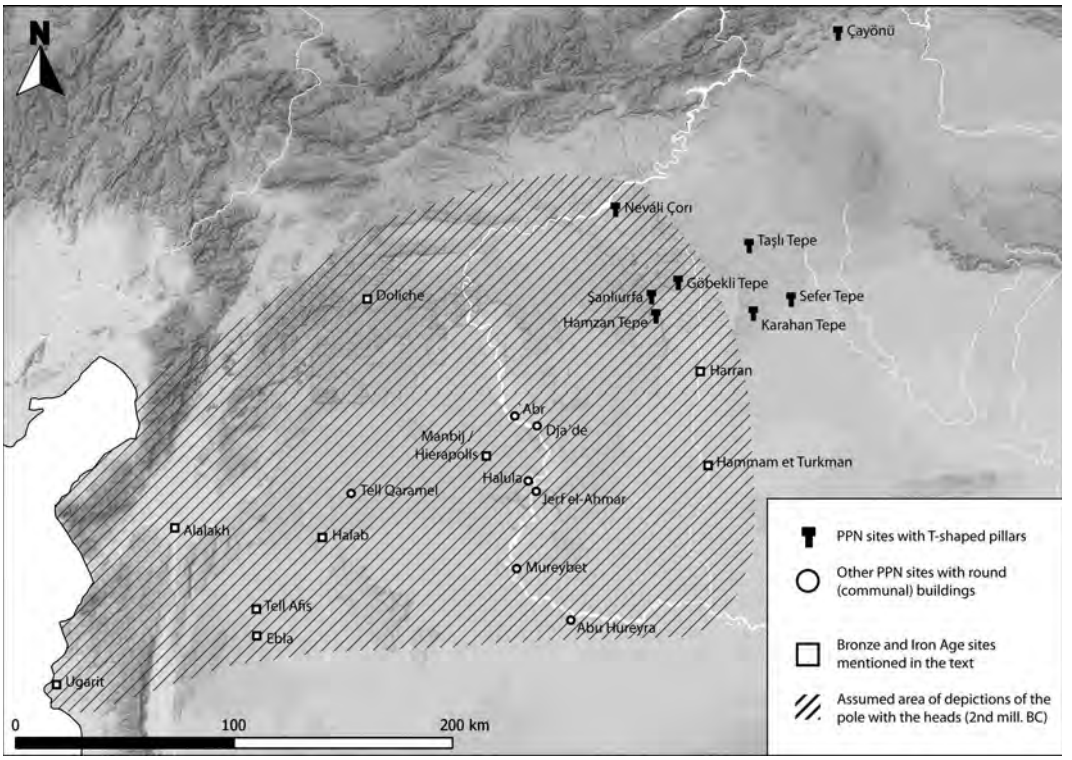

Fig. 10: Map of the investigated area (courtesy Christoph Fink).

There may even be added a few later seals of the late 18th century, which depict the pole with the heads in a slightly different manner, e.g. *en face* or with a pointed headgear (Figs. 9 g, h). These seals indicate that the pole itself did not cease to exist, but slowly became a less popular motive on seals. A similar disappearance of motifs can be observed throughout Near Eastern imagery. It does not indicate, that the objects themselves disappeared, but that the intention of the seal images changed over time. As concerns the semeion, the much later account by Lukian is a strong argument that the pole itself continued to exist, but was no longer depicted on seals.

CONCLUSIONS

Definite representations of deities in the Syrian and Northern Mesopotamian region are testified for the first time around the mid 3rd millennium. At least this was the state of knowledge before the monumental T-shaped pillars in Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori and other sites had come to light. They date back to the 10th millennium and already represent anthropomorphic beings. On account of their enormous size, it is obvious that they embody

supernatural beings. The largest two pillars excavated so far, placed in the center of circle D at Göbekli Tepe, wear necklaces with a bucranium and a disc- and crescent pendant respectively – motifs, which in much later times were to become the symbols of the storm god and the moon god. This is especially striking, as these two are known to have been major gods in exactly the same region with important cult centers in Halab, Kumme, Harran and others, which are attested at least from the 3rd millennium onwards.

Another striking cult object, in Greek texts called the *semeion*, was presumably venerated mainly in Northern Syria, approximately from the coast until the Balih region. It is tempting to trace its origin back to the PPN poles, which were adorned with human heads and a bird ontop. Already the ingenious idea of Seyrig to relate the 'head standard' on Old Syrian seals to the *semeion* described by Lukian, received disapproval at first, but meanwhile seems to be widely accepted. The major obstacle is, of course, that there seems to be no evidence for the period from 1750 BC to 150 AD. However, this could have several reasons: perhaps the pole and perhaps even the heads were of perishable material. Alternatively, the evidence could have escaped the attention of most scholars[19]. Another explication, which also Matthiae offers, would be that the heads were images of gods, who in subsequent periods mostly were represented as complete figures. Much more challenging is, of course, to postulate a continuity of the venerated beings over 8000 years without the missing link.

But it is really necessary to bridge the gap? Holy places have been in use over millennia in all cultures, especially those located in prominent places, and those associated with abundant water, natural springs or caves. In the region examined here, there are several examples of such holy places. Urfa has remained a place of pilgrimage until today, both the area around the so-called sacred spring and a grotto, which is considered as Abraham's birth place, thus referring to one of the prime fathers of all religions present in this area until today. But already at PPN times, Urfa apparently not only represented a settlement but rather a holy place: the live-sized statue of a male being (Fig. 5a) is reported to originate from there, and a T-shaped pillar was discovered nearby during construction works.[20]

A sacred spring, where holy fishes were kept, was also the center of the sanctuary at Hierapolis, where the semeion was kept at the time of Lukian. According to Lukian's account, the *semeion* travelled twice a year to the sea. Some sea water was taken back to Hierapolis, where it was poured into the same opening, where the deluge had disap-

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[19] For example, could the famous heads from late Chalcolithic Tell Brak, which were attached to poles, be related to the *semeion*? For good illustrations see e.g. A. Moortgat, Die Kunst des Alten Mesopotamien I. Sumer und Akkad, Köln 1982, Pl. 27, 28-30.

[20] The PPN site of Yeni Mahalle within the historic town of Şanlıurfa, where the remains of terrazzo floors, T-shaped pillars and other typical PPN artefacts came to light, was described by Çelik 2011.

peared.[21] Indeed, the pole on a rectangular socle is often associated with water (rendered as guilloche; e.g. Fig. 9d), the water god (e.g. Fig. 9g), the rain goddess, or fishes[22].

Harran, situated 44 kilometers southeast of Urfa (or Şanlıurfa), has been famous as the city of the moon god for at least 2,500 years. As well the association of Harran with Abraham and Arabic legends, which localize the grave of Tammuz there (Green 1992), suggest the ancient tradition of a holy place there. Also other forms of the people's religiousness, which surely trace back to pre-Islamic ideas, can still be found in the region examined: e.g. people seeking for help pilgrimage to "wish-trees", where they hang up stripes of cloth. One of these wish-trees is located on Göbekli Tepe (Schönberger 2007). Since the upper ends of many PPN pillars are still visible on the surface of several PPN sites, it is possible, that some of them have been always perceivable.

Generally, conclusions by analogy over millennia are one of the capital sins of interpretation. If they are drawn nevertheless, the continuity of phenomena is usually explained with the help of the "cultural memory". For the examples examined here, another model of explanation seems to suggest itself: the continuity of "Holy Places", which survived in Syria and North West Mesopotamia for millennia.

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[21] For more details and the references see Matthiae (in press) and Otto 2000, 266-267.

[22] E.g. Otto 2000, no. 62; no. 93; Hammade 1987, no. 256.

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