

Karahan Tepe—Its Three Interconnected, Rock-cut Structures Examined

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Summary: Discovered in the mid 1990s, Karahan Tepe is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in a remote area of the Tektek Dağları (Tektek Mountains), situated some 37 kilometers (23 miles) east-southeast of the more well known site of Göbekli Tepe. Since 2019 excavations have revealed a series of installations dating from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (circa 9600-8800 BCE) through till the end of the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (circa 8200-8000 BCE). The author reports on the layout and potential functionality of three interconnected bedrock structures focusing on their cultic symbolism and potential usage.

Key words: Karahan Tepe, Tektek Mountains, Pre-Pottery Neolithic, cult shrines, snakes, T-pillars.

Karahan Tepe is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site situated in the remote Tektek Mountains, located east of the fertile Harran plain, this being the epicenter of over a dozen sites forming part of the Taş Tepeler technocomplex. The name, which translates in English as “stone (*taş*) hills (*tepeler*),” refers to the usage of occupational mounds featuring T-pillars carved from local limestone.

Situated around 37 kilometers (23 miles) east-southeast of Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe is contemporaneous in age with its better known sister site. The discovery there of grains from a wild form of wheat known as einkorn indicates that occupation began there as early as the late Epipaleolithic period, circa 11,000 BCE. Extensive building activities, however, do not appear to have begun at Karahan Tepe until the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (circa 9400-9000 BCE). They then continued through till the end of the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic Neolithic B period (circa 8200-8000 BCE). During Roman times the area was once again occupied by Aramaic speaking communities who either created or made use of hypogea style caves present in the hill facing Karahan Tepe to the north. Today the land is the domain of a local pastoralist community that makes use of the barren rugged landscape to raise goats and sheep.

Karahan Tepe’s discovery in the mid 1990s, along with early survey work carried out there by Bahattin Çelik of Harran University, has been described elsewhere (see Çelik 2000, Çelik 2011, Çelik 2014, and Collins 2014). Since 2019 excavations have taken place under the leadership of Dr. Necmi Karul and his team from Istanbul University (Karul 2021 & Karul 2022). Three interconnected, sub-surface structures were revealed during excavations between 2019 and 2021. These were found beneath a thick layer of soil and rubble covering the hill’s eastern and northeastern slopes and are today designated Structures AA, AB, and AD. A fourth rock-cut enclosure, smaller in size, and dubbed Structure AC, lies immediately to the east of Structure AA.

Structure AD (the Great Ellipse)

The three interconnected structures are carved either in part or in entirety out of the limestone bedrock. The largest, Structure AD (popularly “the Great Ellipse”) is elliptical in appearance with a maximum length of 23 meters (75 feet) and a width of approximately 20 meters (65

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feet). The northern, eastern and southern sections of its perimeter wall are made up of dry-stone walling with a thickness of around 1.5 meters (5 feet). Built into this wall were originally a series of 18 T-pillars, between which were stone benches similar to those found at other Pre-Pottery Neolithic cult centers such as Nevalı Çori and Göbekli Tepe (see fig. 1 for an overhead plan of the three interconnected structures (AD, AB, AA), and figs. 2 & 3 which show what Structure AD looks like today). At least one of the bench tops remaining in situ is clearly the stem of an old T-pillar as it displays carved decoration on its front narrow edge (see below).

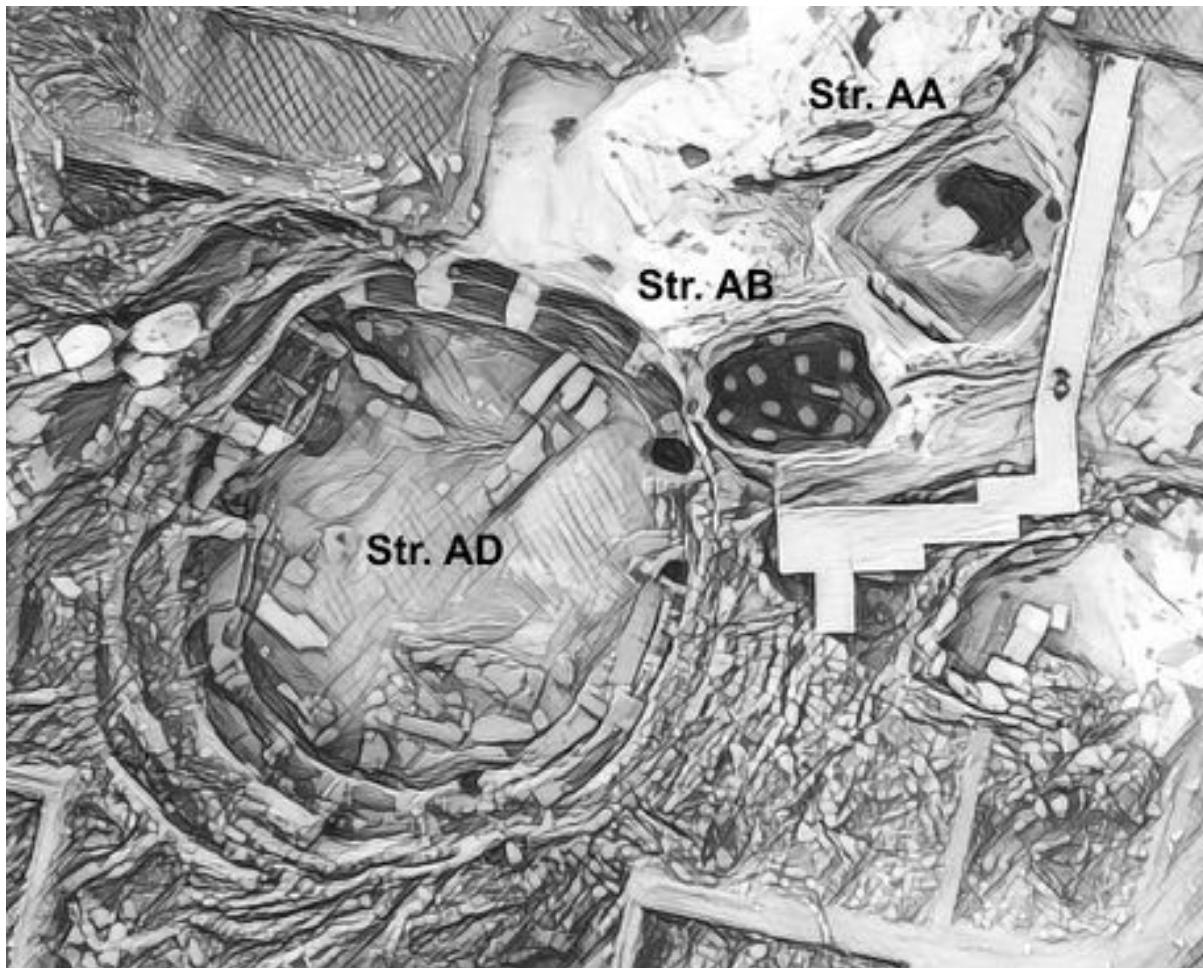


Fig. 1. Overhead plan of Karahan Tepe's three interconnected structures, in order from left to right, AD, AB, AA. Credit: Andrew Collins.

A number of limestone statues, as well as large platters and bowls carved from a variety of stone materials, were found on or around these benches (Karul 2021, 23). These would appear to have been deliberately left in place when the structure was decommissioned and then buried beneath countless tonnes of soil and rubble, an act perhaps seen as “killing” or “putting to rest” the enclosure’s active spirit (Karul 2021, 23).

Central Pillars

At the center of Structure AD two enormous T-pillars would have stood within holes cut into the bedrock. Today these pillars are in multiple fragments, although their original positions can still be determined (see fig. 4). Whether or not these pillars were deliberately broken or

were the subject of intense environmental erosion before the abandonment of the enclosure is unclear.



Fig. 2. Structure AD (the Great Ellipse) looking approximately east. Credit: Andrew Collins.



Fig. 3. Structure AD looking approximately southwest.

Piecing together the various fragments of these twin pillars indicates they were just slightly smaller than an unfinished example still attached to the bedrock on the hill's western-facing slope. This is approximately 5.5 meters (18 feet) in length. The carved decoration on the

western central pillar shows two vertical lines in high relief that curve outward just beneath the T-shaped head. It is difficult to know exactly what this shows, although it could signify the hems of a draped garment.

Whether or not the twin central pillars, as well as those within its walls, acted as roof supports is debatable. No evidence of any roof has been found, and even if it had once existed the chances are it only partially covered the enclosure, or was used on a seasonal basis.



Fig. 4. The fractured central pillars in Structure AD. Credit: Andrew Collins.

Thrones and Buttresses

The western half of Structure AD is entirely unique. Three enormous carved stone benches have been cut directly out of the hill's bedrock (see fig. 5). Each one looks like a rock throne, and on these one might imagine community elders sitting during important rituals and ceremonies. Separating the stone thrones, which have an additional kerb or step at their base, are three (originally four) towering buttresses, each cut entirely out of the hill's eastern slope to a maximum height from ground level of 4.3 meters (14 feet) (Karul 2021, 23). These acted as solid rock variations of the anthropomorphic T-pillars that occupied the rest of the enclosure (to make 18 in total), arguably with horizontal extensions at their terminations.

Confirmation that these buttresses were seen as anthropomorphic in nature is the fact that two of them, the most southerly of the three remaining examples, display carved relief showing what appear to be leopard-skin loincloths below their presumed waistlines; these appearing on their front narrow edges. Archaeologists working at the site suggest the carvings are actually leopards, although the carvings resemble the fox pelt loincloths seen on the two central pillars in Göbekli Tepe's Enclosure D (Pillars 18 and 31), which are held up by carved waistline belts. Such a realization suggests that Karahan Tepe's occupants wore

leopard skin pelts as items of adornment, arguably during rituals and ceremonies. (A similar leopard pelt loincloth can be seen on the front narrow edge of the T-pillar stem being used as a bench seat on the north side of the enclosure.)



Fig. 5. View of the rock-cut buttresses and thrones at the western termination of Structure AD. Credit: Andrew Collins.

Reliefs of animals adorn the sides of the rock buttresses. On the south side of the most southerly example, for instance, is what appears to be a quadruped of some kind. It stands upright, its legs facing toward the hill slope (and thus toward the person sitting on the throne next to it). Other animals adorn the southern side of the buttress next to it, although their identification is difficult to determine due to the fact that they have almost entirely faded away. Other creatures appear to adorn the north sides of the buttresses, but again they are too faint to make out today. Various deep pits cut into the bedrock are seen in the floor of the enclosure most notably close to the benches on its north-northwestern side, to the west of a southerly placed described below, and also at the enclosure's western edge. The function of these pits is unknown, although the one at the western edge could coincide with the enclosure's primary entrance.

Structure AB—The Pillars Shrine

Rock architecture is present at Karahan Tepe in an even more spectacular manner within Structure AB, popularly called the Pillars Shrine. It is situated immediately to the north-northwest of Structure AD to which it is linked via a 70 centimeter (27.5 inch) rectangular porthole window cut out of a thin wall of rock deliberately left in situ for this purpose (see fig. 6). On the other side of this window are five crudely carved steps leading down to the structure's stone floor.

Carved *entirely* out of the hillside, the Pillars Shrine is trapezoidal in shape with rounded corners. In size it is 7 meters (23 feet) in length with a maximum width of 6 meters (20 feet), its southern end being narrower than its northern end. Its limestone walls rise to a height of 2.3 meters (7.6 feet), beyond which is the artificially leveled rock surface.

Filling the interior of Structure AB are 11 standing pillars, 10 of which are fashioned directly out of the bedrock (see fig. 7). Four of them form a line oriented north-south close to the shrine's western wall. Each one is approximately 1.6 to 1.7 meters (5.25 feet to 5.6 feet) in

height (Karul 2021, 24) with slightly wider heads as terminations, making them phallic-like in appearance.



Fig. 6. The porthole window in the stone wall between Karahan Tepe's Structure AD and the adjoining Structure AB (the Pillars Shrine). In the foreground we see the deep curving, serpentine groove linking the Pillars Shrine with Structure AA (the Pit Shrine).



Fig. 7. Karahan Tepe's Structure AB showing its remarkable rock-cut pillars and giant stone head emerging from the shrine's western wall. Credit: Andrew Collins.

The other six rock-hewn pillars are smaller in size. They vary in height between 1 to 1.4 meters (3.25 to 4.6 feet) and are between 30–50 centimeters (12 to 20 inches) in diameter (Karul 2021, 24). Five are positioned roughly north-south in a noticeable zigzag pattern, while the sixth example is located slightly back from the others close to the structure's southeastern corner. Some of the smaller pillars also have slightly larger heads, while the most northerly example has what appears to be a tethering hole two thirds the way up its southern side. This could have been used to attach a rope or cord, although for what purpose is unclear.

The zigzag-like pattern of these smaller pillars could imply some kind of navigational route for the supplicant entering the shrine via the porthole stone. Having said this these smaller pillars have to be viewed in association with the four larger examples on the western side.

Some intimate relationship must have existed between all ten pillars, a point to remember as we now explore the shrine's eleventh pillar (see fig. 8). Unlike Structure AB's other pillars, this one was not cut out of the bedrock. Instead it was carved into shape before being placed upright in a rectangular slot cut into the shrine's stone floor. It is around the same height as the tallest of the rock-cut columns. Significantly, it is crescent shaped with a slightly wider area around its upper termination offering the impression of a striking snake facing roughly toward anyone entering through the porthole window. This suspicion is additionally indicated by a linear indentation on the stone's western side corresponding to the position to the "mouth" of the creature (some have even suggested you can see an eye immediately above it).

It is my suspicion that this standing slab acted in the capacity of a *genius loci*, or “spirit of the place,” in much the same way that in both Hindu and Buddhist tradition spirits in the form of *naga*-snakes are considered to guard sacred places and hidden treasure.



Fig. 8. Structure AB looking southeast with the curved eleventh pillar visible on the left-hand side.

The Giant Stone Head

The importance of snake symbolism in the Pillars Shrine is further indicated by the presence on the shrine’s western wall of something quite extraordinary. Carved once again out of the bedrock, about 2.1 meters (7 feet) off the ground and in the central area of the rock face, is a giant human head on the end of a long vertical neck. The head is enormous, being as much as three times that of a normal human being (see fig. 9). On the underside of the neck are a series of parallel striations perpendicular to its angle of projection. These surely are there to emphasize the head’s serpentine nature.



Fig. 9. The giant stone head emerging out of the west wall of Karahan Tepe’s Structure AB as seen from the east. Credit: Andrew Collins.

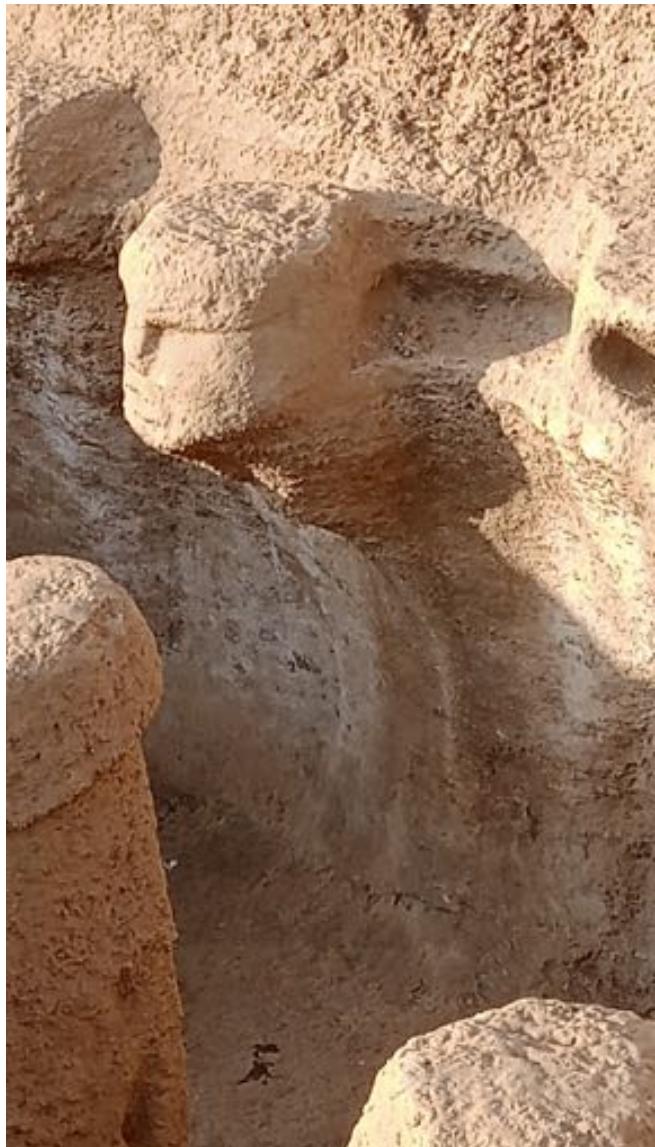


Fig. 10. The stone head in Structure AB as seen from the north. Credit: Andrew Collins.

The head itself is turned slightly toward the structure's entrance porthole (its approximate orientation is just south of east), giving the impression it is turning to look at anyone entering the room. It has a flat top and actually looks like it is wearing a medieval knight's helmet complete with nose guard. This, however, is simply an illusion, since its flat top probably marks the lower limit of a presumably wooden framed roof that almost certainly enclosed the shrine. This seems confirmed in the knowledge that horizontal ledges at the same height as the top of the head can be seen at the top of the shrine's walls on its eastern and western sides, indicating that they supported cross beams of some kind.

The stone head's mouth is carved in high relief and is elliptical in shape, offering the impression that the head is talking to you. Once again, this is unlikely to be without purpose.

Structure AA—The Pit Shrine

On the north side of the Pillars Shrine cut into the level bedrock is a deep

winding groove (see fig. 6) that connects with the southeastern edge of a third and final subsurface feature known as Structure AA and popularly called the Pit Shrine (see figs. 11 & 12). Trapezoidal in shape with rounded corners, it is approximately 8.5 meters (28 feet) in length, 7 meters (23 feet) across, and just over 1.1 meters (3.5 feet) in depth making it much shallower than the two previously described installations.

Within the structure's western wall is a curved bench around 12 feet (3.6 meters) in length. On its front vertical face is an extremely long snake incised with a sharp tool using what is known as the scraping technique (see fig. 13). Its head, which displays two incised eyes, is turned upward. The snake faces northward, and immediately beyond its head is a standing fox in incised relief that also faces north (see fig. 11). The fact that both the snake and the fox face the same direction and clearly form part of the same register suggests some kind of relationship between the two creatures.

Cut into the level floor at the room's northern end is an irregular shaped pit with rounded corners that descends into the bedrock for a depth of around 7.5 feet (2.3 meters). At ground level on its western side is a carved recess large enough for a person to crawl inside.

The Experiential Journey

Steps carved into the shrine's eastern wall allow access into the room. Interestingly, the position of these steps corresponds very roughly to the end of the aforementioned winding groove. In fact, close to the other end of this groove four similarly carved steps lead down into the northeastern corner of the Pillars Shrine. This suggests a connection between the two structures, almost as if when you have finished in one the curved line guides you to the entrance of its companion.



Fig. 11. Structure AA looking west. Note the fox carving at the right end of the bench.



Fig. 12. Structure AA looking southeast.

Necmi Karul writes that those entering the Pillars Shrine likely crawled through the porthole stone from Structure AD (the Great Ellipse) using the carved steps (Karul 2021, 23–24). They would then have exited the room via crude steps in its northeastern corner, meaning that the supplicant would have followed the deep winding groove before navigating further steps down into the Pit Shrine for whatever was to take place there. Karul suggests this clear path of movement shows a direct relationship between the Great Ellipse and Pillars Shrine, implying that any ritualistic or experiential journey undertaken by a supplicant would have begun in the former structure and continued through into the latter feature.



Fig. 13. The incised snake on the front edge of the long curving bench in Structure AA. Credit: Andrew Collins.

I would submit that these proposed actions would have constituted only parts one and two of any journey with the third part taking place in the Pit Shrine. Why this course should have been from south to north culminating in a room with an enormous pit cut into its floor can only be guessed at today. Who, for instance, would have sat on the Pit Shrine's long bench, part of which lies directly above the deep hole carved into the floor? Could this pit have been used to contain live animals, snakes perhaps, or did supplicants lie down within its carved recess as part of some experiential process? If the latter then it should be pointed out that there appears to be no obvious means of descending into the hole, meaning that access must have been via a rope or a ladder.

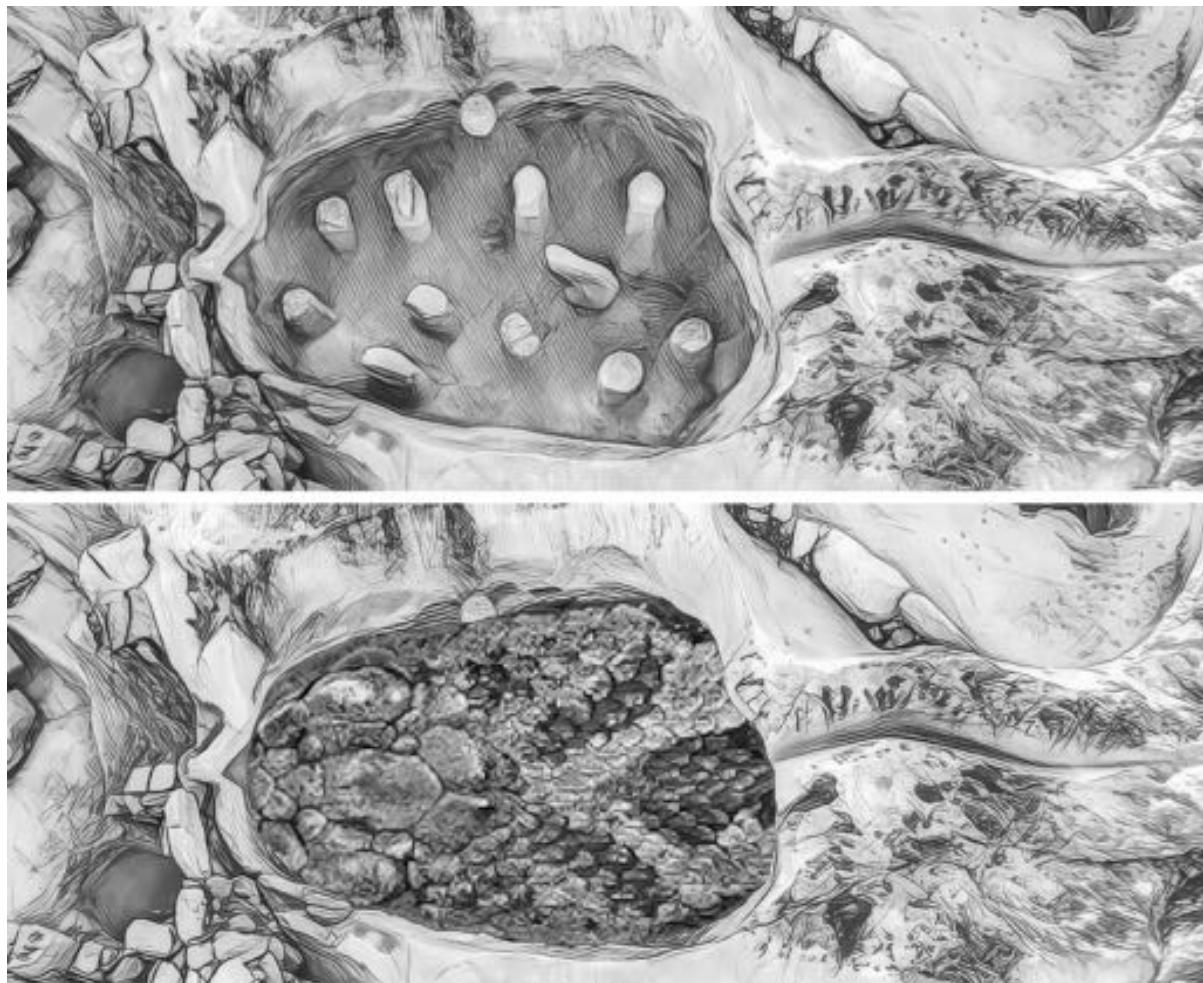
The fact that the winding nature of the deeply cut groove linking the Pillars Shrine with the Pit Shrine resembles a moving snake is also unlikely to be without meaning. Karul describes it as a “serpentine channel” (Karul 2021, 24). It might almost have been imagined that the spirit of the snake would guide the supplicant from one structure to the next.

Suggestions that the function of the curved groove was to carry liquid into the Pillars Shrine remain possible, although having inspected this feature first hand a slight rise in the middle of the groove would make this process more awkward than imagined.

Inside the Snake's Head

If the winding groove is indeed indicative of serpentine movement then its relationship to the Pillars Shrine could suggest the two features are related. If so, was it more than simply a directional marker from one structure to the next? In the knowledge that the ritual journey would begin with the supplicant moving from the Great Ellipse into the Pillars Shrine via the porthole window could Structure AB in fact be a three-dimensional representation of a snake's head, its body implied by the deep groove flowing into it?

One species of snake indigenous to the Tektuk Mountains is the Anatolian meadow viper (*Vipera anatolica*). Synchronizing the head of this species with the overhead profile of the Pillars Shrine shows a close match, which seems unlikely to be coincidence (see figs. 14 & 15). In observing this match we can see that the serpentine groove cut into the bedrock on its northern side seems to highlight the actual neck of the snake. This is defined by the level bedrock on the shrine's northern side, which curls around the Pit Shrine's eastern perimeter. Thereafter the serpentine neck fades out completely.



Figs. 14 & 15. Overhead view of Structure AB, above, and, below, the shrine with the head of the Anatolian meadow viper (*Vipera anatolica*) overlaid.

The quite dramatic realization that the Pillars Shrine is a three-dimensional representation of a snakehead offers some very interesting speculation. It means that anyone entering the structure via the porthole window would have been entering the mouth of the creature. There they would have encountered the curved pillar resembling a striking snake, along with the 10 bedrock pillars and the giant human head emerging from the structure's west wall. What kind of ritualistic process would have accompanied the presence of such highly symbolic rock architecture can only be guessed at today.

The inordinate amount of serpentine imagery and symbolism in both the Pillars Shrine and the Pit Shrine emphasizes how important snakes must have been to the Karahan community. Indeed, if we look more closely at the Pit Shrine even more snake symbolism presents itself. Cut into the level surface of its long curved bench are two large boreholes positioned one in front of the other. These holes are 20 centimeters (8 inches) in diameter and 10 centimeters (4 inches) deep (Karul 2021, 25). Looking down from above they combine with the curved shape of the bench to imply yet another snake, an observation that once noted becomes difficult to ignore (see fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Overhead image of Structure AA showing the serpent-like appearance of its bench.

A Direction of Movement

The fact that the two "eye" holes at the northern end of the bench correspond with the position of two crude steps leading out of the shrine at its northwestern corner suggests that the bench, along with the incised snake and fox reliefs immediately beneath it are all directed toward this point. So it looks as if the supplicant entered the structure via the stone steps at

the northern end of the deeply carved groove and afterward exited the room via its northwestern corner, a course that would have taken them onto the hill's northern slope. It cannot be coincidence that this area of the bedrock also marks the start of the winding neck of the snake whose head is the Pillars Shrine. What this implies is that the creature is manifesting out of the northwest, perhaps indicating the importance of this direction to the site's snake symbolism.

Thus the experiential journey would appear to have started in the Great Ellipse, continued into the mouth of the snake, represented by the Pillars Shrine, and then culminated in the Pit Shrine. Thereafter the celebrant would have climbed out onto the level bedrock either via the steps at the end of the bench or via the steps cut into its northeastern wall. The same basic journey is proposed by Karul who writes:

Str. AB [the Pillars Shrine] is reached by passing through Str. AD [the Great Ellipse]; there is also a connection from Str. AB to Str. AA [the Pit Shrine]. Nonetheless, the main entry is via Str. AD. Therefore, we could assume Str. AD to be the actual place of activities that took place in this structure. The present evidence strongly suggests a ceremonial process, entering the building from one end and exiting at the other end, having to parade in [the] presence of the human head featuring a phallic symbolism (Karul 2021, 25).

This ritualistic directionality also makes sense of another observation made by Karul. The three interconnected structures uncovered at Karahan Tepe are all on the hill's eastern or northeastern slopes. No cult structures have so far been found on the hill's western or southern sides. This has led Karul to surmise that the site's southern plain "must be the living area of the dwellers of the settlement" (Karul 2021, 25).

The Structures as Living Entities

The manner the community at Karahan Tepe viewed the three rock-cut structures can perhaps be seen in the fact that after their useful life they were deliberately buried beneath layers of rock, soil, and debris, a process that Karul suggests is evidence of a systematic decommissioning process. In his words:

The burial of buildings is somewhat comparable to that of human burials, signifying the strength of the meaning attached to the building ... Considering the labor and time required for the construction of such structures, they must have held great meaning for Neolithic societies (Karul 2021, 21). (Original author's emphasis.)

The structures would thus seem to have been treated as living entities inhabited in the same manner that in many cultures a person's physical body is seen to be animated by a non-physical force or spirit. As such these enclosures had to be treated with due respect even after they had completed their useful life. They were therefore ritually "killed" and afterward "buried" in a manner befitting a human being.

Additional Enclosures

Beyond these three enigmatic structures—the Great Ellipse, the Pillars Shrine and the Pit Shrine—are other enclosures that should be mentioned. They include Structure AC, a more basic feature, round in shape, cut out of the sloping bedrock a little way to the east of the Pit Shrine. It was found buried beneath tons of rubble, perhaps as part of a decommissioning

process similar to the shrines already described (see fig. 17). At its southern end is a rock-cut bench that was clearly meant for those inside it to gaze out toward the northern and northeastern horizon.



Fig. 17. Karahan Tepe's Structure AC located on the eastern side of Structure AA. Credit: Andrew Collins.

On the southern side of the three interconnected structures are several further enclosures built into the hillside. These appear similar in design to Layer II features at Göbekli Tepe, indicating that they belong to the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period, thus circa 8800-8000 BCE. Each contains pairs of T-pillars in sizes ranging in height from 1.4 meters to 3 meters (4.5 feet to approximately 10 feet). Some of the pillars display anthropomorphic features including articulated arms that terminate in hands with fingers that curl around on to their front narrow edges. Above these hands are parallel vertical lines signifying the hems of a garment as well as very basic v-shaped “neckties,” similar to those seen on T-pillars at other Taş Tepeler sites.

Curiously, the number of fingers shown on pillars at Karahan Tepe can vary. One fair sized T-pillar, for instance, in Structure AH located at the extreme southern end of the current excavations has eight digits. Why it should have eight fingers is unclear. Did this number have some symbolic meaning to the local community, or was it purely a case of poor workmanship on the part of the stone carver? There are no clear answers at present.

The side of the T-pillar showing eight fingers in Enclosure AH is also quite curious. It shows the figure's articulated arm and shoulder in high relief, although they have been executed in such a manner as to suggest that the shoulder is a bird head, arguably that of a vulture, while the arm itself has the appearance of a curling snake, a likeness that is unlikely to be coincidence (see fig. 18).



Fig. 18. The southern side of the anthropomorphic T-pillar in Structure AH showing the curious avian and serpent-like appearance of the individual's arm and shoulder. Credit: Andrew Collins.

To date just one percent of Karahan Tepe's prehistoric settlement has been excavated, meaning that dozens, and even hundreds, of stone enclosures await discovery beneath its deep layers of soil and rubble. Uncovering these will be crucial in helping us to better understand not only what was going on there as much as 11,500 years ago, but also perhaps who exactly its builders might have been. Further updates will be given on new enclosures discovered as and when new facts are released to the public.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Hugh Newman, JJ Ainsworth, Rodney Hale, Bahattin Çelik, and Dr Necmi Karul for providing material that contributed to the writing of this article.

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