

Sayburç a mid-9th millennium BC site in the foothills of the Eastern Taurus

Eylem Özdoğan

Department of Archaeology, İstanbul University, İstanbul, TR; eylem.ozdogan@istanbul.edu.tr

ABSTRACT - *A Pre-Pottery Neolithic site at Sayburç is currently being studied as part of the Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project – Taş Tepler (Türkiye), which is focused on the Neolithic Period at the Şanlıurfa Plateau. The settlement belongs to the early sedentary societies on the plateau, characterized by monumental buildings, T-shaped pillars, and rich symbolic elements that distinguish the region from its contemporaries in Southwest Asia. A growing body of evidence indicates that rituals and the associated symbolism and narratives play a pivotal role in the formation of the region's early sedentary societies. The construction of special buildings in Sayburç, situated close to dwellings and accompanied by associated symbolism, illustrates the intertwining of the sacred with everyday life. This paper presents the preliminary results of the first three years of research on the site and discusses the cultural dimension of the region itself.*

KEY WORDS - Early PPNB; Eastern Taurus; Neolithic architecture; special buildings; Sayburç reliefs

Sayburç, najdišče iz sredine 9. tisočletja pr. n. št. ob vznožju Vzhodnega Taurusa

IZVLEČEK – *Najdišče iz predkeramičnega neolitika v Sayburcu raziskujemo v okviru neolitskega raziskovalnega projekta Şanlıurfa – Taş Tepler (Turčija), ki je osredotočen na obdobje neolitika na planoti Şanlıurfa. Naselbina pripada zgodnji sedentarni skupnosti z značilnimi monumentalnimi zgradbami, stebri v obliki črke T in bogato simboliko, ki jih ločuje od sočasnih skupnosti v jugozahodni Aziji. Vse več je dokazov, da so obredi in z njimi povezana simbolika ter pripovedi ključni pri oblikovanju zgodnjih sedentarnih družb v regiji. Gradnja posebnih zgradb v Sayburcu, ki so umeščene v bližino hiš in so povezane s simboliko, kaže na prepletanje svetega in vsakdanjega življenja. V prispevku predstavljamo preliminarne rezultate prvih treh let raziskav in razpravljamo o kulturni razsežnosti regije.*

KLJUČNE BESEDE – *zgodnji predkeramični neolitik B; Vzhodni Taurus; neolitska arhitektura; posebne zgradbe; reliefi iz Sayburča*

Introduction

The early Neolithic settlements in the Euphrates and Tigris Valleys, particularly in the region considered the transition between the Eastern Taurus Mountains and the Mesopotamian plains, appeared rather suddenly as early as in the mid-10th millennium BC. These include Körtik Tepe (Benz et al. 2015), Boncuklu Tarla (Kodas

2023) and Çemka (Kodaş et al. 2022) in the Tigris Valley, and Söğüt Tarlaşı-Biris Mezarlığı (Özdoğan M. 1995) in the Euphrates Valley, which have been dated to the late Pleistocene. However, none of these sites recorded a longstanding Epi-Palaeolithic tradition developed by mobile hunter-gatherers. Consequently,

data on the Upper Palaeolithic are also lacking, and the origins of sedentism in the northern frontier remain unknown. The Neolithic in the foothills of the Eastern Taurus shared many similarities with that in most of Southwest Asia, and technological developments as well as the transition to food production can be observed as simultaneous developments over a wide area.

The construction of dams and reservoirs on the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers has facilitated the study of the valleys within Turkey's borders (Rosenberg, Erim-Özdoğan 2011; Hauptman 2011; Özdoğan M. 2017; Özdoğan E., Karul 2020; see also Özdoğan M. et al. 2011a; 2011b). However, the plateaus and plains between the two river valleys and the plains extending into Mesopotamia remain poorly studied regarding the prehistoric periods. The Şanlıurfa Plateau, the subject of recent research, offers invaluable insights into Neolithic societies beyond the river valleys (Çelik, Tolon 2018; Şahin et al. 2023). In particular, the archaeological studies at Göbeklitepe, which began in 1995 (Schmidt 2006), have yielded significant insights into the characteristics of the early settlements on the plateau. A review of the archaeological evidence from the sites on the plateau reveals a striking continuity in the existing settlement density, extending from the mid-10th millennium BC to the end of the 8th millennium BC. Notably, none of the currently excavated or surveyed settlements on the plateau have yielded evidence of occupation during the Pottery Neolithic period. This indicates that the hilltop settlements on the plateau were abandoned before the production of pottery and perhaps before agriculture and animal domestication became the primary economic activities. It is also important to note that none of these settlements have yet yielded any data reflecting the transition between the two periods. The settlements where the transition phase is located in the Euphrates Valley include Mezraa Teleliat (Özdoğan M. 2011) and Akarçay Tepe (Özbaşaran, Duru 2011), while those situated on the passage to the plains environment include Gürcütepe (Er-dalkiran et al. 2023). Consequently, it can be postulated that the evidence for food production in plateau settlements may be less robust than in other areas. However, the lack of comprehensive

research on the plains may result in overlooking any settled societies that may have commenced during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

The research conducted on the Şanlıurfa Plateau has yielded insights into the social dimensions of Neolithic societies in Southwest Asia (Fig. 1). The daily lives of these societies were intricately intertwined with rituals, narratives, and associated symbolism. The area in question is notable for its exceptional density of monumental structures and strong symbolic elements that were important to Neolithic communities (Schmidt 2006; 2010; Karul 2022; Karul et al. 2023). From the beginning of sedentary life, these features demonstrate the significance of spaces that facilitate the formation of bonds and the symbolic representation of social values and traditions. Many studies have indicated that symbols, rituals, and beliefs played a significant role in the adaptation of Neolithic societies to complex social environments during the transition to sedentary life (Rollefson 2000; Verhoeven 2002; Schmidt 2005; Peters, Schmidt 2004; Kuijt 2008; Whitehouse, Hodder 2010; Hodder, Pels 2010; Hodder, Meskell 2011; Finlayson et al. 2011; Dietrich et al. 2012; Benz, Bauer 2013; Watkins 2015; Benz 2017; Dietrich et al. 2017; Benz, Sütterlin 2017; Özdoğan M. 2018; Makarewicz, Finlayson 2018; Becker et al. 2019; Clare et al. 2019; Karul 2021). Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing the challenge of understanding the worldview of prehistoric societies and the factors that sustained social cohesion. While the presence of tangible evidence of the social aspects of these societies is not always evident, the settlements on the Şanlıurfa Plateau offer a convenient vantage point for analysing Neolithic societies in this regard. In this context, it has the potential to facilitate a comprehensive understand-

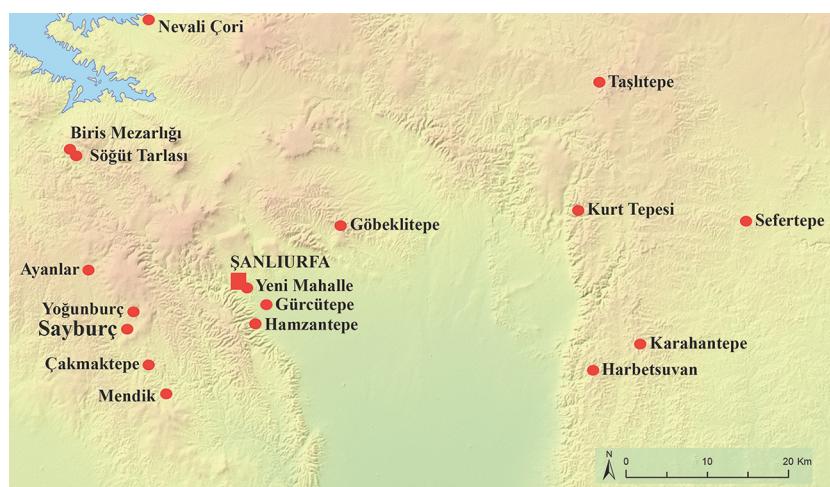


Fig. 1. Early Neolithic settlements on the Şanlıurfa plateau.

ing of the various dynamics involved in the emergence of Neolithic life.

The discovery of a special building and the exposed reliefs prompted immediate research at a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in Sayburç in 2021 (Özdoğan E., Uludağ 2022). The reliefs discovered at Sayburç are notable for their clear descriptive scenes, which provide a distinctive context (Özdoğan E. 2022). The analysis of symbolic elements in artistic productions allows for an objective understanding of the basic worldviews and ideologies that unite society. Although smaller than Göbeklitepe or Karahantepe (Karul 2022), Sayburç has demonstrated the diversity of contemporary sites in terms of size and composition.

The site displays a horizontally oriented mound formation that is characteristic of numerous other sites in the region. Two nearby areas have been identified, and concurrent studies are being conducted in both to ascertain whether functional differences or chronological processes are the primary factors in the development of horizontal settlements. The data from the excavations has permitted a study of the mid-9th millennium BC on the plateau from various perspectives, including architectural development, space use, and daily life. The research conducted at Sayburç has the potential to provide valuable insights into several key fields, including animal domestication, plant cultivation, technological and architectural advances, as well as social changes in sedentary cultures within the plateau. The available data indicates the significance of symbols, rituals, and narratives in this transformation process.

This paper presents and evaluates the work carried out at Sayburç over the past three years. The site's chronological position and the main architectural elements are introduced within the context of the settlement's general characteristics. Furthermore, the discussion will encompass special buildings and ideas about associated symbolism that are still in their incipient stages of development.

The site

Sayburç is situated on the southern foothills of the Eastern Taurus Mountains, 20km southeast of the Şanlıurfa city centre on the Şanlıurfa Plateau (Özdoğan

E., Uludağ 2022; 2024; Özdoğan E. et al. 2023). The Neolithic settlement was constructed on two limestone hills, which were connected by a high ridge. One hill was situated to the north, while the other was located to the south (Fig. 2).

The total area of the Neolithic settlement is estimated to be approximately 3000 square metres. The northern hill is densely populated by local villagers, and the excavations were conducted to the southwest of this area. The northern half of a circular subterranean structure was excavated beneath a modern concrete building (Fig. 3). The structure (Str. AA) has a width of approximately 14 metres and was cut into the bedrock. The fill of the building was damaged by modern activities and mixed with Roman finds. Nevertheless, the presence of blade-based technology and projectile points suggests a date within the PPNB period. The oval AA structure was carved into bedrock, with only a small portion of the walls remaining, possibly as a freestanding structure. On the interior of the wall is a bench constructed from bedrock that runs parallel to the wall. The presence of cavities on the bench indicates that there were pillars on it. The bedrock floor of the structure has been meticulously smoothed and levelled. The inner face of the bench on the north side is decorated with five figures, which extend across an area measuring approximately 70–90cm in height and 370cm in length (Özdoğan E. 2022).

A second structure, designated Str. AB was located to the east of the special building and exhibited considerable damage. The construction of Str. AB was undertaken directly on the bedrock surface. Due to the inclination of the hillside, the structure has sustained significant damage. The remains include a circular



Fig. 2. View of the village of Sayburç and the archaeological sites from the south.



Fig. 3. The northern part of the excavation area consists of structures built on the bedrock and of Roman quarries.

wall and a bench constructed in front of the wall of the building. The eastern and southeastern parts of the area, where the fill is only 20–30cm deep, were utilized as a quarry during the Roman period.

The second and third excavation areas are located on the southern hill (Fig. 4). The concentration of modern occupation in the southern hill is limited to the foot of the hill. The settlement pattern throughout the area follows an agglomerative model, whereby the settlement expands by way of adjacency. The buildings are constructed on bedrock and add to each other, resulting in a lack of standardization in size and layout. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish buildings with a rounded or oval plan or a roughly quadrangular plan. The site contains buildings with straight walls on one side and an oval or rounded plan on the opposite side, which is similar to an apsidal plan. Currently, there

are no discernible gaps or open spaces. Nevertheless, the multiple walls allowed gaps to form between the roofs of the buildings, which served to circulate within the settlement.

Datings

In contrast to the larger settlements in the vicinity, Sayburç does not exhibit vertical stratification, suggesting that it was inhabited for a single period. Radiocarbon dating indicates that the period of occupation spans approximately 300 years. The temporal relationship between the structures in the southern and northern areas remains uncertain. Nevertheless, 11 radiocarbon dates were obtained from above the floors of the structures in the south (Fig. 5). All of the dates are consistent with one another and indicate a date in the middle of the 9th millennium BC. These dates correspond with the early PPNB period and are consistent with the assemblage of chipped stones and architectural features found at the site. The consistency of the architecture and, in particular, the chipped stone technology between the northern and southern areas indicate that there would be no significant temporal discrepancy between the two parts of the settlement.

Structural features of the architecture

The relatively well-constructed corners indicate that the inhabitants had experience in the construction of corners and the robust masonry (Fig. 6). The walls were constructed directly on bedrock and subsequent-



Fig. 4. Excavations at two locations on the southern hill revealed that the same architectural pattern was consistently present throughout the entire area.

ly elevated with a mortared stone wall until they reached the level at which the roofing commenced. In certain instances, the structures display the presence of double rows of walls in addition to shared walls. The walls are remarkably well-preserved, exhibiting overlapping stone masonry in the upper parts, which can also be observed in some fallen debris. This indicates that the drop joints of the walls were slightly extended inward on the upper portion. A system was likely installed between the roof and the wall to prevent water infiltration and facilitate drainage.

The primary construction material utilized was limestone, a prevalent geological formation in the region. The stone was meticulously selected from medium-sized flat stones or irregularly from large or small stones. In addition to stone, adobe mortar was also employed. The structures feature buttresses, which were

constructed on both curved and rectilinear walls. In some instances, the buttresses were constructed in conjunction with the walls, while in others they were subsequently added to the bare walls. As they do not extend into the interior of the structure, they do not create divisions within the interior space. Nevertheless, the incorporation of buttresses did result in the formation of some niches. During the excavation, a layer of earth was identified at the surface of certain walls. It was observed that in certain cases, the soil layer was covered with a layer of high-quality clay or lime plaster, which was sometimes as thick as 1.5 to 2cm.

To date, only one building has been fully excavated (Fig. 7). The floor was constructed by levelling the surface of the limestone bedrock on which the settlement was built. The floor surface was meticulously smoothed, and the sides, which constituted the foundation for

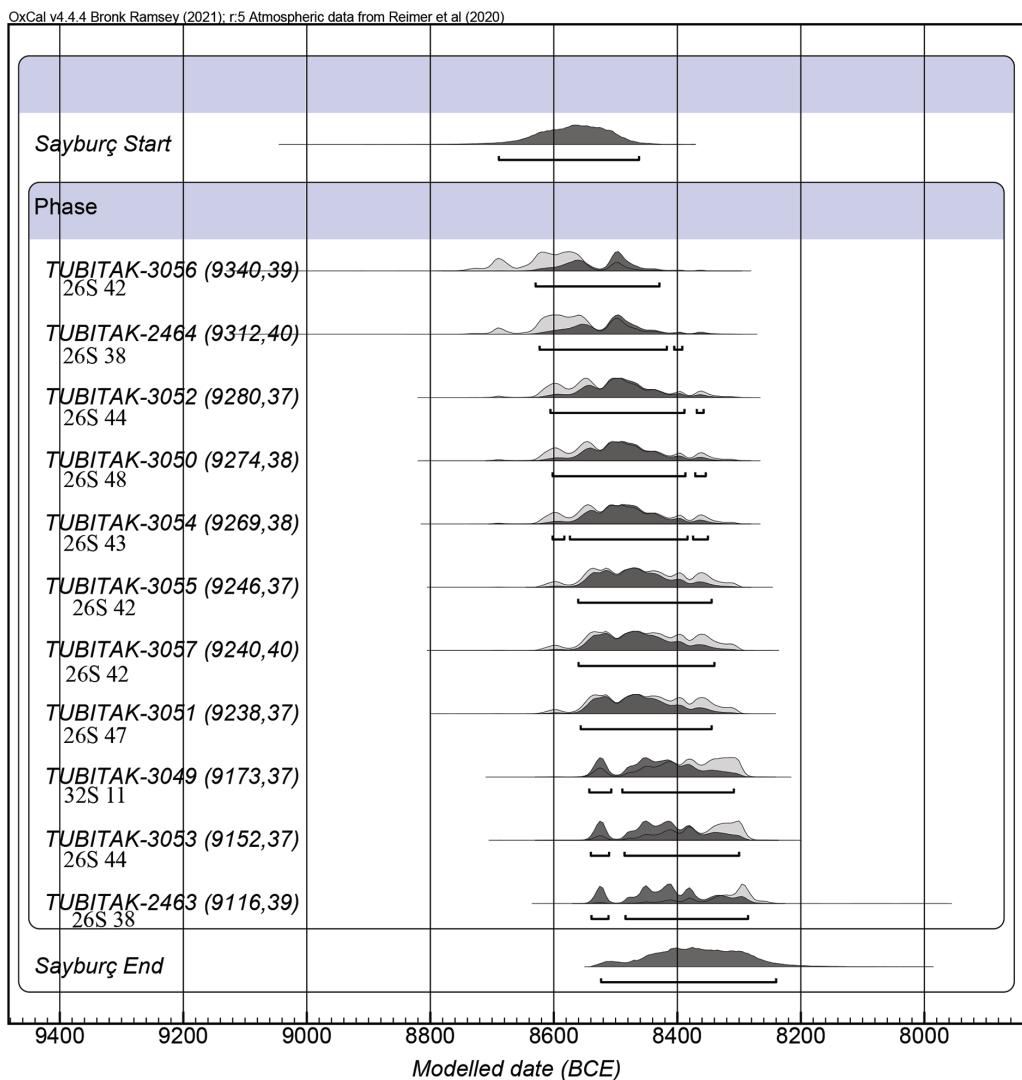


Fig. 5. The radiocarbon dates were obtained from the charcoal remains found above the floors of the buildings (prepared by E. Altınışık).

the walls, were constructed with rounded curves extending from the floor. The eastern section of the floor was coated with lime plaster, as it is assumed that the natural roughness of the bedrock was filled with plaster, which made it flat and smooth. Furthermore, clay and terrazzo floors were discovered in Sayburç. The majority of the clay floors were observed in elevated areas, which may be considered analogous to benches. The surface finish is hard and smooth. Moreover, terrazzo floors were identified within the fill of the buildings. One of the discovered floor pieces measuring approximately 1.80 x 0.75m, was found among the debris inside the building and fell from west to east.

The interior arrangement of the dwellings

The dwellings have been identified by their dimensions, building elements, and artefacts. The practice of utilizing anthropomorphic T-pillars and stone benches, designated as special buildings, was also observed in dwellings. Although the buildings are modest in scale, the presence of work areas, niches, benches, and a hearth indicates the functional and conceptual existence of the home (Fig. 8).



Fig. 6. The structures in Sayburç were constructed in an adjacent manner through the addition of one upon the other.

Due to the limited number of completely excavated dwellings at Sayburç, some building elements are only known from a single example, including hearths. In the Str. BB, a hearth was constructed at the northern end of the eastern wall in the form of a niche opening into the wall. The hearth features a domed structure and narrows upwards (Fig. 9). A potential chimney also opens into the wall, although this section has not been preserved due to destruction.

The majority of niches are located within the shorter walls of the building. In certain instances, the wall of a building may recede outward in the area where the niche is situated, creating a recessed space. In another structure, the construction of niches was facilitated by the addition of buttresses, which provided support and stability to the wall.

In one case, two pillars were positioned near the wall to create a niche (Fig. 10).



Fig. 7. The excavation of a single dwelling at Sayburç has been fully completed.

Two distinct types of benches were identified within the structures. The first type of bench is the clay-plastered bench, which was discovered in buildings that have not yet been fully excavated. These benches were likely constructed by plastering clay on a stone-built platform next to the wall. However, due to the incomplete nature of the excavation the specific features

of these benches remain uncertain. The benches are elevated to a degree that is significantly above the expected floor level. The second type of bench was formed by carving bedrock. One particularly illustrative example that was discovered in Str. Building BB is a completely excavated structure. The floor of the structure is carved into the bedrock. During the process of carving the floor, a bench was formed in the west, in front of the east wall, running parallel to it. The bench was extended in front of the north wall, forming an L-shaped structure that was limited by a buttress. To the east of this structure, another bench of a similar nature is situated at a slightly elevated level.

A number of domestic structures feature pillars that are approximately two metres in height. It is challenging to establish a standard in terms of size and shape, as the parameters appear to be variable. Some of the pillars exhibit decorations, including an arm and a V on the collar, which may be interpreted as symbols of human beings. Two examples of pillars with fingers, a belt, and a pelt hanging from underneath have been discovered. In addition, undecorated pillars were also discovered at the site. T-shaped pillars have only been



Fig. 8. A T-shaped pillar with human features was placed in the centre of the building, which has a bench, a niche, and a hearth adjacent to the wall.

identified in a limited number of buildings. It is crucial to acknowledge here that the majority of the structures have yet to be fully excavated, and therefore it is possible that additional fallen pillars may be discovered on the floors during further excavation. The number and position of these elements are not uniform. In the fully excavated building, Str. BB, the pillar, which exhibits discernible human characteristics, is situated in the centre of the room. Furthermore, pillars were discovered in the centre of other buildings. Moreover, two pillars were situated in close proximity to one another and aligned with the wall, thereby creating a recess

at the narrow end of an oval-shaped structure. In another building, which appears to be a special building in the southern area, the pillars were placed along the wall with a central pillar in the middle. As the building has not yet been fully excavated, the pillars serve to distinguish it from the other dwellings in the area. To date, only one hearth has been excavated on the site, located in Str. BB, which – as noted above, is the only building that has been completely excavated thus far. The hearth is of a domed construction and is situated within the eastern wall. The hearth's floor is constructed from bedrock and is situated approximately 10cm above the floor level. The upper portion of the



Fig. 9. The domed hearth, situated within the wall of the building, has been destroyed from above, although the portion adjacent to the vent is discernible.



Fig. 10. T-shaped pillars are found both in special buildings and dwellings.

chimney, where the hearth's domed walls narrowed, is absent due to damage to the wall. In the same building, the concentration of finds associated with food preparation, such as grinding stones and pestles, is observed in the northern section. A single grinding stone was discovered on the bench to the west, while two additional grinding stones were located on the floor close to it. In addition, grinding stones were placed on a low bench deposited in front of the eastern wall.

The special buildings

In Sayburç, a discernible differentiation between special buildings and dwellings is not readily apparent. The special buildings are distinguished from the others by several characteristics, including their relatively larger size, the number of pillars incorporated into their design, the presence of double-tiered benches or the inclusion of artistic elements. The initial discovery of a special building at Sayburç was made in the northern area. This building, which has been partially excavated, contains reliefs. Upon the initial discovery of this special building, excavations in the southern area were just beginning, and all the structures were presumed to be dwellings. Consequently, it was postulated that a specific area of the settlement at Sayburç, analogous to those observed at Çayönü (Özdoğan M., Özdoğan A. 1990) and Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 1993), was designated for special structures. However, as the excavations in the southern area progressed, it became evident that special buildings were present in this area

as well. It was observed that they were constructed in an intertwined pattern with dwellings. This is not unexpected, given that a comparable phenomenon was observed at Göbeklitepe (Clare 2020) and Karahantepe (Karul et al. 2023). The special building in the north, with a maximum width of 14 metres, is larger than the dwellings excavated thus far. The bench, which extends along the wall on which the pillars were placed, and the reliefs on the bench, provide clear evidence that the building was a special structure. Consequently, it exemplifies the characteristics of special buildings in the region.

As noted above, the building is of a larger scale than that of the other structures in the vicinity. The floor was carved into the limestone bedrock, with a depth of

80 to 90 centimetres in the west and 50 to 60 centimetres in the east. The bench, which encircles the wall, appears to be divided by the pillars. The reliefs on the bench façade facing the space, the bench's non-standardized height, and the upper surface's arrangements indicate that the bench was not intended for sitting or standing. Rather, it served as an installation that enhanced the building's overall aesthetic appeal. The absence of *in situ* fill makes it challenging to comprehend the interior design and utilization of the space. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the results of further excavations in the remaining portions of the structure will provide a more comprehensive insight into the matter.

The reliefs on display exemplify a technical and narrative style that is characteristic of Neolithic art in the region (Fig. 11). Except for a single figure in high relief, the remaining figures are incised. The figures are presented in a linear sequence, from left to right. Nevertheless, two scenes can be differentiated by the figures' postures. The initial scene on the left depicts a bull and a male figure facing each other. To the right of the scene are three figures: two leopards and a male. The male figure situated in the centre of the composition is depicted in high relief. The other figures are gazing at each other, but the male figure in the centre is looking at the room, at the people gathered here. The surface of the bench, oriented towards the wall, including the reliefs, exhibits a coarser texture than the floor, which is marked by the presence of construction traces.



Fig. 11. The Sayburç reliefs are two side-by-side scenes with five figures arranged horizontally (photo B. Köşker).

Upon focusing on the depictions within this structure, several important characteristics emerge. Firstly, the figures depicted are leopards and bulls, two species that are commonly represented in Early Neolithic iconography of the region. Secondly, the depictions place a significant emphasis on the dangerous limbs of these wild species. Thirdly, all the depicted figures, which are identifiable as male, are shown with phallic symbols. Finally, all the figures are depicted in motion. The animals are depicted in an aggressive posture, while the human figure on the left is shown crouching in a nearly dance-like pose. The seated human figure in high relief is depicted holding his phallus (Fig. 12). The figures are situated in a moment of an event that may be interpreted as recounting a story or myth, which distinguishes the piece from its contemporaries. The reliefs are composed of two scenes, which flow from left to right in a horizontal sequence. The horizontally flowing scenes represent a notable departure from the typical depiction of figures on T-shaped pillars, composite statues, and human figures carrying animals on their backs in a vertical perspective.

The composition includes two male figures, both of whom display ithyphallic features, but have different expressions as they are placed in the centre of different scenes. The male figure on the right is depicted in high relief, from the facing side, in a realistic style. On either side of the figure are two leopards oriented towards him. The leopard on the left is also depicted with an erect phallus. The other male human figure is shown in a roughly drawn side view. The line extending from the abdomen represents an erect phallus. The bull, which also has an erect phallus, stands on the opposite side of it. Although the bull is shown from the side, its head is carved in such a way that both horns are visible from above.

The two scenes are distinct and deliberately placed side by side, as evidenced by the blank sidewalls. Ne-

vertheless, the significance of these scenes remains opaque. The narrative presents a harmonious relationship between humans and animals. The plot of this narrative can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives, including a before-and-after analysis or as a series of interrelated scenes. The Sayburç reliefs represent the most comprehensive and revealing visual representations made by Early Neolithic people in the region.

In the southern area, at least three special buildings remain among the dwellings. The structures in question were only partially excavated. In an oval struc-



Fig. 12. The most striking figure is the seated male figure, which is distinguished from the others by its high-relief technique and the direction of its view.

ture designated as Str. CB excavated 80cm from the top, and seven T-shaped pillars were placed in front of the walls, probably on a bench running parallel to the wall (Fig. 13). A central T-pillar was also placed in the middle. In the adjacent Str. CD, the same features were discovered, but only in a limited area. The third structure is located to the south. Str. DA is once again encircled by dwellings. The structure features a double-step bench in front of the wall and at least one central T-shaped pillar lying on the floor, which has been destroyed. Given that this building was also partially excavated, our understanding of it remains incomplete. Some of the structures can be identified as special buildings based on their size and plan. Further excavation is necessary to provide clear definitions.

The burials

Three clusters of human remains have thus far been recovered in the southern region within the domestic structures. All of the recovered human bones are secondary burials, and the bones exhibit signs of burning. It can be reasonably assumed that selected bones, particularly long bones and skull fragments, were placed within the structures. The initial cluster was excavated from the walls of the building, located just beneath the surface fill and partially buried within it. The second cluster is a secondary burial of six individuals. The bones were subjected to severe burning, and the skull

and long bones were reburied in a niche. The structure with the burials in the niche is likely a dwelling. The niche is situated near the point at which the west wall of the structure makes a turn towards the south. As the structure was only excavated to a depth of 75cm, no information is available regarding the context of the building. Nevertheless, it is evident that following the placement of the bones within the niche, the front face was subsequently plastered. The most recently discovered cluster of burned bones were found on the northern side of a dwelling, with only the western half of which was excavated (Fig. 14). They were scattered on the bedrock bench and the floor in front of it. As the building has not yet been fully unearthed, it is difficult to make an assessment of its context. However, it seems that the bones were discarded before the building was abandoned. The number of individuals, their age and gender, as well as the treatment of the bones, are still under study and thus not yet fully understood. Nevertheless, observations made during the excavation indicate that they were composed primarily of long bones and skulls, and were initially secondary burials.

Discussion

The potential for comprehending the relationship between domestic and special buildings is evident in the study of Sayburç. The dwellings constructed on bedrock provide insights into the settlement pattern and structural features, while their well-preserved remains offer useful information about life in the past. As the research is still in its early stages, the place of the buildings in the technological novelties of architecture is emphasized here. The buildings in Sayburç exhibit a transition from a round to a quadrangular architectural form. Similarly, the use of buttresses, which are believed to have reinforced the structural integrity of the walls, is also evident at the site. The apsidal plan, rectilinear wall, well-constructed corner connections, buttresses, niches, and the dome-shaped hearth, situated within the wall, demonstrate the capacity of the community to create well-organized spaces as 'house' contexts. This was also achieved through the application of construction techniques that required a certain degree of technical expertise.



Fig. 13. One of the special buildings in Sayburç features a central and seven perimeter T-pillars against the wall.

The preliminary studies indicate that they are one-room structures built by attaching one to the other. However, some of the smaller rooms that have been uncovered may have been annexes associated with the structures. From the exterior, the settlements appear to be a vast island of contiguous structures. The buildings are constructed next to one another, resulting in a limited amount of open space and restricted access. The intersections of walls between different structures likely served as passageways. The considerable width of some multiple walls may be indicative of the presence of roads within the settlement, which facilitated internal circulation. The houses probably had thatched roofs over their stone walls. In some well-preserved houses, the walls have been extended inside. This suggests that the upper portions of the walls were positioned slightly inward to prevent rainwater from entering the buildings from outside. This also facilitates the drainage of water from a large building island.

It is crucial to acknowledge that none of the special buildings within the site have yet been fully excavated. A structure in the northern area appears to be larger than the other dwellings, and a bench along the wall with reliefs indicates its special function. At least three buildings in the southern area are considered 'special buildings' due to their interior equipment and arrangement of pillars. This pattern of intertwined dwellings and special buildings is noteworthy. This prompts the question of why there was more than one special building and whether there were any differences between them in terms of their use or users. While the answers to these questions may not be known until the buildings in the area are fully excavated, the special buildings and symbolic elements at Sayburç provide sufficient evidence to make an assessment. The symbolic artefacts in Sayburç extend beyond those observed within the context of the special structures. Additionally, personal body ornaments, such as beads and small stone ob-



Fig. 14. The human bones situated in front of the bench are composed of skull fragments and long bones. These bones, which are classified as secondary burial, have undergone burning.

jects, have been unearthed at the site (Fig. 15). Beads and ornaments represent the individual form of symbolic expression that was characteristic of past societies. It is evident that these forms of personal symbolism existed before the Neolithic period, but they increased in both material, type, and quantity with the Neolithic (Özdoğan E. 2016). Nevertheless, the appearance of public symbols during the Neolithic period is noteworthy. This is particularly obvious in the settlements of the Urfa region, where these symbols represent elements that are fundamental to social values. One of the most striking features of these symbols is that they often form contexts associated with special buildings. The presence of these symbols in gathering places also serves to highlight the relationships among these symbols, rituals, and narratives.



Fig. 15. Personal ornaments and secondary use grooved stone (photo Y. Aslan).



Fig. 16. Male human figure in a scene with a bull (photo B. Köşker).

The reliefs in the special building in Sayburç provide a compelling illustration of the public significance of symbolism. The figures display features typically associated with strong, predatory animals, the male gender, and ithyphallic features (Schmidt 2006; Hodder, Meskell 2011). They are carved in stone and depicted in a realistic style, indicating that they are the products of artistic production requiring labour and mastery. As exemplars of a long tradition, they are representative of the broader phenomenon, while at the same time constituting a unique and comprehensive scene that is characteristic of this region. The scenes are arranged horizontally, and the orientation of the figures serves to emphasize two different scenes. Although there is a space around them, the fact that they are depicted side by side makes them two related narratives.

It is of particular importance to consider the contexts in which these depictions take place. As in the case of Sayburç, both in Karahantepe and Göbeklitepe as well as in Nevalı Çori, both depictions and sculptures are found in special structures. The fact that these depictions, which are clearly narrative in nature, are found in special structures – in other words, in structures with public functions – places them at the centre of public events and rituals. The coexistence of special buildings and symbols facilitates mutual understanding of the function of both symbols and buildings (Fig. 16). It seems that narratives, which are the subject of rituals, serve to maintain social cohesion and ensure the continuity of social values. In this regard, the depictions, special buildings, and related rituals serve an important function in the continuity of culture and the transmission of traditions to future generations. Although the narratives themselves are not readily comprehensible, their social implications can be discerned.

Conclusion

The Urfa region has been identified as the site of distinctive special buildings and related symbolism that go as far back as the mid-10th millennium, BC as evidenced by Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe (Schmidt 2006; 2010; Karul 2021; 2022). The discovery of special buildings and reliefs at Sayburç indicates that this tradition persisted until the mid-9th millennium BC. Furthermore,

in Sayburç, as in the other sites, the special buildings are not singular, but rather multiple and integrated into the dwellings. The evidence suggests that the tradition of integrating special buildings and dwellings into settlements persisted for a considerable length of time. In addition to temporal distinction, Sayburç is also distinguished from the other two settlements in terms of size. While the other two settlements exhibit a shift in size and complexity over time, Sayburç remained a relatively small settlement throughout its history. This suggests that distinctive architectural features, special buildings, and high artistic productions are not exclusive to large and prominent settlements.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Museums, the Research Fund of the Istanbul University (Project No. 2023-40050), the Şanlıurfa Governorship, Şanlıurfa Archaeology Museum, Karaköprü Municipality, and The Turkish Historical Society for their support of the research at Sayburç.

References

Becker J., Beuger C., and Müller-Neuhof B. 2019. Human Iconography and Symbolic Meaning in Near Eastern Prehistory: An Introduction. In J. Becker, C. Beuger, and B. Müller-Neuhof (eds.), *Human Iconography and Symbolic Meaning in Near Eastern Prehistory*. Austrian Academy of Sciences. Vienna: 11–24.

Benz M. 2017. Changing Medialities. Symbols of Neolithic Corporate Identities. In M. Benz, H. G. K. Gebel, and T. Watkins (eds.), *Neolithic Corporate Identities*. Studies in Early Near Eastern Production, Subsistence, and Environment 20. ex oriente. Berlin: 135–156.
<https://www.exoriente.org/docs/00100.pdf>

Benz M. and Bauer J. 2013. Symbols of Power – Symbols of Crisis? A Psycho-social Approach to Early Neolithic Symbol System. *Neo-Lithics* 2013(2): 11–24.

Benz M., Deckers K., Rössner C., +7 authors, and Özkan V. 2015. Prelude to Village Life. Environmental Data and Building Traditions of the Epipalaeolithic Settlement at Körtik Tepe, Southeastern Turkey. *Paléorient* 41(2): 9–30.
https://www.persee.fr/doc/paleo_0153-9345-2015_num_41_2_5673

Benz M., Gebel H. G. K., and Watkins T. 2017. The Construction of Neolithic Corporate Identities. Introduction. In M. Benz, H. G. K. Gebel, and T. Watkins (eds.), *Neolithic Corporate Identities*. Studies in Early Near Eastern Production, Subsistence, and Environment 20. ex oriente. Berlin: 1–9.

Clare L. 2020. Göbekli Tepe, Turkey. A Brief Summary of Research at a New World Heritage Site (2015– 2019). *e-Forschungsberichte* 2: 81–87.

Clare L., Dietrich O., Gresky J., Notroff J., Peters J., and Pöllath N. 2019. Ritual Practices and Conflict Mitigation at Early Neolithic Körtik Tepe and Göbekli Tepe, Upper Mesopotamia: A Mimetic Theoretical Approach. In I. Hodder (ed.), *Violence and the Sacred in the Ancient Near East: Girardian Conversations at Çatalhöyük*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 96–128.

Celik B., Tolon K. 2018. Yeni Bulgular Işığında Urfa'da Neolitik Dönem. *Seleucia* 8: 211–232.

Dietrich O., Heun M., Notroff J., Schmidt K., and Zarnkow M. 2012. The Role of Cult and Feasting in the Emergence of Neolithic communities. New evidence from Gobekli Tepe, South-eastern Turkey. *Antiquity* 86(333): 674–695.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00047840>

Dietrich O., Notroff J., Dietrich L., and Schmidt K. 2017 Feasting, Social Complexity, and the Emergence of the Early Neolithic of Upper Mesopotamia: A View from Göbeklitepe. In R. J. Chacon, R. G. Mendoza (eds.), *Feast, Famine or Fighting? Multiple Pathways to Social Complexity*. Springer. New York: 91–132

Erdalkuran M., Uludağ C., and Avcı C. 2023. Gürcütepe 2023 Yılı Kazısı. 42. *Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı* 4: 73–184.

Finlayson B., Mithen S. J., Najjar M., Smith S., Maričević D., Pankhurst N. and Yeomans L. 2011. Architecture, Sedentism, and Social Complexity at Pre-Pottery Neolithic A WF16, Southern Jordan. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of USA* 108(20): 8183–8188.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1017642108>

Hauptmann H. 1993. Ein Kult Gebäude in Nevalı Çöri. In M. Frangipane, H. Hauptmann, M. Liverani, P. Matthiae, and M. Mellink (eds.), *Between the Rivers and Over the Mountains*. Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza. Rome: 37–69.

Hodder I., Pels P. 2010. History Houses: a New Interpretation of Architectural Elaboration at Çatalhöyük. In I. Hodder (ed.), *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 163–186.

Hodder I., Meskell L. 2011. A Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry. Some Aspects of Symbolism in Neolithic Turkey. *Current Anthropology* 52(2): 235–263.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659250>

Karul N. 2021. Buried Buildings at Pre Pottery Neolithic Karahantepe. *Türk Arkeoloji ve Etnografya Dergisi* 86: 19–31.
2022. Karahantepe Çalışmalarına Genel Bir Bakış. *Arkeoloji ve Sanat* 169: 1–8.

Karul N., Semiz N., and Polat N. 2023. Karahantepe 2019–2021 Çalışmaları. 42. *Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı* 4: 205–220.

Kodaş E. 2023. The younger Dryas Layer at Boncuklu Tarla and the Beginning of village life in the upper Tigris Basin. *Archaeological Research in Asya* 35(1): 1000460.

Kodaş E., Genç B., Çiftçi Y., Labendan-Kodaş C. and Erdem Ç. 2020. Çemka Höyük: A late epi-paleolithic and pre-pottery Neolithic site on the upper Tigris, southeast Anatolia. *Neo-Lithics* 20: 40–46. https://www.exoriente.org/repository/NEO-LITHICS/e_NEOLITHICS_2020_Kodas.pdf

Kuijt I. 2008. The Regeneration of Life: Neolithic Structures of Symbolic Remembering and Forgetting. *Current Anthropology* 49(2): 171–197. <https://doi.org/10.1086/526097>

Makarewicz C. A., Finlayson B. 2018. Constructing Community in the Neolithic of Southern Jordan: Quotidian Practice in Communal Architecture. *PLoS ONE* 13(6): e0193712. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0193712>

Özbaşaran M., Duru G. 2011. Akarçay Tepe, A PPNB and PN Settlement in Middle Euphrates Urfâ. In M. Özdoğan, N. Başgelen, and P. Kuniholm (eds.), *Neolithic in Turkey: New Excavations and New Research The Euphrates Basin*. Archaeology and Art Publications. İstanbul: 261–265.

Özdoğan E. 2016. Neolithic Beads of Anatolia: An Overview. In Ü. Yalçın (ed.), *Anatolian Metal VII Anatolien un seine Nachbarn vor 10.000 Jahren. Anatolia and neighbors 10.000 years ago*. Bergbau-Museum Bochum. Grafisches Centrum Cuno GmbH & Co. KG. Bochum-Bonn: 135–151.

2022. The Sayburç Reliefs: a Narrative Scene From the Neolithic. *Antiquity* 96(390): 1599–1605. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aaq.2022.125>

Özdoğan E., Uludağ C. 2022. Sayburç: Şanlıurfa'da Yenir Bir Çanak Çomlekzsiz Neolitik Dönem Yerleşimi. *Arkeoloji ve Sanat* 169: 9–24.

2024. Sayburç 2022 Yılı Çalışmaları. 43. Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı (5): 99–114.

Özdoğan E., Karul N. 2020. Neolitik Teriminin Kavramsal Değişimi ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Neolitik Araştırmaların Dünü-Bugünü. *Arkeoloji ve Sanat* 163: 1–28.

Özdoğan E., Uludağ C., and Polat N. 2023. Sayburç 2021 İlk Dönem Çalışmaları. 42. Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı (2): 307–322.

Özdoğan M. 1995. Yakın Doğu Neolitiği ve Güneydoğu Anadolu: Eleştirisel Bir Değerlendirme. In N. Başgelen (ed.), *Eski Yakındığu Kültürü Üzerine İncelemeler In Memoriam İ. Metin Akyurt – Bahattin Devam Anı Kitabı*. Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları. İstanbul: 267–280.

2011. Mezraa Teleilat. In M. Özdoğan, N. Başgelen, and P. Kuniholm (eds.), *Neolithic in Turkey: New Excavations and New Research. The Euphrates Basin*. Archaeology and Art Publications. İstanbul: 203–260.

2017. The Archaeology of Early Farming in Southeastern Turkey. In Y. Enzel, O. Bar-Yosef (eds.), *Quaternary of the Levant. Environments. Climate Change and Humans*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 723–731.

2018. Defining the Presence of an Elite Social Class in Prehistory. In Ü. Yalçın (ed.), *Anatolian Metal VIII. Eliten – Handwerk – Prestigegüter*. Der ANSCHNITT. Beiheft 39. Veröffentlichungen aus dem Deutschen Bergbau-Museum Bochum. Nr. 226. VML Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH. Radden/Westf.: 29–42.

2022. Reconsidering the Early Neolithic of Anatolia. Recent Recoveries. Some Excerpts and Generalities. *L'Anthropologie* 126(3): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anthro.2022.103033>

Özdoğan M., Özdoğan A. 1990. Çayönü a Conspectus of Recent Work. In O. Aurenche, M.-C. Cauvin, and P. Sanlaville (eds.), *Préhistoire du Levant: processus des changements culturels*. Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Paris: 68–77.

Özdoğan M., Başgelen N., and Kuniholm P. 2011a (eds.). *The Neolithic in Turkey The Euphrates Basin*. Archaeology and Art Publications. İstanbul.

Özdoğan M., Başgelen N., and Kuniholm P. 2011b (eds.). *The Neolithic in Turkey The Tigris Basin*. Archaeology and Art Publications. İstanbul.

Peters J., Schmidt K. 2004. Animals in the symbolic world of Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe, South-eastern Turkey: a preliminary assessment. In P. Bonte, A.-M Brûsebarre, D. Helmer, and H. Sidi Maamar (eds.), *Domestications animales: dimensions sociales et symboliques. Hommages à Jacques Cauvin, Villeurbanne, 21–23 novembre 2002*. Anthropozoologica 39(1): 179–218.

Rollefson G. O. 2000. Ritual and social structure at Neolithic 'Ain Ghazal. In I Kuijt (ed.), *Life in Neolithic Farming Communities: Social Organization, Identity, and Differentiation*. Kluwer Academic/Plenum. New York: 165–190.

Rosenberg M., Erim-Özdoğan A. 2011. The Neolithic in Southeastern Anatolia. In S. Steadman, G. Mc Mahon (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Anatolia, 10,000–323 B.C.E.* University Press. New York: 125–149.

Schmidt K. 2005. "Ritual Centers" and the Neolithisation of Upper Mesopotamia. *Neolithics* 2(05): 13–21. https://www.exorientate.org/repository/NEO-LITHICS/NEOLITHICS_2005_2.pdf

2006. *Sie bauten die ersten Tempel: das rätselhafte Heiligtum der Steinzeitjäger. Die archäologische Entdeckung am Göbekli Tepe*. C.H. Beck. München.

2010. Göbekli Tepe – the Stone Age Sanctuaries. New Results of Ongoing Excavations with a Special Focus on Sculptures and High Reliefs. *Documenta Praehistorica* 37: 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.4312/dp.37.21>

Sütterlin C. 2017. Cultural Memory: Symbols, Monuments and Rituals Sustaining Group Identity. In M. Benz, H. G. Ge-

bel, and T. Watkins (eds.), *Neolithic Corporate Identities. Studies in Early Near Eastern Production, Subsistence, and Environment 20. ex oriente*. Berlin: 35–52.
<https://www.exorient.org/docs/00100.pdf>

Şahin F., Uludağ C., Özçelik K., and Sevindik Y. E. 2023. Şanlıurfa Merkez ve Çevresi Tarihöncesi Dönem Arkeolojik Yüzey Araştırması (ŞAYA) 2021 Yılı İlk Sezon Sonuçları. In C. Keskin (ed.), *42. Uluslararası Kazı, Araştırma Ve Arkeometri Sempozyumu. 38. Ataşurma Sonuçları Toplantısı. Cilt 1. 23-27 Mayıs 2022. Denizli*. T.C. Kültür Ve Turizm Bakanlığı Ana Yayın No: 3735/1. Kültür Varlıklarını ve Müzeler Genel Müdürlüğü No: 196/1. Ankara: 477–497.

Verhoeven M. 2002. Ritual and Ideology in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Levant and Southeast Anatolia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 12(2): 233– 258.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774302000124>

Watkins T. 2015. Ritual Performance and Religion in Early Neolithic Societies. In N. Laneri (ed.), *Defining the Sacred Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion in the Near East*. Oxbow Books. Oxford, Philadelphia:153–160.

Whitehouse H., Hodder I. 2010 Modes of Religiosity at Çatalhöyük. In I. Hodder (ed), *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization. Çatalhöyük as a Case Study*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 122–145.