

A Clay Mask Depiction from Göbekli Tepe

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Long before the extensive use of clay in households for the production of vessels and other items of daily use, clay was, in sundried or burned form, an important material to produce figurines. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic clay figurines are a common occurrence in Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) sites of the Near East (Morsch 2002, 2017; Hansen 2007: 57-94, 2014; Meskell 2007; Kuijt 2017). The find of an anthropomorphic figurine from Hayonim could hint at an even much longer tradition, reaching back into the Epipalaeolithic (Valla 2000: 25, Fig. 11). The quantity of figurine finds in PPN sites differs however, and this may not always be explainable by the size of the excavated areas or the state of research. Two extensively excavated sites sharing several similarities in their architectural features may serve to illustrate these differences. From PPNB Nevalı Çori in southeastern Turkey, 665 figurines are known (Morsch 2017: 189), of which 90% depict men and women (animals or abstract forms are rare). From Göbekli Tepe, which is well-known for its abundant and predominantly male imagery in the relief decorations of architectural features and in the form of stone sculptures, no clay figurines have been published so far.

The late excavator of the site, Klaus Schmidt (2016: 125-127), has repeatedly emphasized this dichotomy. He assumed that the exclusive presence of limestone sculptures and figurines at Göbekli Tepe could hint at different meanings of the two materials – clay and stone – for PPN people. Clay would be relevant to the living and their rituals, while stone belonged to the sphere of the dead, to which he attributed the monumental buildings with T-shaped limestone pillars discovered at Göbekli Tepe¹. One of his main arguments regarded the peculiar spatial distribution of clay figurines at Nevalı Çori. There, figurines have been found in nearly all domestic areas of Layers III and IV (Morsch 2017: 198). They are however absent from the so-called cult building that features pillars similar to those found at Göbekli Tepe (Hauptmann 1993). Inside the cult building on the other hand, nearly all of the limestone sculptures known from Nevalı Çori have been found (Hauptmann 2011: 95-100). This could hint at distinctions between public and household cult activities. But even with this evidence, Schmidt's interpretation can be discussed controversially. The question whether clay figurines always must be attributed to the cultic realm still is, and probably will remain, under discussion (compare the very diverse and partly controversial approaches to figurines in Insoll 2017). The current contribution however has another aim, and that is to discuss an exception from the clay-stone antagonism at Göbekli Tepe.



Fig. 1 Enclosure D under excavation in 2001, a limestone mask depiction was found at the level of the fox reliefs, the clay mask depiction discussed here, 10 cm deeper in the filling. (Photo: K. Schmidt, © DAI)

A Clay Mask Depiction from Enclosure D

During the 2001 excavation season, Enclosure D was in the focus of research (Fig. 1). Excavations in area L9-78 soon revealed Pillar 18, the eastern central pillar of the building, as well as some of the pillars in the encircling enclosure wall. At the level at which the fox relief on Pillar 18 was reached, about 2.20 m deep within the enclosure's filling, a small stone object was retrieved in the pillar's vicinity – the miniature representation of a mask made from limestone (Fig. 3b; Dietrich *et al.* 2018: 8, Fig. 5). But the next 10 cm of excavated sediment (*i.e.* Locus 4.7 in excavation area L9-78) held another surprise: a second mask, but this time made from clay (Fig. 2). This find has never been published and has also not been included in a recent article on mask representations from Göbekli Tepe and other early Neolithic sites (Dietrich *et al.* 2018). During work on this find group a closer examination of the



Fig. 2 Clay mask depiction from Göbekli Tepe. (Drawing: K. Schmidt, © DAI)

piece has shown that the interpretation as another mask representation is more likely.

The fragmentarily preserved object was originally ovaloid in form, the back is concave. It features a very prominent nose and large, nearly open-worked eyes. An indentation supposedly depicting the mouth is rather small, on the other hand, and not very deep. The mask measures just 1.3 x 0.7 cm. The surface is darkened-greyish, which indicates burning in reducing conditions. Whether the mask was intentionally burned remains uncertain; a future scientific examination of the object could resolve this issue.

Dating the mask accurately is not easy, as the still ongoing stratigraphic evaluation is revealing a multifaceted history of backfilling through erosion and intentional events for Enclosure D (for a summary see Pöllath et al. 2018). The monumental round buildings had long biographies of use, and radiocarbon data may indicate a partial chronological overlap with the younger phase of site use, the rectangular buildings of the so-called Layer II (Dietrich 2011). Within excavation area L9-78, where the mask was found, Locus 4 marks the uppermost layer of the at least in modern times undisturbed Neolithic backfill inside Enclosure D. It was divided by a loamy layer with numerous small stones from the superposing unit, reddish in colour, with fist-sized stones and numerous lithic finds. The excavators described it as “heterogenous”, which may indicate a complex formation process. This layer can possibly be interpreted as the youngest event of the refilling of the enclosure, because below this locus, color and composition of the sediment changed, probably indicating another, older backfilling. Thus, the mask would have been deposited during the last stages of backfilling. Its provenience therefore does not give a clear evidence about its use. However, we consider a date for its deposition in the backfill not younger than the early PPNB probable. The find also bears some resemblance to a PPNB miniature mask discovered at Nevalı Çori – which was made from limestone however (Hauptmann 2011: Fig. 17).

Stone Miniature Masks at Göbekli Tepe

Stone miniatures of masks have recently been highlighted as an important feature of Göbekli Tepe and other PPN sites with special buildings (Dietrich et al. 2018). Four such depictions of masks are known from Göbekli Tepe. Before the start of excavations in 1995, a larger-than-life-sized and complete human mask was found during surface cleaning (Fig. 3a; Dietrich et al. 2018: 7, Fig. 4). The depiction of the face is minimalistic, almost abstract. The eyes are very faint, and the mouth is absent. The forehead and nose are carved in a geometrical manner, almost resembling a ‘T’ – not unlike the characteristic faces of contemporary human sculptures (Dietrich et al. in press). With a height of 42 cm it seems too large to be worn, it could have been intended to be fixed on a wall or another kind of support. The second mask is miniature (5.7 cm high), also made from limestone (Fig. 3b; Dietrich et al. 2018: 8, Fig. 5), and was, as already mentioned, found in the upper layers of the filling of Enclosure D in 2001. It has a concave backside; the features of the face are depicted minimalistic similar to the large mask. The third



Fig. 3 Limestone mask depictions from Göbekli Tepe. (Photos: K. Schmidt, drawing Ç. Köksal-Schmidt, © DAI)



Fig. 4 Limestone mask depictions from Göbekli Tepe. (Photos: N. Becker, © DAI).

mask, another miniature (4.7 cm high) was made from a flint cortex (Fig. 4a; Dietrich *et al.* 2018: 8, Fig. 6). It shows curved chevrons engraved into its forehead and was found in 2010, rather high in the stratigraphy, during excavations in Enclosure H, next to (central) Pillar 51. Finally, the fourth miniature mask depiction (4.5 cm high) is again made from a flint cortex (Fig. 4b; Dietrich *et al.* 2018: 8, Fig. 7). Its form follows the reduced depiction of the face of the first two examples, with more pronounced eyes. It was found in 2008 next to the eastern central pillar of Enclosure C.

Discussion

The group of now five mask depictions leaves room for a wide range of interpretations. Are we dealing with personal, transportable mnemonic devices with a connection to possible ritual performances at the site? Are they insignia of participation in certain rites, of initiation? Other than different anthropomorphic representations, for example stone heads, which were regularly deposited deep in the filling next to the pillars (Dietrich *et al.* in press), they do not seem to be linked to the initial biographies of the monumental enclosures, but rather to the final stages of use and their final backfilling. Garfinkel (2017: 147-148) has proposed three principal uses of masks, based on a review of ethnographic literature: performance masks (often used

in dances: Garfinkel 1998, 2014, 2018), funerary masks, and protective masks. The last category comprises miniatures, not supposed to be seen by other people than the owner except for special ritual occasions and meant to ward off evil. Garfinkel places the miniature mask from Nevalı Çori in this category, and it is certainly tempting to interpret the miniature masks (not so much the larger than life mask discovered in 1995) from Göbekli Tepe along the same lines.

Coming back to the clay/stone dichotomy mentioned at the beginning of this short contribution, one² figurative clay item from Göbekli Tepe does not negate the observation that such objects are generally absent from the site. No such representations were found in the lower layers of the enclosures so far, which could be linked to the buildings' use life or the first stages in their abandonment. But the find raises the question to what degree the presence of clay depictions may be obscured by bad preservation of unburnt or only slightly burned/sundried clay objects. The sediments at Göbekli Tepe are very rich in limestone rubble and flint debitage, which may have had a negative impact on the 'survival rate' of such items. Although a massive presence of clay objects cannot be proven, such objects could have been in use in smaller numbers in the rectangular build-

ings surrounding the enclosures, in some cases ending up in the last strata of sediment in the lower lying monumental buildings due to erosion processes. To prove or falsify this hypothesis is a task for future research.

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Endnotes

¹ Parker-Pearson and Ramilisonina (1998) have argued for a similar dichotomy of perishable wood for the living and stone for the ancestors regarding Stonehenge and contemporary timber monuments drawing on analogies from Madagascar.

² It should be mentioned here that another figurative clay item, fragmentary but resembling an aviform Nemrik scepter in shape (Dietrich *et al.* 2017: 121, fig. 5.24 for the stone counterparts) exists from Göbekli Tepe. It was however discovered in a disturbed rubble layer within Enclosure C and cannot be associated with the use life of the building. As this layer has also produced wheel-thrown pottery, the dating of this item remains unclear and will have to await a complete evaluation of the site's Nemrik scepters.

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