

Chapter 10. 1

NEOLITHIC SYMBOLISM AT 'AIN GHAZAL

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Abstract: *The excavations at 'Ain Ghazal produced a collection of eight types of symbols including tokens, animal and human figurines, statuettes, statues, modeled skulls, standing stones, and paintings. The rich assemblage is significant in three major ways: 1. It sheds light on Neolithic communication; 2. The evolution of symbolism can be studied in relation to the site extensive stratigraphy; 3. It brings attention to the dominance of anthropomorphic symbolism.*

Key Words: *symbolism, communication, Neolithic, Near East, anthropocentric*

The words, signals, gestures exchanged in the past have forever vanished. Material symbols are all that is left of bygone communications. This chapter is a synopsis of the material symbols of 'Ain Ghazal discussed in detail in the volume. It briefly describes their types, number, preservation, materials, art forms, and shapes and then presents three major contributions of the assemblage to the study of symbolism: 1. The significance of material symbolic communication; 2. The development of symbolism in the light of the 2000-year stratigraphy; 3. The predominance of anthropomorphic symbolism.

1. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSEMBLAGE

1.1 Material Symbols and Their Numbers

The assemblage of material symbols excavated at 'Ain Ghazal is unusually large and diverse, counting as many as eight categories of artifacts. The list includes 137 tokens of six different types; 151 animal figurines of six species; 49 human figurines including thirteen conical, five females, and six genderless; one stone statuette; three painted and six modeled human skulls; fifteen plaster statues; twelve busts and three two-headed busts; six standing stones; and multiple colored walls and floors including seven painted compositions.

1.2 Preservation

The material symbols of 'Ain Ghazal constitute an outstanding study collection because the artifacts are generally well preserved or professionally restored. The tokens, as well as many of the animal clay figurines, are in relatively good condition except for the horns and antlers of the latter, which are most often separated. Busts broken below the shoulders and decapitated human clay figurines partly complement one another. The painted compositions were photographed or traced when they were freshly unearthed and remnants of white and red pigments are still visible *in situ* on exposed house floors and walls. Among the best-preserved plastered skulls, No. 88-1 has been reconstituted at the Institute of Archeology of Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan, and so were the three modeled faces at the Conservation-Analytical Laboratory of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Finally, thirteen statues and twelve busts of the first cache and the two statues and three double-headed busts of the second cache were restored respectively at the Institute of Archaeology, the University of London and the Conservation-Analytical Laboratory of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C .

1.3 Materials and Manufacture

The symbols were made in four materials: clay, plaster, mineral pigments, and stone. Ivory was seemingly fully ignored and so was bone, except for a few fragments bearing parallel incised lines. The quantities of clay necessary for making tokens and figurines were minimal and the preparation of the paste amounted to an insignificant investment of time and labor. The production of plaster, on the other hand, involved the lengthy combustion of limestone pebbles at high temperatures at a great cost to the local wood supply. Once ready, the paste was modeled into human forms over a reed core. Red colored wash was applied extensively inside the homes, which meant a substantial effort for grinding ochre. Finally, the single small statuette and six standing stones highlight the scarcity of stone use.

1.4 Art Forms and Artisans

Three art forms were involved in the creation of material symbols: modeling, sculpture and painting. The individuals who modeled clay into animal figurines showed a real talent for capturing the characteristic features of the depicted species. They could also impart sensuous shapes to the minuscule female representations. Those who worked with plaster vividly recreated the features of defleshed human skulls or bestowed stunning features to the anthropomorphic statues and busts. Stone was carefully carved in the round into a statuette or roughly hewn into standing stones but, apparently, there was no interest in relief carving, which is entirely absent. The sculptor of the stone statuette who translated the female form into an interplay of circles and triangles, was a master in composition. Nothing of the kind can be said of the painters, who simply smeared a coat of red or white color or traced simplistic linear or curvilinear motifs on the interior walls and floors of houses.

1.5 Forms of Symbols

It is quite remarkable that the material symbols of 'Ain Ghazal were limited to only three forms: geometric, animal, and human. In other words, they excluded shapes drawn from the vegetal and celestial worlds or featuring artifacts, such as tools, weapons, etc.

Geometric forms were used in two media only: clay modeling and painting. The collection of clay tokens which included cones, spheres, discs, ovoids, cylinders and a crescent, as noted by Cyril Smith (1985: 586), was revolutionary by systematically exploiting the basic geometric shapes. The lines and the small or large blobs painted on the floors or interior walls of houses were also based on geometry, although less strictly.

Hunting and animal husbandry played a big role at 'Ain Ghazal, as shown by the large number of bones excavated at the site, which included the remains of some fifty wild species as well as numerous domesticated goats. One would expect, therefore, that animals occupied a prominent place in the Neolithic consciousness and were a primary source of inspiration for symbolism. But in fact, beasts were only reproduced in figurines, which means in miniature size and in the humblest of materials. Moreover the reproductions show very little imagination, presenting all the animals in the same position: standing on four stumpy legs. Goats and rams were among the domesticated species represented, but wild animals, such as gazelles, boars and most especially bulls, were the most popular.

The human shape was by far the most celebrated symbol at 'Ain Ghazal. It was treated in multiple forms as figurines, statuettes, statues, busts and modeled skulls. In other words, except for painting, anthropomorphic symbols were executed in all art forms practiced at the site. Except for pigments, symbols in human shape were reproduced in all the (non-perishable) materials used at the site such as clay, plaster and stone. Anthropomorphic symbols were not only the most popular, but also the most varied. The conical figurines are among the smallest excavated objects and the plaster statues are the largest. Some representations were

limited to facial features, others extended to busts, and still others were full figures. The human body was shown in different positions such as standing, sitting, lying down, or crouching. It assumed multiple styles: the highly stylized faceless and armless conical figurines; the naturalistic rendering of female figurines and statues; the realistic portraiture of the modeled skulls; the sophisticated curvilinear composition of the statuette; and, finally, the Yarmoukian caricatures.

In the end, the collection of material symbols of 'Ain Ghazal exhibits a narrow selection of (non-perishable) materials, art-forms and shapes. Among the latter, the human figure stands out as being used most frequently and imaginatively. These characteristics are not generally found in other Neolithic symbolic assemblages making 'Ain Ghazal quite unique. For example, the symbols of the slightly earlier Turkish site of Gobekli Tepe are mostly representing animals and geometric motifs which are carved in low relief on monumental stone monuments (Schmidt 2011: 41-83).

2. INTERPRETATION

The 'Ain Ghazal assemblage offers three major advantages for the study of Neolithic symbolism. First, because it is richer and more diverse than most contemporaneous Levantine sites, the collection best exemplifies communication in a Neolithic community. Second, the long and well-documented occupation of the site offers a 2000-year socio-economic background to follow the development of material symbols. Third, the assemblage brings into focus the prevalence of anthropomorphic symbolism and its importance.

2.1 Neolithic Communications

We wish we could eaves drop on the messages the material symbols conveyed in antiquity, but alas, their meaning disappeared with the 'Ain Ghazal communities that created them. In the Near East, however, as explained in the preface, archaeologists may find valuable clues to understand the significance of the Neolithic geometric, animal and anthropomorphic symbols in pertinent Bronze Age cuneiform texts or in art. Of course no one claims total identity between prehistoric and historic behavior but only a shared tradition. In this sense, the texts and iconography are legitimate sources because it is the scholarly consensus that the Near Eastern symbolism had its roots deep in prehistory and evolved slowly over the centuries (Mithen 2004: 17-43).

In the first place, as described in Chapter 2.3, the pictographic writing of Mesopotamia makes it clear that tokens served to communicate economic transactions. For instance, the cones, spheres, and disks stood respectively for specific measures of barley, and the ovoids and cylinders represented jars of oil and small cattle. The tokens show, therefore, how individuals exchanged economic information by using geometric shaped counters (Schmandt-Besserat 1996).

As shown in Chapters 3.1 and 4.1, based on parallels in the cuneiform magical texts, the animal and female clay figurines can be viewed as props used in magical rituals. For example the human figurines could represent the beloved whose favors were sought after through magic. In such a case, the objects were meant for witches and warlocks to interact with powerful spirits. Moreover, as discussed in Chapters 6.2 and 9.1, and also on the basis of analogies with magical and necromantic incantations, red and white colors signaled evil spirits, warning to keep away from households, and necromancers used modeled human skulls to conjure the dead to reveal the future.

Finally, as argued in Chapter 7.3, Near Eastern iconography provides good evidence for particular anthropomorphic statues, such as those presenting their breasts, the two-headed busts and the statuettes of pregnant women to represent gods and goddesses. In other words, people saw the sculptures as the manifestations of deities with whom they could interact and to whom they could address their prayers.

The majority of the 'Ain Ghazal material symbolism reveals the eagerness of a Neolithic community to communicate with a supernatural world filled with benefic or malefic spirits, ghosts and, above all, a pantheon of gods conceived in human forms. The tokens in contrast served everyday life economic transactions.

2.2 The Evolution of Symbols

The 2000-year uninterrupted stratigraphy of 'Ain Ghazal makes it possible to relate the evolution of material symbols to the major socio-economic milestones of the site. Namely, the foundation of the settlement ca. 8500 BC; the village period characterized by a small population of some 600-700 residents in the MPPNB, ca. 8500-7500 BC; the "town" period, when the arrival of new settlers rapidly multiplied the number of inhabitants to about 2500 in the LPPNB, ca. 7500-6900 BC; the period of population decline, when parts of the site were deserted in the PPNC ca. 6900-6400 BC; and finally, the abandonment of the site in the Yarmoukian period ca. 6000 BC. It should be well understood that each period was not excavated to the same extent, which precludes numerical comparisons between the assemblages.

Material symbols appeared with the foundation of the site. This suggests that the first settlers, who built their homes on the banks of the river Zarka, came with a tradition of conveying meaning by way of geometric, animal or human forms as well as colors.

The MPPNB period generated the greatest diversity of symbolic expression. People dealt with tokens, colored the interior of their houses in white or red and modeled clay and plaster into animal or human shapes. The climax of symbolic production coincided, therefore, with the first phase of occupation, when 'Ain Ghazal was a small village of tightly built single-family stone houses. It also corresponds to the period when the pristine ecological niche of the village allowed people to successfully practice a mixed economy based on agriculture, goat husbandry and hunting.

During the LPPNB period, red and white painting continued, as well as the modeling of clay tokens and figurines. On the other hand, plaster statues and busts, and modeled skulls, were abandoned either in the last days of the MPPNB or the early part of the LPPNB period. These changes concurred with the massive arrival of new settlers, who built large double-storied houses across the Zarka River, turning the village into a small town. The new community also introduced public stone architecture--"temples"--where prominently displayed standing stones suggest new cultic practices. Lastly, the decrease in symbolic expression coincided with severe environmental stress caused by over-grazing.

The PPNC period produced small collections of tokens and human and animal figurines, including two fine specimens of a bull and a ram (Cat. Nos. 133 and 146). Floors continued to be painted in white, while red color became rare. The most elaborate piece of art at 'Ain Ghazal, the stone statuette of a pregnant female, also belonged to the PPNC period. This symbol of fertility was carved, therefore, at a time when the ravaged environment led farmers to turn to nomadic pastoralism. The small flimsy shrine where the stone statuette was displayed confirms that the impoverished community no longer invested in stone cultic architecture, but merely used perishable material or reused existing structures.

A lone sphere in the Yarmoukian Period shows that people used tokens until the final period of occupation of 'Ain Ghazal. Well-shaped bovid horns or gazelle antlers (Cat. Nos. 136 and 137) attest that animal figurines also continued to be made in the same style and size as previously. On the other hand, the introduction of pottery transformed the anthropomorphic figurines. The Yarmoukian female figures, made of pottery paste, were produced in series in an enigmatic caricature style. Finally, the houses, which preceded the abandonment of the site, were no longer plastered or painted.

In sum, the 'Ain Ghazal stratigraphy documents that most of the material symbolism remained stable throughout the socio-economic and environmental upheavals experienced at the site. Tokens and animal

figurines carried on through the good and bad days with no visible change. In particular, the bull and other wild species continued to be preferred long after pastoralism had replaced hunting. The plastering and painting of the interior architecture persisted well into the breakdown of the economy in the PPNC, with the white color vanishing last.

Surprisingly, however, it was not the same for the anthropomorphic symbols which, on the contrary, took on new shapes in each period. For instance, the large statues and busts, as well as the modeled skulls, which were characteristic of the dynamic MPPNB period, vanished with the first socio-economic stresses, the LPPNB turned to schematic standing stones, and the troubled PPNC period depicted the human form as a pregnant female. Lastly, the human clay figurines took outlandish features in the disastrous Yarmoukian period.

It is noteworthy that the continuity or the changes of each of the three forms of symbols used at 'Ain Ghazal corroborates the interpretations proposed above. For instance, the tokens as an established system of communication could not have changed without creating confusion. Indeed, the token shapes remained the same from the beginning of the system to its very end 4500 years later, at which time they were perpetuated in the pictographs of the Mesopotamian script. As for the animal figurines and the red and white colors, they also never changed because they depended on the fixed formulae of magic rituals. On the other hand, the concept of deities represented in statues and statuettes evolved constantly. In times of plenty, gods were conceived as benevolent beings, with large eyes attentive to human prayers. In times of scarcity, a pregnant female was deemed more propitious to restore prosperity. Finally, in times of starvation the deities appeared malevolent.

The 'Ain Ghazal assemblage exemplifies that each type of symbol developed independently. The geometric and animal symbolism never evolved because they were tied by tradition. Instead, the anthropomorphic symbols were in constant flux because they reflected the changing fate of the community.

2.3 Anthropomorphic Symbolism at 'Ain Ghazal

Can one dare explain the possible reasons why geometric shapes were chosen to represent goods, why animal symbols were preferred for magic and why the human shape was reserved to embody mighty gods?

To begin with, since the shapes of tokens conveyed important economic information, it is unlikely that their form was chosen randomly or for esthetic value alone. Rather, it is logical to assume that geometric shapes proved advantageous because, first, they were striking and therefore easy to recognize and remember; second, they were specific and therefore easy to identify and; third, they were simple and therefore easy to copy and duplicate. The choice of geometric shapes for the communication of transactions of material goods appears to be dictated by functionality.

The lines and the small or large blobs painted on the floors or interior walls of houses may also be viewed as functional. These shapes were among the simplest possible designs, and therefore were the most efficient way of obtaining the desired benefit of color--be it brightness or protection--with the least effort, skill and imagination.

As for the use of animal shapes in magic, there is little doubt that, from times immemorial, the gazelle was famed for its swiftness, the boar for its ferocity, and the bull for its formidable force. Can one then speculate that the representations of gazelles, boars and bulls were meant to harness the extraordinary abilities of these animals to manipulate the supernatural world?

On their side, the human shape lent familiarity to the unknown. For instance, restoring the features of a human skull brought back the familiar appearance of the departed, making him or her accessible for dialog. Similarly, icons with human features allowed people to speak to a deity in the same way they addressed people, knowing the appropriate words to pronounce in the right tone of voice, the proper attitude and posture to assume, the correct gestures to make.

Symbols, therefore, were given their shapes for particular reasons. The rigor of geometry suited the precision necessary for economic communications. Animals, which always captivate humans by their unwieldy character, were sought after to borrow their extraordinary powers. Lastly, anthropomorphic symbolism was most frequently and imaginatively treated because people are fundamentally social and their lives revolve around human interaction. The evolution of anthropomorphic symbolism was singular because, unlike the other symbolic forms, it was attuned to human moods.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the diversity of the material symbols recovered at 'Ain Ghazal allows foraying into multiple facets of the culture otherwise inaccessible. The animal and human clay figurines and colors take us into the world of magic; the modeled human skulls to the realm of the dead and the statuettes and statues introduce us to religion. All together, the symbols unveil a society anxious to communicate with a supernatural world populated with benefic as well as malefic spirits, to connect with ghosts to lurk into the future, and to interact with forces of nature in the pursuit of the eternal human quests of health, love and riches.

There can be no doubt that the 'Ain Ghazal community was shaped by its symbolism and that it had a lasting impact on the ancient Near Eastern society (Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris 2011: 89-99). Among the most prominent examples, the geometric symbolism of tokens provided an efficient and stable means to communicate economic transactions that was the foundation of administration. The anthropomorphic representations of deities led to the belief that gods like humans needed food, drink, shelter, and social interaction. This notion, which became central in the religion of the ancient Near East (Ornan 2009: 93-152), prompted the collection of offerings to satisfy the deities' hunger and thirst; incited architecture to build shrines and poets to compose hymns of praise that grace the first oral literacy. Whereas geometric tokens disappeared with the advent of writing and the power of figurines and colors dwindled as magic became an aberration in the Western World, the anthropomorphic symbols of deities still prevail in our day and age.

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