THE "GILAT WOMAN"

Female Iconography, Chalcolithic Cult, and the End of Southern Levantine Prehistory

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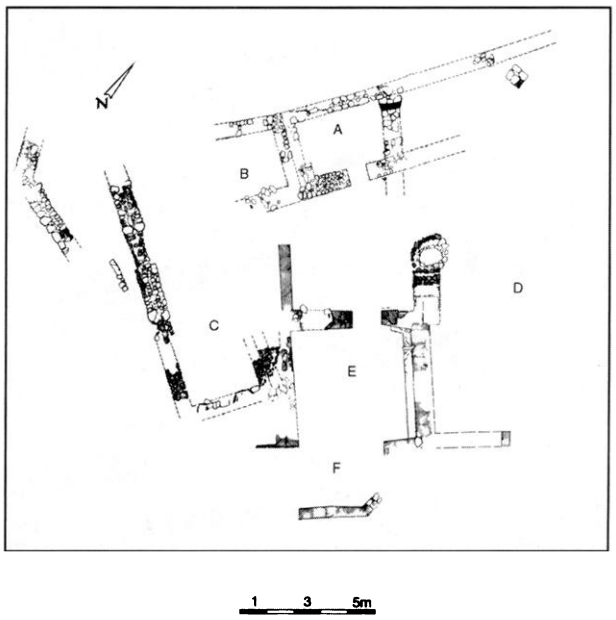
The relationship of women to changes in social power, production, and organization is a topic that has begun to engage archaeologists. Iconographic evidence in particular has been used to explore the roles and status of women in late prehistoric and early historic Western Asia (e.g., Gopher and Orelle 1996; Pollock 1991; Wright 1996). The renewed interest in figurines mirrors the larger issue of incorporating symbolism into archaeological analyses, with particular emphasis on issues of gender and the individual (Bailey 1994; Hamilton et al. 1996; Knapp and Meskell 1997; Robb 1998; cf. Talaly 1993).

The "Gilat Woman," one of the few examples of representative art from the fourth millennium Levant, has a notable place in such discussions (Alon 1976; 1977; Alon and Levy 1989; 1990; Amiran 1989; Fox 1995; Weippert 1998). Her significance in the context of local and pan-Near Eastern cult practices and competing notions of female "fertility" is the subject of this article. Unlike other interpreters, we believe that the markings on the figurine's body and her overall characteristics and provenance do not identify her as a "goddess" but rather with human concerns such as ceremonial life passages and/or highly specific aspects of "fertility." Close study of the figurine and its comparative contexts also demonstrates the multiple levels of cult that characterized late prehistoric village societies and the fusion of religious and political strategies by controlling male elites. The nature of these power strategies, based fundamentally in shamanistic access to the supernatural and political economic control of related symbols and materials, are key for understanding the evolutionary limitations of the southern Levant compared to other regions. Finally, the Gilat Woman is a symbol of the transitional nature of the southern Levantine Chalcolithic period, at the end of a long stream of tradition that began in the Paleolithic.

The Gilat Woman in Context

Gilat is a ten-hectare site located to the northwest of the Beersheva basin on the banks of the Nahal Patish in a transitional zone

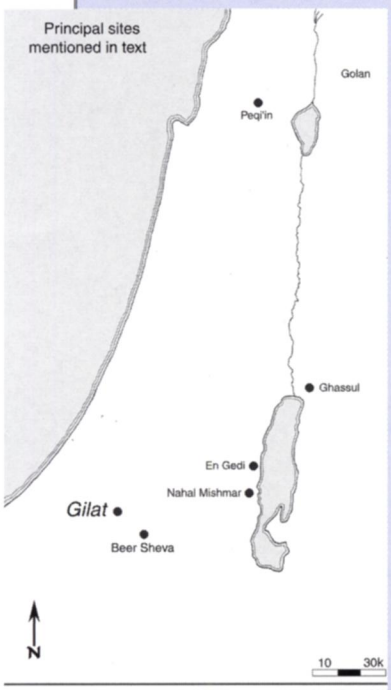


The find spot of the Gilat Woman. The figure was recovered from Room A in Stratum III. ***From Alon and Levy (1989: fig. 2).***

that grades into the southern Coastal Plain. First discovered in the 1950s, excavations were undertaken in the 1970s and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Four strata, divided into a number of subphases, were found. The Gilat Woman was found in stratum III, in a room approximately 3 m × 4.5 m large. This unit, Room A, was located in the middle of a long structure flanked by two other rooms and formed a complex some 16 m long. Another structure was oriented at a right angle to it, creating an open courtyard. The Gilat Woman was found with a similarly styled figurine of a ram carrying three cornets. Some 68 additional objects were found in Room

The Gilat Woman, a complex representation of a suite of human concerns. Multiple layers of meaning yield insights into the nature of the socio-political and religious character of late prehistoric village society in the southern Levant. *From Israeli and Tadmor (1986: fig.16).*

The World of the Chalcolithic



The location of Gilat and other key Chalcolithic sites in the southern Levant.

The Chalcolithic period in the southern Levant is characterized as a period of village-level agro-pastoralism, craft production, which saw the emergence of ranked society and possibly "chiefs" (Levy and Holl 1988; Gilead 1988). Material culture evidence indicates that the "classic" features of the Chalcolithic period developed out of local late Pottery Neolithic cultures, especially the southern Qatifian tradition, which then supplants other traditions, such as the Wadi Raba culture (Gilead 1990; Gopher and Gophna 1993). Radiocarbon evidence suggests that the classic Beersheva-Ghassul tradition or "Developed Chalcolithic" emerged by 4500 BCE and survived until ca. 3700 BCE (Joffe and Dessel 1995; see also Gilead 1994; Levy 1992). A number of regional traditions are apparent, sharing certain aspects of material culture and iconography but utilizing a different mixture of agro-pastoral strategies. The most highly developed and best-known tradition is found in an arc from the edge of the southern Coastal Plain, across the Beersheva basin and out to the site of Ghassul on the northeast margin of the Dead Sea.

The villages of the Beersheva basin, including well-known sites such as Bir es-Safadi, Tell Abu Matar, and Shiqmim, are located along the banks of the Nahal Beersheva drainage and utilized floodwater farming. They also contain extensive evidence for specialized craft production of copper and ivory objects (Levy and Shalev 1989; Perrot 1984). Other important developed Chalcolithic sites include the type site of Ghassul (Mallon *et al.* 1934), the isolated structure at En Gedi (Ussishkin 1980), burial caves in the Coastal Plain (Perrot and Ladiray 1980; van den Brink 1998), and the spectacular cache of copper objects in the Nahal Mishmar cave (Bar-Adon 1980).

The decline of the Developed Chalcolithic began by 3900/3800 BCE and was characterized by the gradual abandonment of many sites. The Terminal Chalcolithic phase, ca. 3700–3500 BCE, saw the almost complete collapse of the settlement system of the northern Negev, although there is greater continuity in other regions such as the Jordan Valley. The beginning of the subsequent Early Bronze I period may now be dated to, or even before, 3500 BCE (Joffe and Dessel 1995). The Early Bronze Age is characterized by the re-emergence of very large village and fortified "urban" settlement, a Egyptian "colonial" system in the southern Coastal Plain, and high levels of Mediterranean crop production and exchange (Joffe 1993).

The famous figurine of a ram bearing three cornets was found in association with the Gilat Woman. *From Israeli and Tadmor (1966: fig.17).*

A, including several stone "violin" figurines, palettes, incense burners and a macehead (Levy and Alon 1993).

The Gilat Woman is a 31 cm tall, hollow terracotta figurine (Alon 1976; Alon and Levy 1989:90). The nude, barrel-shaped woman sits atop a biconical stool. Her right arm is raised and helps balance a twin handled churn with broken neck on her head. Her left arm holds a small biconical vessel, possibly an incense altar, against her upper body, and the left hand rests on her body above the leg. There is no true division in clay or paint between the right hand and the churn, the left hand and the body, or the head and the churn. Her hands and feet are schematized with incised lines representing the fingers and toes. She has small, slightly protruding breasts, a large navel and exaggerated and enlarged lower genitalia, enhanced by her sitting positions. Pubic hair is indicated by small incisions. The only plastic features of her face are the nose and small ears. The mouth is not represented. Circles of red paint represent her eyes and there is also a circle around the nose. Two vertical lines descend from her eyes to below the level of her breasts, and two sets of vertical wavy lines are in front of her ears like sideburns. The legs, arms and torso of the figure are covered with horizontal bands of the

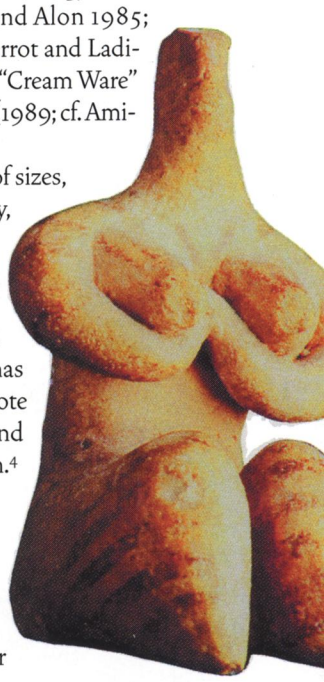
This "violin figurine" is one of sixty-eight objects found in Room A with the Gilat woman. *From Levy and Alon (1993: 515).*

paint in groups of two and three lines. The bands are vertical at the ankle but become wavy lines at the wrists. The churn and biconical stool were covered with red paint as well. Some fragments of the woman and of the ram were also found in a neighboring room of the building (Alon 1976:77; Alon and Levy 1989:90).

Fox recently suggested that the Gilat figurine was a goddess whose decoration represents body painting, and that she and the accompanying ram figurine were part of a fertility cult "centered around milk and/or water, in which birth, death and rebirth were perceived as cyclical, ensuring the revival of the dead" (1995: 225).[1] Weippert, following a suggestion by Kempinski, cites Anatolian parallels and proposes that the figurine represents the "Mother Goddess/Great Mother" (Weippert 1998). While the figurine's connection with "fertility' is inescapable, its iconographic and technological features and the context in which it was found make it an improbable candidate for a "goddess." A fuller analysis of the body treatment and modifications depicted on the figurine suggests other possibilities.

LEFT: The cultic significance of the head in the Chalcolithic plastic arts is indicated by a number of finds including this ceramic ossuary. *From Israel and Tadmor (1986: fig. 20).*

BELOW: Evidence from Mesopotamia suggests that tatooing was practiced there. This figurine dates to the Halaf period and comes from the site of the same name. *From Huot (1994: cover).*



Deformation and Body Marking on the Gilat Woman

The Gilat Woman's body marking and treatment must first be placed into larger contexts. Body modification has an extraordinarily long history throughout Western Asia. In the Gilat Woman, the figurine's head flows into the churn. While there is a painted line suggesting a ring on which the vessel sits, there is no formal separation of the two elements, either iconographically or practically. The cultic significance of the head is manifest in other Chalcolithic plastic arts, such as the ivory statuary and smaller finds from Bir es-Safadi, standard number 21 from the hoard found at Nahal Mishmar, a small basalt head and ivory figurine from Shiqmim, basalt pillar figures from northern sites in the Golan, the Hula Basin, and in northern Jordan, as well as the frontons of ceramic ossuaries found along the coastal plain and the extraordinary site of Peqiʿin (Amiran and Tadmor 1980; Epstein 1988; Gal *et al.* 1997; Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology 1988; Levy and Alon 1985; Levy and Golden 1996; Perrot 1959; 1969; Perrot and Ladiray 1980; Tadmor 1985).[2] Beck also notes that "Cream Ware" vessels often have depictions of humans faces (1989; cf. Amiran 1955).[3]

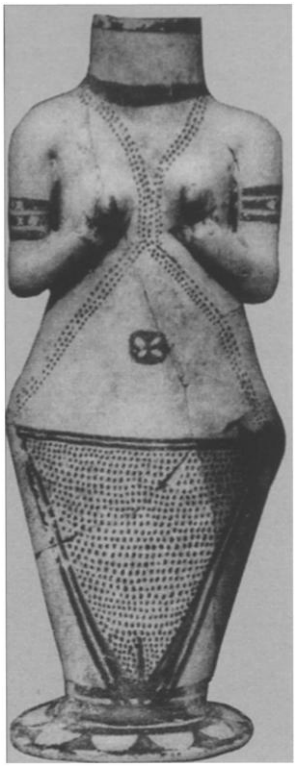
Chalcolithic churns are found in a number of sizes, including very small votives, and significantly, the churn is one of the few ceramic forms that continues, albeit briefly, into the EB I period (Amiran 1985a; 1985b; Commenge-Pellerin 1990: fig. 36.25; Mallon et al. 1934: fig. 59.4, pl. 50 A, B, 102; Tadmor 1990). This object thus has both utilitarian and religious connotations. Note that the zoomorphic vessel with cornets found with the Gilat Woman also has a ritual function.[4]

The Body

In addition to the distinctive schematized or deformed head, the Gilat Woman is marked with red horizontal stripes. Body markings have not been discussed much, nor have their

The Head of the Gilat Woman

If the depiction of the head of the Gilat Woman is not simply schematic, but is meant to represent a deformed skull, then an interesting continuity from the Neolithic period may be suggested. A fascination with crania was central to Neolithic cult, and is well-documented by the numerous cases of skull removal, painting, plastering and other treatment, and caching in domestic and specialized architecture (e.g., Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989; Bienert 1991; Butler 1989; Molleson et al. 1992; Özbek 1988). This practice is widely distributed from the southern Levant through eastern Anatolia, and has connections to concepts of ancestor veneration and worship, as well as property, ownership and residence. Artificial skull deformation has also been documented in the cranial remains from a number of Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites. These include Ganj Dareh, Bouqras, Byblos, Kalavassos and Arpachiyah in Iran, Syria, Cyprus and Iraq, respectively (Anton 1989; Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988; Meiklejohn et al. 1992; Molleson and Campbell 1995; Özbek 1975). This latter practice is significant in that the binding of the skull had to be begun shortly after birth. It indicates that the concepts being signaled by the deformed skull, whether identity, role or status, were ascribed to the child and not achieved. Deformed skulls may be depicted on figurines from the southern Levant such as Pottery Neolithic figurines of the Shaar haGolan type (see now Gopher and Orelle 1996). "Violin shaped figurines" with schematized features including possibly deformed heads, some of which were found at Gilat, should also be noted as possibly representing deformed skulls (Alon 1976: fig. 1; Alon and Levy 1989: 185–90, fig. 7, tables 4–6; Stekelis 1972: pl. 49; Yadin 1976: 121). Comparable artifacts from Mesopotamia, which may indicate similar traditions, are various Samarran and Ubaid period figurines, as well as the enigmatic "Eye Idols" of Tell Brak (e.g., Huot 1994: 176; Weiss 1985: figs. 41–43). Thus, while the shape of the Gilat Woman's head is possibly the result of artistic convention, it might alternately represent the continuity of cultic traditions from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic. This possibility suggests more earthly origins for the Gilat Woman.



FAR LEFT: Figurine from Yarim Tepe II dating to the Halaf. After Yoffe and Clark (1993: fig. 8.13).

Ubaid period figurine from Ur with surface treatment suggestive of scarification. *After Amiet (1980: fig. 193).*

representations in Near Eastern art been analyzed extensively. In the original publication of the objects, Alon suggested that the decoration depicted tattooing. Fox also usefully suggests that the body of the Gilat Woman may be painted (1995). She and Weippert (1998) cite parallels from the ʿAin Ghazal statuary and from Neolithic Anatolia, notably "face-pots" or "effigy vases" from Hacılar and wall paintings from Çatal Höyük (David *et al.* 1988; Rollefson 1983; 1986; Schmandt-Besserat 1998; see also Amiran 1962; Margalit 1983).

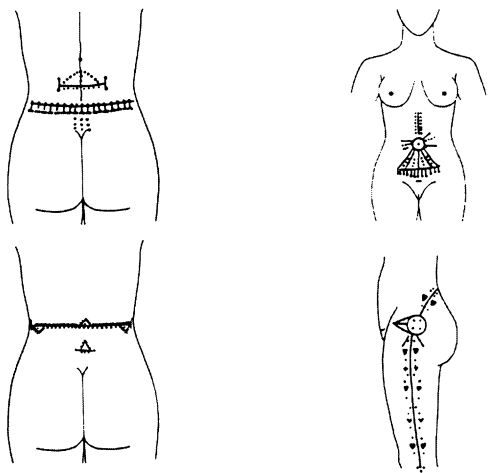
Other examples of figurines may reflect tattooing. Halaf period female figurines from Tell Halaf have horizontal stripes on the legs and chest that may be body painting or tattooing, as does the exceptional example from Yarim Tepe II (von Oppenheim 1943: fig. 551, 12; Yoffee and Clark 1993: figs. 8.13:1–33). Numerous Ubaid period male and female figurines depict body modification, including horizontal stripes (as in an example from Tello [Parrot 1960: fig. 66]), stripes and dots on the torso and shoulders (as in an example from Ur [Woolley 1955: pl. 20]), and possible circular scars (as on examples from Ur and Oueili [Huot 1983: pl. A, 5; Parrot 1960:

The Role and Significance of Body Markings: Ethnographic Evidence

Ethnographic literature gives some indication of the varied styles and meanings of body marking. Much of the relevant information on the early modern Middle East was collected by the underappreciated physical anthropologist and ethnographer Henry Field in the first half of this century (Field 1958; see also Hambly 1925; Rubin 1988). Tattooing and body painting in the early twentieth century served a wide varied of functions in Bedouin, Arab, Yezidi, Solubba, Jewish, and other communities from Egypt to Iran. Among the most common reasons for tattooing were ornamentation, while therapeutic tattooing for medical purposes such as relief from pain, was also widespread. Tattooing was also a magical practice, for example to combat spells, to ward off the Evil Eye, or to strengthen an extremity, joint, limb or muscle. Other reasons were to increase sexual attraction and as tribal markings. More complex totemic identifications are also attested, such as those of Arabs in the Hilla Liwa, including the veneration of particular animals whose tattoos were borne by individuals (Field 1958: 31). The similarities between tattoo motifs and both camel brands and tribal *wasm* should also be mentioned (Field 1952).[1]

On females, tattooing was done primarily in puberty or later, in preparation for marriage, but limited tattooing was also done on infants and in childhood (Field 1958: 37). The locations and designs of tattoos are numerous and complex. Most frequent are patterns of dots and geometric designs, but stylized animals and other devices are also common. Among other places tattooing was done on the face, chest, abdomen, hands, legs and feet. Field reasonably suggests that most tattooers of women in southwest Asia were women, and that the role might be hereditary and regulated. The position was also held by groups of outsiders, such as gypsies and Jews. In the Levant it was apparently a practice for a hadji to be tattooed as an indication of his having made the pilgrimage. Interestingly, the practice was also found among Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land (Field 1958: 37, 52-53, 77; see also Grant 1907: 11).

To judge from Field, cicatrization and branding appear to have been less common in the early modern Middle East than tattooing. Henna, however, prepared from the leaf and seeds of the shrub *Lawsonia alba* and related subspecies, was and is extremely common through the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Its use as a cosmetic by women and men is well-known, as is its association with marriage. The practice of painting the hands and faces of women before marriage is attested in many Middle Eastern communities (Dobert 1985; Grant 1907: 57; Searight 1984). Whether other parts of the body were, or are, painted, is not discussed in the anthropological literature. None of the many examples presented by Field resembles the pattern found on the Gilat Woman with her horizontal lines of red paint.[2] Henna or some other form of painting seems more likely.



Ethnographic evidence of tatooing in the Near East has been documented by Field (1958). In these illustrations from his study of the tradition in Iraq, the locations of tatooing on the female body are indicated.

Notes

[1] A connection is also indicated by the similarity of the Arabic terms for tribal mark, *wasm*, and tattooing, *washm*.

[2] Several of Field's examples, however, strongly resemble patterns found on second millennium Syrian female figurines, especially of a band of incised dots encircling the waist. Sagona (1996) also notes the strong association in both the archaeological and ethnographic records of the color red with hunter-gatherers and village level societies, and the color blue with complex societies. She interprets this as a shift from conceptual or spiritual connections with the ubiquitous color of blood and the earth, to the rare blue of traded lapis lazuli and turquoise. In this context note the use of red ochre to color textiles from the Chalcolithic remarkable burial in the "Cave of the Warrior" (Schick 1998). Also of note are the pebbles painted with red cruciform designs from underground dwellings at Tell Abu Matar and Safadi (Perrot 1955: 167–71, figs. 17–19, pl. 21).

figs. 74–77]). Early and Middle Cypriot "red-polished-figurines" are elaborately decorated with zigzag lines, horizontal bands, chevrons and lozenges, as are the infants they sometimes hold (e.g., Karageorghis 1991: figs. 82–83). Second millennium Syrian female figurines with incised decoration on the chest and waist may also represent body markings (e.g., Woolley 1955: pls. 54–55).

Tattooing, body marking and scarification are customs typically associated with humans. No later mythological traditions from the Near East describe marks of these types on deities, nor are there any representations of figures that are clearly deities where such decorations are apparent. Therefore, we must conclude that the Gilat Woman represents a human female. It has also been noted that the Gilat Woman has only diminutive breasts, but a highly prominent vulva. This may indicate that the figure depicts an adolescent rather than an adult. The lack of large breasts contrasts sharply with other Chalcolithic figurines (e.g., Amiran and Tadmor 1980), and with prehistoric female figurines from the ancient Near East generally (e.g., Morales 1990).

The juxtaposition of small breasts and prominent genitalia are inconsistent with a reading of the artifact as a "fertility goddess," and at least puts the term "fertility" under scrutiny. A variety of interpretations of "fertility" are possible. One may speculate that the figurine represents a decorated adolescent female holding ritual vessels and sitting on a stand, possibly a birthing stool (Amiran 1986).[5] The emphasis on her sexual characteristics and the birthing stool may be related to fertility prior to marriage. Alternatively, the juxtaposition of small breasts and prominent navel and genitalia, the latter perhaps suggestive of a post-partum state, along with the other ritual items, may indicate an apotropaic concern with lactation.[6] These suggestions focus the amorphous idea of fertility on concrete concerns.

Other possibilities are that the figurine is connected with the practice of female circumcision (see Meinardus 1967; Paige and Paige 1981), or that the figurine depicts a woman in a post-menopausal state. This latter suggestion focuses on the idea of womens' societal roles at the end of their fertile years, when primarily domestic activities, such as biological reproduction, may yield to community activities, such as cultural reproduction through teaching and leadership. Finally, we may speculate that the figurine represents a decorated, mature female holding ritual vessels and sitting on a stand, possibly a birthing stool. This particular emphasis on only certain sexual attributes and the birthing stool may more appropriately relate to the activities associated with childbirth, such as midwifery.

The difficulty in arriving at a single persuasive interpretation of ancient symbolism is clear. And indeed, the recombinant nature of particular attributes suggests that the Gilat Woman may have symbolized different things to different people. But all of these suggestions refine the notion of "fertility," removing the figurine from the divine realm and resituating her in the material world.[7]

Chalcolithic ivory statuette, unknown provenience. The treatment of the breasts contrasts with that of the Gilat Woman. ***From Israeli and Tadmor (1986: fig. 14).***

Public and Domestic in Chalcolithic Cult

The crude execution, disproportionality, and decorative *horror vacui* of the Gilat Woman and its companion, the ram with cornets, contrast sharply with other Chalcolithic objects, including ceramics. This qualitative difference may indicate that the objects are not products of a specialized workshop, as in the case of ritual ivory and copper artifacts, but rather a lower production level. The unrefined artistic character—compared with other Chalcolithic art—and the distinct imagery of the Gilat Woman and ram may suggest that these objects were produced at the household level and were perhaps intended as elaborate and specific votive gifts. The Gilat Woman, representative of birthing or other fertility concerns, may reflect a range of domestic activities and community concerns.

Rather than the focal point of an entire cult, the Gilat Woman and the items found with her may have been gifts offered at the cult site. Similarly, the structure in which the cult was housed may be regarded not as a "temple," but rather as a shrine with specific associations. The Gilat Woman therefore provides access to much larger questions regarding the organization of Chalcolithic society, about which there is considerable disagreement, in particular, religious and social ideologies and their relationship with organs of authority (Gilead 1988; Levy and Holl 1988). Here we suggest that the concerns and manifestations of Chalcolithic cult varied according to the priorities of various groups from the household level (as represented at Gilat) to religio-political elites.

Contrasts

A review of the features connected with Chalcolithic cult practices elsewhere highlights contrasts with Gilat. For example, elite objects are frequently made from copper and ivory, a far cry from the simple terracotta of the Gilat woman. Elite objects also employ more complex iconography. For example, Fox has pointed out the importance of masks, especially those representing birds, in Neolithic and Chalcolithic rituals, such as those represented by wall paintings at Ghassul (see Cameron 1981: figs. 7, 8, 14). Painted stone masks have been found in PPNB contexts, such as in the Nahal Hemar cave, there in association with a detached skull treated with bitumen (Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988). The prehistoric significance of animal masks may be their fusion of specific imagery with the fact that they covered the ritually most important part of the body. During the Chalcolithic, masks were used in rituals undertaken primarily by elites.

The significance of vultures and other predatory birds in prehistoric belief systems throughout the Near East is particularly important for contextualizing elite aspects of southern Levantine Chalcolithic cult. The burial of predatory birds at Zawi Chemi Shanidar may date to the Zarzian Epipaleolithic phase, and carved stone bird heads have been found at Natufian Nahal Oren, PPNA Gilgal,

The En Gedi sanctuary is located on a cliff. This location contrasts sharply with the physical situation of the Gilat sanctuary. *Photograph by A. Joffe.*

Qermez Dere, Nemrik 9, while at PPNB Nevalı Çori, two carved limestone birds were found. The famous "vulture shrine" at Çatal Höyük is also clearly associated with mortuary practices (Hauptmann 1993; Kozlowski 1990: 155–61, figs. 64–68; Noy 1989; 1991; Mellaart 1967: figs. 45–49; Solecki 1977).

Levantine Chalcolithic examples include the birds on the famous Nahal Mishmar "crown" number 7, and "eagle standard," and the bird-shaped vessels from Palmachim (Bar-Adon 1980: 24–28; Gophna and Lifshitz 1980; Tadmor *et al*. 1995). A more improbable connection between the Nahal Mishmar symbolism and Egyptian nome heraldry has also been proposed (Gates 1992), but the importance of predatory birds in Egypt is too well-known to warrant review. The bird masks on the Ghassul wall paintings derive from this ancient cultic—and socio-political—tradition. The contrast with the wholly domestic imagery of the Gilat Woman and the objects that accompany her, is striking. Review of the architecture and finds associated with Chalcolithic cult sites further demonstrates spectra of public to private domains, and elite to domestic concerns and ideologies.

The excavators of Gilat, David Alon and Thomas Levy, regard the site as an interregional religious center whose elites received offerings from many parts of the southern Levant (Alon and Levy 1990). Recently, however, Goren's reanalysis of the petrographic evidence has shown that ceramics at Gilat originated primarily in the northern Negev, with only a limited quantity of material coming from the Judean Hills. In contrast, the temple excavated at the shrine site of En Gedi on the shore of the Dead Sea was shown to have ceramics originating in the Judean Hills, while some of the material from the hoard of artifacts found in the cave at nearby Nahal Mishmar originated in the northern Negev, Judean Hills, and Transjordan. Goren points out that these findings reverse the impression about the relative importance of sites gained from study of architecture alone (Goren 1995). These differences are important since En Gedi, like Gilat, is considered a type site for Chalcolithic religion and culture.

Further contrasts are found in the types of objects found at Gilat and En Gedi. At Gilat a wide variety of non-ceramic items were found, including violin shaped figurines, stone palettes, fenestrated stands, and numerous *massevot* or standing stones (Alon and Levy 1989: table 1, fig. 12). At En Gedi there were few non-ceramic finds beyond the base of an alabaster vessel, some beads (Ussishkin 1980: 19–21), and a ceramic bull bearing two churns, the closest parallel to the Gilat Woman's zoomorphic companion (Ussishkin 1980: fig. 11).[8] The Gilat ceramic assemblage has been described as having an exceptional variability of forms, which may suggest a variety of production contexts (Levy and Alon 1993: 516). The same cannot be said for the En Gedi assemblage.

Yet another contrast between Gilat and other Chalcolithic cult sites is found in the location of the structures. The En Gedi building sits on an isolated cliff above the Dead Sea oasis while the Gilat building is situated within a large settlement. The other Chalcolithic shrines of importance are the two Ghassul temples excavated in the 1970s. These were located in an apparently walled precinct approximately 100 m from the center of a settlement. Other temples at Ghassul excavated earlier in this century were located in the northwest of the site. The stratigraphic connection and continuity of these structures and the core of the settlement is unclear (see Bourke 1997; Bourke *et al*. 1995), however, the presence of multiple cult installations at Ghassul indicates extensive infrastructure and complexity of practices.

Who Did the Cult Structures Serve?

All these factors suggest that the various Chalcolithic cultic structures served different clientele and purposes. The En Gedi temple may have been the focal point for mobile groups traversing the Judean Hills, southern Jordan Valley, and Transjordan, and perhaps long distance pilgrimages. The Gilat structure primarily served a more immediate community of the site and the northern Negev, the region in which it was situated (Goren 1995: 297). Ghassul, the largest of all Chalcolithic sites, undoubtedly had more complex relations with local and adjacent populations than either En Gedi or Gilat.

Additional attributes of the various sites give some indication regarding their socio-political organization. The En Gedi temple probably served an organized cult, with a different set of cultic concerns than that of Gilat. These concerns included a more formal spatial relationship between "worshipers" and the various architectural installations, such as an enclosed courtyard, broadroom and an altar, which implies an emphasis on the burning and disposal of offerings, most likely presented in the tremendous number of vessels found in the main structure. The stone altar in the broadroom may have supported a cult statue, or even represented the deity, in the manner of a *massevah* or standing stone.

Gilat on the other hand has a large number of non-ceramic artifacts that could have originated in a variety of different production contexts. The stone palettes, for example, are not standardized, nor are the violin figurines (Alon and Levy 1989: tables 6, 7). This suggests that objects were indeed being brought and contributed to the cult site, but on an *ad hoc* basis. This eclectic collection of items at Gilat suggests a less organized cult, with less restricted spatial and organizational dynamics. The many small artifacts found at Gilat may be gifts to the cult, perhaps on the household level, as we have seen above.

Organization and Ideology

The nature of the offerings at the various cult sites indicates underlying practices and beliefs related to cult organization. That so many offerings at Gilat are non-perishables suggests a different relationships between cult and individual. Rather than offerings transformed into intangibility, like burnt sacrifices, the small items placed in the cult room have an obvious permanence. The lack of transformative practices may also suggest more direct participation or fewer intermediaries. In contrast, the many burnt offerings and ceramic vessels at En Gedi suggest more abstract associations or connotations. The transformations involved, along with the spatially restricted context, indicate more elaborate practices and formalized intermediaries.

Too little is known about the spatial and artifactual aspects of the various Ghassul temples to compare them with other Chalcolithic cult sites. More attention has been paid to the famous wall paintings (Cameron 1981). These combine highly abstract and stylized features with distinctly human ones, such as the juxtaposition of masked humans alongside the "star" mosaic, representing the deliberate interjection of the corporeal into the intangible. The presence of formal intermediaries at Ghassul is clear from the procession scene, indicating also a performance element to the rituals (see Turner 1974). At the same time, violin-shaped figurines were also found in the Tell 3 structures at Ghassul, suggesting the possibility of more direct access to cult facilities by non-specialists (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 83, fig. 34). These features suggest a careful blending of ideological features and practices designed to appear simultaneously accessible and elevated. Thus, Gilat represents an installation dedicated to a domestic cult accessible to all, and En Gedi a specialized installation with a "professional" elite. But the installations at Ghassul represent an entirely different adaptation, one in which the elite raises mystification and abstraction to new levels, and that also may at least in part coopt the domestic sphere and its iconographic vocabulary.

Additional examples of the different Chalcolithic cult practices could be cited, such as the placement of basalt pillar figurines in houses in the Golan, the exceptional finds related to mortuary activities from the Nahal Qanah cave (Gopher and Tsuk 1996), and the recent finds at Peqi'in. These observations point out the underlying variability in Chalcolithic cult. The sources of variability, however, are not to be found in regional variations in belief or practice, but rather in the different loci of cult within Chalcolithic communities.

The "Star" mosaic at Ghassul. The image is part of a ritual complex that contrasts strongly with both the situation at Gilat and Ein Gedi. *From Mallon et al. (1934: frontispiece).*

The various strategies in which religious iconography is employed at the different cult sites is related directly to the organizational level and political ideology of local elites. The iconographic vocabulary of the Chalcolithic was rich and generally shared across regions. But different symbols clustered at the various hierarchical levels of Chalcolithic society. The predatory bird symbolism found at Ghassul temples and on several Nahal Mishmar objects is centered on elite artifacts, manufactured in an industry distinct from that employed for utilitarian objects (Levy and Shalev 1989; Shalev 1994; Shalev *et al.* 1992; Shalev and Northover 1993; Tadmor *et al.* 1995). Other Nahal Mishmar artifacts, such as maceheads, are weapons and symbols of authority that have pan-Near Eastern resonance (Cialowicz

1989). Cranial deformation may also have been an ascribed elite symbol with pan-Near Eastern significance. The Beersheva ivories represent a similar level of elite control of exotic materials and production, but with symbolism more conventionally attuned to the fertility of female pregnancy. Other symbols related to the domestic sphere include the churn, certain body decoration, and perhaps small animal figurines. These symbols are concerned with the body and its various states, and with earthly fertility and subsistence. The Gilat shrine is well-equipped with these items.

Chalcolithic elites at southern sites such as Ghassul and Beersheva posed as the mediators between the supernatural and the corporeal worlds. The creation of elaborate symbols in exotic materials reinforced elite prerogatives of religious authority and hierarchical political economic relationships. These are common strategies in "middle range" societies (e.g., Grove and Gillespie 1992). The ancient predatory animal symbolism is among the first found in highly specialized architectural contexts, quintessentially in the "shrines" at Çatal Höyük in Anatolia.[9] Chalcolithic elites in the southern Levant were among the last inheritors of this long animal-oriented tradition. At Çatal Höyük there is an association between female fertility and predatory imagery, and this is discernible in the southern Levantine Chalcolithic as well (Hodder 1987; Mellaart 1967; 1984). The Nahal Mishmar "crowns", for example, combine the image of the birthing stool and predatory bird symbolism, thereby subsuming domestic concerns into larger religio-political iconography. The Gilat Woman, however, shows none of this, rather the opposite; her companion, the ram, is fully domesticated. She is produced at the domestic level, is replete with domestic iconography, and is deposited in a community shrine.

The broad contrast between "temple" and household worship has been made in many cases, for example with regard to Israelite cult and other "official" religions (e.g., Dever 1990). Nothing so grandiose is suggested here for the Chalcolithic. But the notion of different levels of cultic organization addressing different concerns, and the political economy of religion, is informative both in terms of the specific period, and also of a cycle of structural contradictions that would be played out repeatedly.

Comparative and Evolutionary Contexts

Feminist archaeologists have noted in recent decades that discussions of power, production, symbolism, and other aspects of prehistoric societies have tended to presume sharp dichotomies between the public and private sphere, which essentialize male and female roles (see the review in Conkey and Gero 1997). The evidence cited above does suggest a range of physical loci across which different ritual activities took place; from restricted areas of the religio-political elites to the open local shrine. It should be noted, however, that we know nothing about who the various elites were. Whether women were members of the religio-political elites is simply unknown. Indeed, it remains extremely difficult to isolate individuals with notable rank or status in Chalcolithic mortuary remains (cf. Joffe in press; Levy and Alon 1982).

Power, Gender and Elites

This leads to the question of "how elite" the elites really were, a question that is addressed below. There is little evidence that reflects directly on Chalcolithic gender and sex structures, outside of the few figurines, and more detailed analyses of household organization, production, and ideology have yet to be undertaken (e.g., Tringham 1991). The question here is determining how to map the ideological content of a handful of artifacts onto society, how seriously to take these stylized projections as representative of the whole without unconsciously adopting their viewpoints (cf. Hamilton et al. 1996). If we employ ethnographic and historic materials from much later periods as guides, then gender inequalities are present in early village-level societies. But the internal power dynamics of such societies are complex, which destabilize an absolute partitioning of women with the domestic and men with the public (see Blanton 1994; 1995; Hendon 1996).

Furthermore, while the Gilat woman is clearly a female, the other items in the shrine, such as altars and violin figurines, cannot easily be engendered. It seems likely that the domestic sphere represented at Gilat included both "male" and "female" concerns, with only the archaeologists giving overemphasis to one object of many. Thus while archaeologists must integrate women into their perceptions of the public, men must be brought back into the domestic. But the critical issue is not simply, or even particularly, gender, but rather larger issues of the evolution of power, ideology, and representation.

The Chalcolithic and Levantine Prehistory

This returns us to the issue of the place of the Chalcolithic within the overall structure of Levantine prehistory. Beck's insight that much of Chalcolithic art should be regarded as the "dying gasp of the prehistoric age" is strengthened by contextual study (Beck 1989: 46).[10] The artistic and ritual emphasis on the head is the expression of an ancient tradition, among the first to clearly emerge in the Late Natufian and Early Neolithic. This tradition was initially domestic, with the key element of the ancestor continuing to reside with the family and lineage. By the end of the Early Neolithic, however, and the emergence of more specialized religious activities, loci, and elites, greater emphasis was placed on animal imagery, especially of predators. Whether this expressed human fear and awe of nature is unclear, but the centrality of power, both in terms of the imagery and the social construction of cult, is inescapable (Hodder 1987). In a sense these animal images reflect the transformation of an even longer tradition, going back to the Upper Paleolithic (see Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967). Hunting prowess was undoubtedly a source of prestige and authority throughout prehistory, and endured the advent of agriculture. Fear and mastery of the wild, both literally and metaphorically, are of course recurrent themes for historic period elites and their art as well. The theoretical and symbolic challenge for early elites was how to extend the metaphor while simultaneously extending other forms of power.

During the Pottery Neolithic period in the southern Levant, interpenetration of male and female symbolism is seen in the extensive repertoire of incised pebble and seated ceramic figurines, from sixth millennium Yarmukian culture sites such as Munhata and Sha'ar Hagolan (Garfinkel 1995). This has been interpreted as the male appropriation of female rituals and symbols, in the context of reestablishing agricultural society following the collapse of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (Gopher and Orelle 1996). By the late fifth

millennium and the developed Chalcolithic period, the processes of reorganization and appropriation are complete, as is some formal separation of elite and domestic spheres, creating a range of loci for rituals.[11] Where were they to go from there?

It is clear that the elites at the major Chalcolithic sites fused religious and social power. But how much power was there? Whether these elites were organized around real or fictive kinship or instituted tributary economic relations, both ethnographic indicators of a "chiefdom," is unknown. Furthermore there is no evidence of administration, storage or staple finance, warfare or conflict, sumptuary restrictions, or significant mortuary variability (Joffe in press), and their concepts of territorial organization are unknown. Finally, there is no evidence of a level of specialization or individuation that led to any particular chief being identifiable in the archaeological record (e.g., Renfrew 1973).

At best we may suggest that each major Chalcolithic site was presided over by a group of religio-political specialists. These specialists are more apparent in the larger sites such as Ghassul and some sites of the Beersheva basin, while at smaller sites, which make up the vast majority of Chalcolithic settlement, their presence is unknown. These specialists, however, had only limited power and authorities. The elites at the major centers of Chalcolithic settlement, the Beersheva basin and Ghassul, and perhaps the central Jordan valley, elaborated on preexisting features of agro-pastoral organization and belief, but their innovations were very limited.

That organizational features in general, and hierarchical ones in particular, are so opaque suggests how and why southern Levantine Chalcolithic ideology and regional village level society failed to develop into urbanism, and indeed, ultimately failed completely. Based as they were on what might be regarded as the Neolithic elaborations or extensions of Paleolithic religio-social concepts, such as access to the supernatural, Chalcolithic elites were essentially shamans and not chiefs. While the iconography and ideology certainly had political and economic features, elites never managed to attain more broadly based sources of economic power, such as the management of agricultural production, storage and redistribution of staples, or political power derived from conflict. And with the existence of alternative power bases even within the religious sphere, such as shrines like Gilat, not to mention household and mortuary cults elsewhere in the southern Levant, elite power was severely restricted. Coupled with relatively low settlement and population densities, beyond religion there was little power to be had in the system.[12]

Near Eastern Contrasts

The Chalcolithic southern Levant forms especially profound contrasts with contemporary "chiefdom" level societies of Western Asia and Northeast Africa. In Egypt, Naqada II and III elites successfully fused religio-political ideology and the generation of new symbols, economic power, especially over craft production, and the pursuit of critical raw materials and technologies, such as copper metallurgy, to create territorially expansive "chiefdoms" and ultimately a unified state (Hassan 1997; Seeher 1991). Hassan has pointed out that the emergence of religio-political elites in Egypt involved the integration of female iconography and ideology into a male controlled system of religious authority and craft production (Hassan 1992). Not least of their advantages was the fact that the agricultural productivity of the geographic niches occupied by Naqada "chiefdoms" far outstripped those of the southern Levant.

Similarly, the localized "chiefdoms" of Ubaid southern Mesopotamia could produce far greater surpluses through irrigation agriculture than the simple rainfall and gravity irrigation of the southern Levant. Their pursuit of ritual and political strategies was complemented by increasing control over craft production, social storage, and possibly some form of staple finance. Institutional development in Mesopotamia is also far more easily discerned than in the southern Levant (Stein 1994). Additionally, in Ubaid period northern and southern Mesopotamia administrative technologies in the form of sealing were highly developed (e.g., Rothman 1994). In contrast only a bare handful of crude seals are known from the Chalcolithic southern Levant and no sealings.

The combination of economic and ideological features, as well as agricultural potential, allowed Mesopotamian and Egyptian elites to develop into more complex societies. Among the recurring features of complexity in both Mesopotamia and Egypt was the reorganization of female and unfree labor to serve institutional needs (Joffe 1998; McCorriston 1996; Zagarell 1986). Southern Levantine Chalcolithic elites were simply too small, poorly organized, and hierarchically varied to evolve past the village level. The archaic ideologies and elite structures were insufficiently adaptable to the new climatic and socio-political realities that emerged in the centuries after 4000 BCE. Aridity, Egyptian commercial and colonial interest, and new economic relationships all strained and finally shattered Chalcolithic society, and with it most of the existing iconographic vocabulary.

Chalcolithic elites did participate in an attenuated fashion in pan-Near Eastern elite iconographic networks, indicated by the possible continuation of cranial deformation and more clearly with authority symbols such as the macehead. But the "meaning" of these devices was necessarily different in the deeply peripheral southern Levant than in Syro-Mesopotamia. The rapid renegotiation of iconography and organization that accompanied the Halaf to Ubaid transition in Mesopotamia, for example, almost completely passed by the southern Levant (Akkermanns and Verhoeven 1995; Breniquet 1989).[13] Possessing some basic symbols, Chalcolithic elites could not apply them in ways that generated sufficient social inequality to either ensure their own continued existence or to make the jump to urbanism. These ancient symbols became impediments to breaking out of religio-social sources of power, rather than tools for reformulating socio-economic power. It is not surprising that while elite symbols disappeared, certain household symbols, such as the churn, the cornet, v-shaped bowls, and animal figurines, appear to have continued for a time into the Early Bronze Age.

The non-divine reinterpretation of the Gilat Woman, a private gift associated with household or domestic activity, serves as a key for understanding this duality within Chalcolithic society. The tension and competition between the household or domestic sphere and the public or elite sphere that characterizes subsequent periods, began in the Early Neolithic and was already well-developed in the Chalcolithic. The collapse of the Chalcolithic culture caused the public sphere to briefly recede from view. In the Early Bronze Age this cyclical tension reappeared with the regeneration of village and then urban society, and their constitutive elites. The old elite symbolism

did not survive the transition to urbanism, which was based on the accumulation of new types of social and economic power. Many elements of household symbolism also did not survive the stressful dynamics of urbanism, but were replaced by parallel series of household beliefs, practices, and images, many of which are concerned with "fertility." But in the new Early Bronze Age matrix of social and economic relations "fertility" had an entirely new meaning, defined by the political economies of cities, hinterlands, and trade. Though small-scale by comparison with Egypt, Syria or Mesopotamia, the new southern Levantine social and economic relations of production, accumulation, exchange and consumption brought an end to the last vestiges of the hunter-gatherer "moral economy" of sharing.[14] With the advent of proto-history the social and moral landscape becomes increasingly, and depressingly, familiar.

Conclusions

The Gilat Woman need not be deified to have significance. As one of the last artifacts of deep prehistory, she stands at the end of a long and venerable tradition of apotropaic devices. If the possibilities outlined here are correct, she may speak to intimate concerns of marriage, childbearing, and maturation with which many can identify. Furthermore, she sheds welcome light on the varieties of Chalcolithic religious and socio-political organization in the southern Levant, along with their strengths and limitations, at the very end of prehistory.

Notes

Digital image processing for this article was done by Mr. Kurt Lupinsky.

[1] Historic period representations of Mesopotamian water deities usually show water flowing from a vessel (e.g., Spycket 1981: fig 155). On the topic of female deities in the ancient Near East see Frymer-Kensky (1992).

[2] Levy and Golden suggest that the Shiqmim ivory figurine is a mnemonic device, along with the incised ivory "sickles" from Bir es-Safadi. A calendrical function is more likely, possibly relating to the varying lengths of a woman's monthly cycle. For a parallel from Byblos with a single drilled hole in the head see Dunand (1973: pl. CLXII, no. 34966).

[3] Workshop production patterns of "Cream Ware" also suggest elite control over vessel raw material and manufacturing. See Dessel (1991: 122–27, 250–51).

[4] Jacob Kaplan was the first to establish a connection between the vessel and dairy production (Kaplan 1954; see also 1959; 1960). Amiran has also pointed out that the best parallel for the Gilat Woman, admittedly not very close, is a small figurine from Bab edh-Dhra dating to early EB I, showing a woman with upraised arms whose head is a large two-handled vessel, perhaps a churn (Amiran 1989: 57; Bienkowski 1991: fig. 71).

[5] Goring (1991: 54) also suggests with regard to the figurines from Kissonerga that they may have been intended for rite of passage or initiation, such as those related to puberty. See generally Owens and Hayden (1997).

[6] Compare, for example, the ostracon from Deir el-Medina depicting a mother nursing a newborn while sitting on a biconical stool (Robins 1993: fig. 22). See also an Eighteenth Dynasty anthropomorphic vessel of a lactating woman with small breasts holding a jar (Robins 1993: fig. 27; cf. Pinch 1983).

[7] Some of the conclusions regarding the "fertility" orientation of Chalcolithic cults were made previously by Claire Epstein, albeit with slightly different emphases (Epstein 1978; 1982; see also Amiran 1981; Elliott 1977; 1978; Merhav 1993; de Miroschedji 1993). Unlike scholars who have been oriented solely towards the Beersheva-Ghassul culture, Epstein more usefully includes in her discussion the entire range of Chalcolithic media, symbols and regional cultures. Furthermore, the strict regionalism once thought a feature of the Chalcolithic is also being overturned by new discoveries, which demonstrate similarities and interaction across larger areas, such as those at Peqiʿin (Gal *et al.* 1996; 1997).

[8] The strong possibility that the Nahal Mishmar hoard originated at En Gedi of course changes this somewhat austere picture (Moorey 1988; Ussishkin 1980: 38–41). Since the bulk of the Gilat ceramics have not yet been published, we cannot make comparisons with the En Gedi assemblage, which is extensive, and has a particularly large number of bowls and cornets (Gilead 1995: 202–6).

[9] The 1960 excavations of Ghassul uncovered a series of wall paintings on the west edge of Tell 1. The "leaping tiger" fresco, though highly stylized, is significant in that it depicts a large feline (see North 1961: 32–36, pls. II, V, frontispiece). Other depictions of large felines, specifically leopards, are known from mosaics found at open sanctuaries in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai (Avner 1984). The enigmatic "orthostat-lined holes" found in association with the frescos are reminiscent of the pits found in front of massevot at desert sites in the Negev and Sinai (Avner 1993). For the results of the renewed fieldwork at Çatal Hüyük see Hodder (1996) and the project web site at catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/catal/.

[10] Beck indicates in a footnote (1989: n. 68) that the late Ephrat Yeivin suggested that this important idea should also be extended to our understanding of the Ghassul wall paintings.

[11] For examples of Chalcolithic sites very different from population or cult centers, which have received the bulk of scholarly attention, and in which cult organization would necessarily have been quite different, see Gilead (1989), Gilead and Goren (1986), Gophna and Tsuk (1987), and Govrin (1987). For another settlement with an apparently public, but not necessarily cultic, structure, see the report on Fasaʿel (Porath 1985).

[12] One unexplored set of parallels for Chalcolithic society are village-level agriculturalists resident in arid zones of the American Southwest. This is too broad a topic to be explored here, but on the specific question of restricted ritual spaces or kivas, often decorated with murals, see the essays in Smith (1990; cf. Adler 1993). Another useful comparison may be with Neolithic and Copper Age Italy, where underground installations, often with wall murals, form loci of what Whitehouse persuasively suggests are secret cults into which males are slowly initiated and women excluded (Whitehouse 1991; 1992).

[13] For the slim ceramic evidence for fifth millennium connections between the southern Levant and Syro-Mesopotamia see Gophna and Sadeh (1988/89), Kaplan (1960), and Leonard (1989).

[14] Similar transformations have been proposed for the small-scale societies of Cyprus (Bolger 1992; 1996).

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