House of God or Temple of man?

A macro analysis of rituality and ritual buildings in Neolithic Anatolia and the Levant.

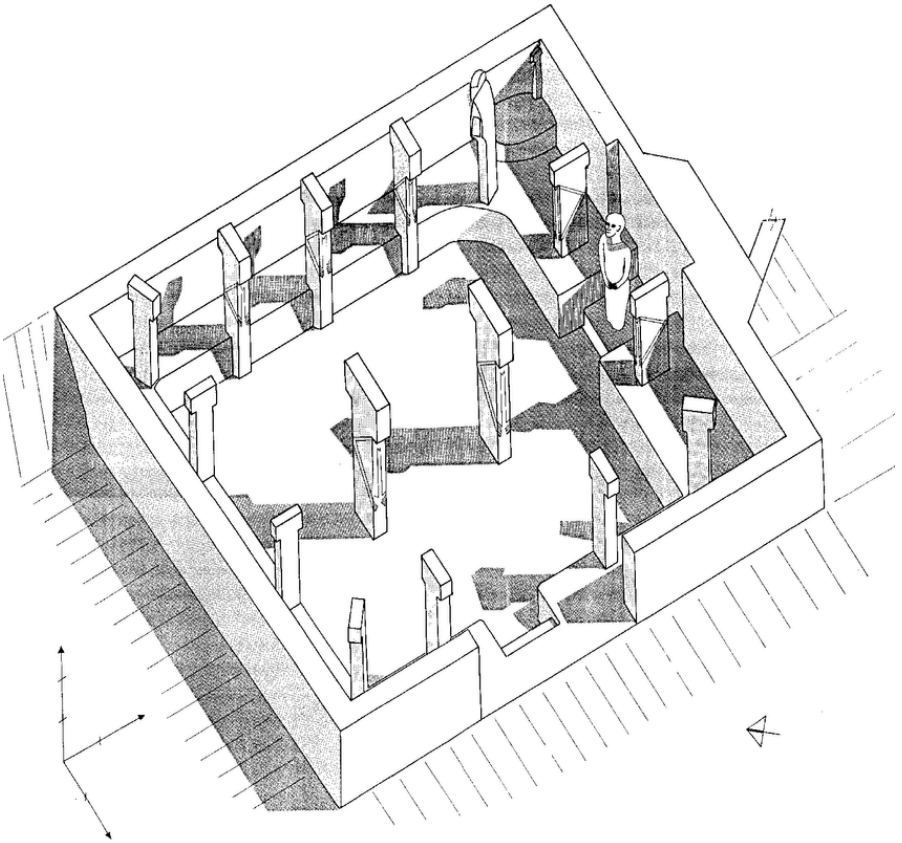

Figure 1: reconstruction of the Nevalı Çori cult building (Lichter, 2014 figure 6)

BA Archaeology

Department of Archaeology

May 2025

Word count:

Abstract

Ritual behaviours in the Neolithic Levant and Anatolia are a popular avenue for research due to the area being one of the first to go through the process of Neolithisation. However, most research focuses on a single site, creating a lack of synthesis.

This study aimed to investigate whether a macro analysis of a large number of sites would be an effective way to research these sites. To achieve 29 sites were chosen, their ritual contents were analysed and quantified and the presence of a separate ritual or public building was noted. The results showed that earlier sites were much more likely to contain a separate ritual structure while later ones seemed to have all their rituality linked to the domestic structures.

The findings seem to suggest that a macro analysis is effective at showing broad patterns that would not be visible otherwise

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of a great number of people. First and perhaps most importantly, my supervisor Dr James Taylor for his invaluable advice and patience when this dissertation was just a foggy idea. To Helen Goodchild for her guidance on maps and arcgis. This dissertation would have looked very different without them.

To my family for always being there and supporting me.

To my friends, both in York and at home for their support, advice and encouragement.

Content

List of Figures

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Neolithic of the Levant and Anatolia is an unbelievably rich and complex area, most famous for its dense village sites such as Çatalhöyük, Çayönü and Ain Ghazal. It is often thought to be the area where sedentism and agriculture first originated, and consequently has been a key area for archaeological study since the 1950s. Ritual elements have also become an area of interest due to their obvious presence, showing up sometimes as monumental architecture, such as Göbekli Tepe, in funerary archaeology such as house burials or plastered skulls or in art such as figurines and paintings.

Despite the scale of the research in this area compared to other parts of prehistory, there remains a gap due to the lack of overview and synthesis. Most papers cover one site in detail and perhaps bring in a few others for short comparisons, very little research has been focused on the overall patterns that can be seen across all the sites. This dissertation aims to show that large scale analysis of many sites can be a helpful tool in discerning patterns that would not be visible when examining only one or two sites at a time. To achieve this, it is important to define what is meant by a ritual as that is a notoriously esoteric and difficult term, especially in prehistory. Once this has been achieved a selection of ritual markers will be chosen and marked as either present or absent. We will therefore be able to discern whether certain ritual practices changed over time or in different areas. In addition to this, the presence or absence of separate ritual structures will be examined. Certain Neolithic sites such as Çatalhöyük are famous for containing only domestic structures with very little difference in what they contain. However, other sites such as Nevalı Çori contain complex ritual structures, separate from the domestic ones.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

These research questions lay out the overall aims of this study, with the main overarching goal being to determine whether this method is viable:

- Is a macro approach an effective way to study these sites?
- How do we define what is ritual and what is domestic?
- Are there spatial or temporal patterns in sites with a ritual building?
- Does that coincide with a change in ritual markers?

To answer these questions a few objectives will determine the next steps that need to be taken:

- Using the definition we have set out for what a ritual is to create a list of relevant ritual markers
- Finding a sample of sites both with and without separate ritual structures and marking the presence of the ritual markers at each site
- Collating and mapping out the data to determine patterns
- Interpreting the data to examine why a pattern may or may not be visible.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The Near East has been the source of much attention since the start of antiquarianism due to his rich material culture. As archaeology developed, it has remained an area of interest due to its importance as one of the first places to see the shift to agriculture and sedentism, the so-called “Neolithic revolution” (Childe, 1950). Despite this continuity, what is studied and how has changed a great deal and much remains to be discovered and written about. Focusing on the presentation of ritual and domestic, this literature review will focus on general trends of the last few decades, as well as what remains to be studied. Importantly, the focus will not be on a single site, as what seems to be missing from the literature is a macro view of religious trends in the area to try to create a synthesis.

2.2 Defining the terms

2.2.1 Ritual and Religion

Before being able to discuss past studies and debates, it is necessary that we define the terms ritual and religion, as well as exploring the difference between the two. Religion is something we seem to instinctively recognise as many of us encounter it often in our everyday lives. Nevertheless difficulties remain when trying to draw the exact borders of what is and isn’t religion, especially when talking about a prehistoric time period. The main issue comes from the fact that religion must include “the intangible, the irrational and the indefinable” (Insoll 2004, 6). Definitions must therefore be broad, while still being exclusionary enough to retain some use interpreting archaeological contexts and materials. Generally definitions of religion surround the idea of gods, spirits or a higher power of some sort. It is, in short, the structure that interactions with these higher powers are carried through. Which is why it is often considered to be practically invisible archaeologically as it is almost entirely within the minds of those that practise it. Ritual on the other hand, is the way that this interaction is carried out. It is often seen as a sort of repeated action and can be both religious or domestic in nature with any action being able to become

ritual over time (Verhoeven 2011,). Which is why this dissertation will be primarily talking about evidence of ritual, with the understanding that these rituals are of a cosmological nature. They are the physical evidence of a potential past religion and all that we have left to interpret as archaeologists.

Knowing that rituals are the markers of religion and therefore the main way we can interact with cosmology in the archaeological record, we must now decide what specific markers we are looking for within the context of the Neolithic Near East. Buildings of cult are often identified through what they contain, in this particular area and time period we find things like status, auroch horns and human burials, both primary and secondary. Clay statues representing humans and animals can also be found at a number of these sites. Some consider them to be decorative or toys for children however a few of these statues seem to have been part of certain rituals. At Ain Ghazal for example, two bovine figurines were “killed” with flint bladelets before the clay was fired, perhaps in an attempt to ask for luck during a hunt (Rollefson, 2000 167). Human figurines are also present at that site, including some of women’s figures that are generally interpreted as fertility symbols, perhaps made to protect a woman during childbirth. The presence of items such as luxury goods or art do not on their own designate a cult building, however their presence should also be noted due to their potential symbolic nature, red ochre could also fit into this category.

2.2.2 The House and Domestic

Defining the domestic, much like the ritual, presents certain difficulties due to its esoteric and loose characterisation, especially when discussing the Neolithic. In general terms, the domestic refers to anything to do with the home and household, but how do we then define a household? It is unlikely that our modern notions of households containing a single nuclear family would translate to the early sedentism of the Neolithic. At Çatalhöyük for example, the people buried inside the houses are not necessarily blood related to one another, implying a kinship system that is more complex and based on a multitude of factors (Hodder 2013, 351). Souvatzi (2014) wrote at length about the Neolithic and argues that terms like household, family/kinship group, house and domestic group are not interchangeable and all refer

to different things. An in depth discussion of the different definitions that surround the Neolithic household is outside the scope of this paper, so the terms household and domestic will be used fairly interchangeably to designate the inhabitants of the houses in the sites discussed. As for how we should define the domestic, both Souvatzi and Hodder take a Marxist approach and see the household as the most basic unit of production in the Neolithic,the one responsible for organising economies and society at large. With this we can try to keep our definition simple and ascertain that the domestic is any task relating to the physical upkeep of a group or society.

With this definition in mind we must now consider the potential markers of domesticity. Most obviously, we would look for any evidence of acquiring, processing or preparing food. This is perhaps the most archaeologically visible way to see whether a site was domestic in nature. Butchered animal remains, burnt grains and hearths are notable examples of this. We may also look out for the processing of non-food items such as tanning hides, weaving and pottery, although the last two would not have been present during the timescale we are focusing on. In general, we must focus on the remains of the house and living spaces through activities related to that area (Hendon 1996, 47).

While ritual and domestic have been defined separately in this literature review, is it important to consider that the two are not mutually exclusive by any means. Many sites and houses contain elements of both (Verhoven 2011). This separation between religious and secular is something that is very ingrained in our modern western society but it is likely that the Neolithic near east had more nebulous perhaps not in the Neolithic Near East. Ritual imbues parts of daily life’s routine, for example Çatalhöyük’s upkeep that requires the replastering and polishing of walls is often considered to contain strong elements of symbolism (Buchli, 2014 290)

2.3 Past Studies

As previously mentioned, the Near East is a heavily studied area, mainly due to its status as one of the first places to go through the so-called “Neolithic revolution”. Much of this work has focused on the climate of the region and the domestication of plants and animals. However, following the shift to post-processualism, a greater

interest was taken in the symbolic and cosmological aspects that may have been instrumental in this shift to sedentism. Perhaps the most important of these works is Jacque Cauvin's seminal book "the birth of the Gods and the origins of agriculture" originally published in 1994, which argues that environmental factors were not the only contributing factor to this shift. Such a drastic change in lifestyle would require a similarly intense change in mindset and beliefs, which Cauvin can be seen in the changing symbols and cosmology of the local people.

Following the release of this book, religion and ritual has become a significant part of the literature of the Neolithic Near East. Continued excavations in Anatolia have revealed a wealth of new information regarding symbology of the Neolithic. One of the most well known is perhaps Göbekli Tepe, a site dating to the PPNA (9600-8800 cal BC) and which saw continued use until about 8000 cal BC (Caletti, 2020, 97). It consists of 9 megalithic enclosure structures, with T shaped pillars placed in concentric circles (Figure 2). These pillars are often seen as anthropomorphic depictions of male hunters; animals are also prominently featured on some of the stones (Banning, 2011 621). The impressive size and scale of this structure is accentuated by the fact that it was likely built by a late hunter-gatherer society. Monumental architecture on this scale is more often associated with sedentarism, they are also sometimes seen as a requirement for early cities, as they imply a complex society with a hierarchical form of power to organise large scale construction. Göbekli Tepe proves that this view is too simplistic and nomadic societies are often more complex than given credit for.

Figure 2: The concentric pillars of Göbekli Tepe. (Dietrich et al, 2012 55)

Other sites have also had a widespread impact, notably, Hodder has used the site of Çatalhöyük to highlight ideas around how socio-political structures develop. Using frameworks set out by Bourdieu, he argues that these structures, including cosmological ones, were created to deal with the increased conflict that ensued from sedentary life (Hodder 2004). This idea is not new of course, Durkheim's work from 1912 similarly argues that the function of religion is to maintain power structures and social unity in a society (Verhoeven, 2011 118). However, studying this from an archaeological perspective gives us insight into when exactly society became complex enough to warrant these conflict-preventive measures.

2.4 Current debates

Considering the popularity of the Neolithic Near East, it is understandable that a number of debates are ongoing in the field. Perhaps the one most relevant to this paper is the prevalence of religious structures separate to domestic structures. Looking at the site of Çayönü, Özdoğan makes the claim that "in the Near Eastern interaction zone, cult buildings were specifically constructed to serve this purpose" (1998, 585). This implies a certain separation of religion and domestic or at the very least, the construction of specialised buildings. We can see some of this at Çayönü

where the skull and piazza buildings seem to lack traces of domestic activity and contain only human remains and other ritual markers. However, some sites clearly contradict this , Çatalhöyük is seemingly devoid of specialist cult buildings, yet it is not lacking in religious activity (Hodder, 2010 3).Looking at the information here, the assumption could be made that the reason some village sites have specialist religious buildings and others do not is simply a question of time. That earlier sites lacked them and they developed later. However this does not seem to be strictly the case. Sites like Nevalı Çori and Çayönü predate Çatalhöyük and yet seem to contain structures used strictly for ritual purposes. It is also interesting to note that while the skull building of Çayönü does not contain any domestic markers, the residential buildings do contain religious markers, mainly primary burials (Pearson et al, 2013 181). Could it then be argued that domestic buildings may contain religious activity, but religious buildings may not contain domestic activity? The difficulty in answering this question stems in part from the fact that the majority of papers choose to focus on a single site, there is a distinct lack of broad synthesis around the villages in the region. This makes it difficult to discern patterns and try to understand how similar or different the cultural practices of separate groups were.

Although not a village site, it is interesting to note the recent debate that surrounded Göbekli Tepe. As mentioned above, this site was not inhabited, rather it may have served temple functions (Clare et al, 2019 105). Despite this, some have argued for a greater domestic usage of the site then previously thought. Banning (2011) argues that our division of sites as purely domestic or ritual is a modern viewpoint that cannot be applied to the Neolithic. He shows that Göbekli Tepe may have been covered with a roof as shown by grooves worn at the top of certain stones (Banning, 2011 629). This would make the site much more adapted to habitation or at the very least, longer stays from the people visiting the site. However there has been pushback to these claims. Dietrich and Notroff (2015) give ethnographic examples of cultures with distinct cultures where ritual activity is concentrated. Therefore,while agreeing that many sites contain a mix of domestic and ritual, the labeling of certain structures as non-domestic and ritual remains useful and accurate. Despite this, Göbekli Tepe remains an interesting example of potential domestic activity encroaching on a ritual space and shows another side to the religious buildings debate.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Finding the sites

As mentioned previously, a pervasive issue within the study of the Neolithic Near East is the lack of an overall synthesis. Therefore to remedy this, a macro approach was taken in examining the ritual material present at these village sites. This entails a systematic analysis of sites from different areas and periods of the Neolithic. Hundreds of sites have been excavated in Anatolia and the Levant, therefore to save time and narrow the scope of this paper, the list of sites was based on Der and Issavi's paper (2017, figure 1). This study discusses the phenomenon of the megasite in the near East as well as Neolithic urbanism in general. Despite not being included in the map, Ain Ghazal was mentioned in the paper (Der and Issavi, 2017 190) and has interesting examples of ritual buildings and was therefore included in the study.The full list of sites is shown in Figure 3. Clearly this is not an exhaustive list, however it covers different parts of the Neolithic, both temporally and spatially and the majority of them contained enough documentation to be effectively analysed. In the literature review, both domestic and ritual were discussed at length, however considering that the sites are villages and therefore domestic sites first and foremost, ritual will be discussed more prominently as it is what deviates from the norm.

Figure 3: Map of all the sites used in this study

Once the list of sites was decided, the first thing to have been determined about the site is whether it contained a separate building used for ritual purposes. In some instances, the presence of a ritual structure is well documented and widely accepted by the archaeological community, this is the case at Çayönü, Ain Ghazal and Nevalı Çori for example. If a site contained a structure separate from the usual domestic buildings but its use could not be determined, or it seemed to contain both ritual and domestic artefacts, it was classified as a “public” building. This is the case at Hallan Çemi, Körtik Tepe and Aşıklı Höyük, the latter of which has a whole complex separate from the domestic areas which seemed to have a different purpose although the exact use is unknown (Düring, 2006 105). Finally sites without any discernible difference in the structure were classified as Absent. This famously includes Çatalhöyük, the typesite for the Anatolian Neolithic, as well as many other sites such as Abu Hureyra and Beisamoun.

3.2 Setting out the criteria

Once this had been established a number of criteria were set out that were deemed to show ritual behaviours sites. These include human burials which are often the clearest way to get an idea of the cosmological beliefs of a society. Children and adults were separated as differential treatments between age groups is sometimes seen in this time period, for example at Sabi Abyad (Akkerman and Brüning, 2019 108) Most of the burials happened in domestic areas, usually under the floors of the house. However a few sites did have separate burial areas or cemeteries, which created a concentration of ritual activity and was therefore noted as well. Secondary burials were also a separate category due to the complexity of mortuary treatments in certain sites. Cranial manipulation would often be considered a form of secondary burial but has been separated in this case as it can be considered to have a special status in this time period with the so called ‘skull cults’, sometimes thought to be a form of ancestor worship (Greski, Haelm and Clare, 2017 1). Within these skull cults is the practice of plastering skulls, which again has been separated in an attempt to see if this practice was present at later sites and grew from the cranial manipulation or happened alongside it. Figurines of different types are another category,

separated into male, female and animal. If the figurine was anthropomorphic but the gender could not be ascertained both the female and male categories were ticked off. Finally, a way to determine the use of the buildings is from the decorations visible. This includes animal bucrania, most often found in the form of auroch horns adorning walls or separating different areas of the house. Mural art whether geometric, animal or anthropomorphic were counted, as well as floor paintings. However care has to be taken as these could be aesthetic choices rather than ritual, so it should be taken on a case by case basis. Clearly these criteria do not represent all the ways that ritual behaviour manifests itself, however they do cover the majority of well known ritual behaviours at the time.

The data was collected and put in a spreadsheet for ease of reading and manipulation (appendix 1). The vast majority of the data came from published papers discussing individual sites. As mentioned in the literature review there is a lack of overview about what these sites contained and in many cases the information required was only mentioned in passing, with the exception of Çatalhöyük which has a database of all the finds available online. This has meant that there is a wide range in the amount and quality of information available as some sites had very little published about them. A few of these sites were also rescue excavations brought on by the building of multiple dams in Turkey and Syria. As a result, following the rescue excavations in the 80s and 90s, there has not been follow up digs with more modern means and techniques. Nevertheless, the majority of the sites discussed had enough information to fill in every criteria set out. Once the data had been collected, maps were made with ArcGis to be able to present the results visually. This was a simple process as the latitude and longitude of the sites are available and well known. Bar charts were created in google sheets to make the overall results easy to navigate, allowing us to see which types of ritual activity were most widespread. The diversity of these sites can make it difficult to categorise these sites without oversimplifying and leaving out key information.

4.0 Results

This section will look in further detail at what the data that has been collected is telling us. Firstly the ritual markers that were laid out in the methodology will be considered, then potential spatial and temporal aspects to the data. Finally each type of site will be individually looked at in greater detail, to lay out any general patterns.

4.1 Ritual markers

Once the ritual markers had been chosen, they could be compiled and compared to try and ascertain any difference or patterns. The first thing to consider is the overall results across all sites (Figure 1). The main thing to note is that primary inhumations and figurines seem to be the most common markers found at the site. Part of this is likely due to the longevity of bones and clay in the archaeological record, as opposed to paints like ochre which can quickly fade or be washed away. Nevertheless it remains that adult burials are the most common ritual marker found at these sites, with children's burials not far behind. This slight discrepancy may be due to differential treatment based on ages. This is seen at Tell Sabi Abyad where men, women and children were buried in one of 7 cemeteries (Kanjou and Tsuneki, 2016 67) but infant burials were also sometimes found in the corner of certain houses (Akkerman and Brüning, 2019 108). Similarly, male anthropomorphic figurines seem to be slightly more common than female or animal figurines, although the discrepancy does not seem large enough to draw any conclusions.

Cranial manipulation is a well known practice in the Neolithic of Anatolia and the Levant and is present at 19 of the sites analysed, part of the well known phenomenon of the skull cult (Gresky, Haelm and Clare 2017 1). Of those 19 sites, 6 included the specific practice of plastering skulls, a method through which the body was buried and left to decompose before the head was taken, plastered and painted, perhaps in the effigy of the deceased (Bonogofsky, 2005 133). This is often thought to be a form of ancestor worship, however at Kosk Hoyuk, the plastered skull of a 15 year old boy was found so it is possible that another criteria is taken into account

when choosing who would be plastered, although this seems to be the only site where this is present (Bonogofsky, 2005 130).

Finally, art and floor paintings are found in few of the sites, they were usually either geometric patterns or sometimes hunting scenes (Schmandt-Besserat, 2013 345) In some cases the floor of a building would be painted a different colour then the others, perhaps indicating a different use or to delineate ‘clean’ from ‘dirty’ areas (Baird, Fairbairn and Martin, 2016 753). Looking at figure 2 it is tempting to argue that sites that do not contain a ritual or public buildings are much more likely to contain art and paintings. However this may simply be due to survivors' bias, as these sites tend to be the younger ones and paintings tend to fade and disappear over time. The temporal spread of the sites will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

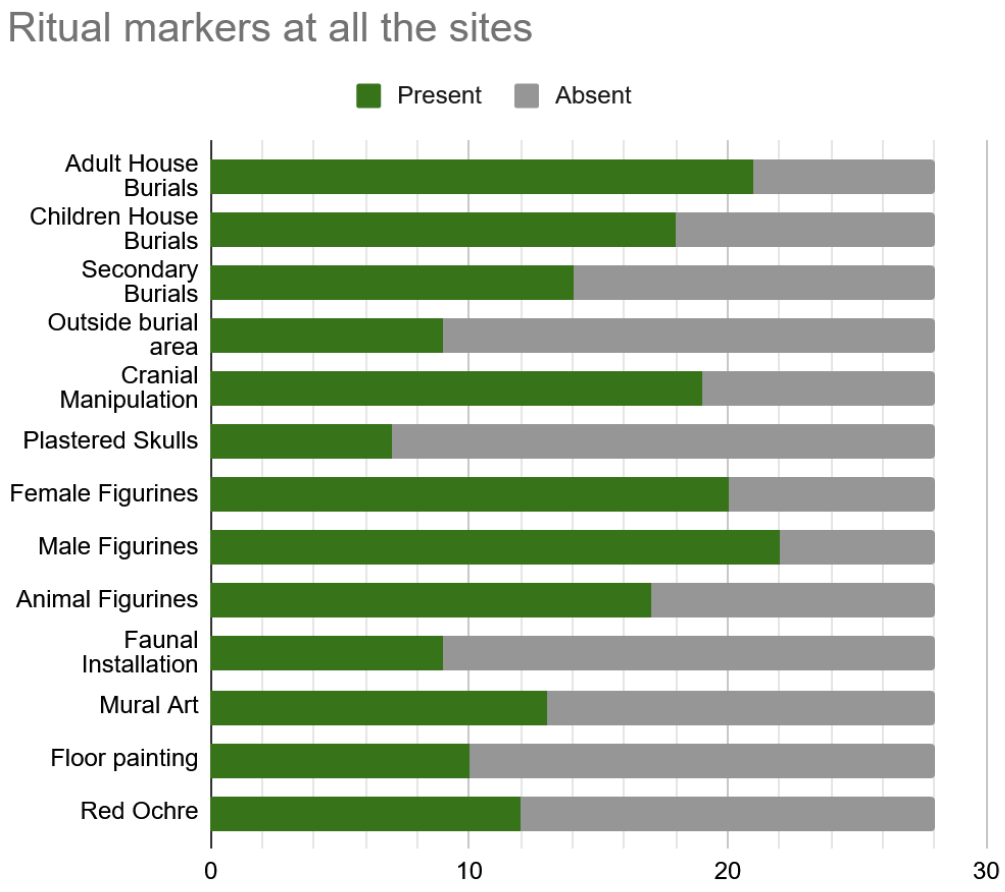

Figure 4: The total amount of each ritual marker present at all the sites. For example, 17 of the 29 sites examined had animal figurines.

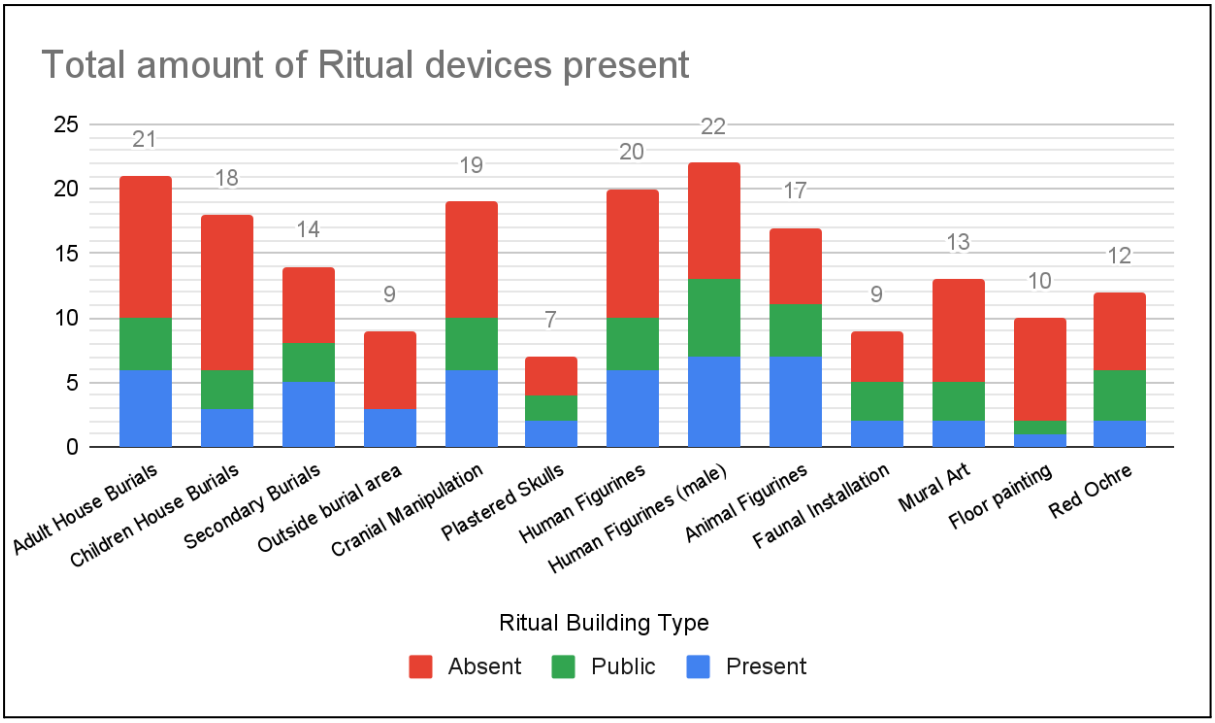

Figure 5: Total amount of ritual markers present, separated by ritual building type. We can see for example that 7 of the 17 sites with animal figurines had a ritual building present. Meanwhile none of the sites with public buildings had an outside burial area.

4.2 Spatial and Temporal Aspects

One of the main research questions this paper was trying to answer is whether the presence of a separate ritual building at a site was determined by the time period or the place the village was located. After assigning a time period to the sites as either early (10,000-8,500 BC) , middle (8,500-7,000 BC) or late (7,000-5,500 BC) and plotting them accordingly, a pattern seems to emerge (Figures 6, 7 and 8). Sites that contain a separate structure deemed either ritual or public appear much more commonly in the earlier Neolithic and seem to fade out over time. Meanwhile sites where all the buildings are domestic became more popular in the later half of the Neolithic. Very rarely it seems, do sites that begin in the later parts of the Neolithic have a separate ritual structure and those that do started in the earlier parts and continued on into the later periods. This is the case at Jericho for example, who was inhabited from the Natufian, through the Neolithic into the bronze and iron age and had different ritual structures throughout these time periods.

This pattern has many implications when considering the development of ritual buildings in prehistory. We know of course that following the Neolithic, ritual buildings and specifically temples became prominent features of the early towns and cities of the Bronze Age. Bronze age cities famously contained entire districts of temples and shrines dedicated to divinities, the most well known of which is the Eanna complex in Uruk. This would imply that ritual and public buildings were somewhat popular in the early Neolithic, decreasing in use dramatically around the late PPNB before being brought back around the Bronze age. Perhaps linked to this is a great decline in sites towards the end of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNC), the causes of which are still greatly debated. One theory is that there was an increased shift to pastoral nomadism, a lifestyle which is almost invisible in the archaeological record. It could also inversely be due to more spread out houses and hamlets as opposed to large villages, to reduce competition for farmland and water (Banning, Rahimi and Singers, 1994 154). In either case, the lifestyle of people in the late Neolithic remains under-studied and poorly understood and by consequence their ritual behaviours are even more unknown.

Lastly we should consider whether there is also a spatial element, meaning whether the area that a site was in made it more or less likely to have a separate ritual or public building.It seems likely looking at these maps that it is tied to the temporal aspect. The practice of permanent villages started out in the eastern parts of the Levant and Anatolia and spread to the west over time. However, by the time the practice of sedentism reached the west, cult buildings had already fallen out of fashion, in favour of the more egalitarian history houses seen at Çatalhöyük and other sites.

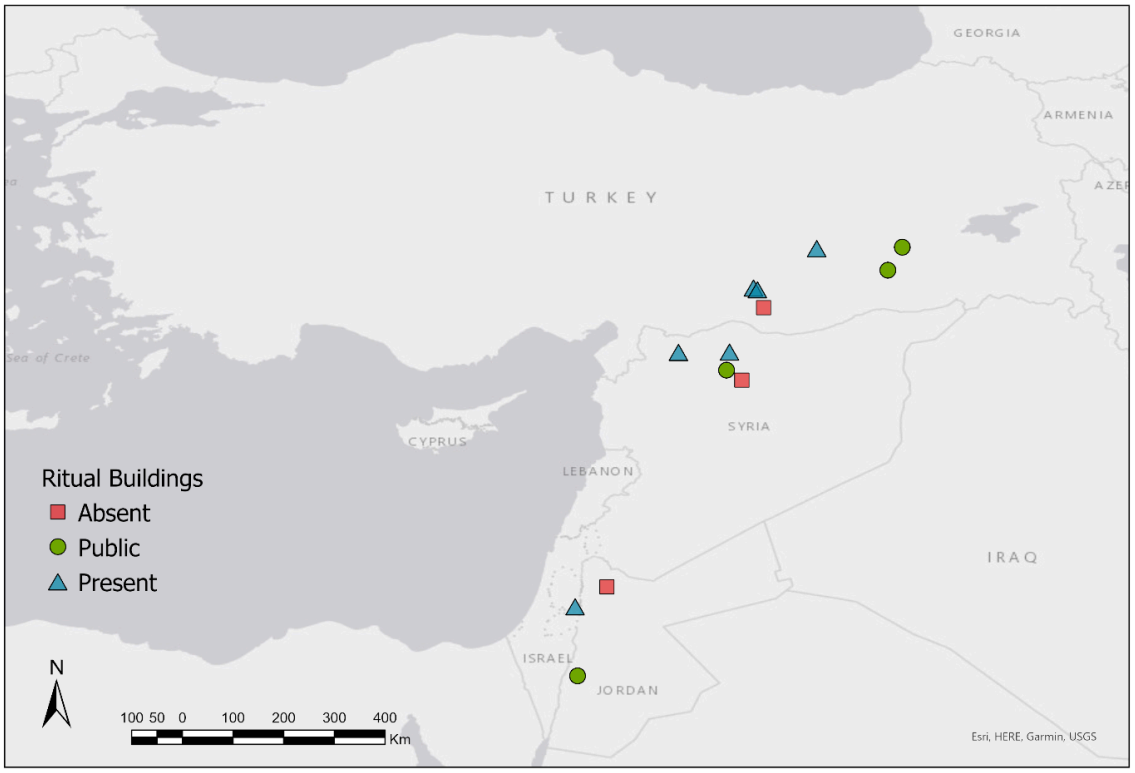

Figure 6: Map of the sites present in the early Neolithic (10,000-8,500 BC) and the type of ritual building they contain.

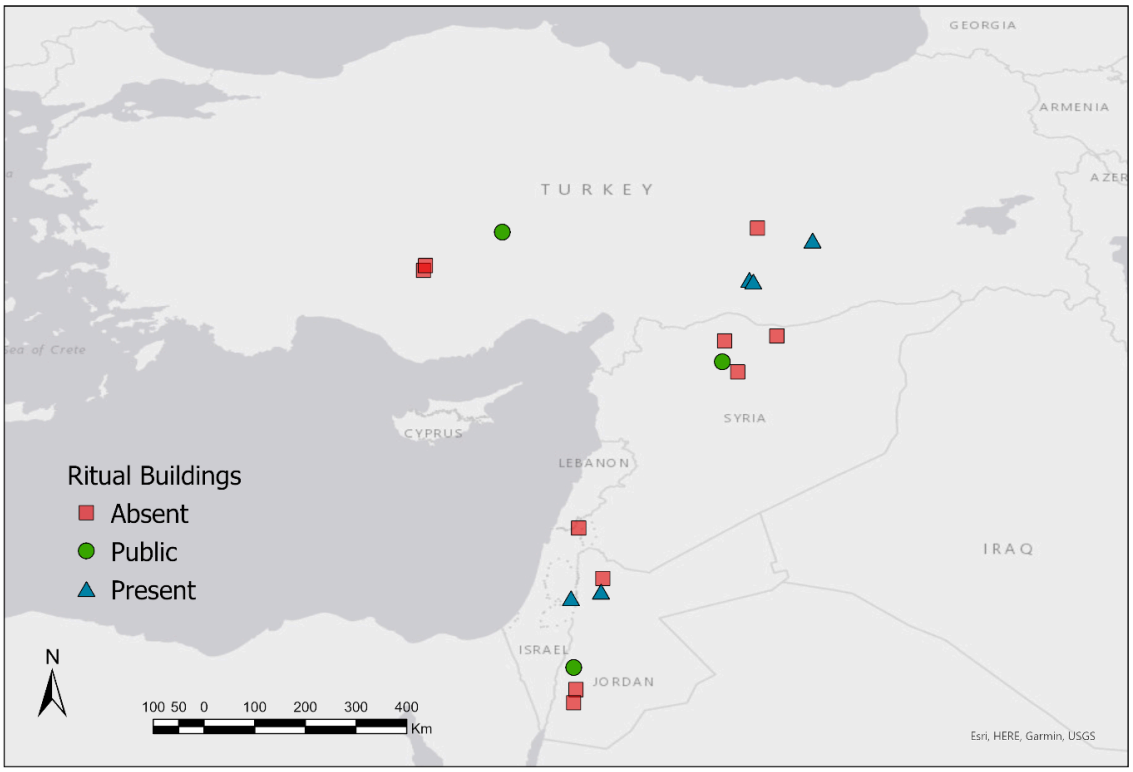

Figure 7: Map of the sites present in the middle Neolithic (8,500 BC-7,000 BC) and the type of ritual building they contain.

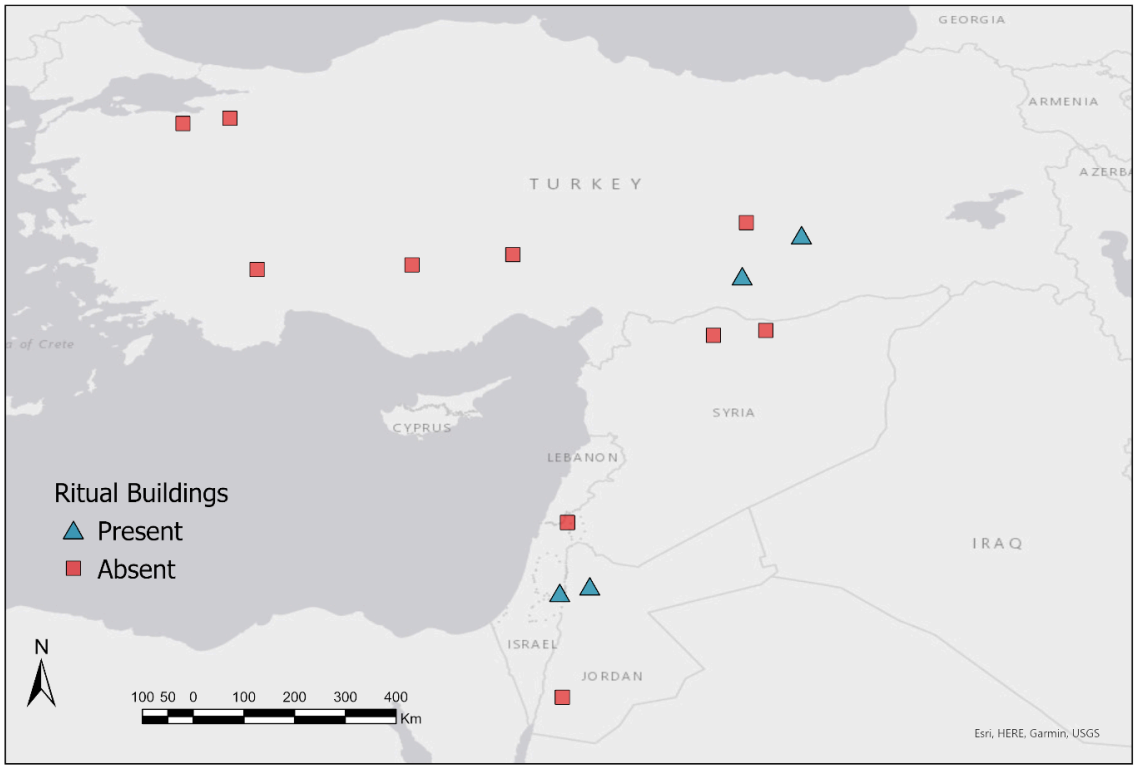

Figure 8: Map of the sites present in the late Neolithic (7,000-5,500 BC) and the type of ritual building they contain.

4.3 Ritual Buildings

Following the compilation of the data, 7 sites out of the 28 analysed were found to have convincing evidence of a specialised ritual building (Figure 9). This includes Çayönü, Ain Ghazal, Nevari Cori, Jericho, Tell Qaramel and Jerf el Ahmar. Another site, Mezraa Teleilat, has a ritual building that is referenced but no further information could be found, it is therefore tentatively included in this section but not discussed in detail (Texttiel 2008, 195). Following this identification, these sites and their respective ritual buildings can be discussed further. The role of these buildings can then be considered, both as places for ritual activity but also as spaces for meetings and mediation within a village.

Looking into the specific ritual buildings with more detail, we can see a great diversity in what makes these buildings separate and ‘cultic’. Nevalı Çori has an easily recognisable “temple” structure often compared to that of Göbekli Tepe with large

T-shaped pillars, often engraved with geometric patterns. It was likely a place where people of the village gathered and performed ceremonies (Tobolczyk, 2016 1403). Ritual buildings as a communal meeting space seems to be a common theme when looking at the sites discussed. At Jerf el Ahmar, two large circular buildings contained no domestic evidence and instead had benches all around the structure (Stordeur et al, 2000 40). A similar thing can be seen at Çayönü in the aptly named “Bench building”(Verhoeven, 2002 239). This highlights the importance of these ritual houses as places for meetings and discussion, encouraging social cohesion and conflict resolution. As well as meeting houses, some of these structures seem used for specific ritual actions. At Çayönü for example, traces of human and animal blood on altar stones could indicate a sacrificial element to these rituals (Verhoeven, 2002 239).

Figure 9: sites with a ritual building

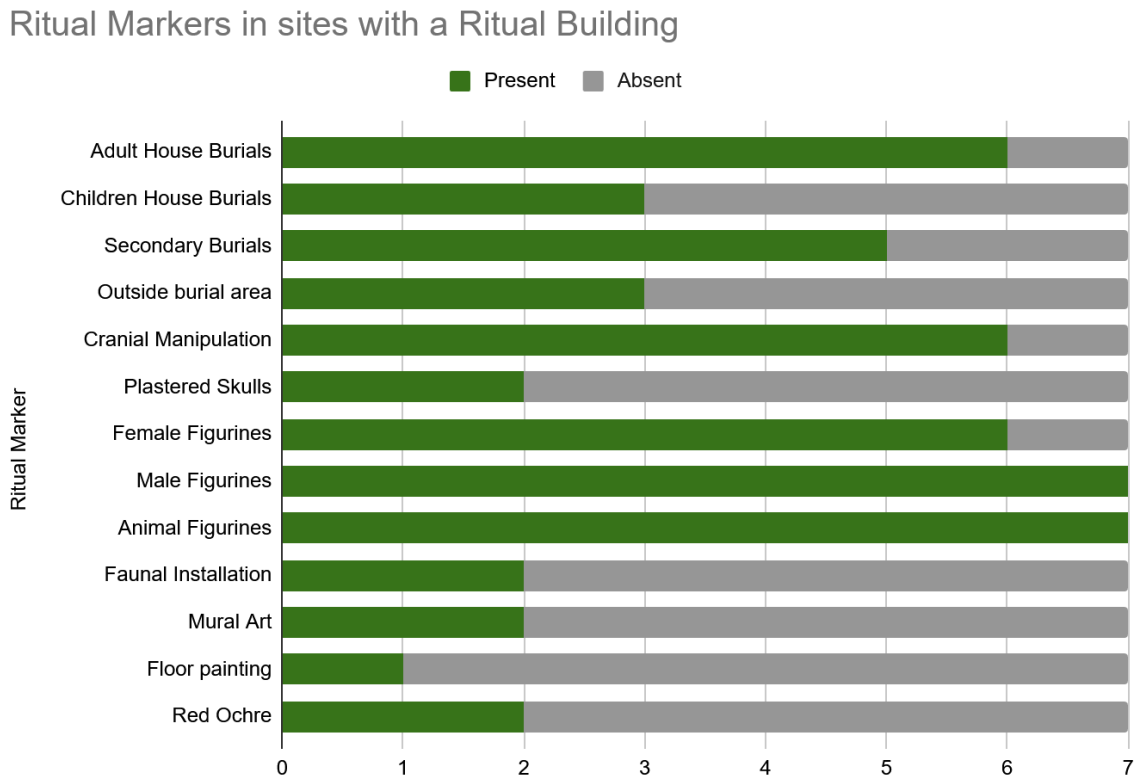

Figure 10: Amount of sites with a certain ritual marker. 7 sites in total, all of which contained male and animal figurines, only one had painted floors.

4.4 Public Buildings

This category encompasses sites with a separate building which was either used for ritual and domestic purposes or whose main purpose could not be determined. In total this includes 6 sites of the 29 studied. As expected for a category this broad, there is a great amount of diversity in the type and style of public buildings present and there is likely some overlap between this category and those that contain separate ritual buildings, as some archaeologists may be more reticent to define buildings as having cultic use. This is the case at Hallan Çemi, a Turkish site which dates back to the late epipaleolithic and PPNA (Rosenburg et al, 1998 27-28). Three layers of the site were excavated, the latest of which contained the two buildings deemed “public”(Rosenburg and Erim-Özdoğan, 2011 128). This is due to their size compared to earlier dwellings, as well as their finds which include prestige material such as obsidian and copper, an auroch skull which had been attached to the wall facing the entrance and the careful resurfacing of the floors. These buildings were

kept very clean and showed no signs of any domestic activity, although the obsidian found contained cores, so these houses may have been where the obsidian was worked. All publications surrounding this site refer to the two buildings being “public” [] despite their similarities to buildings at other sites which have been deemed ritual. The reticence to label these buildings as having cultic use may stem from the lack of other purely domestic buildings from that layer of the site. This means there is not a “norm” from which these buildings deviate and instead their status as “public” comes solely from their difference from previous buildings and the lack of domestic objects found

At Tell Mureybet, the architecture is what separates the normal domestic structures from those for public use. Buildings 42 and 47 are semi-sunken round structures , a clear difference from the above ground structures that were seemingly used for domestic purposes. However it is difficult to determine the exact use of these buildings as they contain elements of both domestic use and a potential administrative role. The domestic elements include hearths, food storage areas and bone tools while the administrative includes bench spaces potentially used for meetings and 8 anthropomorphic figurines, 7 of which are female (José Ibáñez, 2008 668). A similar building can be seen at Wadi Faynan 16, a site in Southern Jordan. Building O75 is similarly a semi-subterranean round building, however in this case the rest of the structures also follow this plan. What makes it stand out is mainly its size compared to the other buildings and the small finds present. The structure has bench structures all around, creating an amphitheatre shape making it a potential site for performances of some kind (Mithens, 2020 7). There are also many small finds that would point towards the building having a non-domestic purpose, for example a complete fox skull deposited in the walls (Flohr et al, 2018 655) as well extracted bird feathers and large collections of beads (Mithens, 2020 7). Clearly this building was important for the community although its exact function within the village remains unclear, which is why it is deemed more of a public building rather than a ritual one.

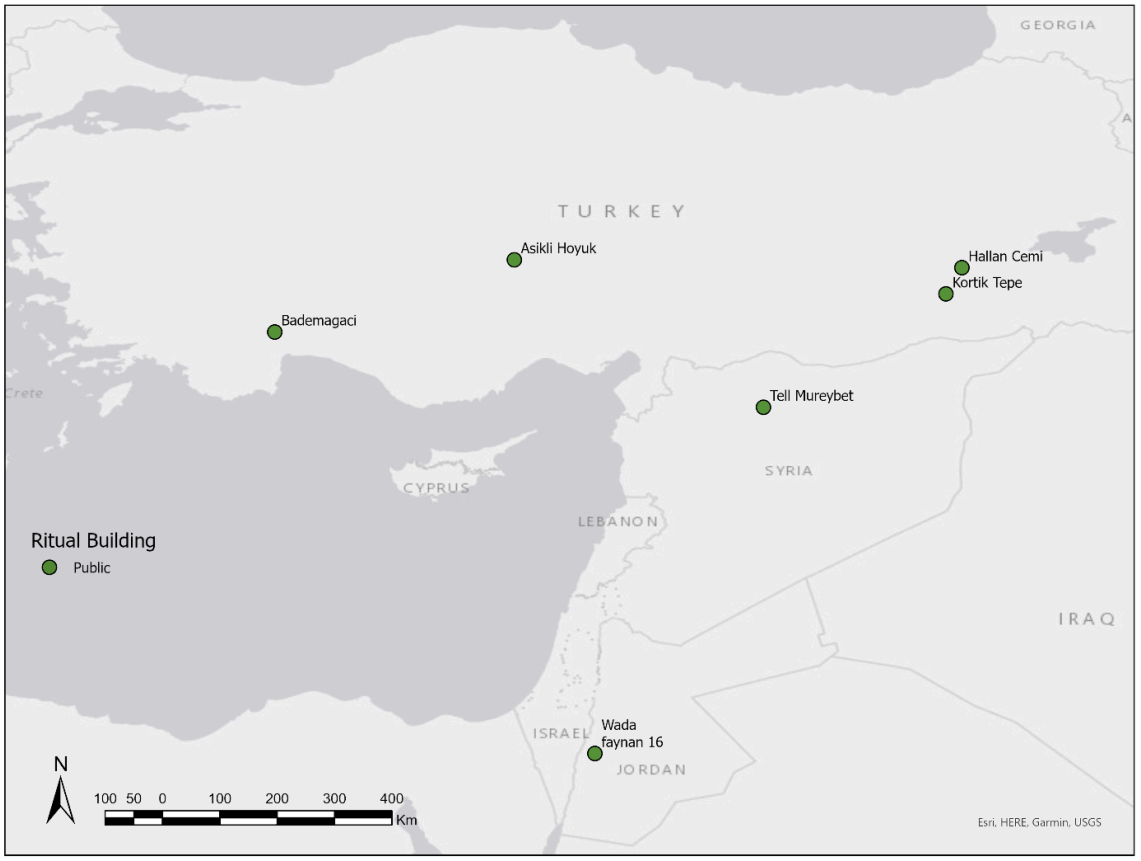

Figure 11: Sites with a separate building categorised as “public”

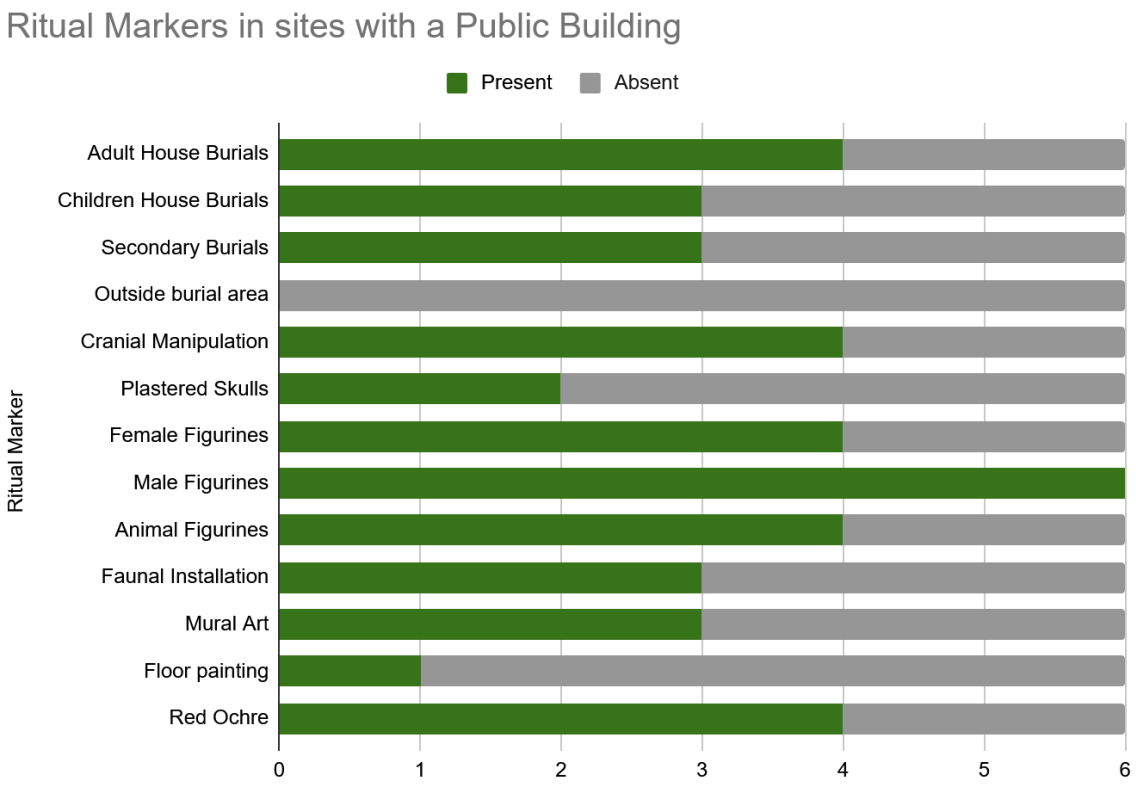

Figure 12: amount of sites with a public building that contained each ritual marker. Once again all of them contained male figurines. This time none of them contained a secondary burial area.

4.5 No separate Buildings

This makes up the greatest of the sites studied with 16 of the 29 not showing any signs of containing a separate building of any kind, either for administrative, or ritual tasks (Figure 10). This, however, does not mean that these sites contain less in terms of religious material. Although it may look like less in figure 11 this is due to the larger number of sites examined and the fact that a few of them had very little information published around them. Like the 2 other categories, burials are the most common ritual, followed by anthropomorphic figurines, this time with female figurines having being slightly more common, although not enough to try and draw out extensive conclusions. Cranial manipulation is present at 9 of the sites, with 3 of them including plastering of the skulls.

Considering the potential temporal element to the spread of temple buildings, and seeing that despite this there is not a reduction in cult activity, the question becomes, where did these cult practices take place? At Çatalhöyük Hodder brought forward the idea of the “History House” following the consensus that no specialist “shrine” building existed (Hodder and Pels, 2010 163). This idea would argue that while Çatalhöyük may seem largely egalitarian, some houses would have accrued a greater amount of symbolic material and social capital over a period of time and therefore gained prestige and importance within the village. This links into the idea of a “house society”, first brought forward by Claude Levi-Strauss in 1975. Simply put, this is a society where the house holds symbolic power as well as influence on kinship ties. It would make sense then, that having separate ritual buildings would be an unnecessary addition to the village, as all the ritualistic and cosmological needs of the community would be filled by the domestic houses.

However it is not only what a house contains that makes it a vessel for cult behaviour, but the house itself. Akkerman and Brüning (2019) brought forward the idea that the very shape of the house was filled with symbolism and meaning. The

site he discusses in relation to this is Tell Sabi Abyad, an extraordinary Northern Syrian site that covers the transition from the PPNB to the Pottery Neolithic. The houses of this site are large and rectangular, divided into different sections on the inside, they have amazing continuity and consistency throughout the occupation of the site which may reflect communal identities and strong social conventions (Akkerman and Brüning, 2019 107). This link between the ritual “temple” and the house continues on for an extended period of time following the Neolithic. Going as far as Sumerian culture where there was no specific word for a ritual structure, instead the word for to designate a domestic house was used (Kornienko, 2009 95).

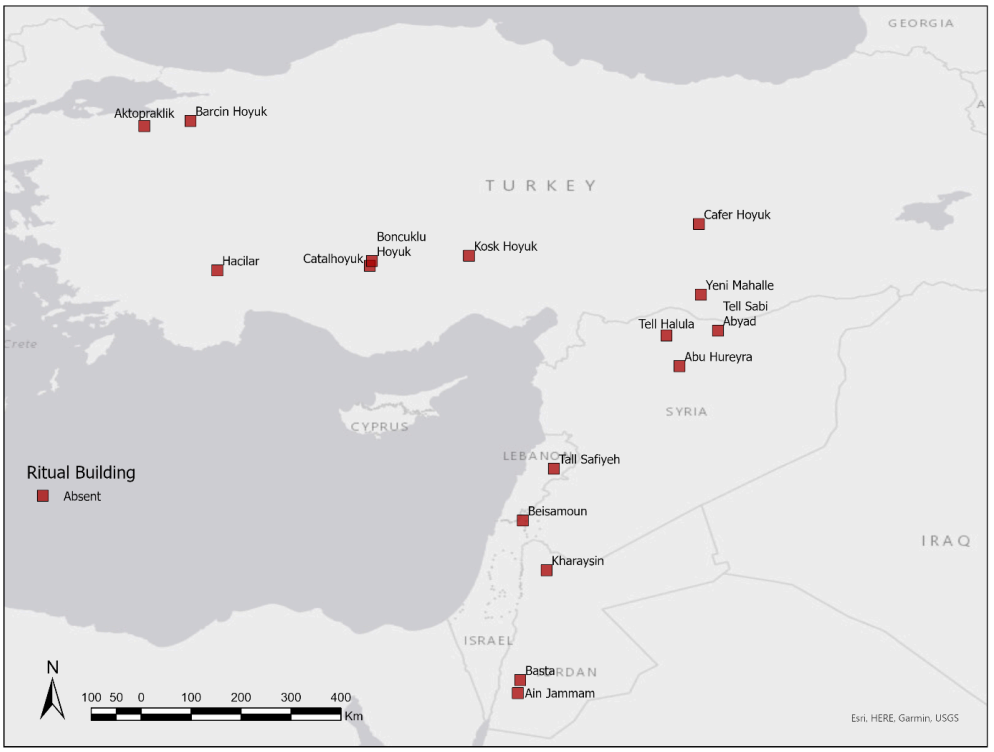

Figure 13: sites without any kind of ritual or public building

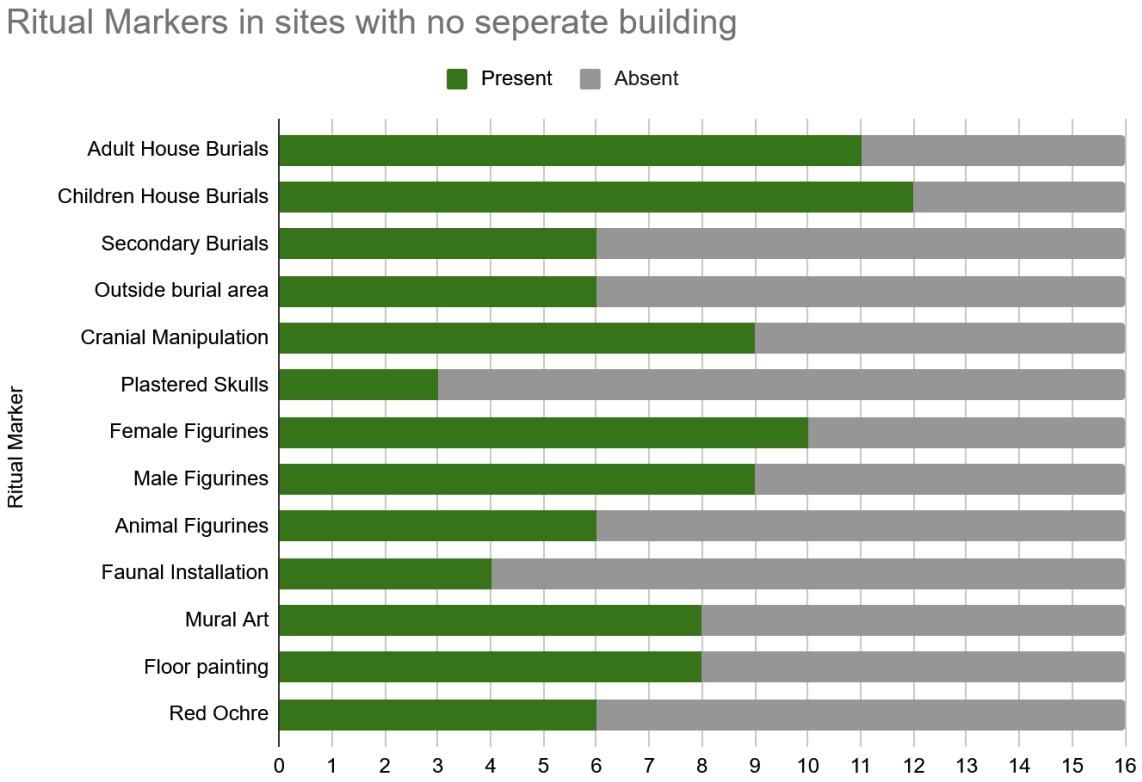

Figure 14: amount of sites without a ritual or public building and the amount of each ritual marker they contain. This chart looks slightly different then the other two due to the higher number of those sites, 16 in total.

5.0 Discussion

The results of this study seems to clearly show a correlation between the time period a site was from and whether it had a separate ritual or public structure. Earlier sites seem much more likely to contain them while later sites seem to have all their ritual activity contained within the domestic structure. It is difficult to determine broad patterns from the ritual markers as only 7 sites had ritual structures, and 6 had a public one, however in general they seem to remain fairly consistent. Burials and figurines remain the most commonly found ritual marker throughout the period, implying that there was at least some continuity in the cosmological beliefs of people at the time. This could suggest that the beliefs of the people remained consistent, but where they chose to practice those beliefs changed. The implications of this will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.1 Dissertation goals

The main goal of this dissertation was to do a large-scale comparison of multiple Neolithic sites in Anatolia and the Levant, with ritual buildings being the focus of comparison. The reason for this was a lack of overall synthesis on these sites despite them having many similarities and being generally well researched, especially for prehistoric sites.These sites are often large, complex and at times excavated by teams from different countries over many years, creating a lack of large-scale analysis to determine broader patterns of the cultures that inhabited these sites. Ritual behaviour being one of the main ways to determine differences between cultures, examining ritual markers and buildings may therefore be one of the best ways to determine changes in cultures throughout the Neolithic.

The most important find may be the discovery that ritual and public buildings seem to disappear as the Neolithic progresses. Perhaps falling out of fashion to be replaced by sites where the domestic houses were the center of cultic activity, taking away the need for a specialised building. The term ‘Neolithic revolution’ can be considered inaccurate, due to its implication of rapid and radical change and we now know the shift to agriculture was much less rapid or straightforward as previously thought

(Svizzero 2017 1). It is still generally accepted, however, that the Neolithic and specifically agriculture laid the groundwork for job specialisation and increased social stratification (Weisdorf 2005 563). It therefore seems counterintuitive for specialist ritual buildings to exist in the early Neolithic and disappear over time. It has been argued at Aşıklı Höyük, for example, that as the building complex was not big enough to accomodate the whole village at once, the access to these meeting places may have been controlled (Düring, 2006 106). This perhaps implies the presence of an elite to choose who could and could not attend. Meanwhile later sites like Çatalhöyük who lack a different building or complex are often described as egalitarian, with very little differentiation in houses, treatment of the dead or diet (Hodder 2014 5).

The narrative we paint is that agriculture created surplus that led to an increased trade and the start of commerce, which in turn allowed the non-food producing sector of society to develop, craftsmen, bureaucrats, scientists etc (Weisdorf 2005 563). Why then, would the continuation of the Neolithic lead to a more egalitarian society, with less specialisation and stratification? It is possible that those late Neolithic sites were not as equal as they first appeared. A recent study of Çatalhöyük shows that while access to foods was broadly similar throughout the site, access to goods not related to survival could show signs of inequality (Twiss et al, 2024 1). It is also possible that specialist buildings would not necessarily entail a specialist class of people; those early sites with ritual buildings may have been equally egalitarian. The burials at the sites seem to support this view of an egalitarian society, whether the village had a separate building or not. Burials within the house are most common and there does not appear to be differentiation in treatment based on age or sex. Nevertheless it is important to remember that at most of the sites, the amount of people found buried in the houses do not represent all of the people that would have lived there. This implies that those buried would have been specially selected, although we do not know the criteria. Similarly, special treatment of skulls such as plastering may have been reserved for a specific group of people, although again it is unclear what that criteria would be.

It is important to note that while the presence of ritual buildings decreased drastically, this does not correlate with a decrease in ritual behaviours. Inhumations, figurines

and paintings remain present at the later sites and, in the case of paintings, even increase. This could indicate a continuity in cosmological beliefs in this period, despite the shift away from specialised ritual buildings. Instead ritual behaviours were further embedded within the domestic, either inside the house or in certain cases on the roof. Perhaps linked to these changes is the seeming disappearance of large scale village sites in the PPNC, the cause of which is still debated. It is often thought to be either a shift back to nomadic pastoralism or inversely, the spreading out of people for increased access to farmland (Banning, Singers and Rahimi 1994, 154). In either case the culture of the late Neolithic seems to have shifted away from the dense villages we see in the PPNB. It may be possible that the disappearance of ritual buildings is an early symptom of this cultural shift. At the very least it demonstrates that Neolithic cultures in the Levant and Anatolia were not monoliths and clearly there was diversity in lifestyles and ritual practices.

Although the research tools used in this study were blunt, it is undeniable that it has succeeded in answering questions and opening up new avenues for future research. This is not to say that it is without issues, using such blunt tools always comes with the risk of leading to strokes too broad to ascertain any real answers. For example some objects that could be seen as purely domestic may have had a ritual aspect, such as pestle and mortars which were elaborately carved in the shape of humans and animals at Hallan Çemi (Rosenburg et al, 1998 24). Some archaeologists have even argued that they may have been imbued with sexual metaphors (Mithen, Finlayson and Shaffrey, 2005). These objects would then be considered both ritual and domestic. Other objects occupy this liminal space, figurines are usually considered an object of ritual, sometimes as a symbol of fertility or to bring good luck in the hunt (Rollefson 2000 167). Other works, however, have questioned this and brought forward the possibility of figurines as toys, teaching tools or simply decoration (Tuttle, 2009 327 Figure 1). The role and meaning of anthropomorphic figures is incredibly complex; they can both be seen as objects of worship and ways for communities to define and differentiate themselves in the Neolithic transition (Vurdu, 2024 164). Deciding whether an artefact is ritual or not has more to do with our modern points of view than the actual uses of the object in the past.

5.2 Ritual, domestic or administrative?

This links to the ongoing debate surrounding the degrees of separation between the ritual and domestic sphere in these village sites and the validity of labelling these buildings as “temples” or purely ritual structures. A pestle and mortar is undoubtedly an everyday object used for domestic purposes such as food processing. Nevertheless it can become imbued with meaning, symbolism and ritual power. Does this mean that it stops being a domestic object or do the two sides coexist? Many have argued that the concept of temples in the Neolithic are problematic and the term is used too liberally in publications (Forest 1999, 1). Or that ritual buildings in the Levant were unlikely to have been designated in a separate manner, instead being referred to the same way as the domestic buildings (Kornienko, 2009 95). Banning (2011) goes further and argues that the boundaries between domestic and ritual are too blurry to be seperated and therefore the labelling of buildings in such a manner is not useful. Nevertheless when looking at these sites we see these buildings being separated and used differently. Not all ritual activity happens in specialised buildings but there are places where rituality concentrates (Dietrich and Notroff 2015). Buildings that are out of the ordinary of a specific village site should be noted and examined; however, calling them temple or shrine structure may be reductive and ignores the potential administrative roles of these buildings, as well as their use for domestic tasks. Ritual centre is probably a better term than temple, however the existence of these separate ritual centres is certain. Cleary not at every site or even at the majority of them, but their presence is undeniable.

It is also important to note that while some buildings may be thought to be ritual while others may be public or administrative, it is likely that in practice these two things are linked. Perhaps future work in this field would collate the ritual and public label into one as they seem inextricably linked with one another. A broader label of unusual or deviant building might be a more accurate description, although those terms do carry somewhat negative connotations. Calling them deviation buildings rather than deviant might help to alleviate this loaded terminology. As public buildings are not necessarily ritual and ritual buildings may not be public and available to all the people in the village, this third category of deviation buildings may prove itself useful for future studies in this area.

Despite the difficulties in defining terms and setting parameters in Neolithic archaeology, it seems that broader and more coarse methods of classifying these sites can still give important results. In fact, it is of great importance that we look at these sites as a large group as well as individually to better understand trends and patterns. We can see that rituality does not diminish as the Neolithic advances, the ritual markers remain remarkably similar throughout. What seems to change is the location of these rituals from specific buildings to spread out throughout all the houses.

6.0 Conclusion

The overall conclusion that has come from this study, regardless of the interpretation of the data, is that a macro approach that focuses on as many sites as possible, while remaining broad in its definitions is an effective way of studying these sites. This method shows us broad patterns would not be visible if we were looking at only a handful of sites. With this method we have determined that separate ritual and public structures were prominent in the Early Neolithic of Anatolia and the Levant, but lessened greatly over time. We have also seen that despite this change in where rituality was performed, the actual markers of rituality (burials, figurines, faunal installations) showed little change and remained fairly consistent throughout.

Avenue for future research might consider focusing solely on sites with separate ritual structures and trying to create a typology of the different structures. It is possible that the integration of the ritual structures into the domestic ones was a gradual process, with the earliest structures like Nevalı Çori having monumental architecture, while later structures were slowly gaining domestic elements such as tools. It would also be interesting to continue this type of research into the chalcolithic and bronze age, to find out when ritual buildings came back into style. Nuance will always have its place in archaeology and the complexity of these sites makes in depth analysis an important part of their study. However, alongside that, broader and less detailed research has merit in helping to uncover overarching patterns and guiding avenues for further research.