Sacred precincts in the Neolithic of the Near East?

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Abstract: The interpretations of unusual or special archaeological contexts in the Near Eastern Neolithic that might suggest the appearance of the first forms of religious belief in early sedentary communities have commonly been associated with magic practices or other concepts related to ritual performance or symbolism. The present work proposes alternative perspectives that focus on the term "sacred" as outlined by three renowned anthropologists: Girard, Durkheim and Eliade. This paper also discusses interpretative views on the development of symbolic and ritual forms in early Holocene societies in the Near East. It is argued that the sacred in the Neolithic is an externally manifested prosocial reality that is gradually adopted via mimetic practices. A number of Neolithic archaeological examples will be presented and analysed in light of mimetic theory and other key anthropological concepts.

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the concept of the "sacred" as applied to archaeological contexts of the Neolithic in the Near East. There has been much theoretical discussion of this subject, especially in the latest publications on Neolithic Çatalhöyük and contemporary sites funded by the Templeton

project (see Hodder ed. 2010, 2014b, 2018, 2019b, 2020). After decades of research on hunter-gatherers and early farming populations of the Fertile Crescent, archaeologists and the wider research community still question the nature of the emergence of the first forms of belief in supernatural agents and the construction of sacred precincts. The Neolithic in southwest Asia is a pivotal period in the appearance of socio-economic developments that gradually and permanently changed the way of living of early Holocene communities. These changes included the abandonment of mobile hunting and gathering lifeways and the adoption of new forms of subsistence (Braidwood, 1972; Cauvin, 2000; Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, 2011). In the timeframe that ranges approximately from 10,000 to 5,000 years BC, communities became more sedentary and engaged more in food production; they began to consistently cultivate the land and domesticated some plant and animal species, such as barley, emmer, einkorn and sheep, cattle and pigs (Zeder 2011). They also started to create large settlements, as well as cooperated and traded on a large scale and established more structured forms of social organisation based on a more complex symbolic way of communication (Kuijt ed. 2002). Moreover, the Neolithic period presents the formation of unprecedented structures, such as the enclosures of Göbekli Tepe, which suggest a prolonged and well-established practice of rituals and, perhaps, religious beliefs in supernatural entities (Schmidt 2012).

This paper discusses the theme of the "sacred" in the Neolithic by introducing three key anthropological concepts and trying to link these to common archaeological finds (in particular some architectural features and internal division of building space) that might suggest the practice of religious belief and the perception of the sacred in Neolithic communities of southwest Asia. Assuming that this phenomenon occurred, it would represent the first clear examples of religious practices in structured sedentary communities. The aim of this work is to propose new interpretative approaches, to contribute to the analysis and discussion of special archaeological finds and to investigate new explanatory models that have not as yet been considered in relation to the Neolithic.

Anthropological approaches to the sacred

The basic idea of the "sacred" is generally conceived as "*Connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration*" (Oxford English dictionary online), while the profane is commonly understood as being the opposite to the sacred. These two words are applied in various contexts such as food, actions and texts and are subjected to cultural interpretation and communal understanding (Insoll 2001; Lambek 2002). It is therefore generally accepted that the sacred is not a fixed concept and, in certain non-Western cultures, it might not be distinguishable from secular or mundane entities. As Dupuy (2019:230) has neatly summarised, the sacred is usually manifested through three components: a) the ritual, b) the system of obligations and prohibition that sets out what is considered sacred and morally accepted and finally c) the mythology that officially tells the story of the founding event. This section does not aim to discuss the sacred in general but it will cover some key anthropological perspectives of the sacred and religious belief that might contribute to recognising such human behaviours in typical archaeological contexts of the Near Eastern Neolithic.

In archaeology, the concept of the sacred is commonly outlined through two main social characteristics. The first aspect is the communal and personal ritual performances related to a presence perceived by the individuals as an external, invisible or immanent, and eventually supernatural and transcendent, being acting in the natural world (Blake 2005; Droogan 2013; Swenson 2015). This entity is not only perceived but also venerated and communicated. The other aspect is related to the idea of a structured community, namely a group that has a defined set of rules and is oriented and formally unified in the expression of its religious belief and identity (Garwood et al. 1991; Edwards 2005).

With respect to the Neolithic in southwest Asia, archaeologists have discussed the dimension of the sacred starting from ritual practices and from the potential meanings of symbols (see for example Bischoff 2002; Cauvin 2000; Hodder and Meskell 2011; Gebel and Rollefson ed. 2005). Verhoeven (2002c) reports a series of different anthropological approaches to ritual practices that

have influenced the current interpretation of the archaeological finds in prehistory. For the analysis of ritual in prehistoric contexts (see fig. 3 and 4 in Verhoeven, 2002c:33-34) he proposes a generalised model that is structured through five main components: framing, syntax, symbols, dimensions and analogy. Each of these forms is essentially interlinked with the others and represents the theoretical grid in the interpretative process of the ritual acts that are strongly based on material evidence. The first step is framing the object of study (e.g. skeletons buried in a special building) by analysing its context, which is not a straightforward process which sometimes requires great attention to detail. A ritual frame is also observed when unusual archaeological contexts regularly occur, namely objects deliberately disposed under a certain order or that have certain properties (see full list on Verhoeven 2002c:26). A further important step is a description of the symbols that frame, and are framed by, the ritual context, followed by a conceivable reconstruction of the actor-audience relation involved in the ritual performance and of the plausible social significances. When possible, the interpretative process is further supported by comparing the results with ritual and symbolic forms manifested in ethnographic examples, which should not be assumed as models, but they should be regarded as 'media for thoughts' (Verhoeven 2002c:32).

In addition to what has been argued on ritual and symbolic behaviour, there are three further interlinked anthropological perspectives that would contribute to the archaeological investigation of the sacred: hierophany, the pharmakon and prosociality.

Hierophany

Hierophany is a concept proposed by Mircea Eliade, that can be synthesised as the manifestation of the sacred. In *the Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade (1959) introduces the phenomenon of the sacred as something that comes from the outside, an external entity that is manifested to the community and makes places, material things and temporal moments sacred. It is the revelation of an absolute reality as opposed to partial or non-reality and it is composed of two elements: the modality of the sacred, namely the phenomenon itself –

how it appears to the individual – and the 'historical incident' which is 'the way in which the sacred was conceived and therefore experienced' (Studstill 2000:178). Between the two elements, Eliade insists on the importance of the modality of the sacred more than the historic aspects (Eliade 1958:7). The reason why the author emphasises the first aspect is that he consistently employs a phenomenological approach to the subject. The principle is to outline and describe the behavioural aspects that surround the appearance and cult of the sacred more than analysing the historical developments that might have contributed to the emergence of the sacred entities.

Nevertheless, although hierophany is observable, the Romanian anthropologist also declares that 'the sacred never appears wholly or directly' (Eliade 1958: 25), it is never fully revealed, and it is expressed through profane objects which are venerated not because of their properties but because they are something more than themselves. Therefore, the sacred belongs to dimensions that are intangible and, because the mere reality of the sacred is unknown, it provokes the human emotions of, for example, awe and fear.

The fact that the sacred is not a fully discernible entity implies that the hierophanies (i.e. tangible sacred things) are not a fixed reality but are subject to change and re-evaluation. This important aspect aims to highlight the idea that the sacred is not a reality idiosyncratically produced by the community but instead is perceived as a phenomenon that has its origins from an external entity in the first instance. From this point of view, the human experience of the surrounding landscape and built environments could assume an important role in the expression of possible religious beliefs. This latter observation could represent a further supporting argument for environmental determinism, which has a long tradition in the history of Archaeology and beyond (see Hulme 2011), but instead the concept of hierophany here should be understood as a convergence of the two modalities through which the sacred is manifested, as Eliade has illustrated in his work. The concept of hierophany also indicates the potentiality, affordances and influences that things convey through their appearance, materiality and engagement with the social environment and individual cognition (Malafouris and Renfrew ed. 2010).

Pharmakon

In ancient Greek philosophy, the ambivalent term of the pharmakon assumes several meanings that could be translated as remedy, cure, drug but also poison and venom and it has often been associated with ritual sacrifice and drama. This concept has been particularly examined in the works of Jacques Derrida and René Girard. Notably, Girard (1986) analyses the ancient Greek religious rituals of the pharmakos as the result of the scapegoat mechanism of violence which has its origins in mimetism.

Developing from the Aristotelian intuition on human mimesis, the mimetic theory or mimetism in Girard's work is revealed through the dynamic processes of human desire, which are essentially subject to other individuals' influences (Girard 1961). Such unpredictable processes emerge and are essentially formed by the triangular mimetic desire between the subject, the model that mediates the desire, and the desired object. In times when the object is not divisible and the subject and mediator are in proximity, the social interaction is gradually altered and rivalry and opposition appear. Hence, when two individuals persistently compete in obtaining the desired object and their respective desires to succeed grows, other anthropological concepts, such as violence, escalation and contagion, quickly arise (Girard 1988). One of the potential negative outcomes of these mimetic dynamics is that of exasperated and undifferentiated violence. This unrestrained violence that forces individuals to fight each other indefinitely ceases when the affected violent crowd arbitrarily selects a victim as scapegoat (Girard 1986). Such a decision unifies the group in the fundamental act of elimination of the perceived reason for the uncontrolled social disorder and turmoil which has arisen. The scapegoat resolution is the natural development of social life in times of conflict and chaos that, according to Girard, is the origin of all cultural forms and ancient religions (Girard et al. 1987).

In his work *Violence and the Sacred* Girard (1977) argues that the sacred is primarily constituted by the unconscious violence that structures the human world and establishes the rules for the community. As a result of past

experiences of disorder and uncontrolled violence, communities institute symbols and social conventions that are essentially reflections of the scapegoat mechanism that freed the group from the violent crisis. Hence, touching or modifying the original forbidden symbolic system and rituals is felt as a threat to communal stability, which is why a violent law is usually collectively imposed for ruling and social monitoring. Community members perceive the beneficial effect of the pharmakon before and after the ritual killing (i. e. the sacrifice), which is the re-enactment of the primordial scapegoat mechanism.

Mimetic theory and the concept of pharmakon, that have also been applied in other disciplines such as politics and psychology, might be an interesting theoretical tool that could be useful in understanding ritual and social organisation in prehistoric contexts such as the Neolithic, in particular in relation to repetition and standardisation, as will be argued later.

Prosocial
Thirdly, the sacred is something that goes beyond the interest of the individual and it promotes a prosocial behaviour. This traditional functionalist characteristic of the sacred derives from the classic Durkheimian approach that highlights the idea that what really matters from a collective point of view is the interest of society at large, rather than the rational individual's mundane preferences. The emotional force that bonds group members and sustains their internal organisation feeds the social consciousness that establishes community values (Durkheim 1964). As the emotional attachment to sacred values decreases, individualism and idiosyncrasies prevail over the social interests.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915) argues that the sacred is the core of religious belief where religion itself is the essence of a society. 'Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate' (Durkheim 1915:40-41). Such prohibitions and correlated enforcing rules are established with the aim of safeguarding community values and structure against individualism. Therefore, the social element of the sacred in Durkheim's perspective is then quite clear: 'the religious character of an object

is not something inherent in it but instead superimposed on it' (Uricoechea 1992:160). Many critiques (notably Goldenweiser 1917) of Durkheim's theory of the origin and nature of religion have been published and they are mainly concerned with the socio-psychological approach to the theme of the sacred and the supernatural. The purpose of this work is not to examine the controversies and flaws in Durkheim's thought, but to highlight the classical notion of the sacred as a way of promoting and supporting sociality by limiting individual proclivities.

The leitmotif that surrounds the idea of the sacred in structured communities as a prosocial phenomenon represents a key factor in understanding the possible evolutionary developments of early farming life. Archaeological records in prehistory and ancient history suggest the increasing community practices in relation to the sacred. As communities grow and expand, more aspects and forms of religious belief emerge and the formation of sacred precincts becomes more evident and widespread. This trend has led some scholars to reinforce the idea that cultural evolution promoted the establishment of strong moralising supernatural entities for prosocial purposes (Norenzayan et al. 2016).

The aforementioned anthropological concepts demonstrate that the social element of the sacred is a complex phenomenon to identify and describe, especially in prehistoric contexts where a lack of written sources impedes an accurate reconstruction of the various social dynamics related to the sacred. Nevertheless, analysing the behavioural aspects relating to community structure could be useful in detecting the forms of the sacred. It is worth mentioning that the social effort of establishing sacred precincts might not necessarily involve the concept of God or religion as normally conceived in modern societies. In fact, although it has been argued that religious belief in early farming communities might involve belief in humanlike external agents (Guthrie 2014), the idea of sacred precincts proposed here does not always imply anthropomorphism. Indeed, the concepts of unawareness in mimetic theory and mystery in the hierophany aim to support a more general and dynamic approach to the sacred that is not restricted to anthropogenic realms. Needless to say, such dynamism is reflected in all cultural dimensions,

including architecture where the distinction between domestic and non-domestic/special building should not necessarily mark any fixed line between the sacred and profane (see Banning 2011). Finally, this paper proposes aspects of the sacred that are visible in the archaeological record and might illustrate social behaviours in prehistory in a more helpful and effective way. In fact, some behavioural characteristics, such as repetition and formalisation, have not been examined appropriately in the archaeological analysis of special contexts. As will be argued later, such behavioural aspects are pivotal in the constitution of essential socio-economic structures of prehistoric communities.

Examining possible sacred precincts in the Near Eastern Neolithic

Special buildings, unusual finds and highly decorated artefacts that might suggest the presence of religious performances have been noticed in diverse Neolithic sites of southwest Asia (fig. 1). Among these archaeological examples, three cases in central Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia have been selected for the examination of certain social aspects, in particular, repetition and spatial-temporal differentiation. Further archaeological examples will be incorporated in the following section for the discussion of the sacred in the Neolithic.

Figure 1: Map of some main Near Eastern Neolithic sites mentioned in the text (© Google Earth)

Boncuklu

The first example comes from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) site of Boncuklu Höyük (8300-7800 cal. BC) located in central Turkey (Baird et al. 2012; Baird et al. 2018). The interesting feature of this site is the household setting. Houses at Boncuklu are usually not large and all structures are single-roomed and sub-oval with plastered floors enclosed by walls that are usually made with mudbrick. These houses are oriented northwest to southeast and are divided into "dirty" and "clean" areas (Baird et al. 2017). The dirty area is the part of the building where cooking and other house-related activities were taking place. Hearths, kitchen facilities and a high amount of organic material and charcoal fragments are found in this section of the house (Baird et al. 2017:757). A larger, cleaner and well-kept area is located to the southern part of the house. Here, the pavements are repeatedly replastered, the dead are buried under the floor usually near the walls and decorative installations are

occasionally placed in this part of the building. Such internal subdivision suggests that people at Boncuklu structured their use of space and distinguished the house activity very neatly. In fact, postholes located next to the wall to support the roof are located 'near either end of the 'clean'/'dirty' floor area division' (Baird et al. 2017:760) and sometimes small finds, such as a figurine or obsidian fragments, are found at the bottom of empty postholes. Also, houses are often constructed in the same location: new houses are built in the same spot where older ones were previously located, always maintaining the same household setting, as recorded in areas K and H (Baird et al. 2012:227). This practice is also present in other nearby sites, such as Aşıklı, Can Hasan and Çatalhöyük (Düring 2006).

Çatalhöyük
Çatalhöyük (7100-5950 cal. BC) is another Neolithic site on the Konya plain (located around 10 km south of Boncuklu), with rich decorative features and preserved archaeological contexts and a continuous occupational span of over 1,000 years (Bayliss et al. 2015; Marciniak et al. 2015; Hodder 2006). Moreover, it is an extraordinarily large settlement (more than 10 ha site extension), densely occupied with most of the buildings erected one next to the other with similar features and internal organisation (Hodder 2007; 2014abc). One of the most interesting aspects of this site is the architecture: there is no clear evidence of extensive employment of streets or large plaza in this early farming village where most of the domestic structures are built in close proximity. At Çatalhöyük there appears to be a further distinction between houses. Some structures contain an unusual number of decorative elements and human remains buried under the floors. These structures have been called "shrines" by Mellaart (1967) and "special buildings" by Hodder and colleagues (Hodder 2016; ed. 2018). The presence of repetitive practices in these buildings is also clearly visible. Like at Boncuklu, houses at Çatalhöyük are built one above the other and also certain key decorative elements are consistently reproduced on the same location and with the same patterns such as the pair of leopards facing each other that have been deliberately depicted on the same wall in 'Mellaart's Shrine 44, Levels VII and VI' (Hodder 2018:22). Such intentional reproduction shows that strong historical links and traditions have been kept for several years (Hodder and

Pels 2010). Moreover, although only a small percentage of all structures have a large number of subfloor burials (Düring 2006:130-147), an elite of people dwelling in special buildings and establishing a socio-economic power over other community members does not seem to be present at Çatalhöyük (see Wright 2014). Such a form of social inequality, on the other hand, is a quite common social phenomenon in the later Bronze and Iron Age cultural entities of the Near East.

Paintings, decorative installations and symbolic objects at Çatalhöyük are almost exclusively located intramurally and are generally related to hunting practices and wild animals (Hodder and Meskell 2011). A great number of alternative interpretations of the symbols and ritual frames at Çatalhöyük have been proposed (see for example Meskell et al. 2008; Relke 2007; Whitehouse and Hodder 2014). It is worth mentioning here that Girard (2015) sees the Çatalhöyük mural depictions of teasing-and-baiting wild animals as a ritualistic re-enactment of the scapegoat mechanism. Part of the objectives of this work is the development of the interpretative tool of the mimetic theory as formulated by Girard and recently proposed by Hodder (ed. 2019b)[3].

Çayönü and the "skull building"
The last example is the so-called "skull building" at Çayönü. Çayönü is a large Neolithic settlement located in eastern Anatolia that has been occupied for an extensive time period spanning approximately 10,500 to 7,000 BC (Erim-Özdogan, 2011). Diverse architectural forms define the stratigraphy of the site and distinguish the phases of occupation. Buildings at Çayönü develop from round huts to large-roomed rectangular structures. The skull building is a non-residential structure where approximately 70 skulls and a large number of human bones belonging to more than 400 individuals have been found. The use and refurbishment of the skull building lasted for more than a millennium from the middle-late PPNA to the late phases of the PPNB (Özdogan and Özdogan 1989). During the course of this period, the location

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[3] Published after the presentation of this paper at LPCANE conference, this recent book *Violence and the Sacred in the Ancient Near East* edited by Ian Hodder (2019) does not discuss all the Girardian concepts in relation to the Neolithic, in particular the pharmakon, namely the twofold meaning that sacred imageries convey. Many aspects of the mimetic theory could be particularly useful in the interpretative processes of archaeological finds in prehistory contexts.

of this mortuary house did not significantly change: a slightly isolated structure on the south-east side of the settlement near the Boğazçay, a small tributary of the Tigris (see fig. 18-33 in Erim-Özdoğan 2011:246-255). Unlike other contemporary Neolithic sites, the skull cult at Çayönü seems to be confined to delimited spaces, outside the domestic life. The excavators of the site have supported such interpretation with the evidence that domestic burial practices at Çayönü decrease from the "cell buildings" phase (PPNB period) and in the PPNC are completely absent in all domestic contexts, which might suggest the idea that the dead were buried somewhere outside the settlement during this time period (Erim-Özdoğan 2011:213). Separated non-domestic structures mainly dedicated to mortuary practices are also observed in other PPN sites such as building 5 at Bestansur in Central Zagros (Walsh and Matthews 2018) and other public buildings at Kfar Hahoresh in South Levant (Goring-Morris 2002).

There are several other examples that might suggest the presence of religious practices and the establishment of sacred areas in the Near Eastern Neolithic, including the enclosures at Göbekli Tepe embellished with tall T-shaped pillars and well-preserved engravings and sculptures of human and animal figures (Schmidt, 2012; Dietrich et al, 2014; Notroff et al, 2016; Dietrich and Dietrich, 2019); the deposition of plastered skulls and animal bones at Kfar Hahoresh that is believed to represent a mortuary centre for local communities (Goring-Morris 2002; Meier et al. 2017); the 'Ain Ghazal statutes that have been deliberately manufactured for display and perhaps for veneration of deities (Schmandt-Besserat 2013) and the communal structures at Jerf el Ahmar and at Nevalı Çori (Stordeur et al. 2000; Hauptmann 1993; Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1998).

Interpretations of such special finds have always been subject to debate since the introduction of deities into the narratives of the Neolithic (Cauvin 2000; Gimbutas 1982; Mellaart 1963). In light of recent critiques (see for examples Kuijt and Chesson 2005) some authors have proposed the role of magic as an explanatory model for Neolithic ritual practices (Gebel et al. 2002; Nakamura and Pels 2014), alongside alternative views (Kuijt 2008; Mithen 2004; Özdoğan 2001, Verhoeven 2002ab). The next paragraph proposes a further

way to interpret special archaeological finds and outlines the theoretical kit for identifying possible sacred locations in prehistoric communities based on the anthropological ideas illustrated earlier.

The dimension of the sacred in the Near Eastern Neolithic

Seeking the sacred in the Neolithic

The Neolithic period is an important phase in human prehistory as a series of concomitant events gradually appear and transform the social life of early Holocene communities, including the creation of remarkable buildings and large settlements. Moreover, a substantial increase in settlement size especially emerges in the late phases of the PPNB in many Near Eastern regions that might have contributed to social stress and ecological degradation (Kuijt 2000; Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2010), although the latter has been criticised (Campbell 2009). In this regard, it has been argued that the Neolithic demographic transition deeply affected the cognition of the individuals immersed in a growing and transforming social context (Gebel and Rollefson ed. 2013). The diachronic changes and increase of Neolithic symbolic forms and ritual practices should be framed in a context of social challenges and transformation, primarily the inter- and intra-group social relationships among members of large communities. In a social environment where oral communication is no longer a sufficient solution for transmitting communicative propositions (see Coward and Dunbar 2014), Neolithic populations produce and use symbols to express intention and volition in order to establish a social power or order against disambiguation and chaos.

These social manifestations suggest that Neolithic people increasingly performed large cooperative actions and more often committed themselves to work together, to create such important artefacts and cultic places, producing new material culture for symbolic reference in order to maintain social bonds in large groups (Sterelny, 2015). Such built environments would allow the development of social devices that permit the surpassing of the cognitive limit for bilateral face-to-face relations, to bypass the problem of information flow, to facilitate intragroup communication and to manage

potential conflicts (Dunbar, 2013). This also implies an increasing commitment and the need of trust when cooperating with unknown individuals, which must be displayed with costly signalling performances. Therefore, such approaches involve forms of cooperation that overtake the concerns of the individual. Delayed economic returns, possible warfare (see Gebel and Rollefson ed. 2010), increasing agro-pastoral labour and great expenditure on building special structures show how Neolithic communities manifest forms of collaboration that go beyond the direct individual interest, favouring instead the interest of the community as a whole.

Within this framework, the sacred intended as a functionalist social device appears to meet the requirements that individuals seek in order to sustain their extended and demanding social links. Considering that order and communication gradually constitute an essential part of the Neolithic social organisation, the sacred seems to embody the spirit that supports, encourages and favours the identity, the culture and the belonging to the land and to the built environments. Nevertheless, such social needs might not be something new to prehistoric communities. In fact, one could argue that Palaeolithic art might also represent the same intent to establish sacred locations (e.g. caves?) for facilitating human interactions and communication, knowledge transmission and perhaps the practice of religious beliefs. Such argumentation would then imply that the formation of sacred places in the Neolithic is an existing common human behaviour visible already in, for instance, the caves of Altamira or Lascaux (Sponsel 2015). Indeed, art and symbols that might suggest the practice of hunting rituals, magic, witchcraft or religious performances is somehow present in all stages of prehistory, including the Palaeolithic (see Berghaus 2004). However, the significance of Neolithic symbolism and ritual contexts is given by the ecological, economic, political and social developments that dramatically changed the lifeways of early Holocene communities and subsequent cultural entities. The uniqueness of the Neolithic in southwest Asia lies in the appearance of large villages of food producers and unprecedented cultic constructions in conjunction with social environments in constant mutation. The type of social structure that gradually appears in the Neolithic is substantially different from the preceding ones, which makes the study of the sacred all the more intriguing.

Standardisation of material culture

The anthropological approaches previously illustrated delineate the theoretical scaffolding for discussing important social characteristics of the sacred. The first behavioural aspect is the standardisation of material culture, a phenomenon that is particularly visible in the later phases of the Neolithic and in large settlements. Some examples are the standardisation of symbols in the stone vessels and other portable objects of Körtik Tepe (Benz et al. 2018: 145-150), the T-shaped pillars in the PPN sites in the Urfa region (Çelik 2015) and the standardisation of building structure at Çatalhöyük (Düring 2007) and Boncuklu (Baird et al. 2017). It has been argued that certain forms of standardisation in ritual practices might be related to a change in the mode of religiosity (Whitehouse and Hodder 2014). However, it would be more convincing to observe the establishment of canons and standards in the Neolithic of the Near East in light of what has been argued earlier, in particular through the mimetic theory. Formalised ritual actions and the standardisation of material culture should be considered as a deliberate re-proposition of symbols that express the cultural identity of the community and that support social learning and transmission (see Benz et al. ed. 2017; Sterelny and Watkins 2015). Moreover, it highlights the negative element of forcing commitment and monitoring for prosocial purposes under a unified standard symbolic system. In a social framework where, for instance, free-riders, division of labour and management of food surplus constitute a set of increasingly difficult challenges to face, the enforcement of standards represent the socially agreed resolution to ease the production of goods, to contain potential conflict of interests and to avoid internal violent crisis. Perhaps it might not be a coincidence that standardised symbols at Körtik Tepe are depicted on vessels, which are typical artefacts usually used for storing and processing desirable goods. Moreover, a large number of stone objects has been found in Körtik Tepe's graves, among which some incised stone plaques depicting undefined creatures (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011:97). The standardisation of the depiction of such indeterminate animals on portable objects (see fig. 31 in Özkaya and Coşkun 2011:125) and their

relation with mortuary practices might suggest the mimetic intent to "manage" death as the ultimate form of violence (see Palaver 2019).

Similarly, the division of space at Boncuklu and Çatalhöyük might be intended to formalise an essential cultural practice. Separating a clean area that is devoted to the burial of the dead and, perhaps, to the veneration of ancestors (see Kuijt 2009) from a more mundane dirty area may represent the intention to highlight and distinguish certain ritual acts from other daily practices (Anspach 2019:134-135; Hodder, 2019a:241). Moreover, the erection and disposition of the T-shape pillars in the Urfa province is not a coincidence. It has been argued that the life-force represented in the stone monuments of Göbekli Tepe involved both animal and human ontologies (Fagan 2017) and that the stylised anthropomorphic forms of the pillars and their reliefs enhance the violent environment that the site embeds (Clare et al. 2019). The negative component of the mimetic mechanism is evident in the architectural configuration of Neolithic buildings by implementing distinct standards. Indeed, a certain cultural element in the Neolithic storytelling has established the symbol of a "T" where human and animal mimetic forms of engagement have been attached to it (see Dietrich et al. 2019). By implementing and dedicating certain domestic or non-domestic spaces for the performances of vital social acts, these areas appear to be more than ordinary domains where feasting, mortuary practices and other ritual acts find their own environment. As Bell (1992) pointed out, the ritual systems are more than just a reflection of forms of social organisation and integration, they constitute instead the hinges of the social system itself. Therefore, it appears that Neolithic populations have acknowledged such an important distinction by introducing sets of standards and principles in the production of material culture as well as in the architectural setting.

Repetitive behaviour
Analogously to the standardisation of material culture discussed above, repetitive behavioural forms are another related characteristic of the sacred that can be observed, for example, in the construction and layout of buildings in central Anatolian sites and the management and deposition of detached human skulls as seen in Çayönü and other Levantine sites such as Jericho, Tell

Aswad and Beisamoun (Bonogofsky 2006). Moreover, the installation of bucrania (at Hallan Çemi, Çayönü, Tell Qaramel, Jerf el-Ahmar and so forth) and interment of animal bones (at Yiftahel, Kfar HaHoresh, Tell 'Abr 3) are also quite frequently found in relation to domestic and non-domestic structures. When analysing special archaeological finds, these repetitive behaviours should be considered as a key element in the process of interpretation insofar as it manifests the deliberate and persistent intention to establish social principles. It has also been argued that the implement and replacement of fire installations at Aşıklı and Çatalhöyük have had a significant impact in community cohesion during the transition from foraging to farming (Fuchs-Khakhar 2019; Anspach 2018).

Repetitive actions suggest the collective intent to maintain certain customs and community rules. Such choices might be interpreted as the result of the continuous re-presentation of a *habitus* (after Bourdieu 1977) that embodies the community system through practice. Such practical acts are not always led by a conscious or rational comprehension and knowledge of the circumstances. Nevertheless, it appears that the community itself manifests the awareness of the prosocial consequences that social commitment to perform certain actions produces, especially in relation to the sacred.

The installations of animal bones manifest the proposition of a widespread Neolithic symbolic system that led Cauvin (2000) to argue for their interpretation as representing the birth of the first gods and goddesses. Perhaps this re-proposition of wild animal symbolism could have been related to some types of rites of initiation or passage as a way of re-enacting the processes that led to the establishment of a pharmakon, which is why many of these ritual performances involve dangerous animals, the violations of taboos and/or engagement in violent acts, as argued by Girard (1977). The concept of the pharmakon, indeed, embodies the twofold meaning of the founding symbolism. On the one hand, it proposes an image of death, terror, fear, aggressiveness, awe and the like (see Benz and Bauer 2013), but on the other hand, it transmits a feeling of assurance, security, reliability, protection and so forth. In other words, the pharmakon in Neolithic communities represents the social convention that sets aside certain things and isolates built

environments in order to arbitrarily establish a communal identity and culture based on past experience, traditions and transmitted knowledge. Similarly, the manufacturing of detached skulls could also be interpreted along these lines, as remembering figures or personalities that have characterised the vital matters of the community (Benz 2010; Kuijt 2008).

Furthermore, small clay or stone figurines could also conceivably be interpreted in this way. Repetitive practices and standardisation in the production of small anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines have been noted at Nevali Çori (Morsch 2017) and Ganj Dareh (Eygun 1992), where a standardised pattern of garments and dresses is consistently represented. Moreover, violin-shaped figurines at Munhata and Jericho (Kenyon and Holland 1982: 554; Garfinkel 1995: 72) are another example of a standardised figure which had a considerate impact in the Chalcolithic art of South Levant (Levy and Golden 1996). In the Late Neolithic, the pointing head and the "coffee beans" eyes of the Yamurkian figurines are accurately represented in the same style (Garfinkel 1993). In Central Anatolia, some Neolithic figurines have holes in their bases or necks, which might indicate the application of body parts made with perishable materials (Croucher and Belcher 2017:449). This latter practice has been noted at, for example, Çatalhöyük (Nakamura and Meskell 2013) and Köşk Höyük (Öztan 2012). Regardless of whether figurines were used for teaching or gaming purposes, religious practices or made for representing genders, body parts, powerful personalities or deities (see Meskell 2017), they would still embody an external figure that is repetitively formed and presented in a specific cultural way. As Bailey observes, what makes a representation successful is its rhetoric, namely the ability to capture the viewer's attention by reminding or connecting what is represented to the individual's past experience or feelings, 'powerful means of proposing alternative realities, because it can exploit the process of representation to replace the real with the fictional' (Bailey 2005:137). Repeating is thus a key aspect of the practical act of forming sacred places because it is not just a course of action to reinforce its reality but a *modus vivendi* that is oriented towards an externally manifested reality that allows diverse and large groups of individuals to harmoniously live and cooperate together.

These themes of discussion of the sacred in prehistoric contexts aim to outline that dealing with the sacred in increasing complex and changing social environments should not be considered as a fixed expression of a social belief in supernatural agency. Instead, the sacred in prehistory, and particularly in the Near Eastern Neolithic, should be first observed as a collective way to face issues and to manage internal and external forces that affect both the communal and the individual.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the possible establishment of sacred precincts in the Neolithic and to provide an alternative view to the current discussion of special archaeological finds that might suggest the appearance of religious practices in early Holocene community of southwest Asia. The ideas proposed here suggest that the sacred is a prosocial reality that gradually emerges in prehistoric human societies via the mimetic mechanism, although it is never fully detectable.

Taking into consideration all of the socio-economic transformations of the Neolithic, including the need to bypass the cognitive limit of oral communication in large groups, the establishment of sacred areas represents one of the key social developments of early farming communities in structuring their internal organisation. Sacred precincts might be conceived and set in the private sphere (see Boncuklu and Çatalhöyük) as well as in the public sphere (see Çayönü) only when certain key anthropological characteristics are evidently present, like prosociality, the pharmakon and hierophany. The spread of standards and canons in the material culture and the regular repetition of practices in special contexts are some of the examples of evidence of behavioural patterns that suggest the initiation of sacred places and moments.

The complexity of interpreting symbolic and ritual forms in the Neolithic could perhaps be pictured through the anthropological concept of liminality

(see also Verhoeven 2000), which defines the intermedial stage during ritual processes, a middle stage between two states. Neolithic communities in southwest Asia display social realities in continuous change, experiencing many new developments and transformations and testing new ways of dealing with these challenges. Perhaps, the Neolithic transition could be seen as a sort of experimental phase in which Neolithic communities gradually conceived the establishment of a more marked, distinct and violent way of perceiving sacred precincts. On the one hand, the archaeological evidence suggest that Neolithic communities manifest a clear intent to distinguish socially important spaces that must be kept clean, well decorated and symbolically rich for, perhaps, the veneration of ancestors or supernatural beings; however, on the other hand, this distinction does not yet seem to be a clear-cut division or separation.

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