

**To cite this article:** Pamuk, S., Kaya, Y. (2022). Intangible Concepts on Objects From the Neolithic Period. *International Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences (IJSHS)*, 6(3), 79-94

**Submitted:** October 22, 2022

**Accepted:** December 11, 2022

## INTANGIBLE CONCEPTS ON OBJECTS FROM THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD

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### ABSTRACT

Considering the earliest Neolithic Period settlements, many interrelated settlements are seen in the regions called as Upper Tigris Valley and Fertile Crescent. Common cultural elements among Neolithic communities may contain important findings of a common symbolic language between communities. The meaning of the motifs can give some information about the ritual areas and communications in the lives of Neolithic societies. In this study, some motifs on stone slabs in the Neolithic Period were examined. It is understood that these motifs include abstract meanings, based on the common or similar characteristics of the motifs seen on the stone slabs found in many Neolithic settlements in Göbekli Tepe and its surroundings. In this study, it is suggested that the motifs on the objects are not only an ordinary motif transfer, but also architectural transfers and the arrangement of the ritual area are also symbolically included. In this context, this argument was supported as a result of detailed examination and research by being brought related finds together. Among the artifacts found in Göbekli Tepe and the surrounding Neolithic settlements, the chlorite plate found in Hasankeyf constitutes the main finding of the theory proposed in this study. The settlements where stone slabs related to the subject were found are Hasankeyf, Körtik Tepe, Gusir Mound in the Upper Tigris Valley and Tell Qaramel in northern Syria.

**Keywords:** Neolithic Period, Ritual, Göbekli Tepe, Stone Slab

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## NEOLİTİK DÖNEM'DEN OBJELER ÜZERİNDE SOYUT KAVRAMLAR

### ÖZET

En erken Neolitik Dönem yerleşmeleri ele alındığında Yukarı Dicle Vadisi ve Bereketli Hilal olarak adlandırılan bölgelerde birbirleriyle ilişkili çok sayıda yerleşim yeriyle karşılaşılır. Neolitik topluluklar arasındaki ortak kültürel öğeler, topluluklar arasında ortak sembolik bir dile ait önemli bulgular içeriyor olabilir. Motiflerin içerdiği anlam, Neolitik dönem topluluklarının yaşamlarındaki ritüel alanlarına ve iletişimlerine dair bazı bilgileri aktarabilir. Bu çalışmada Neolitik Dönem'de taş plakalar üzerinde yer alan bazı motifler incelenmiştir. Göbekli Tepe ve çevresinde bulunan çok sayıda Neolitik yerleşimde ele geçen taş plakalar üzerinde karşılaşılan motiflerin ortak ya da benzer özellikler göstermesinden yola çıkarak bu motiflerin soyut anlamlar içerdiği anlaşılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada objeler üzerinde yer alan motiflerde sadece sıradan bir motif aktarımı olmadığı aynı zamanda mimari aktarımlara ve ritüel alanın düzenlemesine de sembolik olarak yer verildiği savı ortaya atılmıştır. Bu bağlamda ilişkili buluntular bir araya getirilerek detaylı inceleme ve araştırma sonucunda bu sava destek bulunmuştur. Göbekli Tepe ve çevresindeki Neolitik yerleşmelerde tespit edilen eserler içerisinde Hasankeyf'te ele geçen klorit plaka ise bu çalışmada ileri sürülen teorinin başlıca buluntusunu oluşturmaktadır. Konuyla bağlantılı taş plakaların ele geçtiği yerleşimler, Yukarı Dicle Vadisi'nde Hasankeyf, Körtik Tepe, Gusir Mound ve Kuzey Suriye'de de Tell Qaramel'dir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Neolitik Dönem, Ritüel, Göbekli Tepe, Taş Plaka

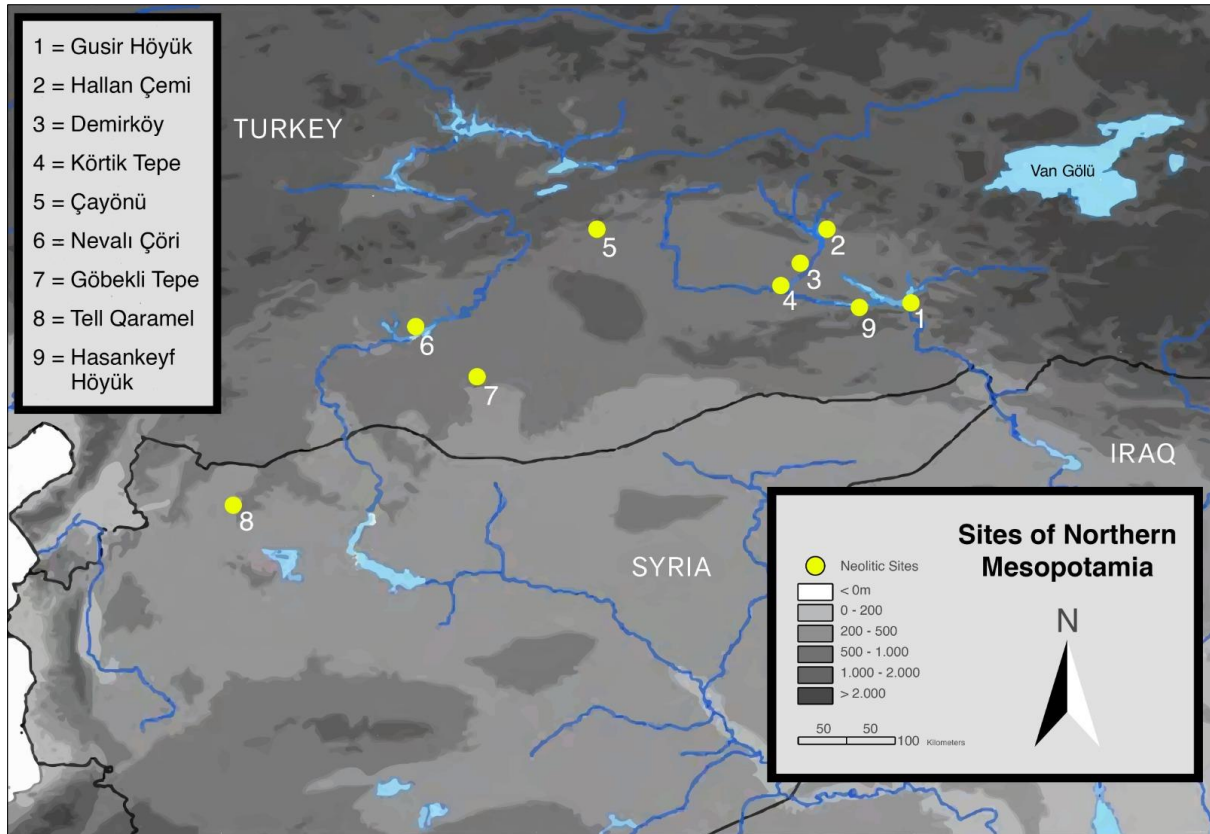


Fig 1 Neolithic Settlements where finds related to the subject were found-Benz and Bauer 2013, 11

## INTRODUCTION

The Neolithic way of life embodies an important transition period characterized from hunter-gatherer to mixed diet economy or settled communities based entirely on agriculture and animal husbandry. Regarding the earliest Neolithic Period settlements, many interrelated settlements are seen in the regions called Upper Tigris Valley and Fertile Crescent. In the earliest Neolithic period, especially the Upper Tigris Valley witnessed many settlements related to each other with its ideal environmental conditions. Among these regions, the excavations carried out in Çayönü, Hallan Çemi, Hasankeyf, Körtik Tepe, Nevalı Çori and Göbekli Tepe have completely changed many views about the Neolithic period (Özkaya and San 2007a, 32-33). The increase in the number of settlements and finds unearthed by excavations day by day and the analysis and interpretation of these finds have revealed the importance of Anatolia in the Neolithic period throughout the civilization history.

Excavations and surveys in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria revealed the existence of areas where similars of T-shaped monumental pillar at Göbekli Tepe

were identified. Watkins states that the communities living in an area of approximately 150 km around Göbekli Tepe are consistently in communication with each other. He also says that the finding of similar finds, consisting of flat stone plates on both sides, in Neolithic settlements in the region is a part of communication. Watkins argues that the motifs on these stone plates, which are sometimes square and sometimes oval, were made to store some kind of information or that they might reflect some kind of communication system. Dietrich and Notroff assume that the images (motifs) on tablets (stone plates) are legible (Watkins 2015, 78). They make this inference due to the repetition of various combinations of images on small objects found in other Neolithic settlements in the vicinity, especially T-shaped pillars like Watkins (Dietrich and Notroff 2017, 75-76). The aim of this article is to support Dietrich and Notroff's claim that the images on the plates are legible, and to reveal the connection of these images with the special structures unearthed in Göbekli Tepe. In this context, this argument was supported as a result of detailed examination and research by being brought related finds together. Among the artifacts found in Göbekli Tepe and the surrounding Neolithic settlements, the chlorite plate found in Hasankeyf constitutes the main finding of the theory proposed in this study. The settlements where stone slabs related to the subject were found are Hasankeyf, Körtik Tepe, Gusir Höyük in the Upper Tigris Valley and Tell Qaramel in northern Syria (Fig. 1).

Göbekli Tepe, which is located on a 9-hectare area on the summit of a limestone mountain that borders the Harran Plain to the north, 15 km. northeast of Şanlıurfa in southeast Turkey, is dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period and consists of three layers. The circular planned ritual structures dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A are in Strata III. Strata II, which generally consists of rectangular planned structures, is dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period. According to the results of the geomagnetic survey conducted in Göbekli Tepe in 2003, it is seen that there are at least 20 more similar structures and it is expected that 12 T-shaped monolithic pillars were used for each structure (Schmidt 2003, 5). The height of the T-shaped pillars shaped from solid stone blocks in the structures unearthed at Göbekli Tepe varies between 4 and 5.5 m. Although the diameters of the circular structures, which are thought to have been built for ritual purposes, vary between 10 and 30 m., T-shaped pillars are connected to each other by walls and benches. The pillars inside the wall are located to face the two large T-shaped pillars in the center (Fig. 2) (Dietrich and Notroff 2017, 68). K. Schmidt

(Schmidt 2007, 11; Özdöl 2011, 183) thought that the pillars in the ritual structures in Göbekli Tepe were arranged in a certain order. Haklay and Gopher (Haklay and Gopher 2020, 348-350) stated that the enclosure areas in Strata III of Göbekli Tepe were planned in a geometric order and architectural plan. We think that these order and architecture were transported and conveyed by depicting them on small objects. It can be thought that the circular planned ritual structures are constantly in the minds of Neolithic people, but they frequently encountered motifs/images evoking of these architectural plans and rituals in their daily lives.

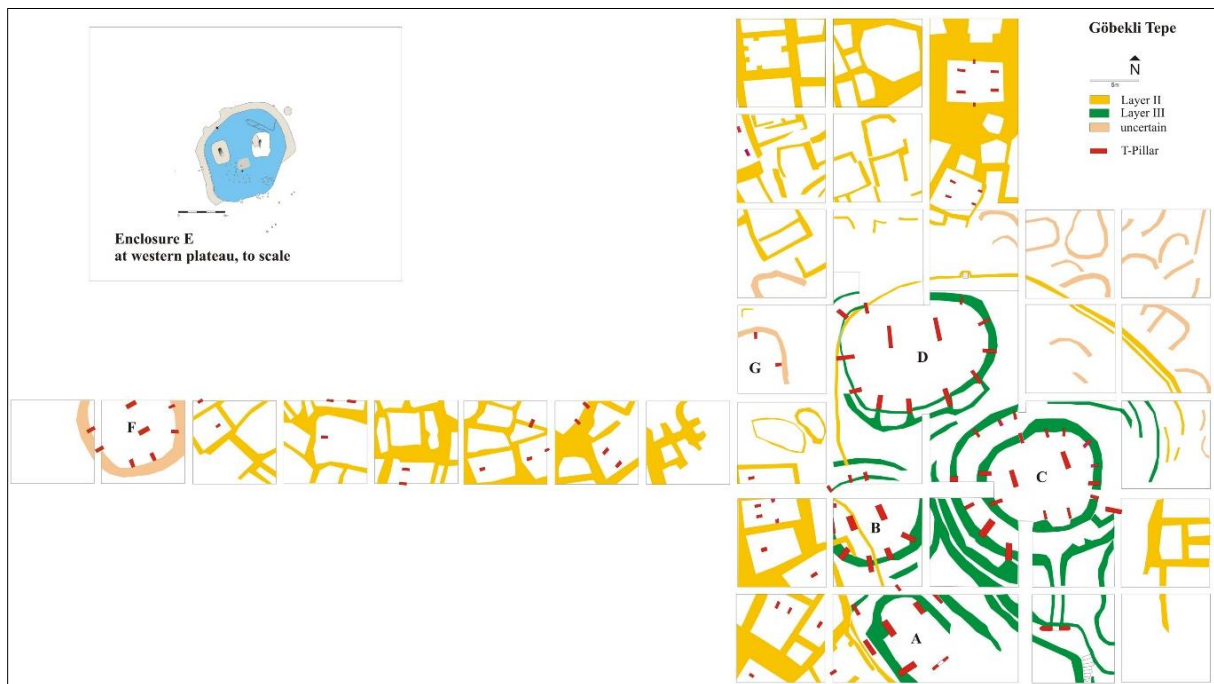


Fig. 2 Göbekli Tepe Planı (Plan: K. Schmidt & J. Notroff, DAI and vd., 2014)

### Transfers on Objects

The absence of any residential area in Göbekli Tepe excavation strengthened the assumption of a common cult area used by many different communities spread over a wide area. In general, the idea that there is a common ritual, iconography and architecture between different groups is acceptable. Perhaps the most important find showing that there was a common symbolic language among the Neolithic communities in the region is the presence of "ritual circle" plates. Small objects with these motifs are generally called plates. While calling these objects as plates is a more accurate definition to avoid confusion, they can be considered as tablets in terms of the abstractions and images they contain. The harmony of the motifs incised on the plates and the architectural style seen in Göbekli Tepe



and the settlements in the region suggest that a common iconography was applied. In addition, this study supports the argument that these signs are legible based on the motif similarities on the plate surface seen in Göbekli Tepe and surrounding PPN settlements.

Before talking about the descriptions on the objects, there are questions that we think should be mentioned first. What do the Neolithic communities refer to for the design and arrangement of the ritual areas seen in other settlements? While the symbolism is so high in the contemporary settlements around Göbekli Tepe, is it correct to consider every expression on the finds as ordinary decorations? Do motifs, which were incised elaborately, contain information?

We think that the motifs on the small objects were transferred between the settlements in the Neolithic period. Although this is explained by the motif transfer, it is also the reflection of the Neolithic human's concepts in their belief world to the ritual structure. So why do we pass by without thinking much about the circular motifs we see on small finds, without associating them with special structures, while the circular forms are so prominent in special structures? These motifs, formed by concentric circles, are applied on small objects in many contemporary settlements of Göbekli Tepe, varying in number from 1 to 4. Couldn't they have transferred the architecture of these special buildings and the narrations about how the ritual took place in these buildings on small objects?

As understood from the questions mentioned above, the designs we try to clarify are composed of motifs seen on small stone objects recovered from Göbekli Tepe and surrounding settlements. When these motifs are examined comprehensively, we think that they should be called as images because of the abstract expressions they have. Because the designs and events realized in our consciousness after the motifs on stone objects are perceived by our sense organs are actually designs created in our image, such as Poseidon in a trident, Jesus in the letters "X" and "R" in churches, or the act of stopping when we see a red light in traffic. We think that the circular motifs and similar expressions seen on Neolithic stone objects can be connected with the ritual areas by means of the image that should arouse in the Neolithic human. In this context, we understand that in this study, not only motif transfer but also architectural transfers and building plans are included imaginatively on various objects.

Among the pieces found in Göbekli Tepe and the surrounding Neolithic settlements, the chlorite plate (Fig. 3) found in Hasankeyf constitutes the main find of the theory asserted in this study. The use of usually up to 12 monolithic

pillars, as in every ritual area at Göbekli Tepe, is probably given abstractly on this small object. As evidence for this, each of them is depicted as a concentric circle on the plate, but with its abstract transference, each of them refers to "T"-shaped pillars, and each of them probably reflects an architectural plan that emulates ritual enclosure areas. Concentric circles on this object were described as each pillar in the general plan structure of the special buildings in Strata III (Dietrich et al. 2014, 12) of Göbekli Tepe. In addition to explaining how the pillars were placed, two pillars called as twin pillars were given in the center of the object in the center of the Göbekli Tepe, Nevali Çori and Gusir Mound ritual structures. The middle of the two central circles in the object was drilled in a wide and planned manner. In this context, it can be suggested that the holes both refer to twin pillars and provide convenience for the owner of the object to be transported. There are 4 zigzag-shaped snake motifs on the object, which are observed to separate concentric circles in groups, and well known from the ritual structures in Göbekli Tepe. In the center, between the concentric circles called as twin pillars, there are images that we can think of as the figure of the priest standing opposite each other, carved as a hollow point by the maker, and in the abstract, leading the ritual. The basis of the idea of two priests is both these two opposite points on the object and the two offering bowls that we can see between the twin pillars in Göbekli Tepe C enclosure. In other words, two different priests were making offerings to two offering bowls. Apart from the points that we think are described abstractly by the priests, there are eight more points on the upper part of the plate, independent of concentric circles. These dot motifs are probably special guests participating in the ritual together with the two priests in the center. While the priests are a group among themselves, the guests form a separate depiction group among themselves. If we separate the abstract expressions of the motifs on Hasankeyf object by subject; they are T-shaped pillars, twin pillars in the center, depictions of snakes, priests and guests. These distinctions probably symbolize Göbekli Tepe C enclosure (Fig. 2). The transfer of the architectural plan on Hasankeyf object is an important find in terms of depicting the design and arrangement of the ritual areas with T-shaped pillars spreading to Göbekli Tepe-centered surrounding settlements in a very detailed imagery.



Fig. 3 Hasankeyf Höyük (Karul ve Miyake vd. 2013: 97)

At Hasankeyf Mound, almost all archaeological data date to the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, with the exception of evidence from the Iron Age and Hellenistic periods. All of the radiocarbon analyzes (Note : Radiocarbon analysis was carried out 15 times in total) are dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC; most of them intensify on the second half of the 10th millennium BC. These dates indicate that the prehistoric settlements of Hasankeyf Mound were contemporary with Hallan Çemi, Demirköy Mound, Körtik Tepe and Gusir Mound in the Upper Tigris Valley (Miyake et al. 2012, 1-5). In the light of the recent data obtained by Miyake, the excavator of Hasankeyf, he states that the settlement existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC and was abandoned towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. He also adds that, based on radio carbon measurements obtained from Göbekli Tepe in recent years, these settlements are almost contemporary with Göbekli Tepe's Strata III, where special structures with round plan are located (Miyake 2016, 31; Miyake et al. 2012, 3-6). In the light of these data, Hasankeyf object will show a parallelism with the dating of the architectural plan found in Göbekli Tepe Strata III. Thus, the narrative on Hasankeyf object and the architectural plan narratives in Göbekli Tepe Strata III strengthen our argument by overlapping as dating. In addition, there are parallels with each other on vases and stone tools unearthed from the settlements of Körtik Tepe, Çayönü, Nevali Çori and Hallan



Çemi (Özkaya et al. 2002, 743).

We investigated our proposal on other objects as well, regarding the transfer of an architectural plan on Hasankeyf object. In this context, we encountered motifs/images that we think support our argument on the stone slabs unearthed in Göbekli Tepe and some surroundings settlements. Among them, the group of finds from Körtik Tepe attracts a lot of attention.

In the graves of Körtik Tepe, which is a contemporary settlement with Göbekli Tepe Strata III, decorated stone plaques that can be classified as an indication of the social function or individual property of some of the deceased were found. Dietrich and Notroff (Dietrich and Notroff 2017, 77-78) stated that the abstract and symbolic information included in these stone slabs indicates the existence of experts in proficiencies such as memory, rituals and perhaps religion. We think that the motifs on Körtik Tepe stone slabs can be perceived as abstract and symbolic information in the architectural plan design and this will further strengthen the argument. On the first important stone plate (Fig. 4) from Körtik Tepe, there is an animal depiction, which is given from the front and of which type is not completely understood (Özkaya and Coşkun 2013, 10-11). The artist has given four concentric circles on the chest of the animal drawn with the scraping technique. We think of these four concentric circles as a plan of the ritual structures in Göbekli Tepe. A ritual structure with four concentric circles was not found in Göbekli Tepe excavations, but Schmidt (Schmidt 2007, 138) stated that enclosure C had at least three concentric perimeter walls. As it can be understood from the plan of enclosure C, although not certain, it also suggests that there may be a fourth concentric circle. In this context, it shows that it is most probably possible that the four concentric circles in the first object (Fig. 4) examined from Körtik Tepe has a ritual structure plan. Another important piece of evidence we found on the object is the pillar images divided into groups of four and two with horizontal and vertical lines. Probably a T-shaped twin pillar in the center of the ritual structure were depicted in the center of the figure with two long vertical incised lines. The 10 horizontally shorter incised lines correspond numerically to the T-shaped pillars on the perimeter wall of the ritual area. In addition, the ritual circle motif on the chest of the figure also symbolizes the plan of the ritual structure. Thus, the artist described both the ritual structure and the T-shaped pillars together. Finally, we see that each of the three cavities standing side by side to the left of the figure on the object connects with the border contours of the animal figure through thin channels. Although it is not certain, we can think a

connection between these cavities, which stand side by side in a row, with the priest or private individuals who participated in the ritual, as we have identified from Hasankeyf object. In this context, there is a close connection between Hasankeyf object and Körtik Tepe object, which supports our argument as both the circular ritual plan and members of the ritual.



Fig. 4 Körtik Tepe (Özkaya ve Coşkun 2011: 125)

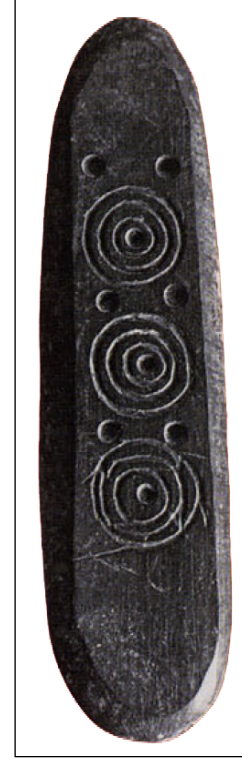


Fig. 5 Körtik Tepe (Özkaya ve Coşkun 2011: 120)

On the second stone plate (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011, 120, fig. 21) (Fig. 5) from Körtik Tepe, the artist has positioned two pits in the form of opposing points, up to six in total, next to each ritual circle motif. In addition, as in the first find from Körtik Tepe, concentric circles appear as four and represent different ritual enclosures. The double cavities, on the other hand, may have referred to two priests performing the ritual or twin pillars in the center of the ritual structure, possibly between the twin pillars, as we identified on Hasankeyf object. On another stone plate (Fig. 6) unearthed from Körtik Tepe, a concentric ritual circle made with relief technique is encountered. This feature reflects the ritual area and there are dot-shaped cavities in the largest concentric ritual circle. We assume that these five cavities are "T" shaped pillar expressions. In this context, the plan of the ritual enclosure and the T-shaped pillar narratives are probably another proof

that the Neolithic people imagined the ritual space plan design as abstract in their minds. On another Körzik Tepe stone plate (Fig. 7), there are three concentric circles in relief. Different from the previous example, T-shaped pillars are not included here. Even by transferring the plan of the ritual enclosure, it meticulously carries the architectural reference on the objects.



Fig. 6 Körzik Tepe (Özkaya ve Coşkun 2011: 125)



Fig. 7 Körzik Tepe

(Özkaya ve San 2007: 306)

In addition, another group of finds unearthed in large numbers at Körzik Tepe are stone plates that always depict the same animal figure with similar expressions, but some of them have concentric circles and possibly matched with a fox (Fig. 8-9). This group has a special place. The same animal figure on the plates is depicted as relief and the details inside are given by scraping. The animal's limbs, which we can call its ears or horns, as well as its forelimbs and bee-shaped body, are depicted as a whole, with a single limb that could be a tail or foot. The animal figures are a narration that we are familiar with from the T-pillars in Göbekli Tepe and other settlements around it. The most important factor that makes this narration different is the fact that the animal has ritual circles on its neck or body as concentric double or triple. While it conveys the architectural plan of the circular ritual areas to us, both with the stance of the body parts reminiscent of the ritual circles of the animal figure, and with the concentric circles it has and in addition the similar animal motif seen on the T-pillars, on the objects it is likely that the otherworldly life that had an intense influence on the daily life of the Neolithic human was abstractly reflected. In this context, the special expressions on the plates with animal figures should be carefully examined.



Fig. 8 Körtik Tepe (Özkaya ve Coşkun 2011: 125)



Fig. 9 Körtik Tepe (Özkaya ve San 2007: 307)



Fig. 10 Gusir Höyük (Karul 2018: 20)

Similar stone slabs with animal figures from Körtik Tepe discussed above were seen at Gusir Mound. On Gusir Mound stone slab (Fig. 10), there are three concentric circles on the neck of the animal figure as in Körtik Tepe (Fig. 9). Different from Gusir Mound find, the smallest of the concentric circles is given as a relief. Körtik Tepe is seen as a hollow in the finds with animal figures.

Within the scope of the study, the finds from Göbekli Tepe and its contemporary settlements located in the southeast of Türkiye were evaluated. However, it should not be ignored that this is not limited to Türkiye, but also that it finds parallels in the neighboring country Syria. One of the examples to be given regarding the design of Neolithic ritual areas comes from the settlement of Tell Qaramel

(Mazurowski 2005, 508, fig. 10) in Northern Syria. While there are 3 concentric circles on the stone plate (Fig. 11) uncovered here, a zigzag snake motif is seen in the horizontal area bordering the ritual circle. We encounter ritual motifs associated with Göbekli Tepe seen at Tell Qaramel in Neolithic settlements in northern Syria. The fact that only an example is given from Tell Qaramel here is due to the support for the assertion we put forward.

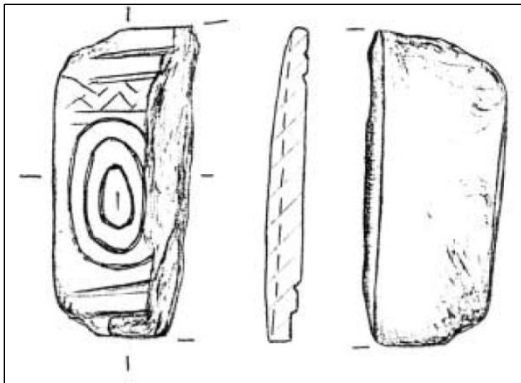


Fig. 11 Tell Qaramel (Mazurowski 2005: 508)  
(Watkins 2015: 78)



Fig. 12 Göbekli Tepe

Finally, a find unearthed in Göbekli Tepe differs from other stone slab finds because it is basically a bone object. The most striking thing about this bone object (Fig. 12) is that for the first time among the small Neolithic period finds unearthed, “T” shaped pillars are depicted concretely, not abstractly. There are two T-shaped pillars side by side on the object, and it probably refers to the rule of two pillars in the center of the ritual circle, which we use while interpreting these stone plates.

## CONCLUSION

Consequently, the architectural plan transfers on the stone objects found in Hasankeyf, Körtik Tepe, Gusir Mound and Tell Qaramel reflect the design and arrangement of a common ritual area centered on Göbekli Tepe and spreading to other surrounding settlements. Circular motifs and similar narrations seen on Neolithic stone objects connect with the ritual areas themselves, by means of the image they should evoke in Neolithic communities. This study has shown that not only motif transfer, but also architectural transfers and building plans are included imaginatively on various objects.

Slabs with ritual circle motifs act as tablets in terms of the abstract meaning and concept they contain. The harmony of the motifs embroidered on the plates and the architectural style seen in Göbekli Tepe and the settlements in the region suggest that a common iconography was applied. In this context, it had an important contribution to the theory that the motifs/images on the Neolithic Age stone plates were legible. With this study, it has been understood that the narrations seen on the finds in the contemporary settlements around Göbekli Tepe, especially in Göbekli Tepe, are not ordinary decorations and that these motifs made meticulously are a store of information.

It can be said that circle motifs on small objects in the Upper Tigris Valley and some Neolithic Period settlements in Northern Syria had a close relationship with the circular planned ritual structures in Göbekli Tepe in terms of plan, and Neolithic communities drew such motifs on small objects to remind ritual action. Neolithic people draw imaginary expressions on small objects to remember the ritual act, that is, the ritual moment. It can probably be thought that the circular motifs on the plates acted as a kind of cross or amulet, as in Christianity.

Finally, based on the fact that similar animal figures were seen in different settlements with similar narrations, the stage reached in this study has also reflected the fictions of the Neolithic people in the world of thought by carrying the architectural plans of the ritual circles with it, much more intensely than expected.

As a result of the ongoing excavations in new areas to be discovered in connection with Göbekli Tepe in the future, we hope that the documents we have presented will find greater support.



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