

SNAKE FIGURES IN THE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC PERIOD¹

ÇANAK ÇÖMLEKSİZ NEOLİTİK DÖNEMDE YILAN FİĞÜRÜ

ЗМЕЕВИДНЫЕ ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЯ ДОГОНЧАРНОГО
ПЕРИОДА ЭПОХИ НЕОЛИТА

Bahattin ÇELİK*

ÖZ

Yılan, genellikle her inançta ölümler dünyası ile ilişkilidir. Zehiri ölümcül olabildiğinden ve deri değiştirebildiğinden, pek çok mitolojilerde khitonien bir özelliğe sahiptir. Yani yılan, ölümü ve aynı zamanda ölümsüzlüğü temsil eder. Türkiye'nin Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde, Çanak Çömleksiz Neolitik Dönemde yaşayan Neolitik topluluklar, taşların, kapların ve kemiklerin üzerine yoğun olarak yılan figürleri resmetmişlerdir. Yılan figürlerini neden yaptıklarını henüz tam olarak bilemiyoruz. Göbekli Tepe'de yer alan dikilitaşlar üzerine resmedilen hayvanlara bakıldığında, hem insanların faydalandıkları sığır, ceylan, eşek, domuz, tilki gibi hayvanları, hem de akrep, yılan, örümcek ve aslan gibi insanlar için tehlikeli hayvanları resmettiklerini görmekteyiz. Körtik Tepe'deki mezarlarda bulunan taş kaplar ve kemikler üzerine yapılan figürlerde de aynı şekilde faydalı ve zararlı hayvanların resmedilmiş olduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışmada, daha önceden tespit edilmiş yılan kabartmalarının nerelerde bulunduğu ve bölgede yeni bulunmuş olan yılan kabartmaları üzerinde durulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yılan, Yılan Resmetme Tekniği, Çanak Çömleksiz Neolitik Dönem, Kült Yapıları, Dikilitaşlar.

ABSTRACT

The snake is generally associated with the world of the dead in almost all faiths. The snake features chthonian property in majority of the mythologies as its poison can be lethal and as the snake molts its skin. That is, the snake represents the death as well as immortality. The Neolithic societies inhabited the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey during Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period depicted snake figures intensively on the stones, vessels and bones. Yet, we are not sure why such societies depicted the snake figures. When we look at the animals depicted on the pillars at Göbekli Tepe, we can observe that the livestock exploited by the societies of that era, such as cattle, gazelles, donkeys, pigs, foxes as well as the wild animals that are dangerous for the people of that era, such as scorpion, snake, spider and the lion were depicted. The figures carved on the stone vessels and bones discovered at the graves (burial sites) in Körtik Tepe also depict both beneficial and predatory animals. This study will deliberate the sites where the snake reliefs were discovered until this day as well as the snake reliefs recently discovered in the region.

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* Academic Member at Ardahan University, Faculty of Humanities and Letters, Department of Archeology. bahattincelik@ardahan.edu.tr

Keywords: Snake, Snake Depiction Technique, Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period, Cult Buildings, Pillars

АННОТАЦИЯ

Традиционно Змею во все времена относили к потустороннему миру необычное специфическое выделение яда и сбрасывание чешуи у змеи в мифологии занимает особое место именно змея ассоциируется со смертью и безвыходностью В юго-восточной части Турции были найдены камни и надгробья человека, на которых были изображения змеи, принадлежащие к догончарному периоду эпохи неолита Остается неисследованным факт изображения таких фигур Мегалитические колонны в Гебекли-Тепе украшены резьбой по камню с изображением таких животных как корова, газель, осел, свинья, лиса, а также имеются рисунки скорпиона, змеи, паука и льва, как особо опасных для жизни человека. На могильных плитах и надписях в Керкут -Тепе также обнаружены изображения животных, которых подразделяют на опасных и полезных. В нашей работе мы исследуем хронологию таких рисунков и принадлежность змеевидных рельефов к той или иной местности.

Ключевые слова: змея, техника изображения змеи, догончарный период эпохи неолита, культовые сооружения, мегалитические колонны.

Introduction

Snake reliefs are frequently encountered at Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period societies that emerge as the first sedentary societies at Southeast Anatolia Region and Northern Syria. Numerous snake figures were discovered at Cafer Höyük in Malatya, at Çayönü and Körтик Tepe in Diyarbakır, Hallan Çemi and Hasankeyf Höyük at Batman, and Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori and Karahan Tepe settlements at Şanlıurfa. Moreover, snake figures were discovered also at Jerf el Ahmar, Tell Abr 3, Mureybet and Tell Qaramel settlements in Northern Syria. Usually, such snake figures were engraved to the stones or the bones by employing embossing or engraving technique, and the snakes were mainly depicted with triangular heads, zigzag shaped bodies, with short length and dwarfish figures. Several snake figures, on the other hand, were depicted with round head sections and long bodies. In particular, majority of the snake reliefs fabricated on the pillars at Göbekli Tepe dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period were depicted with triangular heads. Again, at Göbekli Tepe, some snake figures were depicted in a water course in order to create a background, or intertwined snakes were depicted to form a mesh-like pattern. Snake reliefs were formed on the bone and stone vessels at Körтик Tepe settlement, which dates further back than Göbekli Tepe, and the body of the snake were depicted differently at such reliefs as if trying to achieve different patterns on the body. The snake figures also appear as an indispensable element on various finds from all cultures and civilizations also during the post-Neolithic periods. The snake figures are also encountered frequently on some seal impressions and colored vessels during the Chalcolithic Period subsequent to the Neolithic period.

The Snake Figures in Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period

The precursor snake figures during early Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period are observed at Körтик Tepe (Özkaya and San 2007: 28-29, Fig.15, 18; Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: 96, 99, Fig. 20-23). The snake figures at Körтик Tepe are generally engraved on burial gifts. The

snake figures engraved on some stone vessels and animal bones left as burial gifts were depicted with triangular heads, zigzag shaped bodies with patterns (Özkaya and Coşkun 2008: Res. 16-18; Özkaya 2009: 6, Fig. 8). Such patterns should have been formed in order to indicate the species of the snake depicted. In fact, the lines that extend parallel to the body at the central part of some snake figures (Özkaya et al. 2013: 40, 59, 61; Özkaya and Coşkun 2008: Res. 17-18) are observed at adder snakes that still inhabit the region (Picture 1). In particular, even the tongue of the snakes was depicted on the stones and bones.

Snake reliefs with very long body section (Coşkun et al. 2010: Fig. 2a) or zigzag patterns that resemble the body of the snake (Coşkun et al. 2010: Fig. 2b; Özkaya and Coşkun 2011: Fig. 17, 19) were depicted occasionally at the brims and occasionally at the trunk of the stone vessels discovered at Körtik Tepe. The patterns of this type that resemble the body of the snake are most probably the symbolic representations for the snakes. Zigzag shaped patterns are worked on stone vessel parts discovered at Tell Abr 3 settlement in Syria, which are similar to those discovered in Körtik Tepe (Yartah 2004: Fig. 18.2,4; 2005: Fig. 7.1). Furthermore, zigzag patterns were discovered on a stone plate unearthed at an area contemplated to be a cult building within said settlement (Yartah 2004: Fig. 9.4, 10; 2005: Fig. 2.4). Similar snake patterns made on stones rather in the form of grooved stones or flat engraved stones of approximately 6 cm X 3 cm in size mostly unearthed in Jerf el Ahmar settlement in Syria (Stordeur et al. 1996: 1, Fig. 2a-c) were also encountered in many other settlements. Likewise, snake-shaped figures with “V” shaped heads and long zigzag shaped body were discovered as engraved on grooved stones and flat engraved stones at Tell Abr 3 (Yartah 2004: 155, Fig. 18.3; 2005: 5, Fig. 7.3) and Tel Qaramel (Mauzurowski and Yartah 2001: 304, 307, Fig. 10.630,636,638; Fig. 11) settlements. The snake patterns made by employing both engraving and relief method on flat engraved stones like the ones at Jerf el Ahmar are also discovered at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2007: Fig 12; 2011: 52, Fig. 12; Schmidt and Köksal-Schmidt 2014: Fig. 3).

Moreover, snake figures were also depicted on bone spatula discovered at Körtik Tepe (Özkaya and Coskun 2011: 99, Fig.36,37). This type of bone-engraved snake patterns was encountered in many of the Neolithic settlement sites. Bone spatulas in the form of the body of a snake were also unearthed at Hallan Çemi (Rosenberg 2011: Fig. 16) and Malatya Cafer Höyük (Cauvin et al. 2011:7, Fig. 24.2; 2007:108, Fig. 24.2). A bone arrowhead discovered at Mersin Yumuktepe was produced in the form of the body of a snake (Caneva 2007: Fig. 23; 2012: Fig. 27-28). Snake figures were also discovered at Aksaray Köşk Höyük as reliefs made on ceramics (Öztan 2012: Fig. 31). And again, a vessel discovered at Niğde Tepecik-Çiftlik settlement contains a relief with zigzag patterns in the form of the body of a snake (Bıçakçı et al. 2012: Fig.30-31,33). Stylized forms that resemble the body of a snake were depicted on painted vessels at Şanlıurfa Mezraa Teleilat (Özdoğan 2007: Fig. 61.63; 2011: Fig. 67,69) and also at Mersin Yumuktepe (Caneva 2007: Fig. 21; 2012: Fig. 27).

Snake reliefs engraved on pillars are encountered frequently at Göbekli Tepe (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 183-184, Fig. 10-12, Tab. 2). A snake figure made on the stone by employing engraving technique is present only on a single specimen out of the artifacts discovered at Göbekli (Beile-Bohn et al. 1998: Abb.27.5). Only the rear part of the head section of what contemplated to be a life-size sculpture was revealed in Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 1999: 75-76, Fig. 10; 2011: 96, 98, Fig. 11a-b). This section of said sculpture piece contains a short snake relief with triangular head and zigzag shaped body (Hauptmann 2007: 142, 144, Fig. 10). Furthermore, zigzag patterns that symbolize a snake

were also encountered at Göbekli on some of the stone vessel pieces that we recognize from Körtik Tepe (Schmidt 2013: Abb. 8.2; Beile-Bohn 1998: Abb. 26.2). In addition to the foregoing, snake reliefs formed by short and long intertwining snakes with triangular heads were discovered particularly on the pillars (Schmidt 1999: 13-15, Taf. 5, 8). Depictions of other animals in addition to the snake reliefs are also observed on some pillars (Schmidt and Köksal-Schmidt 2014: Fig. 1-2,4). In general, the snake reliefs on majority of the pillars unearthed at Göbekli Tepe were used for filling the gaps on the pillars (Schmidt 2013: Abb. 5).

Recently Discovered Snake Figures

Recently, settlements with similar cultural characteristics with Göbekli Tepe were discovered in Şanlıurfa region (Çelik 2015a: 9-22). Snake reliefs were encountered on “T” shaped pillars and some other pillars unearthed at such settlements. Snake reliefs were identified on sides two pillars discovered at Karahan Tepe, one of the recently discovered settlements. The snake relief on one of the pillars (Picture 2) was depicted with round head and long body part (Çelik 2000: 6-7, Fig. 1; 2011: Fig. 8-10). The other snake relief (Picture 3), on the other hand, was depicted with triangular head (Çelik 2011: Fig. 11). What is interesting here is that both reliefs were discovered on pillars arranged in juxtaposition, but revealed as a result of illegal excavations (Çelik 2011: Fig. 8). This fact is significant as it demonstrates existence of two snake reliefs within the same building. Likewise, snake reliefs were discovered also on different pillars erected within a building at Göbekli Tepe. Moreover, zigzag patterns were also identified on the stone vessel pieces, which we recognize from Körtik Tepe, discovered at Karahan Tepe (Çelik 2000; Fig. 4b; 2011: Fig. 24.7) and Ayanlar Höyük settlements (Ercan and Çelik 2013: Fig. Drawing 1a-d).

Recently, a new snake relief is discovered at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement at İsmail Kalesi (Çelik 2015b: 92, Res. 16) located beside Sumaklı Village 50 km east of Şanlıurfa (Picture 4). This snake relief differs from the snake reliefs at Göbekli Tepe as the head section of the relief is depicted in oval form. Presence of a vertical groove, however, located immediately beside the head reminds us the grooves engraved at the sides of the pillars at Göbekli Tepe (Becker et al. 2012: Fig. Abb. 12). The purpose of such grooves made on the pillars at Göbekli Tepe is indicated to be for hanging the ornaments (Becker et al. 2012: 25). The body part of the snake resembles the short and zigzag shaped body parts of the snakes recognized from Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe (Schmidt 1999: Abb.Taf. 5; Çelik 2011: Fig. 11).

Assessment and Conclusion

The snake reliefs depicted with round head and long body discovered at Karahan Tepe represent a unique discovery as no such other snake depiction has been discovered at any of the archeological sites in the region until this day (Picture 2). Only several snake figures depicted on grooved stones and flat engraved stones by employing engraving technique discovered at Jerf el Ahmar settlement have resemblance to Karahan Tepe snake relief (Stordeur 1996: Fig. 2b,d). No snake species that inhabit the region resembles the Karahan Tepe snake relief. Karahan Tepe snake with head section depicted in the form of a disk might be a cobra. The possibility where such relief might have been depicted based on actual observation springs into mind taking into consideration the fact that existence of the cobra species is recently discovered in the region (Baran 2005: 159). The other snake relief with triangular head identified at Karahan Tepe, on the other hand, shows similarities with the snake figures recognized from settlements such as Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, Jerf el

Ahmar, Körtik Tepe, Tell Halula, etc. (Picture 3). Such similarity is important as it demonstrates how frequently the travelling artisans that create such works wander around the region.

If we consider the snake relief discovered at Sumaklı Village İsmail Kalesi, this relief doesn't resemble the snakefigures discovered at Nevalı Çori, Karahan Tepe and Körtik Tepe. This relief bears similarities and similar features only with the snake reliefs with oval head section depicted on the sides of the pillar no 57 unearthed at Göbekli Tepe (DAI 2014:133-134, Fig. 13). The body part of İsmail Kalesi snake with almost oval head section, on the other hand, has similar features with many shapes that resemble snake bodies as discovered in Göbekli Tepe (Picture 4). Here, we should mention that the snakerelief at İsmail Kalesi is made in a more realistic fashion as it greatly resembles the heads of the snakes that inhabit the region today (Picture 1).

In conclusion, there are some very dangerous snake species that roam Southeast Anatolia Region and Northern Syria (Baran 2005: 151-152, 158-159). The lebetine viper (*Macrovipera lebetina*) considered to be the most dangerous species can be frequently encountered in the region (Baran 2005: 151). These snakes most probably roamed in the vicinity of the settlements during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period. It is highly probable that the people from that period depicted the snakes due to their lethal characteristics and as they were most probably considered to be immortal as they molt their skin. Regardless of the underlying reason, snake figures were frequently depicted in the region during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period and this tradition has survived for a long time during the subsequent periods.

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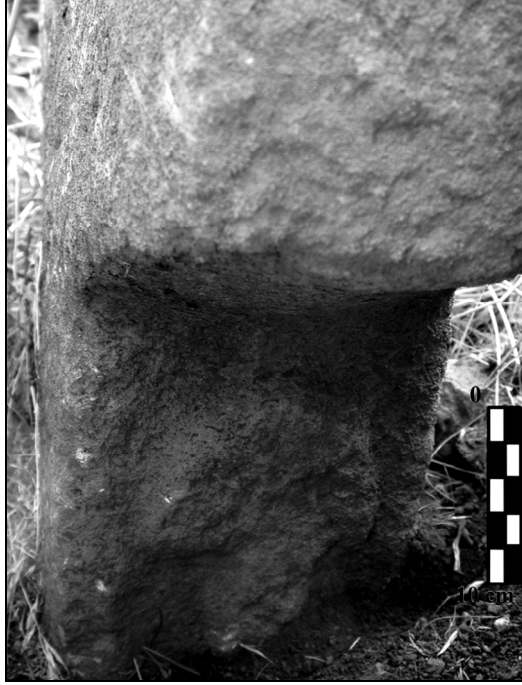
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Picture 1: A Lebetine Viper (**Macrovipera lebetina**) from Besta Faki Settlement.



Picture 2: "T" shaped Pillar with Snake Relief from Karahan Tepe.



Picture 3: The Second Pillar from Karahan Tepe with Snake Relief.



Picture 4: A Snake Relief from İsmail Kalesi Settlement.