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ARCHAEOLOGY, PREHISTORY AND RELIGION

It is not the intention of this article to display a negative attitude: rather, it is an appeal for careful, critical analysis in a field which, more than others, is open to dramatic reconstructions based on subjective value-judgements. The reason for this tendency is not difficult to find. In the period before literacy, there is no written evidence to provide a check or balance, no dimension other than that of material remains, revealed, for the most part, from excavations. A study, therefore, of the rise of religion (in all its aspects: *exempli gratia* magic, superstition, belief, practice, symbolic decoration, theology, monotheism, polytheism, ceremonial, festivals, celebrations and so on) without the aid of written sources must be more than a dramatic interpretation; there is a need for exact definition of criteria and for lucid exposition of the methods (if not models) of analysis.

In order to illustrate the underlying theme of this paper, two questions are posed here:

1. is the nature of excavated material sufficient to allow the reconstruction of religion in pre-literate periods?
2. is it possible to extrapolate from a literate Second Millennium to the pre-literate Sixth Millennium and reconstruct a sequence of religious development?

It seems that the most commonly accepted answer to these questions is positive\(^1\). I contend, however, that, because there may be a danger that the nature of the religious traditions in the Classical period may itself be misunderstood, there is a need to state the premises on which all reconstructions or extrapolations are based. Thus the substance of this note will not break new ground; it is intended rather to draw archaeological attention to an existing

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problem than to make a conscious attempt to find solutions. It is my intention to suggest a background against which the study of the religion of the literate and historical societies in Anatolia may be set. At the present stage of research into Anatolian prehistory it is demonstrably more important to pose the sort of questions which an excavator or interpreter of archaeological remains must face when he is dealing with pre-literate societies. Above all there is the necessity to define the limitations of the evidence and, therefore, to pose the sort of questions which the excavated material is capable of answering.

By what criteria does a common, ordinary object become a cult, extra-ordinary object? This may be a commonplace debating subject amongst archaeologists but it must be reconsidered here. In two recent books, one dealing with the Levant, the other with Anatolia, the answer is classic, unequivocal, uncomplicated and direct: by the combination of circumstances, i.e. by association. Mellaart’s criteria for a ‘shrine’ at Çatal Hüyük are:

1. decoration (i.e. wall-painting and plaster reliefs),
2. associated finds (figurines, clay seals, pottery with evidently religious motifs),
3. burials (the ‘high-status’ type).

The interpretation based on these criteria is exclusive: no other suggestion is countenanced. No alternative is accepted; no other possibilities are examined. Cauvin’s base-lines are more generalized, since he is not dealing, as does Mellaart, with one particular site:

1. environmental context of ‘cultures’,
2. associations and significant interrelations in burials, sacred objects and places,
3. deliberate emphasis in the physical features of figurines,
4. extrapolation from historic and ethnographic sources.

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5 Viz. the remarks p. 108, lines 20-22 and 31-35.
6 Cauvin, *op. cit.* (note 2) 14ff.