

Sexual symbolism in the Early Neolithic of the Southern Levant: pestles and mortars from WF16

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ABSTRACT – WF16 is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in the Southern Levant that has produced an important collection of ground stone artefacts. These include one explicit and one ambiguous representation of a phallus – the latter may be a human head and shoulders. The authors note the visual similarity of certain pestles from WF16 to phalli and suggest that such artefacts and their use may have been imbued with sexual metaphor. As such, the most potent references to sex, reproduction and fertility in the early Neolithic may not be the exotic figures claimed to be 'Mother Goddesses' but located in the most mundane of domestic artefacts.

IZVLEČEK – WF 16 je predkeramično neolitsko najdišče v južni Levanti, v katerem je bilo veliko število terilnih kamnov. Ti artefakti vključujejo tudi nedvoumno in dvomljivo predstavitev falusa – dvomljiva morda predstavlja človeško glavo in ramena. Avtorji so opazili vizualno podobnost nekaterih tolkačev iz najdišča WF 16 s falusi in domnevajo, da so ti artefakti in njihova uporaba prežeti z metaforo spolnosti. Glede na to, morda niso najmočnejše aluzije na spolnost, reprodukcijo in plodnost eksotični kipci, ki naj bi predstavljali »mati boginjo«, temveč so skrite v najbolj vsakdanjih artefaktih.

KEY WORDS – WF16; Pre-Pottery Neolithic; ground stone artefacts; sexual symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Excavations at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of WF16 in the southern Levant have produced a suite of ground stone objects of cylindrical form (Shaffrey, *in press*). They range from a 51 mm long representation of a human phallus to a relatively non-descript piece of stone of similar dimensions which has been catalogued as a utilitarian 'processor'. These form the ends of a continuum of artefacts which are relatively more or less phallic in form, the majority of which have been categorized as artefacts for the pounding (processors) or grinding (pestles) of plant material. Such artefacts are found at Neolithic and many pre-Neolithic sites in the Southern Levant and document the increasingly intensive processing of

wild, cultivated and then domesticated plants that formed the transition from hunting & gathering to farming (Wright 2003). In light of the explicit representation of a phallus at WF16, we consider whether such activity may have been imbued with sexual metaphor.

THE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC A IN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A in the Southern Levant is a period of critical cultural and economic change from the mobile hunter-gatherers of the late Pleisto-

cene to the village based farmers of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (*Kuijt & Goring Morris 2002*, Fig. 1). Kathleen Kenyon first identified this transitional period in the lowermost strata of Tell el-Sultan at Jericho, below the collapsed mud-brick buildings of PPNB and later prehistoric periods. Although the size of the Jericho PPNA settlement, and the presence of a stone tower, have not been matched elsewhere, the character of PPNA structures were better defined at the open area excavations at Netiv Hagdud, c. 50 km from Jericho, where annular buildings up to 7 meters in diameter were fully exposed and an assemblage of barley grains, most likely from wild but cultivated plants, was recovered (*Bar-Yosef & Gopher 1997*). By the late 1980s several PPNA sites were known in the vicinity of Jericho on the west bank of the Jordan Valley that appeared to be a core area for early Neolithic developments. During the 1990s the excavations at Jerf el Ahmar (*Stordeur et al. 1997*) supplemented those at Mureybet (*Cauvin 1977*) to expand our knowledge of the PPNA in the north and demonstrated the existence of a rich animal symbolism and buildings that appeared transitional from the circular structures of the PPNA to the rectangular buildings of the PPNB, similar to the transition reported during the PPNB at Beidha (*Byrd 2005*). The significance of the northern Levant for the development of Neolithic ideology was further illustrated by the discovery of Göbekli Tepe in southern Turkey, a unique hilltop Neolithic site with monumental standing stones engraved with wild animals (*Schmidt 2001*).

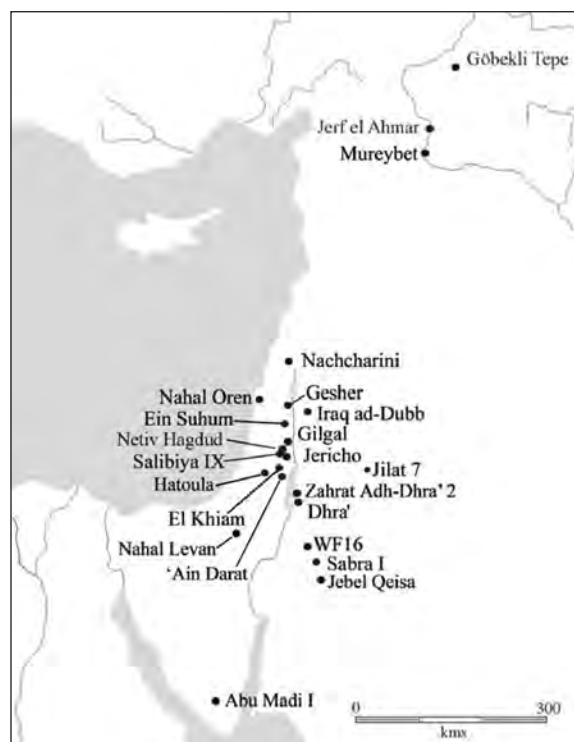


Fig. 1. Pre-Pottery A Neolithic sites in the southern Levant, and sites in the Northern Levant referred to in this chapter.

In light of these excavations, the southernmost reaches of the Jordan Valley appeared marginal to the development of the Neolithic. But since 1997 excavations have taken place at three PPNA sites on the east side of the valley, at the southern reaches of the Dead Sea. Dhra' has now been shown to be more extensive than previously believed with at least one well-preserved mud-walled building (*Finlayson et al. 2003*), while the newly discovered Zahrat Adh-Dhra has been dated to the end of the PPNA period, contemporary with PPNB sites further north (*Sayej 2004*).

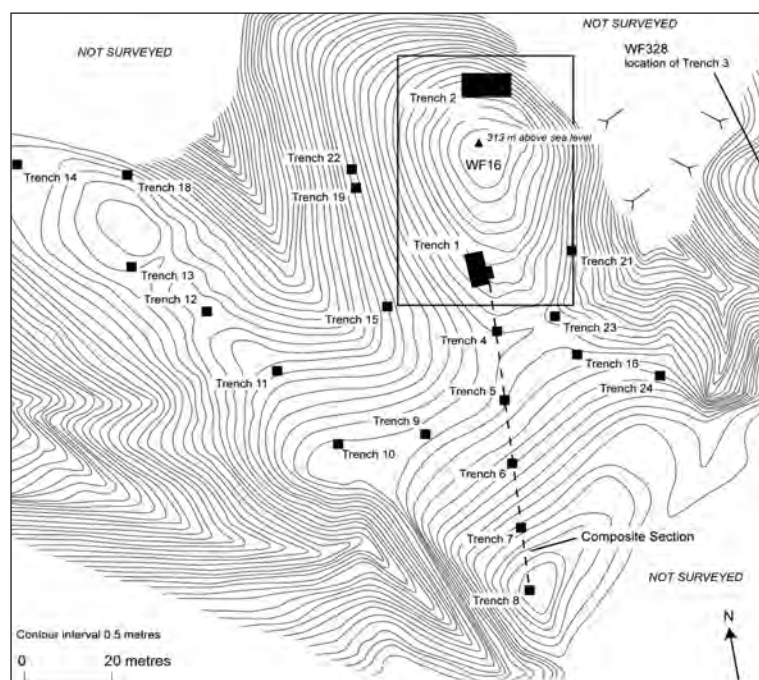


Fig. 2. Location of test-trenches excavated at WF16, April 2001.

WF16 is the most substantial and best preserved of the known PPNA sites East of the Jordan Valley (*Mithen et al. 2000; Finlayson & Mithen, in press*). Following its discovery in 1996, site evaluation was undertaken by surface collection, test-trenches and geophysical survey between 1997–2001 (Figs. 2–4). The latter revealed a complex array of structures, equivalent in size and complexity to those from Netiv Hagdud, while the excavation has de-



Fig. 3. North facing section through feature F8 within Trench 2, WF16, September 1998, showing burial pit 243 to the right of the picture.



Fig. 4. Excavation of Trench 3, WF16, September 1999, looking north. Pit 342 that contained a human burial is visible in the mid ground, adjacent to an arc of walling.

monstrated up to two meters of stratified deposits within which faunal remains are relatively well preserved for a site of this period. These indicate that capra sp. had been the principle prey item, whereas gazelle dominates the faunal remains from PPNA sites elsewhere in the southern Levant where data permits such conclusions.

IDEOLOGY AND ECONOMY IN THE PPNA

The relatively well-known female figurines from Neolithic contexts of the Levant and Anatolia have frequently been described as 'Mother Goddesses' and assumed to be associated with an ideology that stressed fertility and reproduction, seemingly appropriate for the new farming lifestyles. Cauvin (2000) championed this idea, arguing that a shift

from a Natufian zoomorphic to a PPNA anthropomorphic art can be detected and interpreting rather ambiguous figurines from Salibiya IX and Gilgal in the Jordan Valley as female forms. He stresses their similarity to slightly later female figurines from Mureybet, and argues they were the precursors to the female figurines excavated by Mellaart at Çatalhöyük that have come to epitomise the image of a 'Mother-Goddess' (Mellaart 1967). Cauvin (2000) emphasised that all figurines from early phases of the PPN that indicate sex are female, with a masculine

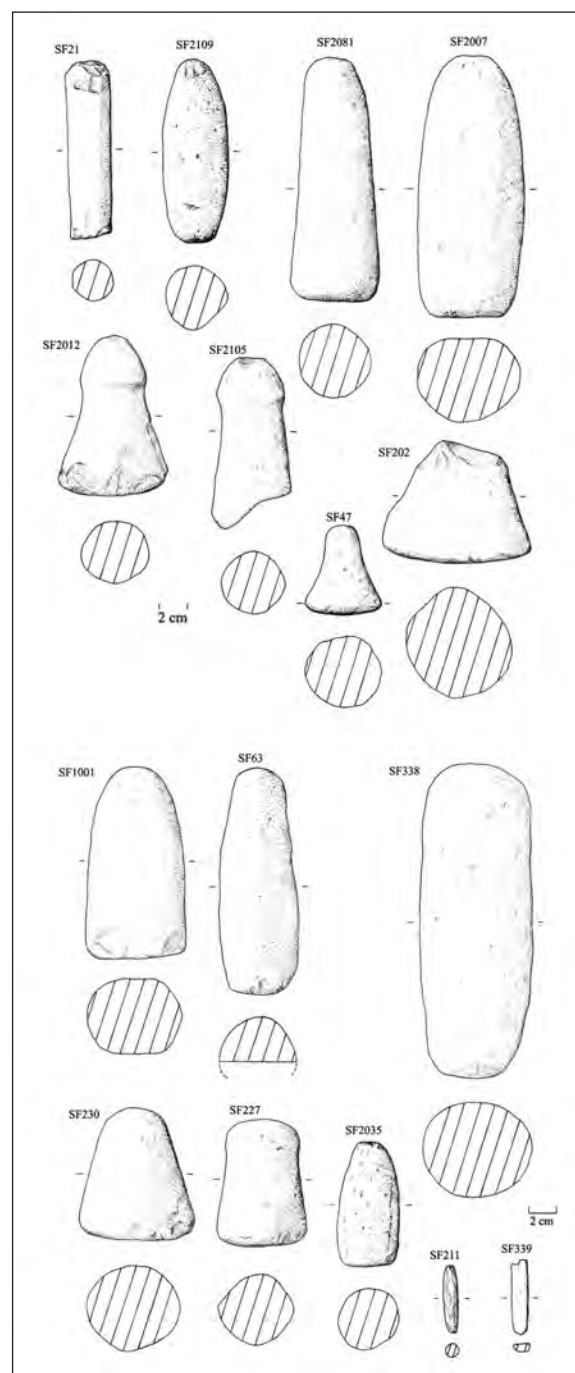


Fig. 5. Pestles from WF16.

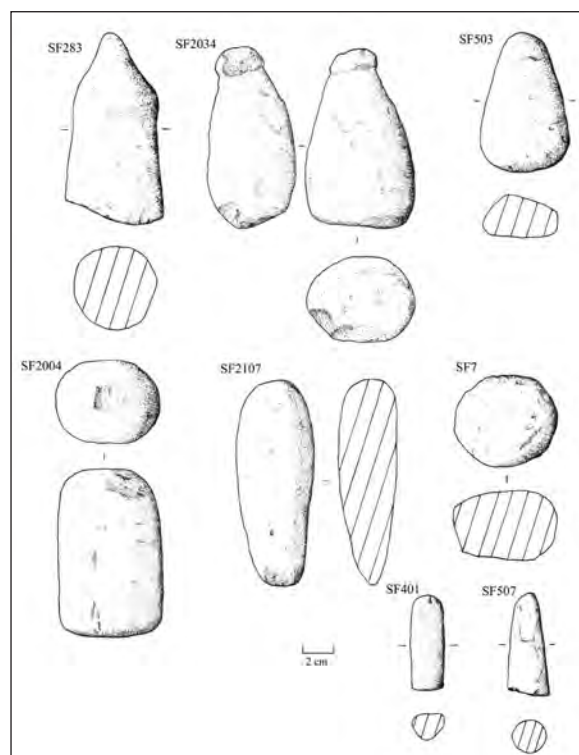


Fig. 6. Processors from WF16.

aspect only appearing in the PPNB, although he focuses on the bull image for that period, with small ithyphallic figurines from Munhata as the only explicitly male figurines. In contrast to his assumption of female identities for PPNA figurines, he assumes a male identity for the 'Ain Ghazal statues with no sexual distinctions.

Cauvin was writing not only before the discoveries of zoomorphic art at the early Neolithic sites of Jerf el Ahmar and Göbekli Tepe, but also before the critical re-evaluation of the art of Çatalhöyük that has questioned the interpretation of female figures as Mother Goddesses. Indeed, rather than a wholesome ideology of bountiful fertility that of Çatalhöyük seems more likely to have based on fear of nature, violence and death (Mithen 2003:88–96).

GROUND STONE ARTEFACTS OF THE PPNA

Ground stone objects are usually abundant at PPNA sites, coming in a wide variety of forms that predominantly fall into the categories of mortars, pestles and processors (Wright 1993). Many of these forms are also common during the preceding epipalaeolithic and following PPNB periods, indicating long-term continuity and gradual development of plant processing technology (Wright 2000). Some forms

are relatively distinct to the PPNA; most notable are cup-holed mortars, which have a central hole between 8–9 cm diameter and 5–7 cm, deep, presumably used to catch finely ground material or liquids. The test-excavations and surface collections at WF16 produced 201 items of portable worked ground stone artefact and 25 large mortars that cannot be easily moved (e.g. Figs. 5–8), several of which were positioned within the floors of structures. While some of the ground stone artefacts might have been used for grinding pigments, no direct evidence for this has been recovered and we assume that they were primarily used for processing plant foods.

Macro-plant remains were not well preserved at WF16 but indicate that a wide variety of plants including cereals, pulses, fruits, small-seeded grasses and legumes had been exploited. As such this is typical of PPNA assemblages from elsewhere. Although there are no unambiguous examples of domestic plants from PPNA contexts, it is often assumed that wild plants were being cultivated, such as by watering, weeding and transplanting.

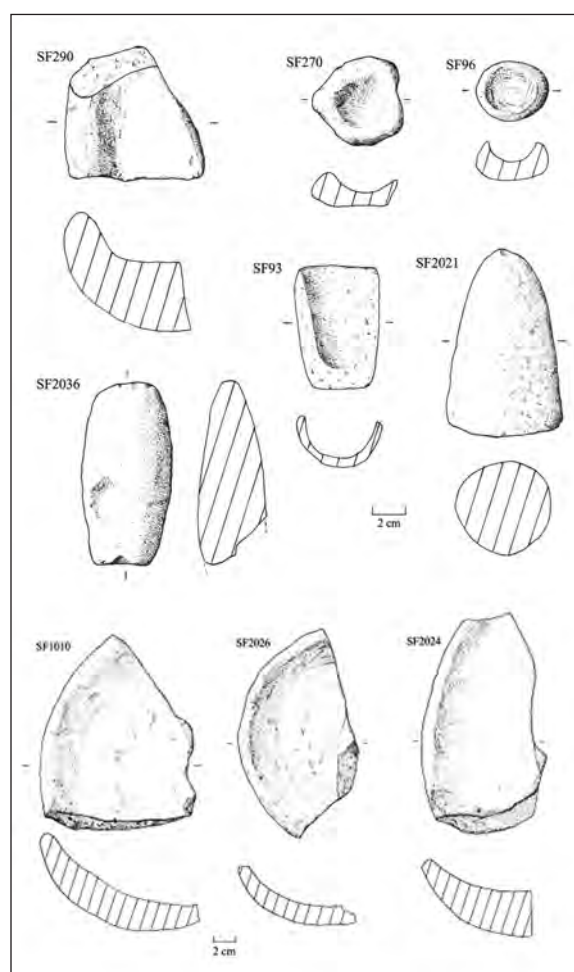


Fig. 7. Mortars, Vessels And Celts from WF16.

As with other PPNA sites of the Southern Levant, WF16 has produced a small number of so-called ‘art’ objects that have geometric designs or are anthropomorphic in form; the rich animal imagery present in the northern Levant at this date appears absent (Figs. 9 & 10). One of these objects is the lower torso of a person with well-pronounced hips but no clear indication of gender (Fig. 9:SF1007); another is a realistic-looking phallus, made from fine-grained limestone, 51 mm long and 28 mm in diameter (Fig. 9:1005); a third object might also be a partially carved phallus, discarded/lost prior to being detached from the stone base (Fig. 10). Alternatively this might be the representation of a head and torso, or a deliberate mingling of the two.

While these artefacts are categorised as ‘art’, ‘decorative’ or ‘symbolic’, objects, other pieces of ground stone which are categorised as pestles and processors also have a visual resemblance to phalli. Two ‘knobbed’ and two ‘tapered’ processors are particularly striking (Fig. 5: SF102, SF2105; Fig. 6:SF283, SF2034), but by their very nature all pestles and processors are essentially phallic in form. Had there not been at least one explicit phallus at WF16, one would have no basis for suggesting that this visual resemblance may have also been apparent to the PPNA people and that the preparation of plant foods might have been associated with sexual metaphors and symbolism.

In this light, one can reassess some of the stone objects listed by Cauvin as female figurines, including statuettes from Salabiya IX, Nahal Oren, Gilgal and Mureybet, and suggest that some aspects suggest at least a sexual duality. (The possible female symbolism of the grooved stones, so-called shaft straighteners, is not discussed here, as so far these are not associated with plant processing).

SEXUAL SYMBOLISM AND THE PREPARATION OF PLANT FOODS

While we have no direct access to the symbolic world of the PPNA, plant processing equipment, procedures and products have been frequently associated with

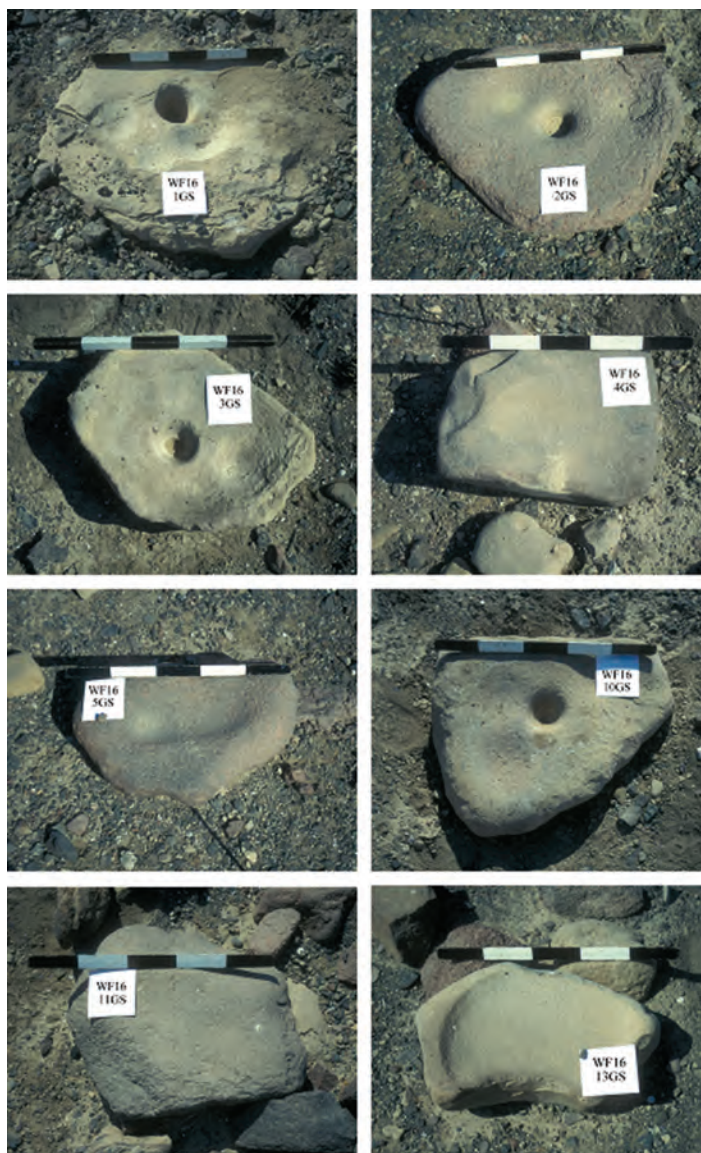


Fig. 8. Sample of Grinding Stones from WF16.

sexual symbolism throughout history. In the Old Testament Job (31:9–10) uses the analogy of a mortar and pestle for grinding grain as a metaphor for sex; Jacobsen-Widding (1992) describes how all domestic artefacts of the Shona people of Zimbabwe are imbued with sexual meanings on the basis of their shape (male, erect; female, round and compact). She describes how a Shona man must not sit on a mortar lest he becomes impotent, while sitting on a mortar and straddling a pestle was a cleansing ritual thought to ward off impotence in Senegal (Fofana 2004). Marshall (2000) described a suite of stone artefacts from the Northwest Coast of America between 3000 BP and the nineteenth century that include functional items such as bowls with explicit sexual imagery. Within modern Jordan, cultivation is still replete with sexual imagery, with the name for the stilt/sole of the ard being dhakar (male/

penis), and only men are allowed to till the land. The relationship between ard and land is seen as similar to that between men and women (*Palmer 1998*). There is a conflation between ideas of fertility and reproduction in the land and in people. It is intriguing that this relationship between plant food production and sexual symbolism may pre-date the domestication of plants, but at a time when people may have begun to cultivate wild crops in terms of sowing, tending and harvesting.

With regard to food itself, Camporesi's (1992) study of Italian peasant society has explored the existence of sexual metaphors in greatest depth and described bread as 'the most grandiose sexual metaphor' ever invented. Bread is, he argued "a reproductive and sexual image that is daily ingested, assimilated and digested...Bread serves as an emblem of both male and female reproductive organs, an edible metaphor of the phallus and the vulva, both in the (feminine) ellipsoid loaves and in the numerous loaves of phallic form" (1992.16). Camporesi also explains that it is not just cereals that are replete with sexual imagery: fresh broad beans in the pod symbolise the phallus, and the dried bean the testicle.

Rather than focussing on either the plant material or the plant processing equipment itself, we should

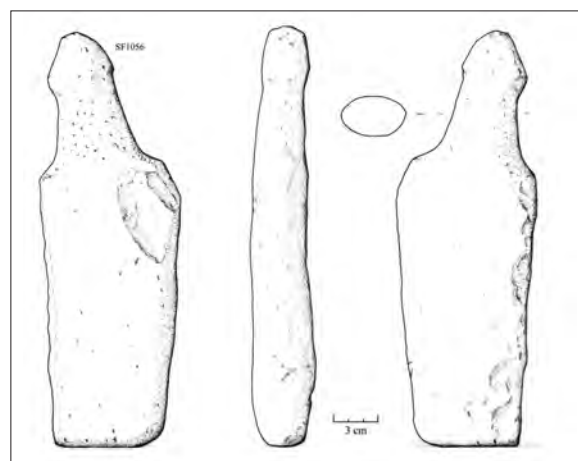


Fig. 10. Non-Utilitarian Ground Stone Item from WF16.

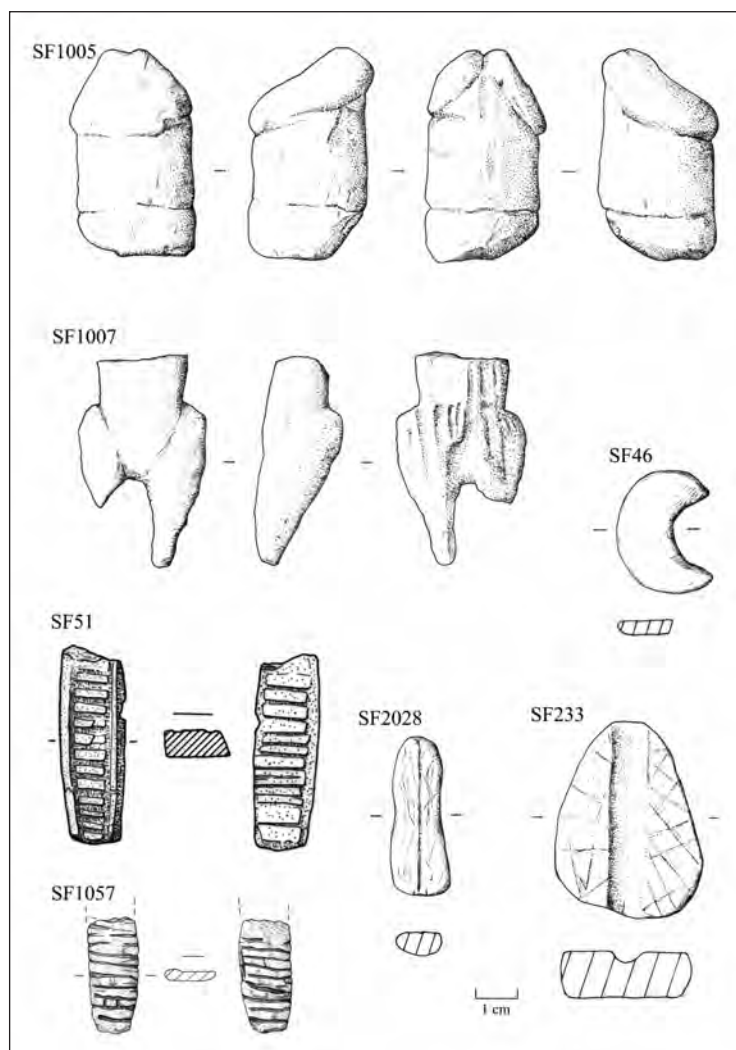


Fig. 9. Non-Utilitarian Items from WF16.

perhaps be concerned with the process of transformation involved in the production of plant-based foods. Here we might draw an analogy with the symbolism often associated with iron-production in traditional African societies (*Haaland 2004*). This is often overtly sexual, apparent to an outsider by the use of the same term for the tuyere, the nozzle through which air is forced into the furnace, as the male sexual organ, and by describing the furnace itself as the womb of a woman. When the iron bloom is removed the smelters say the woman/furnace is giving birth, and the slag is seen as the afterbirth. The Fipa of Tanzania explicitly associate the blowing of the bellows with heavy breathing during intercourse and openly recognise the metaphoric connection between biological reproduction and cultural production of iron.

Similarities between processing ore into iron and seeds into food are readily apparent: both involve

equipment that has physical resemblances to the male and female sexual organs (pestles/tuyere as phalli, mortars/furnaces vulvas/wombs), which only become meaningful when brought into contact with each other in a manner that involves physical excursion (grinding, bellowing). Both involve the transformation of natural things, usually by the combination of solids and liquids and by the use of fire.

METAPHORICAL MINDS OF THE EARLY NEOLITHIC

We have no direct evidence that processing plant material in the early Neolithic was imbued with sexual metaphor other than the physical resemblance of pestles to phalli at WF16, and the presence of at least one stone phallus at the site. But in light of the sexual symbolism of plant processing and plant foods throughout history and in diverse cultural contexts,

we believe this is inherently likely. Thinking and acting by metaphor is the key characteristic of the modern mind (*Mithen 1996*), especially those metaphors that draw upon the human body (*Lakoff & Johnson 1999*). Metaphorical thinking is likely to have been particularly prevalent during the period of major cultural and cognitive change that marked the transition to agriculture. This does not, of course, have any bearing on the utilitarian function of the pestles and mortars from WF16 and elsewhere during the PPNA, and we are not suggesting that an ideology involving sexual symbolism was a causal factor in the transition to agriculture. We simply intend to note the possibility that the most potent references to sex, reproduction and fertility during the early Neolithic may not be the exotic looking figurines claimed to be Mother Goddesses but located in the most mundane of 'domestic' artefacts, illustrations of which rarely escape from the specialist pages of excavation monographs.

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