

From Göbekli Tepe to the Nebelivka Temple: A Comparative Analysis of the Structural Components of the Oldest Temple Complexes in Asia and Europe

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Abstract

In the past thirty years, monumental archaeological discoveries related to the oldest temple complexes in Asia and Europe have emerged on the global cultural stage. In 1995, the ancient temple complex of Göbekli Tepe, dating to the 9th millennium BC, was discovered in southeastern Türkiye. Seventeen years after the discovery of Göbekli Tepe, in 2012, an Eneolithic temple of the Trypillia culture, the Nebelivka Temple, was excavated in present-day Ukraine, dating to the 4th millennium BC. Today, both temple complexes are recognized as the oldest religious centers in Asia and Europe, respectively. The findings from Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple, along with accompanying materials, extend far beyond archaeology. They shed light on the history, culture, and religion of prehistoric times. It is the ancient religion that establishes connections between the two temple complexes, allowing us, as this study reveals, to transcend the material, seemingly disparate archaeological facts to understand the general characteristics of an organized religious system of the early agricultural type. This paper explores some specific similarities between the two temple complexes and their cultures overall. Both temples exhibit a shared spatial arrangement of key structural elements, and there is ideological affinity in the iconographic themes, symbols, and artifacts that were not used in other world cultures. This comparative analysis reveals patterns of religious interactions and parallels across different regions and even subcontinents over a significant period. In this study, the author comprehensively highlights the features of the oldest forms of religiosity, providing valuable information on the genesis and evolution of beliefs inherent to organized early agricultural communities. Such a specification of “Neolithic religion,” demonstrating signs of a global

phenomenon in the ancient world, is a highly promising direction for modern science, relevant both for research in the Near East and European civilization. This research enriches our understanding of ancient cultures and provides valuable material for contemplating the role of religion in the development of human society as a whole, opening new perspectives for further scientific inquiry in this field.

Keywords

Göbekli Tepe, Nebelivka Temple, Trypillia Culture, Neolithic Revolution, Prehistoric Religion, Proto-Religion, Prehistoric Symbols, Agricultural Religion of the Neolithic, Earliest Temple Complexes

1. Introduction

The first temple complexes in Asia and Europe studied here are linked with the emergence of early agriculture in their respective regions and the transition from subsistence to productive economic systems. Historically, our understanding of this early period of agricultural communities has not fit well with contemporary notions of their complex spiritual life, developed ritual practices, and monumental religious architecture.

A view has emerged that the worldview of ancient people was limited to belief in “meteorological” phenomena, such as the sun, thunder, moon, and dawn (belief in what one sees), and fear of these natural phenomena. For example, sociologist D. Bell describes the generalized phenomenon of the emergence of religion as follows: “Religion arose from fears of nature—both the physical terrors of the environment and the dangers lurking in the inner psyche, which were unleashed at night or evoked by special seers.” (Szerszynski, 2005: p. 10)

Examining the causes that gave rise to religions, the philosopher Epicurus (340-270 BC) considered the fear of death to be the primary reason and urged people not to fear death. Democritus, on the other hand, noted: “Ancient people, observing celestial phenomena such as thunder, lightning, the convergence of stars, and eclipses of the Sun and Moon, were overcome with terror and believed that gods were responsible for these events.” (Kolodnyi, 2000: p. 101)

Furthermore, until recently, there was a stereotypical belief in the inferiority of natural religions compared to “revealed” religions, considering them “primitive” and outdated.

Thus, the path we are also taking involves a rethinking of the idea that sacred texts represent the only true interpretation of divine realms and the most accurate path to understanding truth. It is worth noting that human history before the advent of writing constitutes the vast majority of religious experience. Over 99% of human experience pertains to the Paleolithic period (Toth & Schick, 2007: p. 1963), and no society from ancient times to the present has existed without religious beliefs.

It would be speculative to assume that “God” or “gods” appeared only when humans wrote about them, and before that, they existed somewhere distantly, uninvolved in earthly affairs. The structural and formal features of the temple complexes under study demonstrate that contrary to popular belief, archaic humans had a clear concept of sacred spheres and used available means of communication to express their essence.

We are not disheartened by the absence of written records of such distant events. On the contrary, our path will be free from mythical legends and self-evident truths that sometimes threaten to overshadow the very archaeological discoveries, sentimentally presenting the desired as reality.

This study will examine historical periods from a time when the first stages of cuneiform writing in Sumer were still seven and a half thousand years away, and the “archives of the earth” had already created their first indestructible records. Today, archaeology complements our understanding of all historical epochs and adds significant aspects that would remain unknown without its sources. Since archaeological materials are, by their nature, “unbiased” and “uncompromised,” not subject to selection driven by personal interests, they will help us achieve greater objectivity in this research.

Thus, there is an urgent historical need to reassess and reveal pre-literate early agricultural cosmological religions, uncovering an entirely new structure of sacred reality that was prevalent in ancient societies. This reassessment allows us to better understand the origins of human spirituality and its development over millennia.

One of the ancient Asian geographic centers of agriculture is recognized as the so-called “Fertile Crescent” (a term coined by archaeologist J. Breasted), where the Göbekli Tepe temple complex was actually established. In Europe, one of the cradles of agriculture is recognized as the territory of modern-day Ukraine, with central Ukraine and its world-renowned black soils remaining a “global granary” to this day. It is here, in the Kirovohrad region, that the Nebelivka Temple of the Trypillia Culture was discovered in 2012.

The transition to a sedentary lifestyle, characterized by the systematic and predictable labor involved in agriculture, prompted early farmers to develop a unique model of societal ideology and religious thought. Historians refer to this period of dramatic change as the Neolithic. The beginning of the Neolithic was one of the most fundamental shifts in human history, possibly even the most significant before the advent of digital civilization. British archaeologist G. Childe aptly termed this distant historical era the “Neolithic Revolution,” which transformed the course of human development.

With the advent of agriculture, there emerged a cult of cultivated plants and the natural forces that influenced their growth, particularly the Sun, Moon, and Earth. Agriculture gave rise to a true religious cult of fertility, renewal, and vegetation. The grain sown in the spring vanished from the visible world but was later revived as a wheat ear, symbolically resurrecting and thus providing salvation and growth to the agrarian community.

It is likely that during these ancient times, several agrarian cults were established, which were later widespread among various cultures:

- The dying and resurrecting deity (interpreted as the dying and resurrecting grain or nature);
- The image of the Goddess, Mother, or Virgin, likely stemming from the archaic cult of the Earth/Mother Earth, which births itself;
- The cult of the rising Sun;
- The sacred Tree (a prototype of the World Tree or Tree of Life);
- The cult of the number seven.

These developments influenced concepts of calendrical systems, cosmology, and the construction of temple complexes, which were the earliest on the planet among farmers. Through these earliest temples, we gain access to information about the initial concepts of deities, general notions of the sacred, and the reconstruction of certain ritual practices.

As German archaeologist K. Schmidt noted about the Neolithic Temple Göbekli Tepe, which he led excavations for in 1995: “It is probably already possible to speak of the formation of a religious system in its essential features as an organized form of ritual practice” (Schmidt, 2011: p. 89). This observation aligns with the conclusions of Ukrainian scholars regarding the Nebelivka Temple, based on materials from which the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine is currently reconstructing the religious system of the Trypillia culture (Zavalii, 2023b: p. 33).

According to recent research, agriculture in Europe and Asia shares a common ancestral origin and cultural connections. As B. Rebinder rightly observed, there must be a certain “nationality due to the land” (Kolodnyi et al., 1996). Throughout the spread of agriculture and related religious beliefs, connections between various, often isolated communities persisted for millennia.

The tendency towards settled life and deliberate food production fostered a conscious strategy of living, prompting ancient farmers to relocate and carry their technologies, genes, and culture with them in response to significant changes in circumstances (climatic, social, ideological, etc.).

It is acknowledged that over 8,000 years ago, the first farmers of the “Fertile Crescent” began their migration due to internal circumstances, including towards Europe (Parzinger, 2016: pp. 66-72), interacting with indigenous peoples. This process continued for the next 3,000 years, opening new opportunities for the development of human civilization as a whole and the formation of local agricultural centers.

New technologies for sustaining life spread in various ways and at different historical times, sometimes along with their carriers. This contributed to cultural diversity both within natural regions (coastal areas, steppes, forest-steppes, forests, mountains) and geographically (east-west, south-north) (Ohneviuk & Videiko, 2023).

At that time, human communities were highly dependent on the natural environment, so the first farmers selected settlement sites and their development

strategically. In this historical process, the modern lands of Ukraine emerged as a powerful core of the agricultural gene pool of European civilization. The beginning of agricultural technologies in Ukraine dates back to the 7th millennium BC (Ohneviuk & Videiko, 2023: p. 24).

As a result of interactions among various Neolithic groups, the Trypillia-Cucuteni culture formed in the Carpatho-Balkan region in the latter half of the 6th millennium BC. Between 4200 and 3600 BC, the so-called mega-settlements (early large proto-cities) of the Trypillia civilization developed in Central Ukraine. These settlements of the historical ancestors of the Ukrainians had areas up to 341 hectares (in the case of the proto-city Taljanky (Videiko, 2015: p. 232)) and populations exceeding 10,000 inhabitants, which in the modern world makes them recognized as the largest prehistoric communities in Europe (Hofmann, Müller-Scheeßel, & Müller, 2024). These sites in Ukraine have also been listed among the largest human settlements in the world for certain historical periods (List of Largest Cities, 2022).

It was during this “Golden Age” of agricultural development in the territory of modern Ukraine that the Nebelivka Temple of the Trypillia culture emerged.

In the author’s view, ancient religion preceded the rapid development of the Trypillia community in Ukraine. In other words, the Marxist narrative that agriculture was the primary factor in human “ascension” may not hold true in the case of Trypillia. It seems that, in this instance, religion preceded advanced agriculture.

Ancient Neolithic temples undoubtedly indicate how significant and influential religious beliefs could have been in the development of civilizations. As aptly noted by M. Eswaran: “Religion could also plausibly have been a midwife aiding the birth of ancient states.” (Eswaran, 2024)

It is known that the earliest settlements of the early Trypillia culture were already organized according to the cultural standards of future mega-settlements. It is also recognized that the expansion of the Trypillia culture progressed from west to east, from the Dniester Region towards the Southern Bug and further to the Hrebnyuk Yar region in Cherkasy (Burdo & Videiko, 2007: p. 98). These ancient people, guided by their unified faith, literally “moved towards the rising Sun,” and their sacred buildings were oriented in the same direction.

This scientific fact aligns the migration movement and orientation of sacred buildings with the cardinal directions towards which their religious beliefs and likely religious imagery and prayers were directed. It is quite plausible that the ancient ethnic group had religious motivations in their actions, particularly in the direction of their expansion.

Such a cosmocentric orientation could have been a fundamental factor in the formation of mass settlements of the circular type, the development of a network of temples and shrines, and the vigorous advancement of agriculture.

It is worth noting that the Trypillia-Cucuteni culture on both sides of the Prut River, while having significant similarities in ceramic complexes, still shows remarkable differences. These differences have become increasingly noticeable

recently. The complex circular planning of gigantic settlements with circular streets (in contrast to the irregular row planning of buildings typical of the Cucuteni culture (Shatilo, 2021: p. 13), from Romania and Moldova) and the network of temples and shrines become a distinctly Trypillia heritage and model of their existence.

In this case, religion, rather than “labor,” provided the foundation for the formation of a shared identity and worldview among the Trypillians. It is to their religious beliefs that these ancient people owe their prosperity and development. If this is the case, the studied religious system should be viewed as a grand spiritual achievement of the “artists of the Sun and fire” in human history.

This work does not address the historical interconnectedness of ancient farmers in Anatolia and Europe. However, since this work is dedicated to the comparative analysis of two temple complexes from these regions and the cultures in which they functioned, this issue should be highlighted from a religious studies perspective.

It is important to emphasize that the cultural connections between prehistoric farmers were much deeper than previously thought. It is pertinent to refer to the research by M. Videiko and T. Hoshko titled “The Gold of the Trypillians: Searches Lead to Anatolia?” which discusses the origins of the golden pendant found at the Nebelivka Temple during its excavation in 2012.

It turned out that the pendant is made from a natural gold alloy originating from Northwestern Anatolia (Videiko & Hoshko, 2018: p. 82). Such a small jewelry piece evidences the scale of the cultural exchange of relics. The pendant likely reached the Nebelivka Temple through complex communication processes and was either left or lost there. The prerequisite for such finds must have been a wide network of inter-regional contacts maintained regularly (Dietrich, Heun, Notroff et al., 2019: p. 684). This artifact is not only evidence of material exchange but also symbolizes deeper cultural and spiritual interactions between distant Neolithic civilizations.

The Anatolian gold relic establishes a certain spiritual bridge between the ancient farming communities of Europe and Asia, specifically in the realm of religious connections. Additionally, the presence of such an object in the Nebelivka Temple may indicate the existence of pilgrimage routes or sacred paths along which not only goods but also ideas and religious practices traveled. All this allows us to reassess the scale and complexity of cultural interactions during the Neolithic period.

In summary, it is necessary to examine the religious parallels between two ancient temple complexes in Europe and Asia and to establish some interconnected forms of ideology. Such similarity seems quite plausible, as these sites reveal not only remnants of essentially related material cultures of farming types but also fundamental forms and symbols that existed in Göbekli Tepe and later Anatolian settlements like Çatalhöyük, and are well known from the Nebelivka Temple and the Trypillia culture in somewhat transformed forms.

The Trypillia manifestations of the sacred have undoubtedly undergone a complex process of evolutionary transformation and altered their mode of expression. They reflect the enormous accumulation of experiences and religious knowledge of prehistoric people, whose intellectual development increased along with settled agriculture. At the same time, the Trypillia phenomenon represents a significant originality emerging from the patterns of development of the autochthonous population of Ukraine.

It is worth mentioning the research by J. Glover, “The Rise and Fall of Göbekli Tepe,” in which the researcher places the Mizyne culture of Ukraine, which existed long before Göbekli Tepe (Glover, 2022: p. 85), at the forefront of complex religious manifestations. In this sense, the achievements of the Trypillia civilization are more likely a culmination of existing continuity and evolution of autochthonous communities rather than the beginning of something new.

To quote D. Davis on the Trypillia-Cucuteni culture, it is undoubtedly one of the most impressive Neolithic civilizations in Europe, surpassing the earliest known cities of Mesopotamia in some aspects (Reese, 2022).

Establishing worldview connections over 3000 years between the earliest temples in Asia and Europe from the decline of Göbekli Tepe to the beginning of the Nebelivka temple complex inevitably leads us to understand a shared religious tradition that could be called Neolithic or even the “mother religion” of the world. This genesis of the studied religious tradition counters the established notion of an “endless number” of religious manifestations of Neolithic cultures. It highlights the significance of both sacred monuments in Ukraine and Türkiye as part of a “global religion” of early farmers.

This religious phenomenon can be termed “maternal” also because, according to all three sacred book traditions and the creation philosophies of monotheistic religions, the myth of Adam and Eve dates back to approximately 4000 BC (Dating Creation, 2022). This historical time coincides with the actual emergence of the Nebelivka Temple, which, in the coordinates of Abrahamic religions, should be considered a paradisiacal place that possibly shaped part of the modern religious “face of the earth.”

The methodology of this research is based on the analysis of archaeological sources. However, the study of “Neolithic religion” should be conducted within the framework of contemporary religious studies with an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from modern ethnography, anthropology, history of religion, and theology. The work employs comparative-religious methods, empirical, and phenomenological methods.

A significant portion of our research methodology is based on the comparative approach, which has gained wide recognition in the phenomenology of religion. This approach allows us to expand our understanding of deeper cultural unity, and identify inter-religious connections based on spatial structures of temple complexes, symbols, phenomena, and specific religious artifacts.

The author explores how the structures of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka are

heavily dependent on and interconnected with concepts of yearly cyclicity, solar culminations, and spatial orientation towards these phenomena. This implies a fundamental unity of temporal and spatial dimensions within which both temples functioned.

We will begin our research with a presentation of general information about both temple complexes, as these fundamental concepts might be unfamiliar to the reader. We will then proceed with a comparative analysis of the spatial organization and architectural planning of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka Temples. To understand one of the main religious ideas of both ancient structures or complexes, it is necessary to place them in the appropriate spatial-temporal context and identify similar patterns in other related sacred structures, which will lead to conclusions about one of the key paradigms of ancient religion.

Next, we will examine key material monuments of both temple structures, their possible interpretations, and meanings, which form general ideas about archaic agricultural religion. Based on the gathered research data, the author will formulate appropriate conclusions.

Thus, this work aims to approach the understanding of the ancient agricultural-type religious system. This system likely began to form in the society of early hunter-gatherers and farmers in the foothills of the Eastern Taurus mountains between 9000 BC and 7000 BC. It later achieved its final development and flourishing in the agricultural culture of Trypillia in the territory of modern Ukraine during the time of the Nebelivka Temple, approximately 4000-3700 BC, incorporating the worldview features of the local autochthonous population. The resulting synthesis constitutes a unique religious system. This system may have significantly influenced the formation of subsequent religious traditions in the region, leaving its mark on the beliefs and practices of later cultures. Understanding this religious system allows us to better grasp not only the spiritual world of ancient agricultural communities but also the processes of cultural exchange and evolution of religious ideas in a broad geographical and temporal context.

2. Göbekli Tepe: General Information

Göbekli Tepe is the world's oldest known temple complex (Baumgarte, n.d.), (Meulenberg, 2021: p. 3), a colossal ritual site (Parzinger, 2018: p. 76) built over 11,000 years ago during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period (Becker & Clare, 2014: p. 7). The structures were erected approximately between 9600 and 8200 BC (UNESCO. Göbekli Tepe, 2018). According to German archaeologist K. Schmidt, who led the excavations, "At the end of the first research campaign, there was no doubt that we had discovered a cultic center, worked on by people from an entire region over a long period" (Schmidt, 2011: p. 109) He believed that the temple, built by hunter-gatherers and early farmers after the last Ice Age, served as a catalyst, directing humanity toward agriculture, urban life, and everything that followed (Ragazas, 2013).

To date, no definitive religious meaning has been assigned to the megalithic

complex. K. Schmidt considered Göbekli Tepe to be “the first temple in the world,” dedicated to the cult of the dead (Schmidt, 2011: p. 234). Italian archaeo-astronomer D. Magli suggested that key sanctuaries at Göbekli Tepe align with the rising of Sirius, around 9100-8250 BC (Collins, 2014). Ancient Near Eastern Researcher M. Black proposed that shamans at Göbekli Tepe performed fertility rituals dedicated to a female Sky Goddess (Black, 2022). Additionally, there are more exotic theories circulating in print and electronic media claiming that the temple complex is the Garden of Eden, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a shaman’s temple, or even an alien base (Kurt, 2017: p. 1110).

Göbekli Tepe was first noticed in 1964, and excavation began in 1994-1995. The archaeological remains were buried underground for thousands of years, preserving the stone structures of the temple much better than the later megaliths in Europe. In 2018, it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Located between the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Göbekli Tepe is in the heart of modern Islamic civilization, where all Abrahamic religions originated. According to divine revelations, the prophet Abraham considered the father of monotheistic beliefs, lived in this region for seventy-five years (Genesis 11: 31-32). The area is also known as the “Fertile Crescent” for its significant agricultural advantages, where, for the first time on earth, people began gathering, sowing, and producing bread. This region is also known to Anatolians as the “City of Prophets” (Özalp, 2019). The natural conditions here were ideal for the development of human communities, where nomadic hunters and gatherers transitioned to agricultural life.

The temple complex sits atop an artificial megalithic mound (tumulus), standing 15 meters high and covering an area of 9 hectares (Haklay & Gopher, 2020: p. 344). The Turkish word “Göbek” means “navel,” “belly,” or “dome.” The phrase “Göbekli Tepe” is best translated as “navel of the earth” or “protuberant hill,” accurately reflecting the silhouette of the mound with its ancient temple ruins. In Kurdish, the complex is known as Girê Mirazan or Xerabesh and was considered a sacred place (Göbekli_Tepe). The motivation behind constructing such a massive earth mound in the Stone Age likely had religious roots as elevated places were thought to be closer to the sky, thus considered homes of Gods and sacred by themselves.

On this artificial mound, ancient hunter-gatherers or early farmers constructed a group of circular structures (stone concentric circles), which together form the ancient religious complex.

The Göbekli Tepe structures represent a cultic site without provisions for permanent habitation, although evidence of ancient dwellings has been found in the surrounding area.

The core of the temple complex consists of four stone circular structures of varying sizes, formed from similar elements: T-shaped monolithic columns made from solid blocks of crystallized limestone. These columns are connected by stone walls and stone benches, which archaeologist K. Schmidt interprets as possible

altars (Schmidt, 2010: p. 16). In the center of each stone circle stand two particularly large T-shaped columns (up to 5.5 meters high (Haklay & Gopher, 2020: p. 344), adorned with various relief motifs depicting animals, anthropomorphic expressions, probable calendrical representations, and other religious themes of the time.

The columns of Göbekli Tepe also convey religious symbols that need to be examined separately within the context of this research.

Notably, the central T-columns in the stone circles of Göbekli Tepe were arranged along a conceptual world axis from east to west, nearly aligned with the cardinal directions and in a uniform spatial arrangement. Significantly, central T-shaped columns in some stone enclosures were set on stone pedestals, while in others, they were embedded in the floor. The organization of these circular structures in a specific spatial order, with signs of monumentalizing the T-shaped columns, defines the ritual space of the complex, which is organized with a deliberate religious intent.

Within the temple and its vicinity, ritual stone basins, mortars, and numerous grinders (likely used for grinding grains) have been found, indicating large-scale processing of plants (Peters, Schmidt, Dietrich et al., 2014: p. 3066). Grains such as wheat, rye, and barley, discovered in the area around the megalithic complex and in nearby settlements, may have been involved in the temple's ritual activities. The ritual grinding (preparation) of grains is an important activity associated with sacred rites. Schmidt and his team also reported finding bones of wild animals, including red deer, wild boars, goats, sheep, and aurochs, as well as various bird species such as vultures, ibises, and ducks. Most of these animals are depicted on the sculptures and columns of the ancient temple.

According to K. Schmidt, the stone benches connecting the circular structures into a cohesive whole should be considered archaic altars. This suggests that major ceremonies involved significant fire and light.

Thus, the Göbekli Tepe megalithic complex, with its distinctive internal arrangement, most likely represents an open-air temple complex with four main circular structures, potentially interconnected within a specific worldview. The circular space of the stone enclosures is filled with T-shaped columns, connected by stone masonry and stone benches (possibly altars). The columns were topped with religious images, primarily reflecting a hunting-oriented ideology. In the center of the stone circles, in all four cases, were the two largest T-shaped columns, probably aligned along a conceptual world axis east-west (with some deviation), possibly pointing to the sunrise at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. This alignment prompts an examination of the phenomenon and the genesis of the temple from the perspectives of archaeoastronomy and solar cults.

The megalithic complex at its final stages was intentionally and quickly buried, and it appears to have been ritually interred and prepared for this purpose (Peters, Schmidt, Dietrich et al., 2014: p. 3065). It has been established that the so-called "burial of the structures" was primarily anthropogenic in origin (Schmidt, 2011:

p. 224), with the mixture used to cover the temple consisting of earth, stones, animal bones, flint fragments, artifacts, and tools. Before this symbolic burial, the building was likely cleaned (Dietrich, 2016: p. 2). The people of the Stone Age attempted to conceal the grandeur of their spiritual world underground, and perhaps the mixture used to cover the temple also had ritual significance. After this, the ceremonial fires of the hunter-gatherers were extinguished forever. Göbekli Tepe was completely hidden and abandoned around 7000 BC (Seyfzadeh & Schoch, 2019: p. 35).

Whether the end of Göbekli Tepe was a revolutionary event, an evolutionary process or the result of a deliberate plan by ancient sages remains an open question. However, approximately 3,000 years after the decline of Göbekli Tepe, ancient fire altars of agrarian religion reemerged with renewed strength in the territory of modern Ukraine. The largest Eneolithic temple on the European subcontinent, known today as the Nebelivka temple complex, continued the tradition of sacred human events and welcomed its devotees. In any case, this historical process represents a genuine “Neolithic religious revolution,” according to G. Childe’s terminology, and the hidden similarities between the temple remains of Nebelivka and Göbekli Tepe provoke particular scientific interest.

3. Nebelivka Temple Complex: General Information

The Nebelivka Temple, also known as the Nebelivka Temple Complex, is the largest cultic structure of the Cucuteni-Trypillia cultural complex, covering an area of 1,200 square meters. It is also the largest temple of Eneolithic Europe (At the Eastern Border, 2015; Videiko, 2015: pp. 231-233; Cucuteni and Ancient Europe, 2016: p. 70). It remains the largest and most advanced temple complex of Eneolithic Europe, representing a unique type of religious structure while also embodying the broader phenomenon of ancient religion.

The Temple was constructed approximately between 4000 and 3900 BC, during the era of the development of large Trypillian proto-cities, some of which spanned up to 341 hectares (for example, the Trypillian proto-city of Taljanki). These Trypillian settlements, located in the area of modern-day Central Ukraine, are included in the list of the largest cities in human history, as referenced in the “List of largest cities throughout history” (List of Largest Cities, 2022). It was within one of these large giant settlements, covering 275 hectares, that the Trypillia Temple was discovered in its eastern part.

The Nebelivka Temple Complex was initially discovered in 2009 through magnetic surveying. The particularly large size of the structure (60 × 20 meters) immediately attracted the attention of archaeologists. Over seven weeks in the summer of 2012, a joint British-Ukrainian expedition conducted excavations of this “megastructure” (as it was archaeologically defined). Thus, the actual archaeological discovery of Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple were separated in time by only 17 years. However, the most notable ancient temples of Europe and Asia have experienced different fates in the modern world. Göbekli Tepe was inscribed

on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2018, while the excavation site of the Nebelivka Temple was covered with earth after the archaeological research. Today, farmers grow sunflowers over the remains of the ancient complex (*The Nebelivka Hypothesis*, 2023). In hindsight, it must be acknowledged as a significant mistake that one of the most important religious monuments of the Eneolithic period in Central Europe did not receive the attention it deserved.

The construction of the entire Nebelivka settlement, covering 275 hectares, and its central religious structure took place after a large-scale natural forest fire cleared the Nebelivka promontory around 4000 BC. According to Durham University (UK), whose staff participated in the excavation of the Nebelivka Temple, this site, after being naturally purified by fire, may have been perceived by the “keepers of tradition” as a future pilgrimage center for the entire community (*Chapman & Gaydarska*, 2019: pp. 6-7, 17-18). Given the high significance of the fire cult in the Trypillian religious complex, the site where the largest Eneolithic temple in Europe stood can be considered a territory sanctified by fire, a space cleansed by a fiery sign for a sacred city.

The Temple is a large two-story structure located at the highest point of the settlement’s plateau. This hilltop placement ensured its visibility from several kilometers away. The hill offers a magnificent view of the eastern part of the world. At the base of the hill, on its eastern side, there once flowed a full river, now known as the Nebel. The entire “megastructure” was situated on a platform measuring 90 x 60 meters (5400 square meters). Access to the platform was provided both from outside and within the settlement. Archaeologists concluded that the structure was constructed in such a way that it determined the layout of this area (*Videiko & Burdo*, 2015: p. 312). Its relative isolation in the landscape, its elevation, and distinctiveness likely further sanctified this sacred structure.

On the Nebelivka hill, the first organized farmers of what is now Ukraine built a tripartite temple, divided into three worldview zones. It consisted of a main ritual hall, a sanctuary in front of the entrance to the ritual hall, and a temple courtyard adjacent to the sanctuary. The size of the structure is estimated at 1200 square meters (60 x 20 meters). This complex architectural ensemble as a whole constitutes the religious temple complex of the ancient Trypillians.

To construct such a monumental structure as the Nebelivka Temple, finding a way to unite groups from different regions and organize large-scale communal work was likely necessary. The answer to how this was achieved lies in the religious beliefs of this organized community.

The entire Temple structure was built along the world axis of “east-west.” The central entrance to the Temple was oriented towards the sunrise, which suggests a religious tradition associated with the direction from which life-giving energy emerges. The east is the direction where humans, throughout their history, have seen the sunrise in the morning, so the association of the sunrise with life, and sunset with death, should be considered an inherent characteristic of the human species.

On the first floor of the complex, there were seven fire altars divided into two rooms in a ratio of 3 to 4, a central depression for the main religious symbol of the temple, a clay podium with a set of ritual vessels, ceremonial grain grinders for crushing grains, a ceramic table, a ceremonial set of cups, and more. The western part of the building (the main ritual hall) was a monumental columned hall with a circular balcony around the perimeter at the level of the second floor and a partially open roof space. The eastern part of the structure (the sanctuary) was the most structured, with a series of partitions and remnants of thresholds indicating the presence of five or six rooms distributed across two floors. The western and eastern parts of the structure were connected by a “solar corridor,” which on the days of the equinox allowed sunlight to reach the center of the ritual hall (Anatoliy, 2020: p. 75). Thus, the ritual hall and the sanctuary in the temple’s interior began with an arched or circular structure into which the sun would shine on specific days of the year.

In the Temple itself and nearby, a significant number of artifacts were found that clearly illustrate the religious concepts and rituals that took place there. This establishes a coherent concept of prehistoric people’s relationship with the sacred sphere and their understanding of religion.

The Nebelivka promontory, where the colossal Trypillia Temple was located, has been recognized in the British archaeologists’ work “The Pilgrimage Model for Trypillia Mega-Sites: The case of Nebelivka, Ukraine” (Chapman & Gaydarska, 2019) as a likely pilgrimage center of the ancient world. In their thorough conclusions, the British archaeologists perceive the “mega-site” of Nebelivka as a pilgrimage center created to instill a sense of religious power and unity. Pilgrimage groups could have arrived at the Central Temple during the season of up to eight (snow-free) months per year from surrounding settlements within a 100 km radius of Nebelivka. Ritual leaders from various Trypillian communities might have alternately organized religious ceremonies in the temple (Early Urbanism in Europe, 2020: p. 464; Chapman & Gaydarska, 2019).

Like Göbekli Tepe, the Nebelivka Temple also underwent a final ritual at the end of its existence. Whereas Göbekli Tepe was hidden beneath a layer of earth, the Trypillia Temple was deliberately prepared and burned. This sacred act likely coincided with a collective ritual of burning the entire Nebelivka proto-city. It appears that the “great sacrifice” occurred in several stages.

The first stage involved preparing the inventory in an established order, with items arranged in the same sequence as in real life. This “final set” was probably not very different from the usual, but still held symbolic significance similar to that of funeral inventory. The burial of the “mega-structure”/temple complex involved over 60 kg of pottery, and at least 332 vessels—most for communal use, indicating contributions from many households (Gaydarska, Nebbia, & Chapman, 2020: p. 107).

In the second stage of the ritual, the sacred building was filled with fuel, likely straw, and kindling. In the third stage, the structure was engulfed in flames,

followed by the burning of the entire settlement. Such conclusions can be drawn from the study of building clusters at Trypillian proto-cities Maidanetske and Taljanky, where the nature of the ruins indicates instantaneous burning (Cucuteni and Ancient Europe, 2016: p. 45).

Thus, the Nebelivka Temple began its existence in the fire element and was returned to it at the end of its cycle. It is important to note that the temples of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka survived to the time of their discovery only due to the final rituals of their “burial.” Their conditional “resurrection” in the modern world is linked to a past that would not have existed had they been merely abandoned.

The incineration of the Nebelivka Temple reduced its sacred space to a state of stone, hiding its religious greatness under Ukrainian soil for millennia. In the case of Göbekli Tepe, the layer of earth applied preserved the world’s first temple forever. In other words, the people of that time possessed the spiritual power and ritual knowledge to renew or resurrect, which has been effectively confirmed by sensational discoveries in the modern world.

To summarize, the ancient religious complex of Nebelivka has all the hallmarks of a pilgrimage center located in a probably sacred settlement of the time that hosted its believers for great celebrations. The Temple itself was integrated into the configuration of the entire settlement, enhancing its sacredness through movement from the periphery to the center. The Temple was a two-story structure with a partially open roof or construction over the main ritual hall, which provided a symbolic connection to celestial spheres during rituals.

In the horizontal plane, the sacred complex had three worldview zones, extending from its central square and temple courtyard to the transition into the temple’s interior, its sanctuary, and main ritual hall, culminating in the “holy of holies” – the central point marked by the temple’s main symbol – the sacred Tree (Painting-Reconstruction, 2024; Zavalii, 2023a: p. 158). The temple structure was equipped with a “solar corridor” along the world axis of “east-west,” which unified the entire complex.

The Nebelivka Temple, located in Ukraine, is currently the largest and most developed temple complex of Eneolithic Europe, representing a distinct type of religious structure and simultaneously reflecting the general phenomenon of agricultural religion.

Considering the aforementioned characteristics of these two ancient religious complexes in Asia and Europe, it is worth delving into the specifics of their worldview similarities and identifying the features and traits that link the “cultural bridge” between the two early agricultural cultures.

4. Comparative Analysis of the Spatial Organization and Architectural Planning of Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple

When studying ancient temple complexes, some researchers begin their

interpretations with the external archaeological features, leading them to analyze images, search for lost statues of gods, or identify obvious religious signs. However, many scholars overlook the subtle signs of the logical placement of structures within the temple complexes on the landscape. It can be argued that their iconic patterns form general, interconnected elements that express broader meanings or ideas in the form of the “interaction” of their components. By establishing such a general or interconnected idea underlying the planning of temple complexes, we simultaneously identify the patterns of religious ideas or motifs and the methodology for interpreting them. This approach should be the starting point for studying the earliest temple complexes of Asia and Europe within the scope of this work.

For rural cultures, the sun, as an evident natural force associated with the growth of crops and the entire world of nature, played a central role in the organization and construction of cultic structures at sites such as Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple. This complex organizational expression of ancient agrarian religion embodied the sacred multiplicity of the annual solar mystery. It can be said that for the agrarian communities, the wholeness of the year in the cycle of passing seasons was the supreme cosmological principle of the ancient religious system, represented in various, typically tripartite, symbolic images and forming the foundation of the temples themselves.

It seems that solar cosmology was already established among the agricultural communities that built the first megaliths in southeastern Anatolia, around 9000-8000 BC. This likely relates to the earliest concepts of creating and maintaining order in the world. Accordingly, the placement and precise interaction of different elements within the temple could ensure an established sanctity. According to the conclusions of the archaeologists who studied Göbekli Tepe, it was determined that: “The architecture and art of Göbekli Tepe reflect a complex system of beliefs and a hierarchically structured universe” (Peters, Schmidt, Dietrich et al., 2014: p. 3066).

The example of the Nebelivka Temple demonstrates that the three fire altars of the main ritual hall were organized in such a way as to emphasize their dimensional dependence and position within the temple on the visible annual procession of the sun over the eastern horizon (Zavalii, 2021b: p. 91-92; Zavalii, 2024) (Figure 1).

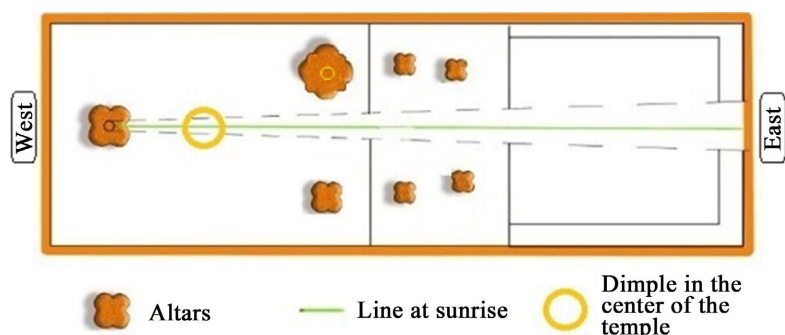


Figure 1. The floor plan of the Nebelivka Temple, according to the level of the first floor (Zavalii, 2023a: p. 144).

The altars in the main ritual hall of the Nebelivka Temple clearly demonstrate the dependence of the “solar year” cycle on the structure of the sacred building. This well-documented religious expression has led scholars to reconsider the religious complex of Göbekli Tepe from the perspective of solar archaeoastronomy, incorporating insights from the Nebelivka Temple. This comparative analysis has revealed identical spatio-temporal features in the organization of Göbekli Tepe that had previously been overlooked by researchers. It becomes apparent that the first hunters and farmers of Southwest Asia sought to integrate “solar nature” into Göbekli Tepe, just as the early farmers in what is now Ukraine did with the Nebelivka Temple.

The alignment pattern of the altars in the main ritual hall of the Nebelivka Temple and its central religious symbol corresponds to the spatial arrangement of the four stone temple circles at Göbekli Tepe, as demonstrated by the following comparison (**Figure 2**).

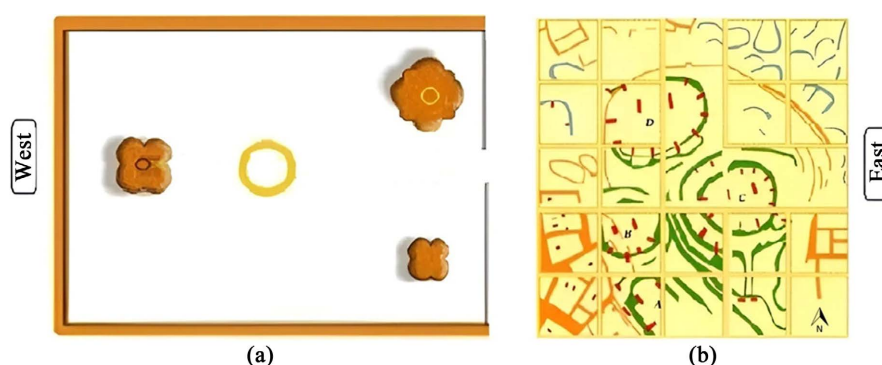


Figure 2. Organizational and spatial comparison of the sacred architecture of the oldest temple complexes in Asia and Europe in their respective landscapes. (a) Placement of fire altars and the central religious symbol in the main ritual hall of the Nebelivka Temple; (b) Placement of the temple circles with the conventional designations A, B, C, and D at Göbekli Tepe.

This comparison clearly shows the interdependence between the placement of the altars and the central religious symbol in the Nebelivka Temple and the spatial arrangement of the four circular structures at Göbekli Tepe. It becomes evident that the dimensions and positions of the three circular structures A, B, and D at Göbekli Tepe correspond precisely to the visible annual procession of the sun over the eastern horizon, toward which all four structures were oriented. The fourth structure, C, is located directly on the path of the sunrise during the spring and autumn equinoxes. Together with structure B and their internal spatial organization, they form the sacred east-west axis. Along this sacred spatial vector at Göbekli Tepe, the T-shaped columns are located, likely serving to mark the symbolism of the annual equinox further.

This phenomenon of the spatial organization of temple objects should be considered a defining feature of ancient agrarian religion, as seen in other ancient agrarian sacred complexes in Europe and Asia. The clear rhythm of symmetrically

arranged objects in a specific order could be established by the structures themselves, altars, depressions, above-ground superstructures, and even earthen mounds (kurgans). This religious phenomenon is studied from the Stone Age to the Late Bronze Age across the Eurasian territory. It is worth mentioning several examples of the world's oldest sacred places from the Stone Age in what is now Türkiye, such as Karahan Tepe (circa 10,200 BC), Boncuklu Tarla (circa 10,000 BC) and comparing them with the spatial organizational structure of the Bronze Age sanctuary-observatory Bezvodivka (Klykavka, 2019: p. 90) (3rd-2nd millennium BC) from modern Ukraine (Figures 3-5).

These illustrations clearly reveal the analogies in the organizational design of ancient complexes and the sacred approach in determining the dimensions of their structural components. The highlighted sites demonstrate spatial and organizational similarities and a high degree of standardization across sacred objects



Figure 3. Computer-generated 3D reconstruction of the Karahan Tepe temple complex, Türkiye (a 3D model developed by M. Mellace) (Intervista esclusiva, 2023).



Figure 4. Excavations at Boncuklu Tarla, Türkiye (Boncuklu Tarla, 2024).

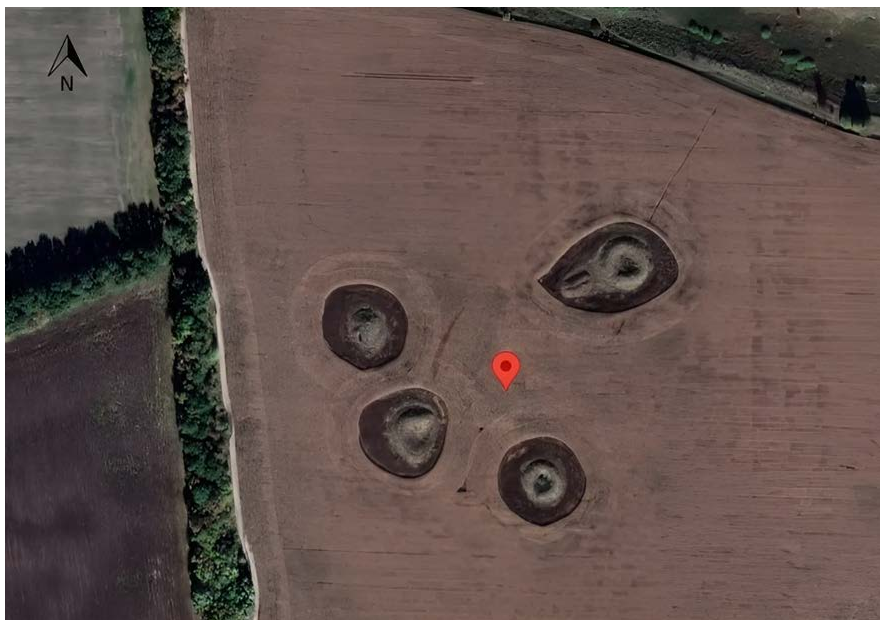


Figure 5. Satellite image of the Bronze Age mound complex and sanctuary at Bezvodivka, Ukraine (Google Maps).

in Asia and Europe. These “traces on the ground” constitute the oldest informational archive of humanity, spanning from approximately 10,000 BC to 2000 BC, as recorded in the provided material.

It is crucial to reiterate that the sacred concept of organizing the dimensions of altars and their positions within the spatial coordinates of the Nebelivka temple complex, according to the three main solar events of the calendar year, is reflected in the dimensions and positions of the stone circles at Göbekli Tepe and the temple complexes at Karahan Tepe, Boncuklu Tarla, and even the mound complex at Bezvodivka in Ukraine.

Understanding this religious pattern in ancient temple complexes and sanctuaries enables us to discuss an “archaeologically documented” procession of equinoxes occurring thousands of years earlier than previously believed. For Göbekli Tepe, this also serves as an argument that it was conceived as a single project (even though the stone circles were constructed at different historical times) and gradually developed in a hierarchical and structured spatial order. This discovery also allows for conclusions regarding the actual orientation of this archaeological monument. The available evidence provides compelling grounds to conclude that the key structures at Göbekli Tepe were oriented eastward. This suggests a new understanding of what was initially planned and later realized.

It is also important to compare Göbekli Tepe with the probable Trypillia temple complex at the settlement of Viitivka (circa 3900-3500/3400 BC), Ukraine. Recent geomagnetic research at Viitivka has recorded a case of a possible temple structure composed of three separate buildings, all of which are oriented with their main entrances towards the rising sun (Zavalii, 2023a: pp. 147-148), forming a certain religious ensemble of structures (Figure 6).

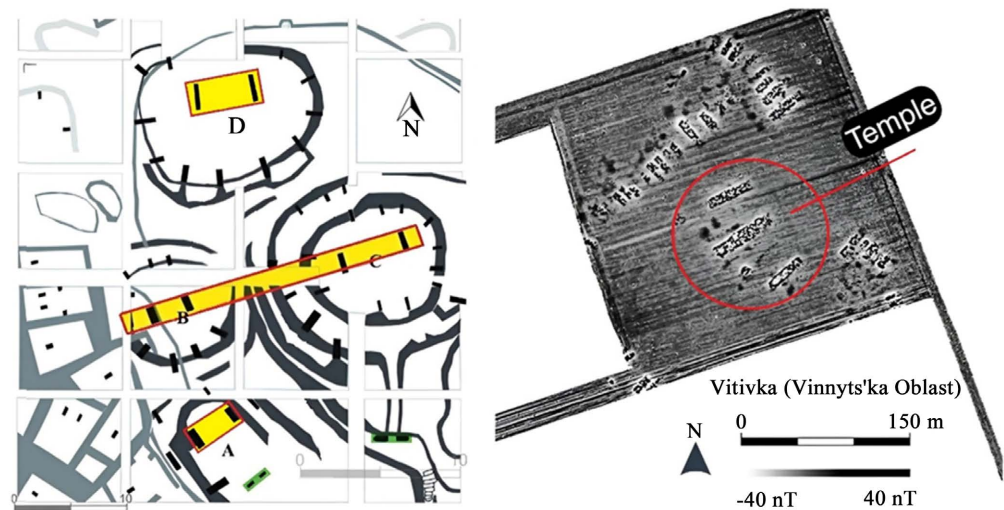


Figure 6. A comparison of the spatial orientation of the stone structures at Göbekli Tepe with the probable Trypillia temple complex at Vitivka (Ukraine).

The spatial orientation depicted here clearly shows the interdependence in the organization and planning of archaic structures. The T-shaped columns at Göbekli Tepe, highlighted in yellow, are aligned according to the solar equinox and solstice lines, creating an objective spatial representation of the annual solar cult. For the Trypillia religious complex, this also suggests that the triadic unity of space and time in temple structures could be expressed on multiple levels, including the internal features of the temple, the design of religious artifacts, and the construction of individual structures linked by a common purpose. This analysis reveals the “language” and expression of religious ideas, interconnected by their shared nature and events.

The author of the study also noted that Göbekli Tepe exhibits general archetypal features of an ancient agrarian order, linked to the same triadic harmony of space and time in the construction of the stone structure C. According to German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt, who led the excavations, and other experts, the so-called structure or building C (**Figure 2(b)**) at Göbekli Tepe was built with three concentric circles (Schmidt, 2011: p. 142; Dietrich, Meister, Dietrich et al., 2019: p. 4), seemingly nested within one another. This feature makes structure C the largest among them, and its symbolic expression conveys the well-known Trypillian symbol of tripled circles.

Moreover, when considering the circular structures D, B, and A at Göbekli Tepe, they collectively represent three circles of varying sizes. If one were to superimpose them, the same structure of tripled, concentric circles, unified into one, would emerge. Notably, structure C at Göbekli Tepe, composed of three rings, seems to encapsulate the three circles of structures D, B, and A, thereby concentrating the central point of the temple complex. In the Nebelivka Temple, the sacred center of the main ritual hall, located between the three altars, was marked by a sacred plant symbol (Zavalii, 2021b: p. 104), while at Göbekli Tepe, it was marked by two T-shaped columns. It is possible that among the over one hundred

sacred structures of the Trypillian civilization identified by geomagnetic surveys in Ukraine (of which only two have been excavated), future discoveries may reveal temples with two plant religious symbols at their centers. The known concept that the Tree of Life is associated with the symbol of a column (Lazarovici, 2005: p. 150) would then have an exact material expression in the study of ancient temples.

It is important to note that the concept of tripartite or tripartition temple space was first laid down in the foundation of temple planning at Göbekli Tepe. This concept was later realized in the sacred fields of Trypillia Temples and, in certain forms, is reflected even in the modern world of Orthodox churches. It is known that most wooden churches in Ukraine, built before the 19th century, are tripartite, divided by their layout into the altar, nave, and vestibule zones, or have three domes in their design (Wooden Churches of Ukraine, 2017), which, in one way or another, fits into the concept of trinity. Therefore, it becomes clear that resolving the question of archaic temple construction leads us, in the modern world, to a network of interconnected “webs of religious ideas” in sacred human objects.

The sacred has its origins. Created within the laws of human perception, it tends to be reproduced. Once it becomes the property of humans, whether manifested in stone or clay structures, it can be found in later images of Gods from written texts, which are equally sacred. The Trinitarian nature of the archaic temple cult and its structures is the same as the later trinitarian nature of God, and it will remain so in the human perception of the world around us.

Moreover, the recurring geometric pattern of the sacred trinity of the Solar Year cult unites the aforementioned complexes and represents the oldest understanding of cosmic harmony, which can be considered an innate psychological law of the human species. The three key points of space and time, apart from the annual unity, are also represented by the symbolic path of the Sun during the day: sunrise, culmination, and sunset, which together form a whole. This “psychological trinity” is repeated by ancient people in various ideograms and symbolic meanings, which are not always obvious and immediately understood by modern observers. The sacred trinity of the “Cosmic Law” and the unity of the year are also conveyed through other semiotic interpretations in the cultures of ancient farmers, which should be explored in the next section of this work.

5. Iconographic Expression of the Trinity of Space and Time in the Early Agricultural Complexes of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka

Based on the research conducted on the Nebelivka Temple and the religious system it operated within, it has been established that the sacred trinity was manifested in Nebelivka at multiple levels. This trinity can be observed in the threefold concentric circular layout of the settlement, one of the largest of its time, which included two circles of structures and an artificial ditch that symbolically encircled the entire residential conglomerate. This trinity also extended to the organization of the tripartite temple complex itself, as well as the altars, relics, and artifacts

found within the temple's walls, which convey the spirit of the cosmic Trinity (Zavalii, 2024; Zavalii, 2021a) (Figure 7).

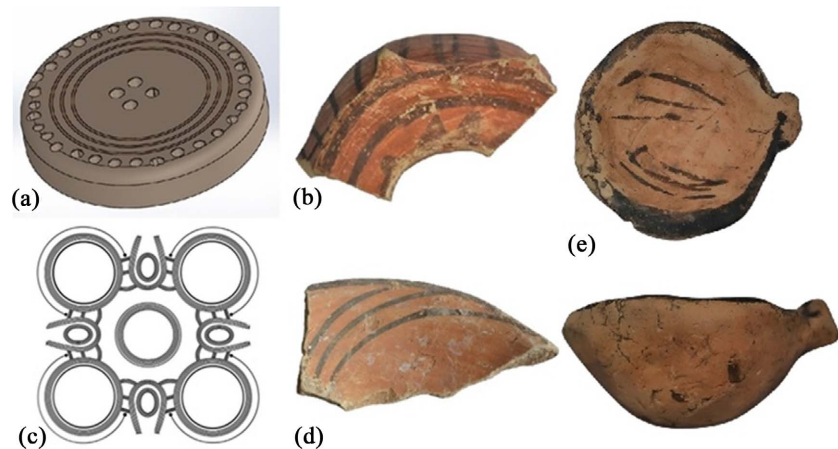


Figure 7. Relics discovered in the Nebelivka temple complex and its vicinity, unified by symbols of the Trinity: (a) Nebelivka disc—an astronomical calendar of the Trypillian people; (b) A fragment of a ceramic model of a Temple from the Nebelivka settlement; (c) Iconography of the main altar of the Nebelivka Temple; (d) A fragment of a ceramic plate; (e) Ritual plate or scoop with a bucranium, with three lines depicted in a circle in the center, top and side view.

The concept of the trinity in the religious life of the early farmers represents a holistic perception of the Year, unified by the three key positions of the Sun in the horizontal projection above the eastern horizon throughout the year. The archaic image of the Year is an expression of the “Cosmic Law,” forming a great sacred Triad, where each element retains the image of the whole.

The ancient people, like modern ones, likely envisioned the path of the sun over the visible horizon as a semicircle, complemented by the idea of a complete circle in sacred iconography. This can be explained by the notion of the invisible part of the celestial sphere, the sun’s nighttime path, which was likely imagined as a complete or connected circle. This image symbolizes the continuity of the cosmic cycle and the unity of the visible and invisible worlds.

This concept reflects the profound understanding of the cyclical nature of the universe by ancient agricultural societies and their efforts to integrate these observations into their religious systems. The trinitarian image of the Year not only served as a calendrical guide for agricultural activities but also formed the foundation for complex cosmological beliefs that influenced all aspects of life in early farming communities.

The understanding of the Year as a sacred, holistic phenomenon, in which all worldly processes pass infinitely and inevitably, was the highest cosmological concept, which in modern terms could still be defined as “God.” This is merely an attribution of a different name to the archaic laws of the Universe. This reveals the great Law of eternal return and resurrection, which can be considered a universal archetypal characteristic of human existence within the surrounding environment.

It's important to emphasize that this idea emerged several millennia before the Christian doctrine of the Triune God, and this is not without its own reasoning. Since humans are an inseparable part of the surrounding nature, observing the regularity and repetition of natural phenomena creates a fundamental need in the human mind to systematize this order. Humanity has attempted to maintain this order through various conceptual ideas. Among the most prominent of these are ancient temple complexes, where the psychological patterns of human existence in open spaces are clearly manifested.

It is reasonable to suggest that the artistic elements and motifs used in Trypillian religious art may have originated from earlier forms that existed at Göbekli Tepe. In such a study, it is crucial not to seek absolute similarities in the visual tradition but to follow established rules and natural influencing factors that were decisive for the visual expression of certain artistic means.

Thus, the use of a visual element, motif, or structure of a real temple object can be identified on a more general level of cosmological ideas, defining and revealing common notions of the sacred structure. In this process, elements suitable for interconnection will emerge, offering the opportunity to better understand both temple complexes and their systems of expression.

These materials offer insight into a new and previously unknown “mother language of symbols,” the interpretation of which is a subject of study in the field of religious studies.

In the western part of the circular Sector D at Göbekli Tepe, a T-shaped column known as the “Vulture Stone” was discovered. This column is more intricately illustrated than any other on the site. According to the author, its religious significance conceals the same sacred meaning of the three-dimensional Year-Universe, which is concretized here through cosmological-zoomorphic scenes connected to the indivisible flow of time, day, and night (**Figure 8**).

It is worth noting that the illustrated column from Sector D likely represents the concept of a two-tiered or binary Cosmos, as it was imagined by the archaic people of the Neolithic. The lower part of the column depicts purely chthonic creatures—scorpion, snake, boar, amphibious bird, and a headless humanoid figure. The headless human figure likely emphasizes the mortality of earthly existence and its corresponding cosmological level. The upper part of the column likely depicts the celestial world, predominantly featuring birds, which are closely associated with the sky.

Near the center of the upper part of the column, there is a circle or a notional circular center, a sort of “axis mundi,” around which the entire “heavenly scene” unfolds. It should be noted that most researchers interpret this notional center, marked by a circle, as the Sun or the Moon (**Sweatman & Tsikritsis, 2017; Kurt, 2017: pp. 1122-1123**). However, according to the author, the metaphor of the Sun and Moon is encoded here under different plots, forming a certain cosmological-ideological system. This will be further substantiated later.

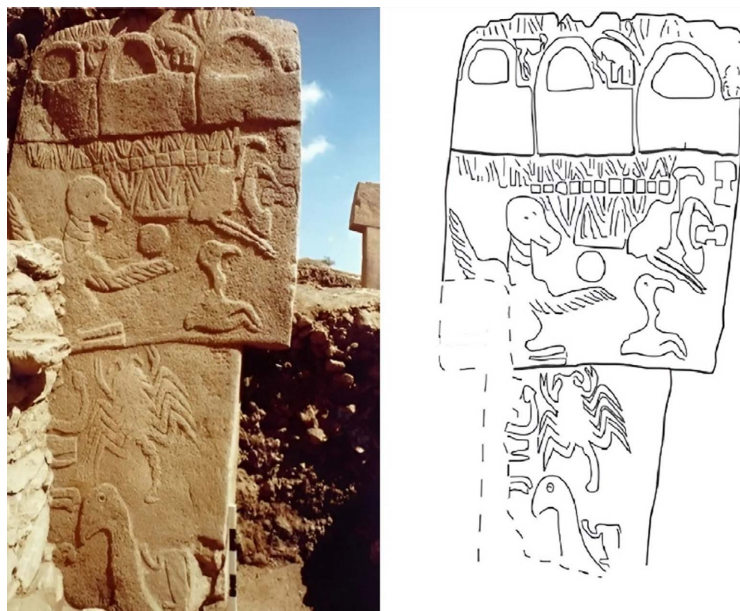


Figure 8. Illustration and photo of Column 33 from Sector D at Göbekli Tepe (photo by K. Schmidt).

In the author's view, the central circle likely represents the symbol of the sacred center, the microcosm of order, around which the entire narrative of the "Vulture Stone" unfolds. Moreover, it may reflect the idea of the invisible part of the celestial sphere, specifically the night path of the Sun. This path was likely imagined as a closed or connected circle, symbolizing the continuity of the cosmic cycle and the unity of the visible and invisible worlds.

It is important to pay attention to the three rounded structures or distinctive arcs above the massive horizontal plane at the top of the column (**Figure 8**), which convey the same logic of the Solar Year's dimensionality, corresponding to the sunrise and sunset over the horizon during the summer and winter solstices and the spring and autumn equinoxes.

Indeed, the symbols of the arc-like objects, within which figures are close to a circle, can easily be interpreted as graphic representations of the sunrise and sunset over the horizon. If we imaginatively remove the zoomorphic images from the upper part of the column, what remains is essentially a map of Göbekli Tepe with its four main structures, as if viewed from the heavenly realm from the east.

Of course, the ancient sculptors were not striving to create an accurate geographical map of this site; rather, they intended to provide a symbolic representation of order, creating a kind of "sacred landscape." The conceptualization and visualization of the natural world played a significant role in ancient beliefs and ideologies. To better understand the aforementioned assumptions, a new figure is introduced into the structure of the work (**Figure 9**).

In the structure (**Figure 9**) it was necessary to introduce a plan of the main ritual Hall of the Nebelivka Temple to once again confirm the author's interpretation of the ideological relationship between the two sacred complexes. It

becomes clearly evident that the main structures of the temples correspond well with each other, and the “stone picture” seems to “inscribe” such a sacred order. Indeed, the provided illustration reveals a consistent spatial concept, where the dimensions of the temple elements and the upper depiction of the “stone picture” correspond to the annual Sun cult. All these figures are excellent representations of the three main solar events of the year, which are organized in a proper chronological order. The emphasis on the central point likely represents a type of Mundus, where time and space converge.

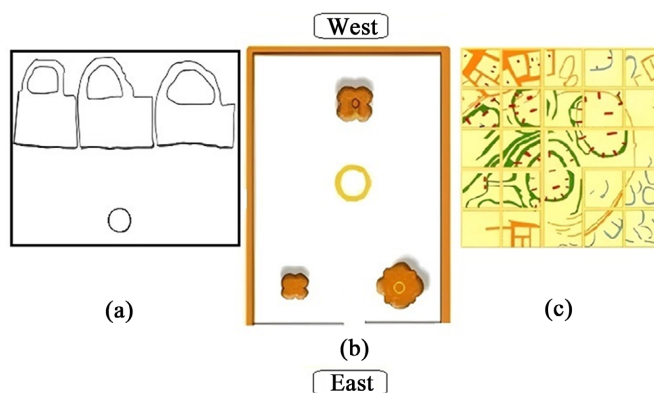


Figure 9. Expression of the Triadic Harmony of Space and Time in the Early Agricultural Complexes of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka: (a) Illustration of Column 43 in Sector D at Göbekli Tepe, highlighting three circular structures or waves above a horizontal plane and the center marked by a circle; (b) The main ritual hall of the Nebelivka Temple with three fire altars and the center marked by the main temple symbol; (c) The layout of the temple circles at Göbekli Tepe based on archaeological excavations.

From the Trypillia religious complex, it is known that the “solar arcs” or “waves,” which marked the passage of the annual seasons on ritual pots, also conveyed hidden symbols of the night cult. The encoding of such hidden religious meanings followed a certain artistic design, which became apparent in connection with the study of the Nebelivka Temple and its relics. Looking at the facade of the ceramic replica of the Temple from the Nebelivka settlement (**Figure 7(b)**), it becomes clear that the ancient religious geniuses designed the central entrance to their Temple of the Sun and Fire using the same three lines (a magnified indicator of the cyclicity of the Year), further emphasizing the rounded “passage” with the symbol of the shining sun. From this and other similar symbolic codes, the origin of another mass of religious information, marked by “linear arcs,” became clear. Most importantly, it became evident that where the “solar wave” ends, the cult of the night and its images take over.

It is worth mentioning that special attention should be drawn to the upper part of the column from Göbekli Tepe, numbered 43, with the depiction of three wave-like structures. Precisely where the wave ends (which can be interpreted as the solar period of the day or, in a broader sense, the solar season of the year), zoomorphic images appear. This phenomenon is well-known and researched in the Trypillia culture (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10. Zoomorphic images positioned between arched waves in the iconographic representations of Göbekli Tepe and Trypillia.

The starry sky and zodiacal ages played a crucial role in humanity's understanding of the Universe and religious beliefs even in the early historical periods (Zavalii, 2022: p. 15). It seems that here we are witnessing starry allegories of animals as they were imagined in the Neolithic era, which inevitably became visible when the solar wave completed its "heavenly course."

Could it be that the origins of the zodiac, literally the "circle of animals," emerged from our exploration of the world's earliest temple complexes? The author is confident in answering this question affirmatively, as we are simultaneously investigating the cult of the cyclical year, onto which animal starry allegories were likely superimposed. Furthermore, recognizable animals from Figure 10, such as the bull, dog, bird, and sheep/goat, are still present in Greek and Chinese zodiacs.

Based on this assessment, we further affirm the kinship of religious ideas between the two temple complexes and the similarity of cultural expressions. Different in origin and time, but united in spirit, these ancient peoples created similar religious structures rooted in the archetypes of their consciousness. This reveals a "single face" of deeply rooted cosmic harmony in the people's consciousness, encoded in the images of three-dimensional order and the starry sky.

This insight uncovers one of the central paradigms of the "mother religion of the world," which became apparent only with the latest archaeological discoveries of the 21st century.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that from the three circular images to the central point of Column 43 in Sector D, the ancient sages of Göbekli Tepe depicted distinctive streams or lines, which narrow and seem to converge precisely at the center of the sculpture's composition and the central circle. Considering archaeologist K. Schmidt's report on the structure of three concentric circles in Sector C of Göbekli Tepe, located between the three other sectors A, B, and D, this appears to be an important message and a key to understanding the narrative.

By comparing archaeological and iconographic materials, a semantic field of the same sacred time and space is revealed, which merges into the concept of the cyclicity of the tripartite Year. The artistic expression of streams or lines from the

three circular structures of different sizes to the central circle of the column is likely the same as the actual archaeological materials, expressed in the triple Sector C, which, according to the author, was conceived as the sum of the three circles A, B, and D.

It appears that the people of the early agricultural cultural sphere were trying to express and mark the “Center of the World,” where two fundamental coordinate systems of natural religion, time and space, converged. As previously mentioned, in the Nebelivka Temple, this central coordinate of space and time was marked by a depression or pit in the center of the main ritual hall, located between the three fire altars, from which a sacred symbol emerged. At Göbekli Tepe, the central enclosure itself formed a depression in the ground, in the middle of which stood two columns.

Returning to the detailed examination of Column 43 at Göbekli Tepe and its iconography, attention should be focused on the depiction of eleven rectangular shapes positioned between the three solar structures and the central circle. It seems these eleven figures are in a flow between the three markers of “solar time” and the concept of the One, toward which all the drawn lines converge.

Perhaps this is how the priests of Göbekli Tepe sought to convey the concept of the unity of the year, linked to the numerical indicator of eleven. In this context, the “stone picture” may represent the logical sequence of the unfolding of time: from the three main “structures” of the year, time unfolds into eleven equal periods, which inevitably constitute a unified whole.

A similar expression can be observed in the authentic Trypillia temple calendar, the Nebelivka Disk (**Figure 7(a)**), where the three central lines encompass the four seasons of the year, which, in turn, are divided into ten equal periods, all forming a unified concept of the Sacred Year of the Nebelivka Temple era.

It is also important to highlight the bird images in the upper part of Column 43. According to the author, these images play a role in representing the day and night as the primary flow of time in the system of natural life and religion.

Birds are the only creatures that can ascend to the realm of the Sun, stars, and Moon, and thus their depictions may convey corresponding meanings. The large bird, a vulture, is shown with outstretched wings in flight. It is known that in many cultures, this bird was a symbol of rebirth and purification. It was believed that vultures took the bodies of the dead and carried them to the heavens. In essence, many archaic civilizations (including Native Americans, Mesopotamians, and others) believed that these birds were messengers of the Gods. Perhaps this is how the ancient Anatolians sought to further affirm the cult of the sun through this image. This may also be emphasized by the depiction of three wavy lines on the vulture’s neck, once again bringing us back to the hidden symbolism of the tripartite year.

A dichotomy to the aforementioned solar bird is also noticeable. It is literally realized in the depiction of two birds on the opposite side of the vulture. These birds are recognizable as ibises, which are hard to mistake due to their distinctive

beak shapes. The ibis is a sacred bird associated with the lunar cult in ancient cultures. Their curved beaks are well associated with the crescent or waning Moon. Consequently, even the ancient Egyptian moon God Thoth was depicted with the head of an ibis ([Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017](#)).

It is reasonable to assume that the imagery on the column also incorporated a symbolic representation of day and night through the various types of birds depicted. In the case of the vulture, the solar symbolism was likely emphasized by the three lines on its neck. Meanwhile, in the case of the ibises, one bird was depicted with an eye, and the other without, potentially symbolizing the two phases of the moon—full and new moon—corresponding to the open and closed eye of the bird.

In this context, the upper part of the column could convey and unite the sacred meanings of the year by integrating both Solar and Lunar understandings of time. It is worth noting that the column itself was found in a structured religious complex that, according to this research, was created with a clear spatial arrangement aligned with visible astronomical phenomena. Thus, the depiction of the Sun and Moon under different symbolic codes comes to the forefront in such an astronomical structure.

The upper part of the studied column also includes the image of a snake within the complex of zoomorphic representations. The snake is positioned separately on the left side of the composition. The snake motif is one of the most widespread symbols on the obelisks of Göbekli Tepe.

Snakes depicted on the columns of Göbekli Tepe likely held deep calendrical and cosmological significance for the ancient hunter-gatherers and the first farmers of the Anatolian region. This hypothesis is based on several important observations and assumptions.

Firstly, the biological cycle of snakes is closely linked to the seasonal changes in the region. They begin their active period and mating season in April-May, coinciding with the start of the summer season in Anatolia. This coincidence could have served as a natural marker for the change of seasons for ancient people who closely observed natural phenomena.

Secondly, the behavior of snakes throughout the year shows distinct phases that could be associated with broader cosmological concepts. After hibernation, snakes “awaken” in the spring, symbolizing the rebirth of nature. Their activity during the summer and autumn, followed by their return to winter dormancy, could be seen as a miniature model of the annual cycle as a whole.

The shedding of a snake’s skin likely symbolized rebirth, and its checkered pattern could have been associated with the alternation of day and night. Additionally, the sinuous (snake-like) line left behind in the sand or earth after a snake pass is one of the most natural and evident graphical symbols of cyclicity and the infinite nature of movement. In other words, the snake is an “eternally writing” creature with inherent dichotomous characteristics (a forked tongue, checkered skin, the birth of a snake from an egg that splits into two, the duality of life and death

that this reptile can bring to humans), and its ability to regenerate, could be closely associated with the cosmological myth of creation, rebirth, and renewal in the cult of the year.

If this interpretation is correct, then the isolated image of a snake in the collection of images on Column 43 is meant to denote cosmic order and the cyclicity of time. In conjunction with the other images on this column, it could serve as an indicator of the same context of the Year's cyclicity and may be linked to the other zoomorphic images through hidden numerical symbolism.

The author notes that the upper part of Column 43 at Göbekli Tepe also conveys the numerical value of "seven." The entire thematic complex of zoomorphic images amounts to precisely this number of depicted animals. This correlates quite well with the context of the Nebelivka Temple. Research has shown that the numerical context of "seven" in the Trypillia Temple was emphasized by seven fire altars, which concretized the entire spatiotemporal continuum of the year. The three largest altars in the main ritual hall symbolized the three key solar-astronomical events on the eastern horizon. The four smaller altars in the sanctuary of the Nebelivka Temple symbolized the four phases of the moon, structuring the indivisibility of the flow of day and night in the harmony of the year (Zavalii, 2024: p. 276).

This emphasis on the number "seven" in the context of the ancient column from Göbekli Tepe may also underscore the spatio-temporal metaphors of day and night within the cyclicity of the year, where its indivisible structures are metonymically transferred to zoomorphic images. The archaic agrarian idea of cosmic time represented by the number seven later appears in cosmogonic mythologies, where the world is created in seven days or seven stages. This concept is especially prominent in early Jewish religious writings, where there is a connection between seven-day cycles and the stages of God's creation.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that the "Vulture Stone" was created to depict a landscape for cultic-ritualistic beliefs, which were highly idealized to meet the expectations of a specific temple environment. In comparative religious studies with the Nebelivka Temple, this "stone picture" reveals patterns of interpreting the three-dimensional sacred year or cosmic order within a specific material object, which can be seen as a hierophany – a manifestation of the sacred in the profane world.

This highlights the fundamental importance of celestial phenomena in the religious beliefs of early agricultural societies and their desire to synchronize earthly existence with cosmic cycles, which is characteristic of cosmo-centric and pantheistic worldviews. This approach to the sacralization of space and time through material objects can also provide insights into the evolution of human religious consciousness.

6. Discussion and Prospects

Evidence of Neolithic religiosity certainly extends beyond Göbekli Tepe and the

Nebelivka temple complex. The territories of the ancient Near East and ancient Europe contain numerous facts about the complex religious life of Neolithic and Eneolithic communities, many of which remain disconnected and, in some cases, undiscovered. The conducted research establishes certain guidelines and a methodological foundation for further study of this topic.

Archaeological discoveries of recent decades have significantly expanded our understanding of the spiritual life of ancient communities. In addition to Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka complex, which became key objects of this study, there exists a whole range of other significant sites. For instance, in the Near East, these include Nevalı Çori, Karahan Tepe, Tell Qaramel, Çatalhöyük, and others. In Europe, these are the ancient cultures of the Balkan-Danube region, the Aegean culture, Cucuteni, and other related agricultural cultures. More than a hundred temples and sanctuaries of the Trypillia period, which were discovered in Trypillian proto-cities and settlements through preliminary magnetic surveys, are yet to reveal their religious secrets. All these monuments and archaeological complexes constitute an invaluable resource for further study of Neolithic agricultural religion or proto-religion.

This extensive network of archaeological findings allows us to construct a more comprehensive picture of the spiritual life of ancient societies in Europe and Asia, revealing both common features and regional differences. Each new discovery adds an important fragment to the overall mosaic of proto-religion, helping to reconstruct complex systems of beliefs and rituals that existed long before the emergence of writing and formalized religions.

However, despite the wealth of archaeological data, interpreting these findings often remains a challenging task. This is precisely why the methodology employed and developed in the course of this study assumes significant importance. It offers a systematic approach to analyzing archaeological data, which takes into account not only individual artifacts but also the overall context of their location, the orientation of structures, symbolism, and possible astronomical aspects. Such a comprehensive methodology allows for the creation of a more complete picture of ancient religious beliefs.

The comparative analysis of Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka temple complex, located in different geographical regions of Asia and Europe, allows us to identify both common features and unique characteristics of religious traditions across various cultures. This approach takes into account the influence of geographical environment, available resources, social structure of the community, and specific historical conditions in the development of a single agricultural tradition.

The shared spiritual agricultural foundation, which originated in the Middle East and spread across Europe, created the basis for the formation of similar religious concepts and practices. However, local conditions and cultural peculiarities of the indigenous peoples in each region led to the development of unique characteristics. One can observe how the forms of ritual structures evolved, symbolism became more complex, and cosmological concepts developed.

This study not only enriches our understanding of specific monuments but also offers a valuable methodology for examining ancient religious traditions in a global context. The proposed methodological approaches and analytical tools can be applied to other archaeological sites of this period, contributing to the formation of more comprehensive insights into the spiritual life of early agricultural societies.

It is important to note that studying the origins of human spirituality and early forms of organized religion can provide valuable insights for understanding the role of religion in contemporary society and its evolution over millennia. In this context, we inevitably encounter the seeds of later religious narratives and images that continue to influence modern society.

Furthermore, understanding the common origins of various religious traditions can foster intercultural and interfaith dialogue, helping to find points of convergence and enhancing mutual understanding between different cultures and faiths.

7. Conclusion

The study of the earliest temple complexes in Asia and Europe opens new horizons in understanding the spiritual life of early agricultural communities. Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple emerge as key evidence of a complex and developed religious system that existed long before the advent of writing and formalized religious doctrines. These archaeological discoveries compel us to rethink traditional notions of the “primitiveness” of early religious beliefs.

Examining these sites paves the way for a deeper, more nuanced, and accurate understanding of our past. This understanding, in turn, can offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary global challenges related to the spiritual and cultural development of humanity.

It is important to note that the possibility of such a comparative analysis has arisen thanks to previous extensive research on the Nebelivka Temple complex in Ukraine. Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple have become two parts of a whole, and their ultimate significance becomes clear in their combined context.

The temple complexes of Göbekli Tepe and Nebelivka are vivid testimonies that humanity’s quest for the sacred and spiritual played a key role in the evolution of society. One might suggest that religion was one of the main preconditions for the emergence of early agricultural communities. This challenges traditional materialistic views on the development of civilization.

This new perspective suggests that communal religious activities and the construction of sacred complexes may have been catalysts that contributed to the formation of more complex social structures. Large-scale projects like Göbekli Tepe and the Nebelivka Temple required an unprecedented level of cooperation, planning, and resource distribution.

One of the main paradigms of ancient religion, as defined in this work, is the specific organization of temples within their spatial and temporal context. These complexes served as models of harmony between human transformative activity

and nature, embodying cosmological ideas and sacred geometry. This allowed them to function not only as places of worship but also as “cosmic calendars” and early observatories that synchronized the community’s life with the rhythms of nature. This approach to organizing sacred space demonstrates a deep understanding of the interconnection of all aspects of existence, which could offer valuable lessons to the modern world in its search for sustainable development models and harmonious coexistence of different peoples.

The architecture and orientation of temples reflected the understanding of the structure of the universe, creating a microcosm that symbolically represented the macrocosm. Temples were integrated into the landscape to emphasize, rather than disrupt, the natural beauty and harmony of the area. This spatial organization facilitated the establishment of a connection between the earthly and the celestial, between the human and the divine.

Common features and symbols found in the temple complexes of Anatolia and Ukraine suggest the possibility of a broad network of cultural and religious connections during the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods. This allows for the hypothesis of a certain “global religion” among early agricultural societies that could have been “mother” to later religious traditions in the Near East and Europe. Thus, the perspective of a certain religious unity on the following principles emerges:

1) Cosmological Worldview: Central to this “global religion” was the understanding of the unity of the cosmos and the cyclical nature of the world, in which humanity itself was included. This was effectively reflected in the architecture and planning of temples, as well as in their symbolic and iconographic features. Such a position indicates a pantheistic worldview among the adherents of this type of religion.

2) Triadic Unity of Space and Time: The concept of three worlds (heaven, earth, and the underworld) and three phases of solar time in the visible plane above the eastern horizon (equinox – the central point of the horizon; summer solstice – the highest point of the horizon; winter solstice – the lowest point of the horizon). This results in a special numinous quality of the cult of the Year and its divisions.

3) Integration of Sun and Moon Cults into a Unified Religious System: This concept reflects the synthesis of solar and lunar cults, manifested in symbolism and architectural planning. The Sun and Moon were likely viewed as complementary cosmic forces within a unified flow of time, reflecting the overall order of the universe and governing the cycles of nature and human life.

4) Symbolic Language: The use of similar symbols across different regions of the ancient agricultural world suggests the existence of a shared symbolic language that could have been transmitted between cultures through evolutionary transformation.

5) Sacralization of Agricultural Existence: This is evident in the corresponding cult of fertility, plant growth cycles, and sacralization of the animal world. Agriculture was likely perceived as part of the cosmic order, where human activity harmoniously integrated with natural cycles.

6) Ecological Awareness: The close connection with nature and the understanding of the necessity for harmonious coexistence with it may have been common among various Neolithic cultures.

7) Inclusivity: Such a religious system of early agricultural types was open to incorporating new elements and interpretations according to local conditions and needs. Despite common features, each studied religious complex has its unique characteristics that align with local traditions and beliefs. This demonstrates how universal concepts were adapted to specific cultural contexts.

8) Supranational Concept: The type of religious consciousness examined is not confined to any particular nation, race, or group of people, religious sage, or spiritual hero, but represents a universal system based on general human observations, intuition, and experience. Since such a religious system cannot have a specific founder or prophet, it is devoid of specific historical events and personalities that link religion to specific nations or people.

This perspective of spiritual unity allows us to view human history in a new light, emphasizing the deep connections between different cultures and regions. It can also help us better understand the origins of contemporary religious and philosophical ideas, many of which may have their roots in this ancient religion of solar light and fire.

Finally, this perspective could inspire new approaches to addressing modern global challenges, drawing on ancient wisdom about harmonious coexistence with nature and cosmic order. In times of ecological crises and social upheavals, a return to these fundamental ideas may offer valuable insights for creating a more sustainable and balanced world.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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