

HANS DIETER HUBER

## Images of the Dead

In recent years attention has been drawn repeatedly to the relationship between pictures and death. In the figure of the *effigies* for instance, the representation of the dead in a tomb, we now realize a millennia old desire to get a picture of deceased people. This desire extends today to the plastination of corpses by the controversial German anatomist Gunther von Hagens.

My thesis is that the image is created originally from the fear of death and one's own mortality. Even holiday snapshots fall into this category. It is the desire to capture and preserve something which cannot be preserved. In the end, all living things and all material are subject to decay. The need is great, of course, to transform the flow of time and the disintegration of life into something permanent and static, something eternal to capture the happy moments of life. Images are representative of something absent. They are representatives for the absence in the present or for past models. One could also say that images leave a testamentary trace of the past or the absent. For these reasons it is interesting to take a closer look at how pictures were made from the dead in the early Neolithic cultures.

I begin with Jericho. During the excavation campaign of 1950, a large number of separated and modelled human skulls were found at Tell-es-Sultan. You have to imagine that the severed heads were probably set up on the floor while the dead bodies were buried under the house. Overall, they found 85 such separate skull burials.

The heads are made from the cranial skeleton of the dead, whose flesh such as cheeks and noses were modelled through tinted clay and the eyes were supplemented by the addition of seashells. The cranial skeleton was obviously covered with a layer of lime and colour pigment.



Fig. 1: Head from Jericho, 7000 - 6000 v. Chr., Archeological Museum Amman, Jordania.  
Source: Honor/Fleming 1999: 25

It is therefore a pictorial representation, one might say, an attempt to produce a portrait of the deceased. The features of these excellently modelled heads are so individual and realistic that one must assume the intention to reconstruct a portrait of the deceased. It is also necessary to attribute a memorial function, if not a function in connection with animistic ancestor worship.

In any case they are images and they establish a reference to something that they themselves are not and are not able to be, that is to be present *in personam*. They refer to the deceased by a copying and imitation of its appearance by artificial means. But the hallmark of these heads is not only imitation, they *are* actually what they represent, namely, a *real* skull and not just a *representation* of one. By using the real head of the deceased, the portrait really has some of the features that it refers to. It exemplifies and denotes the deceased at the same time, one could argue with Nelson Goodman (1969: 52 - 56). The deceased person is physically present in the representation, for it is the skull of the deceased. Besides the image, an aura of the original and the authentic is revered. These heads have an intermediate position between an image and a relic. To see the image of the deceased, you have to fade out the real skull in your perception. In order to see the relic, you have to ignore the representation.



During the excavations at Jericho there were also found three almost life-sized, clay figures, stabilized by a network of reed, a sort of puppet or fetish of the deceased. Unfortunately, only a male head could be preserved. They have stylistic similarities to the clay-reed sculptures from Ain Ghazal in Jordania.

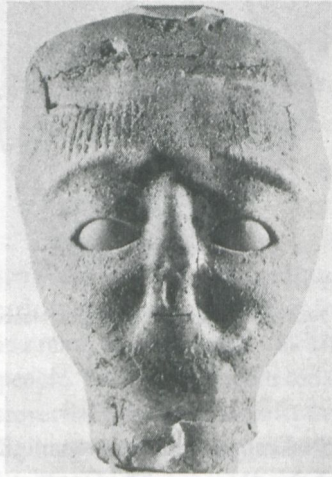


Fig. 2: Male Head, Jericho (PPN B; Jerusalem, Israel Museum). Source: Brockhaus 1: Frühe Kulturen

The ruins at Ain Ghazal near Amman were hidden undisturbed in the ground for almost 7000 years until they were accidentally uncovered by the construction of a highway in 1974. But the significance of the site was not really recognized until 1981, when during road working bulldozers uncovered architectural remains and graves. During its colonization period from about 7300 to 5000 BC, the city had a large area of 14 to 15 hectares, and there were almost 3,000 people living there. During the excavations four human male skulls were found, their faces were remodelled with layers of chalk and clay.

These three masks were the typological precursors of the whole-body figures that were found in 1985 in another landfill. Originally formed over real skulls, the masks were later detached again and placed separately in a pit with their faces turned upside down. Was this a form of ritual burial? What was buried here; the mask of a dead man, his imprint, his image, or his representation? Only a few dead were buried under the floors of the houses. The vast number of dead was probably buried outside the settle-

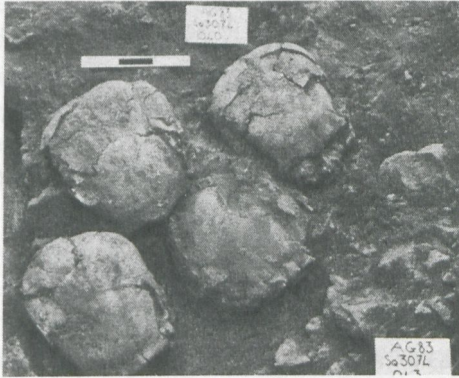


Fig. 3: Four separate buried male skulls. Source: *Gesichter des Orients* 2004: 39, Figure 2.14

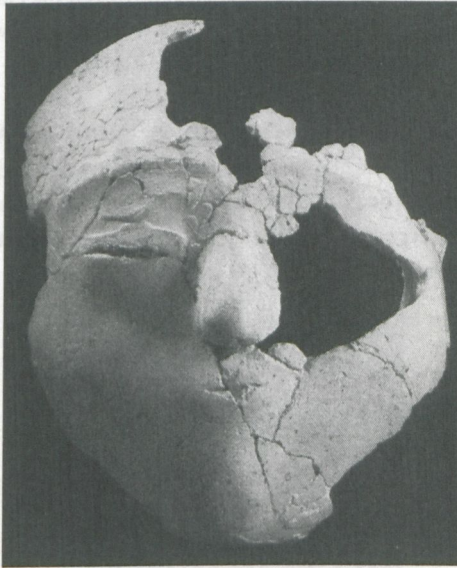


Fig. 4: One of three face masks, formed over a human skull, about 7100 BC. Source: *Gesichter des Orients* 2004: 30, Figure 2.2

ment. There are clear signs that some graves in the settlement were later reopened and the skulls taken out without the lower jaw.

Over this skull without the lower jaw, for example, the three facial masks were formed, though the actual face of the deceased was not replicated. Through the missing lower jaw, the masks took on a slightly wider and



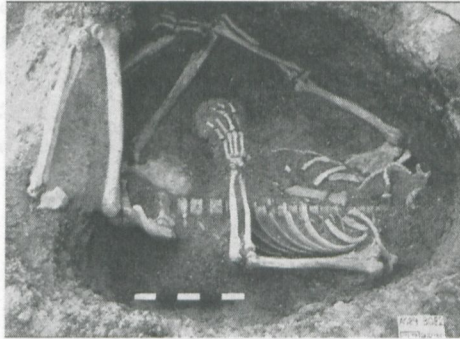


Fig. 5: Typical Burial Form PPNB at Ain Ghazal, Jordania. Source: *Gesichter des Orients* 2004: 38, Figure 2.12

condensed form. The eyes are shown closed; however, they are emphasized by a bitumen deposit. This early form of ancestor worship was apparently continued until several centuries later as indicated by the free-form full body sculptures.

Amazingly, around the same time, in Çatal Höyük in Anatolia a very similar burial cult can be observed in a preserved wall painting. There one sees how suspended dead bodies without heads are exposed to vultures. This has been interpreted as a burial ritual; perhaps the head was previously removed and preserved in a certain way.



Fig. 6: Wall Painting Çatal Höyük, Anatolia: Vultures with Corpses without Head. Source: Brockhaus 1: Frühe Kulturen

However, it seems that the practice of ancestor worship in Ain Ghazal with decorated skulls had ended by about 6500 BC. Simultaneously with the advent of ceramics and their increasing importance in the everyday life of the population, the burials within the settlements seem to have disappeared.

I come now to the full-figure sculptures constructed from clay and reed dating from the period of 6700 - 6500 BC. In the summer of 1983, the first of two hoards was discovered which contained a burial of almost life-sized, anthropomorphic clay sculptures. Overall, more than thirty sculptures were found in Ain Ghazal. The figures vary in size; busts of small-scale up to almost life-size sculptures were found in the two hoards in uninhabited houses. The characters of the first landfill were dated about 6700 BC. They were recovered contiguously and sent to the Archaeological Institute of the University College in London for preservation and restoration.



Fig. 7: The sculpture »Zeina« after conservation at London, about 6700 BC. Source: *Gesichter des Orients* 2004: 32, Figure 2.4

They were distinguished by an emphasized body shape and by the colouring of the surface. Bitumen deposits in the eyelids and the construction of the iris as a large eyeball in white lime also today exert a very



intriguing effect on the viewer. At the bottom line of the pupil of this figure, a rest of green eyeliner in Diopside mineral was discovered. The second hoard contained more voluminous and unpainted figures dating to around 6500 BC. They were sent to Washington for restoration. The faces seem to be more expressive. Almond-shaped eyes with inlaid pupils can be easily recognized, which seem to stare melancholically, wistfully, or even angrily into infinity.



Fig. 8: Whole-Body Sculpture with Two Heads, about 6500 BC. Source: *Gesichter des Orients* 2004: 32, Figure 2.6

Particularly puzzling, however, are three two-headed busts from this second deposition which look like Siamese twins. The delicately crafted faces stand out strongly from the flat, plain and board-like modelled body.

It can be assumed that the figures once stood upright, as the inner skeleton is made of reed, which is also located in the legs. This indicates an attachment of the figures to a stand. When detaching the figure from its stand, the feet were broken off. They were therefore likely to be mounted and displayed on a base, a stand or a floor in an architectural context.



Fig. 9: Modelled Skull from Tell Ramad, Syria. Source: Sophie 1993: 43

During excavations at Tell Ramad in Syria, another variation of modelled skull sculptures was found. These skulls were assembled on a small modelled and stylized body made from burnt clay. The tiny bodies of burnt clay, which are about 25 cm high, wear the skull like a stand. They have strong pins on their underside with which they could perhaps be inserted into a recess or a holder.



Fig. 10: Mother Goddess from Tell Kashkashuk, Syria, 6000 - 5000 BC. Source: Sophie 1993: 47

The small clay figurines, on which the skulls were mounted, are modelled in a similar fashion to the well-known and widely used fertility goddesses and idols. A comparison with the figure of a female goddess from Tell Kashkashuk, now in the museum of Aleppo, makes clear that similarity.



The houses in the neolithic settlement at Çatal Höyük in Anatolia were not only the residence for the living but obviously also for the dead. They were buried under the clay platforms. As the last in the series of generations of ancestors, the living members of a family slept above the corpses of the dead. Father and mother, grandfather and grandmother were buried in the bottom of the bunk. It was necessary that the body was exposed to the open air and skeletonized before his burial. Wall paintings in two houses illustrate this process of exposition.

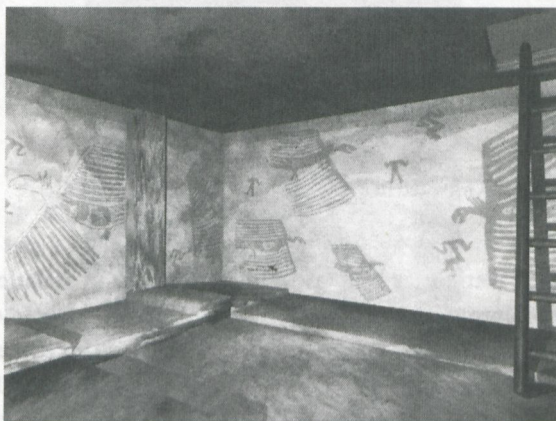


Fig. 11: Çatal Höyük: Wall Painting from House VII 8, »Vulture Sanctuary«, about 6000 BC (computer reconstruction). Source: Klotz 1997: Figure 24

Huge red-coloured vultures with a wingspan of 1.5 meters come down to small human bodies. The missing heads and the crouching posture suggest lying corpses. One must assume therefore that the bodies were laid out in the open, to be left to the vultures. Skeletons were also found under the clay platforms in the houses in the same crouching or extended burial posture with the arms bent. It is probable that the head was previously separated to serve a specific function, as we have supposed with the clay-supplemented skulls from Jericho. The heads were in fact found on the sleeping platforms.

Many rooms exhibited elaborate wall decorations. To this James Mellaart concluded that they may have been cult rooms although the same platforms, stoves and ovens were found in the living quarters. Therefore from the 139 uncovered rooms 48 would have served as cult rooms, which is a relatively high number. He did not entertain the possibility of a multi-functional as-

pect of the rooms. It therefore seems more likely that each family used their own houses as a combined living room, a place of worship, and as a grave in which votive donations were offered and ritual ceremonies were held. Roughly shaped clay figures, which show animals or anthropomorphic sculptures, were found deliberately broken and stuck into the walls of the rooms or deposited in groups in the ground in front of the walls. They are most probably interpreted as ritual offerings. Here again we see a close relationship to the clay reed sculptures from the Middle East.

We now make a time jump from about 4,000 years and we transfer ourselves into the early Bronze Age to gain a better understanding of religious worship of the Neolithic. In two early Bronze Age tombs in Cyprus (about 2000 BC), several small clay models were found which show representations of religious cults or magical practices. In a grave in Kotchari, two clay models, about 19 cm and 23 cm high, were found which consist of a rectangular panel, in which three pillars are embedded which are topped by bull heads and two praying hands or arms.



Fig. 12: Clay Model of a Sanctuary, Crowned by Bulls, Kotchari, Cyprus, about 2000 BC. Source: Zypern; Museum Nicosia 1989: 27 (Sturm)

On the ground in front of the >bull wall< stand a female figure and an amphora. It could be the representation of a worship ceremony in which fluids are offered to the bull gods.





Fig. 13: Clay Model of a Sanctuary, Vounos, Cyprus, about 2000 BC. Source: Euphrat 1982: 48

The most interesting piece of this excavation is a relatively large clay model found in grave 22 from Vounos. It has a diameter of 37 cm and a height of 8 cm. It is very similar in form to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic round houses which are found in the same time period in Cyprus, for instance in Lemba Lakkous. On the right and left side of an arched gate, two people are standing with folded arms. They apparently guard two bulls or cows that are located behind a sort of semi-high fence or shed. Opposite the entrance on a low podium are three creatures with bull's heads and snakes hanging down from their hands. To the Right and to the left, several people are also sitting with folded arms on benches. In the middle of the room, a group of eight individuals stand looking at each other with their arms folded, and a woman is carrying a child in her arms. The details of the scene are still unclear. Who are the people sitting on the benches? Are they representations of gods, ancestors, or real people? The only certainty is that there must have been a bull or serpent cult who found entry into Cyprus from the mainland. The interesting thing about this clay model is that on the outside wall next to the entrance apparently a spectator has climbed the perimeter wall to take a secret look at the holy ordinance on the inside. This probably means that attendance at these cult rituals was reserved for select people. Perhaps the extended family paid homage to their ancestors and deceased.

The plausibility of this thesis is further illustrated by a look at a similar clay model from the island of Crete.



Fig. 14: Clay model of a round Temple from a grave in Archanes, Crete (about 1100 - 1000 BC). Source: Vasilakis: 211

Two male figures are lying on the domed roof of a round temple, about 22cm high. They are supporting themselves with their left arms as they raise their right arms over the round opening in the middle of the roof. In front of them, above the door opening, a cat-like animal is depicted with striped fur, round ears and a long tail.

In the door opening a female figure appears with raised arms and a polos-like head covering. The doorway of the model is sealable with a fitting model door and can be mounted both right and left side of the doorway with eyelets. The significance of the small sculptural model is unclear. The headdress and gesture of the seated woman are reminiscent of the appearance of the famous Minoan Snake Goddess.

Accordingly, it would be a more or less exact replica of a cult room in Archanes. The two men were then identified as either a secret audience trying to catch a glimpse through the central skylight into the cult room. Or one could explain the situation as a local cult for this deity, which is no longer evident to us.

The interesting thing about the Minoan burial culture is that big round tombs with a central entrance were created for the family graves, which are very similar to the neolithic round houses found in Cyprus. However, they are not in a municipal bond but individually designed with a good





Fig. 15: Minoic Snake Goddess, Crete, Iraklion, Archeological Museum. Source: Vasilakis: 85

eye for the landscape. In these tombs numerous gifts were found, including several small clay models which show representations of the dead being worshipped.



Fig. 16: Clay Model of a house with two columns, Kamilari, Crete, 1900 BC. Fotoarchiv Hans Dieter Huber

In the tomb of Kamilari two clay models were found. One depicts a death cult and the other one a cult dance. We see a rear wall with three high-level windows, and in front of that sit four ancestral figures on small stools or platforms. Directly ahead of them stand two cylindrical altars, one of which is covered with food, and two much smaller people are kneeling before the ancestors and offering them a drink.

But why were they putting models of behaviour, which show how they were revered by their families through dance and worship, into the grave of the deceased? That's an interesting question that must be answered. Are we dealing with model-like representations that point to a pictorial meta-level which shows us how we, the living, have to perform the proper reverence for the deceased ancestors? Or do the clay models act as representatives for the worship ceremony in general so that no real worship is necessary anymore because the real cult performance has been replaced by a clay model lying in the family grave? Are these models directed to the behaviour of the living, by showing them what they have to do with regards to the veneration of the dead? Or are they addressed to the deceased? Are they items needed by the deceased for their new life in the hereafter? Does the dead person take his cultural and social behaviour of his former life into the new world he is entering after his death?

These questions are difficult to answer because written records are missing. Nevertheless, the two clay models show very well how we can imagine the worship of ancestors, gods and the dead in those early Bronze Age times. And perhaps we can grasp a similar understanding of the cult of veneration of the dead in the early Stone Age era of Jericho, Ain Ghazal and Catal Höyük.

I would like to end with an artistic work from a contemporary artist. The Mexican artist Teresa Margolles (\* 1963 in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico) has developed a very shocking work on violence, murder, executions and death in recent years. In a very poetic and at the same time disturbing work Margolles let soap bubbles float down on the viewer. They burst either on the bodies of the visitors or on the floor of the exhibition. The soap, however, was mixed with water, with which dead corpses were washed before the autopsy in the morgue of Mexico City. In the face of this knowledge you could say that the bubbles are a representation of the souls of the deceased, in which a last remnant of the substance of the dead tries to get into contact with the living. But even this last memory, the image of the dead, is shattered by the resistance of the living people and the matter of reality.



## References

- Gesichter des Orients – 10000 Jahre Kunst und Kultur aus Jordanien. Begleitband zur Ausstellung der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, in Kooperation mit dem Vorderasiatischen Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz.* Bearb. von Beate Salje. Mainz [Zabern] 2004
- GOODMAN, N: *Languages of Art. An Approach to Theory of Symbols.* London [Oxford University Press] 1969, pp. 52 - 56
- HONOR, H.; J. FLEMING: *Weltgeschichte der Kunst.* 5. Aufl. München [Pres-  
tel] 1999, S. 25
- KLOTZ, K.: *Die Entdeckung von Catal Höyük. Der archäologische Jahrhundert-  
fund.* München [Beck] 1997
- SOPHIE, C.: *Syrie, Memoire et Civilisation, Ausst. Kat.* Institut du Monde Ar-  
abe. Paris [Flammarion] 1993
- VASILAKIS, A.: *Das Archäologische Museum Iraklion.* Athen, o. J.