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Human Self-perception and Self-expression during the 9th Millennium calBC: Funerary Practices and Symbolic Meaning of the Human Representations at Dja'de el-Mughara (Syria)

Bérénice Chamel¹ – Eric Coqueugniot²

Abstract: Located on the left bank of the Euphrates River, approx. 100km north-east of Aleppo and 30km south-west of Ain el Arab/Kobane, the Neolithic tell of Dja'de el-Mughara is the only site in the North Levant that covers the entire 9th millennium (Late PPNA to the end of the Early PPNB), a crucial phase for the process of Neolithisation. Six to nine metres thick, the archaeological levels are particularly rich in indications of the techniques, the social organisation and the human self-perception. With a total of 116 individuals, spread over 34 funerary deposits, Dja'de el-Mughara has the largest Late PPNA and Early PPNB collection of human remains. Funerary practices are various in type and in location, although the greatest number of human remains is situated in the DJ III 'House of the Dead' with 80 individuals. A very strong link was noticed between burial and the architecture, but no significant association was recorded between the funerary practices and the age at death or the sex. Human representations are limited to figurines (in clay, limestone, chalk and bone). The female ones are diverse and do not seem related to the unique principle of fertility (only one represents a clearly pregnant woman). Others seem to be masculine and one has scarification marks. Some resemblance exists between the treatment of the bodies and the treatment of the human representations.

Keywords: Pre-Pottery Neolithic; Syria; funerary practice; human representation; Dja'de el-Mughara; symbolism

Self-perception and self-expression of prehistoric humans are expressed through burial practices, and the representations they made of themselves. Traditionally, it is considered that the Early Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines and representations have an important symbolic meaning related to fertility or to deities.³

The question of figurines, and more generally figurations, is central to many reflections on the driving force of Neolithisation and on the symbolic thought of 'Prehistoric Man'. In his major book, Jacques Cauvin⁴ emphasises the role of the woman/bull couple, opposing a principle of female fertility and male virility. According to him, economic and social change, marked by the passage of a hunter-gatherer's way of life to an economy of production, was preceded by a psycho-cultural change, a mental revolution seen especially through 'the woman and the bull' pairing. Therefore, animal and human figurines are a class of artefacts which focused the thoughts of many researchers.

The site of Dja'de el-Mughara yielded an important collection of human remains from the Neolithic phases as well as several human representations in the form of figurines. In this paper we tried to relate these two types of material to gain a better understanding of the self-perception and self-expression of the Neolithic inhabitants of Dja'de el-Mughara.

Presentation of Dja'de el-Mughara

The tell of Dja'de el-Mughara is located on the left bank of the Euphrates River, upstream of the bridge of Qara Qosak, north-east of Aleppo (Fig. 1). The tell is located at the interface of two environments: the flood plain of the Euphrates and the steppic hinterland of the Jezireh. This site belongs to the salvage excavations programme linked to the construction of the Tishreen Dam and it was excavated from 1991 to 2010, under the supervision of Eric Coqueugniot (CNRS, France).⁵

¹ CNRS, UMR 5133 Archéorient, Lyon, France; berenicechamel@gmail.com.

² CNRS, UMR 5133 Archéorient, Lyon, France; eric.coqueugniot@mom.fr.

³ Hamilton 1996; Lesure 2002.

⁴ Cauvin 2000.

⁵ Coqueugniot 2000.

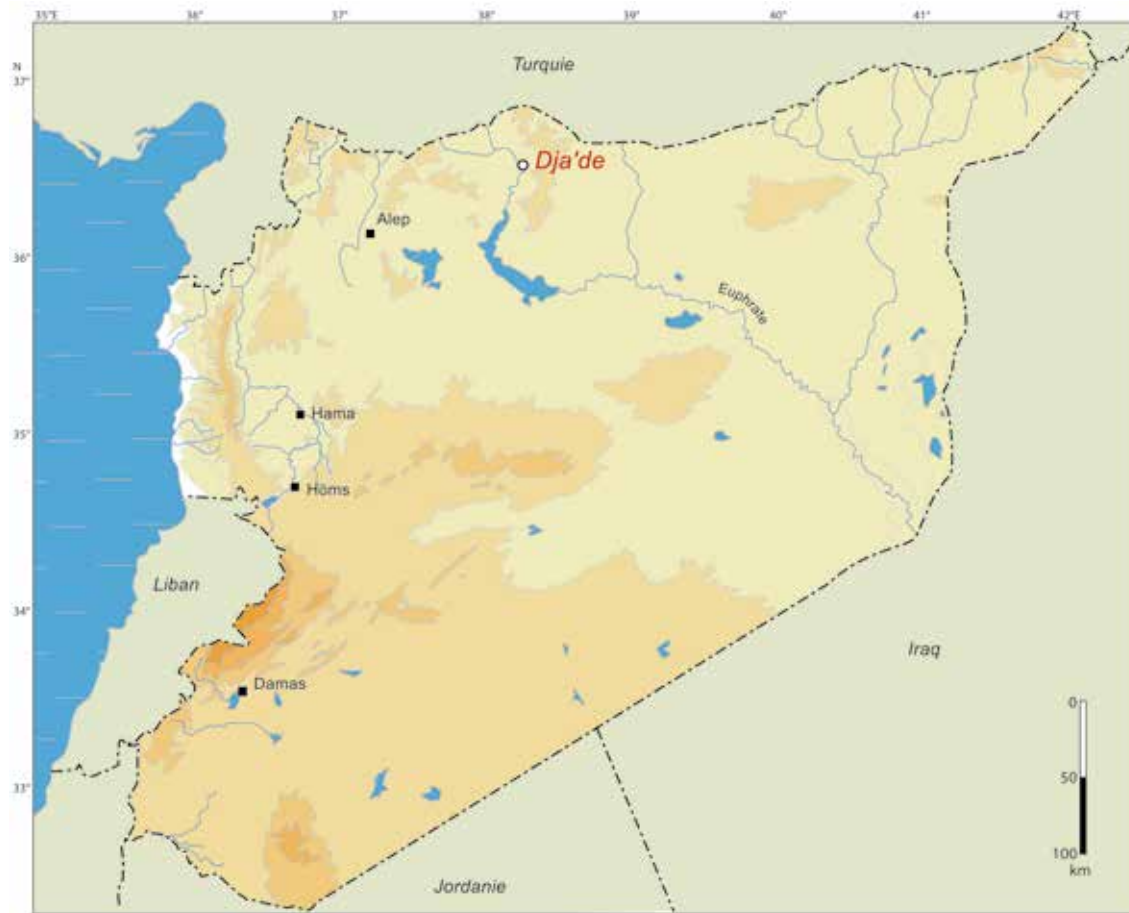


Fig. 1 Localisation of the site of Dja'de el-Mughara in Syria (CAD: Archéorient)

Dja'de el-Mughara presents a very long sequence with seven to nine metres of stratigraphy, which covers most of the 9th millennium BC. On the basis of the lithic industry, the Pre-Pottery Neolithic sequence has been divided into three main phases: DJ I (9310–8830 calBC), DJ II (8800–8500 calBC) and DJ III (8540–8290 calBC). However, this whole Neolithic sequence is a continuum as the limits between the three phases are blurred. Furthermore, the evolutions are not simultaneous for the architecture, the lithic industries and various social features such as funerary practices.⁶

The earliest phase of occupation, DJ I, is related to the Late PPNA. The architecture alternates between rectangular buildings, with large stone walls and paved floors, and circular buildings. However, the most important discovery for this early phase is a large sub-circular building, definitely for collective use, with very well preserved geometric paintings on the inside surface of the walls, named the 'House of Paintings'. As regards portable art, this phase yielded grooved stones, figurines and two large engraved flagstones, characteristic of this period.⁷

The DJ II phase is an initial phase of Early PPNB, which is at this moment the only occurrence of this period in the Near East. The architecture is composed of large rectangular buildings with several rooms, but some particular features are present such as a burnt house and a high concen-

⁶ Coqueugniot 2016.

⁷ Coqueugniot 2000.

tration of animal bones in exterior spaces. This concentration of bones was left in situ and was not mixed in with areas for rubbish or pits as is usual. According to the archaeozoologist⁸ the composition of the fauna is also unusual, mainly big game (equids and aurochs), and the remains have not been trampled and quickly covered with a gritty sediment. It seems that this area gathered the remains of a special collective event, a feasting. The portable art for the second phase is mainly represented by figurines made from the first phalanx of equids⁹.

The phase DJ III corresponds to the second part of the Early PPNB. It yielded small rectangular buildings, divided into small rooms, with large exterior spaces between them. One particular building exists which has been named the ‘Maison des Morts’ (‘House of the Dead’) because 80 individuals were buried beneath its floors. The portable art for this period is more important and varied: grooved stones, figurines from equids phalanx and, lastly, anthropomorphic figurines were found on the site, but none in a funerary context.¹⁰

After phase DJ III, the site was abandoned during the Middle–Late PPNB period. The last two phases did not belong to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic and the site was re-occupied in the early 7th millennium BC for the DJ IV phase and in the mid-3rd millennium BC for the DJ V phase. For both these phases, the settlement was very small and is limited to a few houses and pits for DJ IV and to Early Bronze Age graves for the last phase, DJ V.¹¹

With regard to the Neolithisation context, the site of Dja’de el-Mughara occupies an important place, at the interface between two economic models: the hunter-gatherer economy of predation and the farmer-breeder economy of production. Its very long continuous sequence therefore allows longitudinal studies to be produced.

The funerary practices

The funerary practices at Dja’de el-Mughara are various. During the three Pre-Pottery Neolithic phases, 116 individuals were buried inside or outside the buildings, as primary or secondary deposits.¹²

Phase DJ I (Late PPNA)

The DJ I phase yielded only five individuals: three mature adults, one young adult and one immature individual who died between the age of 10 to 15 years old. It was not possible to determine the sex for these individuals, not even for the skeleton with coxal bones, due to extreme fragmentation. Skeleton 661 was found on the floor of the communal ‘House of Paintings’ in a hyperflexed position. Unfortunately, the bones were badly crushed by the collapse of the building which seems to have been intentional, as a decision of closing the structure.¹³

The second type of deposit for this phase is secondary: four individuals were represented only by their skull or jaw. These skull deposits, which are common for this period,¹⁴ seem to share a strong link with the architecture. For instance, deposit 627 was discovered on the floor of a house and placed on its base in the corner of a room, with its gaze turned toward the centre of the room, with a possible staging (Fig. 2.1). With regard to the other skull deposits, one is in a pit, and one was discovered under a pebble bed, wedged with pebbles and small stones (Fig. 2.1).¹⁵

⁸ L. Gourichon, personal communication

⁹ Coqueugniot 2000.

¹⁰ Coqueugniot 2000.

¹¹ Coqueugniot et al. 1998.

¹² Chamel 2014.

¹³ Chamel 2014.

¹⁴ Kurth – Röhrer-Ertl 1981; Contenson 1992; Stordeur 1997; Stordeur 2000; Chamel 2014.

¹⁵ Chamel 2014.

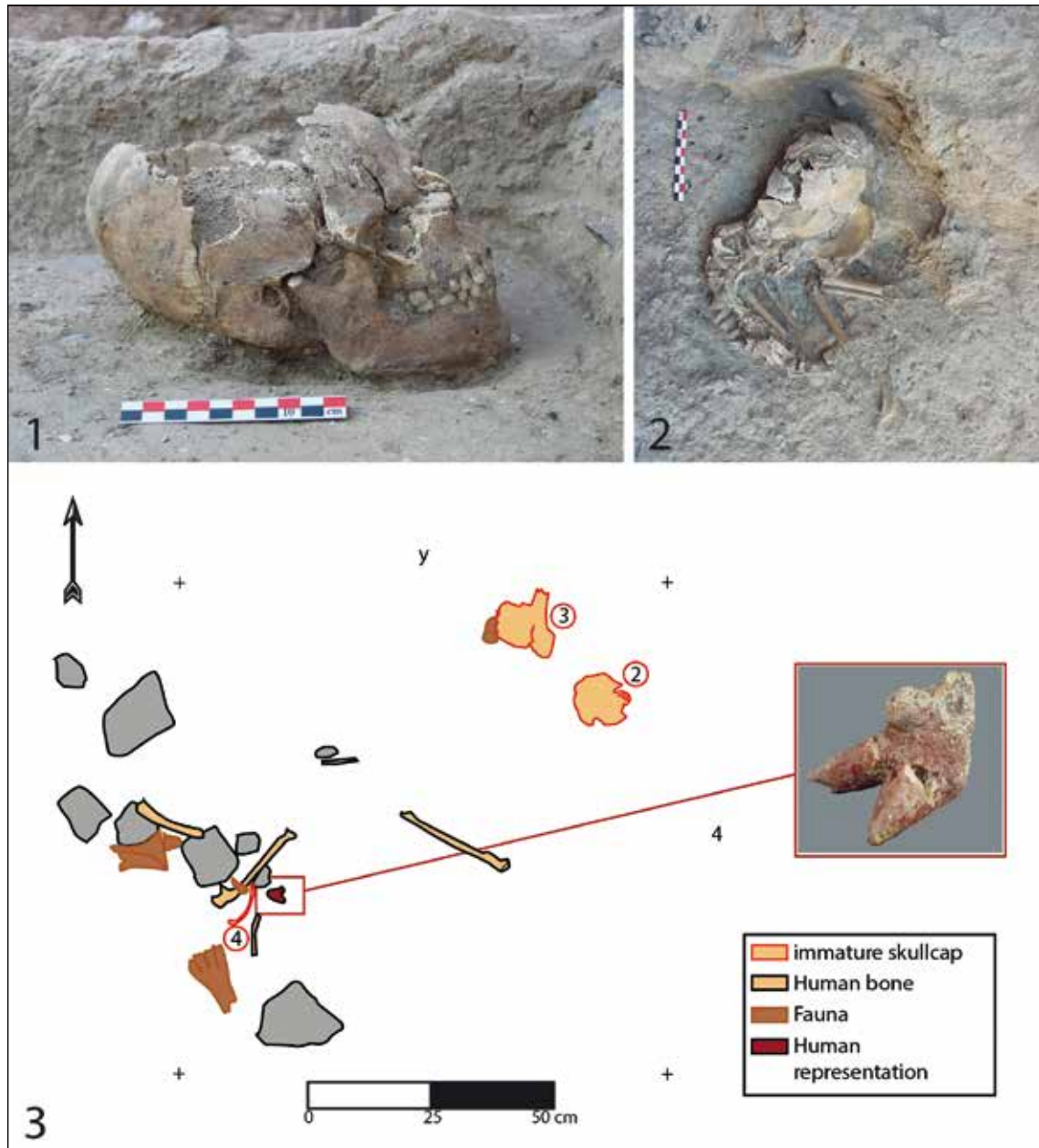


Fig. 2 Funerary deposits for DJ I and DJ II. 1. Burial 627 in DJ I; 2. Burial 483 in DJ II; 3. Immature skullcaps and human bones in an exterior space with a human representation of a pregnant woman, DJ II (photo: E. Coqueugniot, CAD: B. Chamel in Chamel 2014)

Phase DJ II (beginning of early PPNB)

The phase DJ II yielded a more important number of individuals: 26, distributed between 8 immature individuals and 18 adults. Only one of these can be sexed, a man from a single primary deposit, the skeleton 413. Funerary gestures are really varied for this phase and we noticed the first appearance of plural deposits in the site. Indeed, 17 individuals came from deposits with more than one individual, some of them being collective burials with re-opening, and some of them multiple burials, with a one-time event deposit of the dead. For example, grave 350 is a multiple deposition of 7 individuals, with a one-time deposit, while burial 283 is a collective deposit with 5 individuals, buried at several different times. It is interesting to note that this burial is outside of the house, while the other plural burials for this phase are often inside.

The other skeletons of DJ II came from single and primary deposits, often in a flexed position, on the right or on the left side. With regard to the composition of the population, all ages at death are represented here, from 1 years old to mature adults. For the 483 deposit, an immature individual who was between 1 and 2 years old at death, his/her position in the house, against a wall, makes the hypothesis of a foundational deposit possible (Fig. 2.2).

Lastly, some scattered human bones were discovered: two mandibles on the ground and three pieces of skullcaps from two immature individuals on the floor of an open space. Other bones scattered not far away come from two individuals, one adult and one immature; they have been found with a figurine of a woman, probably pregnant, but we do not know if this association is intentional (Fig. 2.3).¹⁶

Phase DJ III (end of early PPNB) and the ‘House of the Dead’

The last phase of the Neolithic, DJ III, is the one with the most important number of human remains: up to 85 individuals. There are still primary and secondary deposits, multiple and collective burials, and scattered human remains, but the difference is that most of the dead (94%) were buried in relation to a particular building this time, the ‘House of the Dead’. Amongst the 85 individuals, 33 are adults and 52 are immature individuals.¹⁷

The ‘House of the Dead’ is an ensemble of seven rectangular buildings, rebuilt during a 250- to 300-year span at the same place, with only small modifications of the plan. All of the structures yielded human remains, on the inside (Minimum Number of Individuals = 51), usually in small cells, or outside the building, against the exterior walls (MNI = 13). Sixteen other individuals are believed to be associated with the buildings, but there is no certainty. The ‘funerary occupation’ of this unusual building can be divided into 3 phases (Tab. 1).

The question is whether this building was in use only for the dead or whether daily activities were also carried out inside during its utilisation as a burial place. In fact, only the last state of the house (Structure 27–28) yielded some archaeological material, while the sixth other stages were free of artefacts.

Phase	Number of structure	Burials inside ‘House of the Dead’	Burials against ‘House of the Dead’	Associated burials?
3	St. 27–28	Sp. 108		
		Isolated mandible		
2	St. 150			Sp. 183
	St. 155	Isolated mandible	Sp. 179	
		Sp. 181		
		Sp. 180		
1	St. 209	Sp. 180 inferior	Sp. 240	
	St. 222			Sp. 304
	St. 282			
	St. 294			Sp. 297

Tab. 1 Structures and funerary deposits in relation to the ‘House of the Dead’ in DJ III

¹⁶ Chamel 2014.

¹⁷ Chamel 2014.

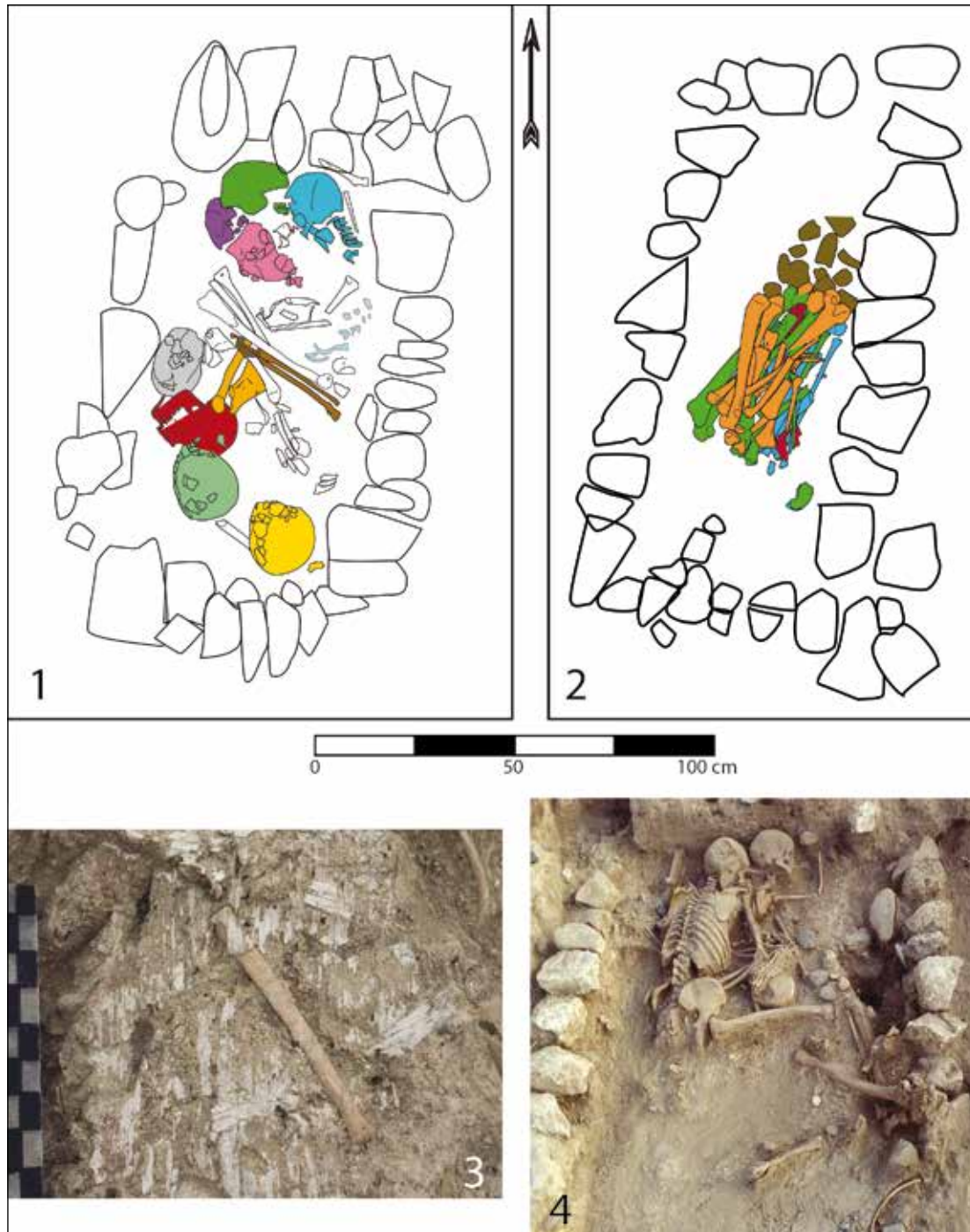


Fig. 3 Funerary deposits in the 'House of the Dead' (DJ III). 1. Final sub-phase of the 180 deposit; 2. The 181 deposit; 3. Traces of mats and ochre in the 179 deposit; 4. Final sub-phase of the 108 deposit (photos: E. Coqueugniot, CAD B. Chamel in Chamel 2014)

Phase 1 of the 'House of the Dead' includes the first four architectural layers (Structures 294, 282, 222 and 209 – Tab. 1). One collective burial, the 180 inferior, contains 14 individuals, including 8 adults and 6 immature individuals, among which is a perinatal individual. The basal layer of human remains is composed of parts of skeletons, with some connections preserved, probably disturbed primary burials, while the final layer has obvious primary burials, without any disturbances. The burial, which may have been in use during at least three architectural layers, remains in the same place during this time, indicating that there has to be some knowledge about the place

allocated to the deceased. Outside the building but pressed against the wall is a primary deposit of an adult, burial 240.

Phase 2 encompasses two architectural layers. One of them, structure 155, yielded two collective burials, 180 and 181, and an isolated mandible found at the corner of two walls. Due to its position, this bone can be considered as a foundational deposit. Associated with this same building, a collective burial (179) is pressed against the external face of the northern wall.

Burial 180 is located on top of the collective burial 180 inferior, belonging to phase 1, and includes 13 individuals with 6 adults and 7 immature individuals, among which is a perinatal individual. This collective grave can be divided into several sub-phases which contain both primary and secondary deposits, including a large set of skulls for the last sub-phase, with a clear choice of arrangement against the western wall, together with a bundle of long bones (Fig. 3.1). At the end of the last sub-phase, a pebble bed is created in order to close the grave.

In phase 2 and for the first time in the 'House of the Dead', a funerary deposit occurs in the southern cell of the house and is clearly identified as a secondary deposit. Burial 181, with the remains of 5 individuals, consisted of long bones, especially from the lower limbs, arranged like a bundle, which were probably in a bag (Fig. 3.2).¹⁸

The exterior burial associated with the structure 155, named 179, is an ensemble of several deposits, both primary and secondary. It contains 12 individuals, including 3 adults and 9 immature individuals, among which are three perinatal individuals. Traces of mats (Fig. 3.3) with a layer of ochre were discovered between the different layers, and a human figurine is associated with the last layer of the grave.

Phase 3 of the inhumations in the 'House of the Dead' concerns the last architectural layer, structure 27–28. It contains burial 108 (Fig. 3.4), which brings together 2 adults and 12 immature individuals, among which are 2 perinatal individuals, in the eastern corner of the northern cell. Two sub-phases are clearly visible for this burial, with some sediment between the two. After the last inhumation, the burial was then sealed by a pebble bed.¹⁹

Regarding whether potential selection criteria may have restricted access to the tomb to only a part of the community is very difficult to state. The question can be addressed on two different levels, the level of the whole 'House of the Dead', and the level of the burials which are inside. It must be noted that, depending on the state of preservation of the human remains, it was often impossible to estimate the age at death and to determine the sex. Nevertheless, the latest burial (108) includes a high proportion of immature individuals that is 87% of the remains. In this case, a selection according to age cannot be excluded.

The human representations

At Dja' de el-Mughara, remains which have survived are rare, limited to some figurines (we didn't find any engraving and painting with human representation), and usually found in secondary position. Anthropomorphic figurines made in different styles and materials (clay, animal bones, different stone, etc.) were found throughout the entire archaeological sequence. Some are clearly female, other are not gendered. Some are nude, others wear clothing (Figs. 4.7; 5.1, 3). We observe also a rare case of a representation of a phallus.

Throughout the sequence, female figurines are not standardised. For example, in phase DJ II, one figurine evokes a pregnant woman (Figs. 2.3; 5.2), but it is the only one found which could clearly evoke fertility. Another very thin and elongated one is certainly not a fertility symbol (Fig. 4.1).

¹⁸ Chamel 2014.

¹⁹ Chamel 2014.

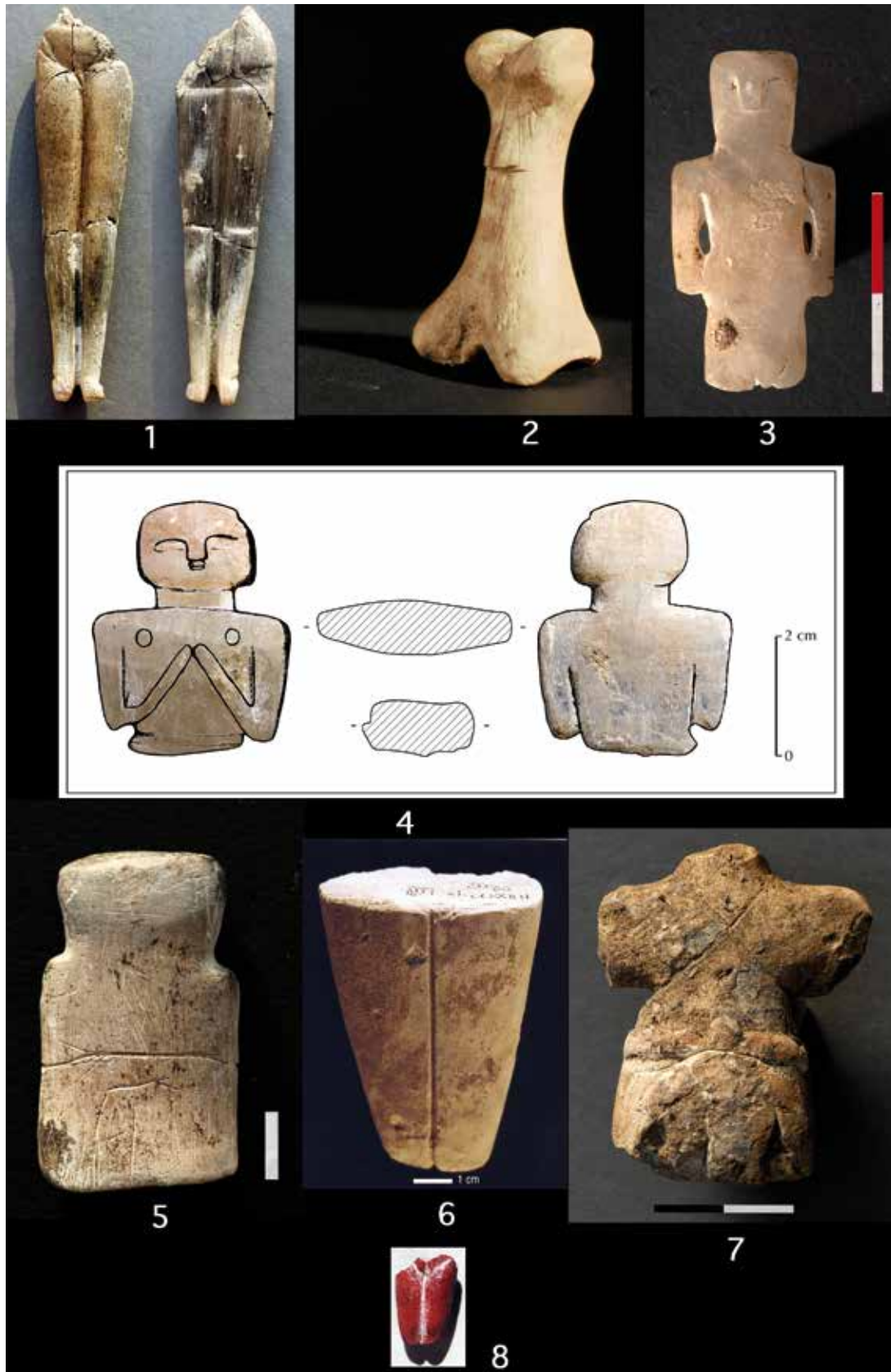


Fig. 4 Photographs of some human representations. 1. Elongated female figurine (DJ II); 2. Schematic figurine on equid phalanx (DJ III); 3. Gypsum figurine, definitely male (DJ I); 4. Gypsum female figurine (DJ I); 5. Schematic chalk figurine (DJ I); 6. Inferior part of a chalk figurine with intentional saw marks (DJ III); 7. Chalk figurine with clothes (DJ III); 8. Small figurine in red stone from DJ III (photos: E. Coqueugnot)

If figurines are not necessarily female ones, then it is clear that early female figurines are not always symbols of fertility. We now know that bucrania of aurochs are not always bulls (in Dja'de el-Mughara as in Çatalhöyük some are bucrania of cows!).²⁰ The discoveries from Dja'de el-Mughara suggest that the idea of a 'revolution of symbols' based on the duality between 'the woman and the bull' and between female fertility and male virility is at least to be debated.²¹ Even when we do have a pregnant woman, is it as a symbol of fertility or for educational purposes including sex education for girls as has been observed in some ethnological situations? Or is it to be used as some kind of magic support during childbirth protection rites?

Many schematic figurines created from the first phalanx of equids (more than 40 items, mainly from DJ III, Fig. 4.2)²² have been found. This use of the natural shape of the phalanx of equids to make figurines is not restricted to Dja'de el-Mughara; it has also been acknowledged at Mureybet²³ and in the Chalcolithic in many other regions.²⁴

A special figurine in gypsum found in the filling of the 'House of Paintings' (phase DJ I, Fig. 4.3) is definitely a male one. Its style evokes another small figurine found in Göbekli²⁵ and the great male statue of Yeni Mahalle,²⁶ suggesting the existence of an 'anthropomorphic canon' in the area of the Golden Triangle.²⁷ Another figurine (a female one) in gypsum (Fig. 4.4) as well as a very stylised figurine in chalk (Fig. 4.5) were found in the 'House of Paintings'.

The breaking of figurines is common. This fragmentation appears to be intentional as suggested by figurines with traces of prior sawing and by the fact that it does not occur in zones of weakness (Figs. 4.6–8; 5.1). The intentional fragmentation of figurines is a classic phenomenon during the PPN, for example at Ain Ghazal²⁸. Fragmentation can be linked with magical practices, as it is known in later Mesopotamia by texts²⁹. For the stone figurines, different materials have been chosen (chalk, gypsum, metamorphic rocks) and the colour could be a criterion for the selection of materials of different origins.

In conclusion, with regard to the figurines, we should note that:

- Whatever the period, many figurines are abstract and schematic and so gender is often not clearly specified. Even when they are not schematic, anthropomorphic figurines are not always female, and some asexual figurines could be male ones. If the precise determination (gender) is ambiguous, that is not due to an inability to make a faithful representation, but rather it seems to be intentional, with there being no desire to clarify the gender.
- In addition, the swift throwing away of the figurines among the waste suggests that they had no inherent value, that the act of manufacturing them was important and that they were for short-term use.

Discussion

After this presentation of human representations and funerary practices, we would like to describe the eventual convergences and differences between these two aspects.

During the Pre-Pottery Neolithic sequence, we are able to observe great variability in the funerary practices: from DJ I to DJ III, all types of inhumation were represented, both primary and

²⁰ Twiss – Russel 2009; Coqueugniot 2014.

²¹ Coqueugniot 2014.

²² Christidou et al. 2009.

²³ Gourichon pers. comm.

²⁴ Bıçakçı 2001; Olsen 2008.

²⁵ Schmidt 2000.

²⁶ Hauptmann 2003.

²⁷ Kozłowski – Aurenche 2005.

²⁸ Schmandt-Besserat 2013.

²⁹ Postgate 1994.

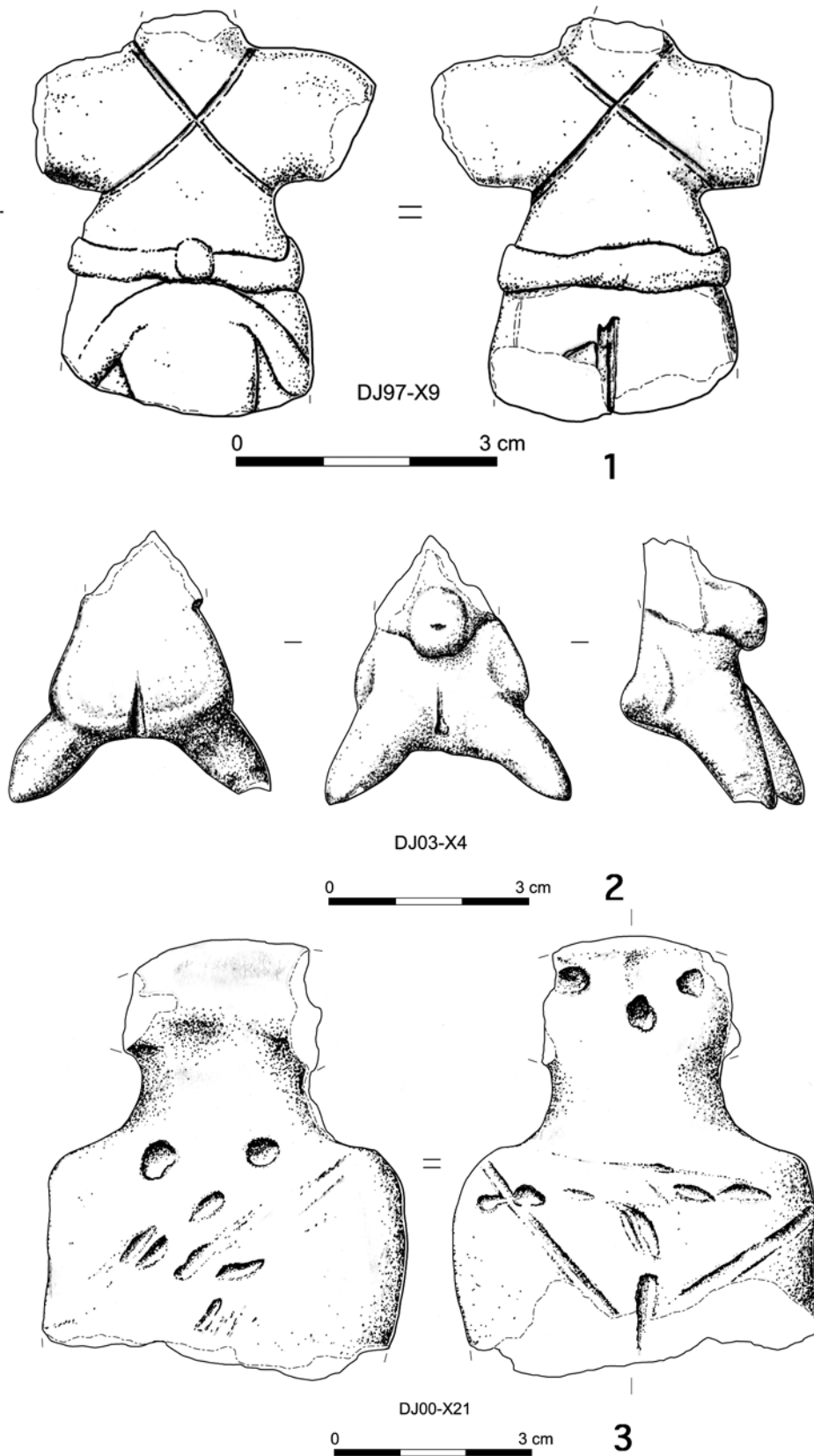


Plate 4 Drawing of three figurines from DJ II and DJ III. 1. Figurine in chalk with clothes – cf. Fig. 4.7; 2. Clay figurine, painted in red, of a pregnant woman – cf. Fig. 2.3; 3. Clay figurine with mark of clothes and possible scarification marks (drawings: R. Douaud)

secondary. The minimal number of individuals in a grave can be very variable too, from 1 to 16 individuals. The variability can also be observed in the human representations as well as in the choice of materials (clay, animal bones and stone) and in the style of the representations (nude or with clothes, sitting or standing, etc.). In both cases, there are no clues of a standardisation in human representations or in the treatment of bodies, contrary to the Middle PPNB site of Tell Halula where standardisation is seen for funerary practices.³⁰

In the funerary practices, we do not observe selection according to age at death or sex for the individuals buried in the site, and there is also no obvious selection using these criteria in the ‘House of the Dead’ in the DJ III phase. With regard to the figurines, although we have some that are obviously female, others are not gendered and can be hypothesised as male representations. In Dja’de el-Mughara, only one figurine seems to be linked to a fertility symbol, the ‘pregnant woman’.

The last hypothesis we would like to highlight concerns the obvious intention to move on, which can be clearly seen both in funerary practices and in human representations. With regard to funerary practices, there is an irrevocable closure of the graves after they have been used with a sealing of a pebble bed for DJ III or by setting fire to a building after the last inhumation as in burial 661 in DJ I. For the 108 burial, the pebble bed definitely sealed the grave and the funerary occupation of this particular building. On the other hand, in Tell Halula (Middle PPNB), the bodies were buried in the entrance of the houses and their emplacements are clearly visible during daily use of the house for everyday activities.³¹

This desire for a ‘closure’ or for an ‘ending’ can also be seen in the human representations. Indeed, regardless of the material from which they were made, figurines are often broken or sawn; the cuts are not due to natural causes, rather there is a desire to deliberately destroy the representation, perhaps to mark the end of its use. Another argument for this hypothesis is that figurines were always found in secondary context, on the soil, on rubbish or in concentrations of animal bones as if their work was done. But it is interesting to note that there were absolutely no figurines found in a funerary context.

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³⁰ Guerrero et al. 2009.

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