

Prehistoric Religion

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In today's society religion is common and incredibly diverse. Every religion found at any point in time on this earth has its own extensive history and unique features. The religions of today and those of the past are commonly studied and often discussed throughout high school and college textbooks and classes, but rarely are the very beginnings and roots of religion discussed with any explanation or in any sort of depth. Usually these conversations begin with religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition or with others such as those found in ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, or Mesoamerica. The concepts found consistently throughout religion did not simply arise instantaneously over a particular night. They began sometime along modern day humanity's evolutionary history, and then continued growing until they reached what they are known as today. Religion is defined as "a set of beliefs based on a unique vision of how the world ought to be, often revealed through insights into a supernatural power and lived out through the community" (Guest 577). The first incidences in the world's history that are considered the beginnings of religion occurred in the Middle Paleolithic period. From the Middle Paleolithic, religious ideas would continue developing through the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods until becoming recognizable as they are known today in the Bronze Age.

The first semblance of religious practices began in the Paleolithic period, which occurred roughly from 2.6 million years ago and lasted until 10,000 years ago. The biggest issue researchers face when with studying and attempting to understand the religion of this time period is that writing systems and record keeping were not invented for thousands of years. However, it was during this expansive time period that the first ancestors and relatives of modern humans began to bury their dead. Specifically, around 300,000 years ago. The practice of burying the dead indicates a belief in or fascination with the concept of an afterlife. Neanderthals, as well as a relative of modern humans, *Homo heidelbergensis*, have been discovered to be behind the first

known deliberate disposal of their dead. In Pontnewydd Cave in modern day Wales lies the bodies of five to fifteen Neanderthals believed to be intentionally placed there (Pettitt). This practice is known as funerary caching. Funerary caching is the practice of leaving or burying many bodies in one area, together, as opposed to burying the dead in the strict sense of the word. Funerary caching can be found to have occurred until approximately 100,000 years ago.

In the Middle Paleolithic period, intentional burials began being found with grave goods. As Karl Narr explains, “corpses were buried with stone tools and parts of animal, laid in holes in the ground and sometimes the corpses were especially protected” (Narr). This is the first time burials of this kind show up in the fossil record and from there they only grew in grandeur. In the Upper Paleolithic, grave goods became richer and more common, but it is impossible to discern if the increase in grave goods was due to changing religious or spiritual beliefs or the ways in which they had changed (Cauvin and Watkins 6), finding grave goods may suggest more about the social and economic position of the deceased individual rather than the religious beliefs of the culture.

The process of secondary burials also became a typical practice in the Upper Paleolithic time period. There were two types of secondary burials practiced. In the first, the body of the deceased was charred and then buried. In the second, the body was first left to decompose naturally or was possibly de-fleshed before finally being buried (Narr). Many scholars believe that these different and deliberate forms of disposal of the dead are evidence that these prehistoric societies believed in some form of an afterlife.

Sacrificial practices also began in the Middle Paleolithic and carried through to the Upper Paleolithic. From the Middle Paleolithic, archaeologists have found pits filled with animal bones near burials. This placement suggests that Neanderthals and the first anatomically modern

humans made sacrificial offerings to the dead and possible ancestor worship. As the Paleolithic period ended and the Neolithic period began, human sacrifice started to be widely practiced. Human sacrifice was often heavily found in relation to animal sacrifice as well as the practice of cannibalism (Narr). Typically, human sacrifices were young females or children and “analysis of the human remains themselves may add important clues to social organization and conceptions of life and death in those populations” (Formicola 446). These practices of sacrifice are commonly tied to fertility and agricultural rites.

Throughout the Paleolithic, some Neanderthal societies practiced an early form of totemism or animalism because “they performed rituals related to hunting and believed in a master of animals,” (Wunn 419). Evidence found by multiple archeologists in several locations across Europe from the Middle Paleolithic caves points to the possibility of a widespread Neanderthal bear-cult, and, therefore animalism. Animalism, as described by Karl Narr in his article *Prehistoric Religion*, “is characterized by close magical and religious ties of humans with animals, especially with wild animals,” (Narr). Furthermore, in the oldest known cave art, animals play a large part. Humans rarely appear in these first known cave paintings and when they do appear, they often have animal characteristics or they are mixed human-animal figures. As Fuller and Grandjean explain in their article, *Economy and Religion in the Neolithic Revolution*, “by 30,000 BC, carvings and cave paintings by anatomically modern humans showed a fascination with the animals they hunted, probably expressed not only in art but also in religious beliefs” (Fuller and Grandjean 372). While it cannot be conclusively known how these prehistoric people interacted with nature religiously, there is compelling evidence that their spirituality and beliefs were influenced by the world around them.

During the Neolithic period, change began to occur much more quickly. This is a period of rapid change known as the Neolithic Revolution and it began around 10,000 BCE, as the Paleolithic period ended. The Neolithic Revolution saw varied changes in all aspects of life across the world. At this time, the Ice Age in which the world had been encapsulated was finally ending. The ending of the Ice Age led to a gradual shift in the global climate and is most likely spurred on this sudden period of change. As R. A. Guisepi states in his article, *The Agrarian Revolution and the Birth of Civilization*, “climatic changes associated with the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age (about 12,000 B.C.), may have played an important role” (Guisepi). The climatic shifts caused the big game in many areas of the world to migrate to new pasturelands in the northern regions. The growing patterns of wild grains and other important crops also shifted due to the change in climate. Societies had once been exclusively hunter-gatherer and nomadic began to settle in one place, where they started to domesticate both plants and animals. Because of this change in lifestyle, other aspects of community and culture, such as religion, could be further explored and elaborated.

Throughout the Neolithic period religion changed, becoming more complex and widely spread. The changes were primarily in the structure and ritual of religion, rather than the actual beliefs of the practicing peoples. The structure of religion became much more organized. For example, “specialized buildings for religious activity led by religious functionaries,” (Fuller and Grandjean 375) were created. On several Neolithic sites, there are buildings with no apparent signs of ever been inhabited, suggesting that their sole purpose was religious. Religious rites became more elaborate and objects began being commonly used to “symbolize aspects of the supernatural” (Fuller and Grandjean 375). This is proven by the excavation of objects that have no discernable utilitarian purposes and therefore would have had a symbolic meaning. Actual

belief systems are thought to have remained mostly as they had been in the time period before. The most typical and main beliefs of the time were sets of myths depicting supernatural powers..

Neolithic beliefs in the afterlife may have been significantly more developed than some scholars originally believed. In this time period, new death and resurrection myths began to take shape. Many of them were based around a belief that the world had been created from the death of an important god. There is a significant possibility that these notions about life and death came out of the rising death rate due to sanitation problems, communicable diseases, and high fertility rate. The increasing death rate was caused from the change in living styles that emerged in the Neolithic. All of these problems facing societies of the day would have “reduced the life expectancy of Neolithic villagers compared to their nomadic ancestors,” causing the Neolithic peoples to further consider aspects of life and death [Fuller and Grandjean 375].

The first temples were built during the Neolithic time period. Monumental structures are found standing all across the world. The oldest of these is Gobelki Tepe in what is modern day Turkey. Since 1995 the megalithic monument have been excavated and, Klaus Schmidt of the German Archaeological Institute, believes that Gobelki Tepe is the “first manmade holy structure” (Curry 278). Radio carbon dating and analysis of stone tools found at the site have determined that the structuresat Gobelki Tepe are approximately 11,000 years old. As excavations continue, more than twenty “ceremonial structures” have been uncovered by Schmidt and his team, with more believed to still be buried (Curry 279). Many argue that this area is not the religious center that Schmidt claims it is, however the important signs of an ancient settlement, “hearths, trash pits, and small fertility figurines,” are missing from the archeological record (Curry 279). Additonally, there are no close sources of water, meaning that

the area probably would not have been realistically useful for habitation. A site dedicated solely as a ritual destination is highly unique for this point in time.

Catal Huyuk is another site in Turkey that the excavations of have revealed insight into Neolithic religion. Catal Huyuk, commonly considered “the first city” (Wesler 73), covered over thirty-four acres and consisted of rectangular single-story homes with their most notable feature being their only access point coming from a hole in each roof. Also revealed throughout the excavations were buildings that are currently believed to have been used for religious or ceremonial purposes. These buildings are comparable to the houses in the city, but “had superior decoration in the form of reliefs and wall-paintings” (Macqueen 226). There has been some debate over whether or not the inhabitants of Catal Huyuk worshipped any specific deities. Some anthropologists and archaeologists, such as James Mellaart, the first excavator of the site, claim that the residents of Catal Huyuk believed in a supreme mother goddess or some other similar female deity. In *An Archaeology of Religion*, author Kit Wesler argues that these claims are largely unfounded. She instead states that “archaeologists cannot demonstrate the worship of gods until the arrival of early states” (Wesler 155). Wesler believes that it is not until the arrival of the Bronze Age that evidence for specific deity worship appears in the archaeological record. At the point time when Catal Huyuk was being constructed and inhabited, the majority of the world was still entrenched in the Stone Age. Most settlements were instead either tribes or chiefdoms and would remain as such until the end of the Neolithic time period, which occurred roughly around 3500 BC.

State level societies finally began arising in the Bronze Age. The Bronze Age is characterized by the use of bronze and copper, proto-writing systems, and the rise of early features of the urbanization of society. This is the first time period in history where metal was

used as a material. Throughout the world, the Bronze Age began at different times. Generally, it is stated that each area of the world entered it at some point during 4500 BC and 2000 BC. The gap between societies entering the Bronze Age can be incredibly expansive. Areas such as Greece and China entered into the Bronze Age well before 3000 BC. Meanwhile in northern Europe, specifically the British Isles, some areas did not enter the Bronze Age for well over a thousand years later, in 1900 BC. For a society to be considered to have entered the Bronze Age, it must have been smelting its own copper and making it into an alloy with either tin or other metals. Or it also could have been trading for bronze with another society that was smelting copper and alloying with other metals.

As society continued developing, so did religion. Religion expanded significantly through this time period. The Bronze Age saw rise to members of society deemed by Kristian Kristiansen in *The Handbook of Religions of Ancient Europe* as “religious specialists” (Kristiansen 80). These members of society included ritual chiefs, priests, and gods or goddesses. Societies of the Bronze Age were almost exclusively theocratic. Political leaders, chiefs, and kings, were thought to be “empowered by the gods” and were in command of any religious texts used by the society [Kristiansen 80]. Often, these texts were delivered orally, but would eventually be written down as written language developed.

During the Bronze Age, the well-known civilizations of Assyria, Babylon, Sumeria, Egypt, and Crete arose, and with them, their religions. In Egypt, most of the archeological evidence that gives insight into the religion of the era comes from funerary monuments and the burials of the social elite and royalty. In the early Bronze Age, there was a “moral community between the living and the dead,” meaning that the dead were an essential part of society [Dorman]. There was a highly developed belief system behind the afterlife and a part of it

involved an intense passage to enter the afterlife. The elaborate mortuary practices and burial practices that occurred before and after death were all to ensure a safe and successful voyage into the afterlife. The most well-known of these practices was the process of mummification. Bodies of the royal and the elite were mummified because it was thought by the Egyptians that the body must remain intact and in order for the deceased to continue living in the afterworld. The journey to the afterworld was a passage filled with challenges and difficulties. One of these obstacles was a judgement after death where the deceased's heart was weighed. If the deceased failed the test, then they would "die a second time and would be cast outside the ordered cosmos" (Dorman). The beliefs of the ancient Egyptians would heavily influence other religions of the region.

The Minoan civilization and religion is another highly developed settlement that took place at least partially in the Bronze Age. In the Neolithic, the residents of the Mediterranean island of Crete used the caves of the island as places of dwelling. In the Bronze Age the Minoan civilization the caves were abandoned for their use of homes, but were instead used for cemeteries. Eventually they became centers for Minoan cult worship practices. Evidence for these practices consists of the findings of "pottery, animal figurines, and occasionally bronze objects" (Rutter and Gonzalez). These objects found in caves that were used for habitation through the Neolithic and then used for cult purposes, as well as in caves that their only known use was for religious reasons. In addition there is significant evidence for animal sacrifice found in some of these caves, mainly from "large quantities of animal bones, mostly from deer, oxen, and goats and no doubt derived from some form of animal sacrifice" (Rutter and Gonzalez). Known cult centers of the Minoans are not only found in caves, but also below or on the tops of the hills of Crete.

Religion is constantly changing and developing. Every religion found at any point in time on the planet has had its own history and unique features. Religion is not an unknown topic to be discussed within classroom settings but religions' origins is not as commonly studied. Oftentimes, these experiences only cover the religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. What would become religion developed slowly over hundreds of thousands of years. The first events in history that are the spark of the beginning of religious practice occurred in the Middle Paleolithic period. From the Middle Paleolithic, religious ideas continued developing through the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods until becoming recognizable as they are known today in the Bronze Age, in societies such as those found in Old Kingdom Egypt and the Minoan civilization of Crete.

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