

# Section 3 – Settlement

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## Ain Ghazal

Ain Ghazal is a large Neolithic site that was first established around 7250 BCE. It is located in what is now Jordan, near Amman. The peak of its success appears to have been around 7000 BCE, and the site was abandoned 2000 years later. The site was discovered in 1974 by engineers building a road, but unfortunately excavation did not begin until 1982, by which time much damage had already been done. The site is now under threat from urban development. Nevertheless it has been a rich source of finds and information.

The population rose to about 3000 by 7000 BCE, was sustained for about 500 years and afterwards it shrank to around 300. This fall has been attributed to environmental circumstances that may have been partly caused by the goats the people herded.

Like Tell es-Sultan and Çatal Hoyuk, no pottery is associated with the settlement. Hunting and gathering were pursued alongside cultivation, and the reasons for settlement are probably the same as at the other two: perennial water and natural food supply. The people cultivated cereals, peas, beans and chickpeas, and hunted antelope, wild pigs and horses, as well as hares and other small game.

The rectangular houses were built of sun-dried mud bricks. The exteriors were rendered with mud and the interiors with lime plaster, which was regularly renewed. They were built in terraces on a hillside overlooking a valley. Each had one main room and an anteroom. As at Çatal Hoyuk, no evidence of defensive architecture has been found or any large civic buildings. It is probable that the people lived in extended family groups which, once again, would probably have been centred on a matriarch.

The burial practices at Ain Ghazal remain somewhat mysterious, but they reflect those first seen in Natufian culture. Some people were buried inside the homes, and of these, some had the heads later removed and re-buried in separate pits. Why only some were chosen for this treatment and not others is not clear. We do not know whether the heads spent some time between the interments on display, but they may have. It is possible that the dead were buried quickly because of the corruption of the body, to avoid the foul smells and risk of disease. After a while, the heads may have been dug up to allow the family time to mourn and pay their respects.

So far, everything fits the overall pattern of settled Neolithic life that was appearing in many parts of the region, as illustrated at Çatal Hoyuk. However, Ain Ghazal has revealed one fascinating development. Thirty-two figurines made of lime plaster moulded onto bundles of twigs have been found. These are approximately half life-size and have cowrie shell eyes with bitumen pupils. Fifteen full figures have been discovered, along with fifteen busts and two partial heads. The figures were not scattered about the site but were in two discrete locations.<sup>1</sup>

Strikingly, three of the busts are two-headed. These call to mind the two-headed figures of women found at Çatal Hoyuk, but do not have breasts, so their gender is uncertain and may represent a woman and a man. They are not sexualised, as was the tantalising Natufian figure of a couple making love, but gaze straight ahead at the viewer. They might suggest a shift from venerating the Great Goddess as the supreme deity, to accepting two, or at least a binary deity, the female/male partnership. The two discrete groups of hunter-gatherer life were joined in settled society, and this may be the cultural expression of that.

This interpretation of the figurines is supported by later mythology. There was first a Great Mother, who conceived life without requiring a mate. Then the first Great Mother, known by a host of names across the planet, and represented either as the Sea or the Earth, gave birth to twins, one female and one male. These twins were both sister and brother, and woman and consort; the single unitary deity had become binary.

Çatal Hoyuk and Ain Ghazal represent a societal stage that persisted in Mesopotamia for thousands of years. During this horticultural phase, crops were raised in small gardens, principally by women. Foraging and hunting remained the primary methods for acquiring resources. The lifestyle continued as before, mixing hunting and gathering with horticulture and limited animal husbandry, but now people had discrete, permanent living spaces. The genders remained equal, and there is no evidence of warrior culture or endemic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, because of the damage to the site, many others may have existed but will never be found.