

# Section 3 – Settlement

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## Tell es-Sultan

The Younger Dryas appears to have made sedentary life precarious and people returned to nomadic wandering. They probably took their hunting dogs and herds of goats with them, and mixed a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle with a wandering herder one.

When warmer and wetter weather came, settlement was re-established very quickly, suggesting that the people had remembered the advantages it gave through their oral traditions. In the Fertile Crescent, three important, large settlements were founded.

The first of these was at Jericho. The earliest evidence of settlement here dates to 10,000 BCE. It appears that the perennial spring, today called Ein es-Sultan, remained active through the Younger Dryas drought. From 9500 BCE onwards, the occasional campsite here became a more permanent settlement and eventually an established town.

The earliest phase of settlement is known as Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA). It is characterised by an absence of any pottery and small villages of circular houses made of sun-dried mud and straw bricks, thatched with brush and mud. These houses were usually around five metres in diameter. There were hearths both indoors and out.

The people who lived here left the earliest evidence we have of an important funerary practice that would later appear elsewhere. From the earliest times, they buried their dead within their homes.

The people hunted wild game but also cultivated cereals; they were carrying on the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but were no longer nomadic. They had no need to wander because they could hunt, find, or grow enough to eat the whole year round. This transitional culture retained much of the previous lifestyle while introducing new practices and ideas. It is probable that, at least at first, the settlers lacked confidence that the droughts would not return, but as time went by their camps developed into organised, permanent settlements.

Estimates of the size of the settlement now known as Tell es-Sultan vary. Some sources believe it may have had as many as two to three thousand inhabitants at the peak of its success. Others suggest a much lower population, perhaps as low as two or three hundred at maximum. Tell es-Sultan has unusual architectural features: a stone wall 3.6 metres high and a tower of the same

height with twenty-two internal steps.<sup>1</sup> These were massive structures and clear precursors to the monumental architecture that would come to characterise patriarchal cities. Their purpose remains enigmatic, but one explanation is that the wall was built as a defence against flood water and the tower for religious purposes.<sup>2</sup> Whatever their function, the effort required to construct them is estimated to have been at least equivalent to one hundred men working for one hundred days.

After the PPNA period a new culture appeared, called Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB), characterised by rectangular houses built of elongated brick. Skulls, upon which the flesh had been replaced with moulded plaster, were found in these houses. It is believed that the skulls were buried under the floors of the houses long enough for the flesh to rot, then dug up and the plaster applied to form a likeness of the person in life. These skulls were then kept in the houses of the living, and may have been venerated, or regarded as having contact with the world of spirits. These are sophisticated artworks, which were not only plastered, but also painted. Shells were inserted into the eye-sockets to represent eyes, and even moustaches and beards were painted on. This elaborate process indicates the existence of a religious culture which may have been based on ancestor worship and the concept of life after death.<sup>3</sup> Most of the skulls that have been recovered are those of men, although some are of women and children.

According to Dr. Hamdan Taha,<sup>4</sup>

‘The Neolithic Period at Tell es-Sultan represents the transformations during the first period of human history from a prehistoric subsistence pattern based on hunting and gathering, to a new subsistence pattern based on domestication of plants and animals of the first settled society. The production surplus of agriculture enabled human beings to free part of their time, which was dedicated in the past to securing food, for building houses and creating art. The material culture of this period indicates the growing social complexity of Neolithic society.’<sup>5</sup>

Tell es-Sultan is interesting because it appears to contain the precursors of the characteristics typical of later, violence-based, patriarchal cultures. Yet there is no evidence of generalised warfare or violence at this time and furthermore, all evidence of patriarchal culture vanishes for

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<sup>1</sup> Mithen, Steven. *After the ice: a global human history, 20,000-5000 BCE* Harvard University Press. 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Akkermans, Peter M. M & Schwartz, Glenn M. *The Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (c.16,000-300 BCE)*. Cambridge University Press. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that these represent the beginning of the art of portraiture, but this is a dubious claim. However they are certainly the first evidence of portraiture of the dead as a central cultural element.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Taha was Deputy Assistant Minister for Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the Palestinian Authority.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=3083&ed=181&edid=181> Retrieved 23/06/14.

thousands of years afterwards. It is possible that this settlement was founded by people who had been displaced by drought and sought to predate on others using the perennial spring. This might explain the wall and tower. If this were the case, then the fact that it was a historical cul-de-sac might lead us to ponder whether this early version of the patriarchy was dependent on the presence of easy victims, and when wetter weather came and those potential prey went elsewhere, it died. This would speak to the parasitic nature of the patriarchy, the success of which depends on the exploitation of the vulnerable by the violent. If the tower and walls of Tell es-Sultan do indeed indicate the first incidence of patriarchy, then they show something else too: without easy prey, it collapses.