Art of the Ancient Near East

Sites in the ancient Near East are considered to belong to the beginning of the Neolithic.

Figure 1: View of Gobekli Tepe

Situated in the southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey, it is recognized as the oldest known human-made religious structure.

- The Neolithic is signified by a progression in behavioural and cultural characteristics including the cultivation of wild and domestic crops and the use of domesticated animals.
- The ancient Near East was home to the earliest civilizations within a region roughly corresponding to the modern Middle East and included Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, ancient Iran, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula.
- The Fertile Crescent is a crescent-shaped region containing comparatively moist and fertile land within otherwise arid and semi-arid western Asia.
- Neolithic culture in the Near East is separated into three phases, Neolithic 1 (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A), Neolithic 2 (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), and Neolithic 3 (Pottery Neolithic).
- Tell Halaf was the first discovered site of Neolithic culture.
- The temple located in southeastern Turkey at Gobekli Tepe dating from circa 10,000 BC is the oldest human-made place of worship.

Note: Domesticated means “tame” or “naturalized.”
Figure 2: View of the excavated ruins at Tell Halaf, Syria

It was the first find of the Neolithic culture, subsequently dubbed the Halaf culture; characterized by glazed pottery painted with geometric and animal designs.

Figure 3: Pottery from the Late Ubaid period

Ubaid-style pottery has been found at various sites along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf.

Figure 4: Example of Halafian pottery

These were produced by specialist potters. Some were painted with geometric and animal motifs.
The Neolithic or New Stone Age was a period in human development that originated around 10,000 BC, lasting until 3000 BC. Considered the last part of the Stone Age, the Neolithic period is signified by a progression in behavioural and cultural characteristics including the cultivation of wild and domestic crops and the use of domesticated animals.

The ancient Near East was home to the earliest civilizations within a region roughly corresponding to the modern Middle East and included Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, ancient Iran, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula. Sites in these locations that go back to approximately 9500 BC are considered the beginning points of the Neolithic period.

Neolithic culture in the Near East is separated into three phases, Neolithic 1 (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A), Neolithic 2 (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), and Neolithic 3 (Pottery Neolithic).

Fertile Crescent

This is a crescent-shaped region containing comparatively moist and fertile land, within otherwise arid and semi-arid western Asia. Definitions of the area vary slightly, but always include Mesopotamia and the land around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, with portions of Iran, Kuwait, Turkey and the Levantine coast including Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and the West Bank. This region is also often called the cradle of civilization, as it saw the development of the earliest human civilizations.

Neolithic 1 (PPNA)

The Neolithic 1 phase is commonly believed to have begun with a temple located in southeastern Turkey at Gobekli Tepe dating from circa 10,000 BC. The structure was developed by nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes and serves as the oldest known human-made place of worship. The site features seven stone circles covering 25 acres that contain limestone pillars, believed to have supported roofs of some form, carved with animals, insects, and birds (Figure 0). The major advances of the Neolithic 1 phase revolve around developments in farming practices, such as harvesting, seed selection and the domestication of plants and animals.

Neolithic 2 (PPNB)

The Neolithic 2 began around 8800 BC and is characterized by settlements built with rectangular mud-brick houses with single or multiple rooms, the greater use of domesticated animals, and advancements in tools. Burial findings and the preservation of skulls of the dead which were often plastered with mud to create facial features suggest an ancestral cult of some form.
Neolithic 3 (PN)

Beginning around 6400 BC, this period is characterized by the emergence of distinctive cultures throughout the Fertile Crescent, such as the Halafian (Turkey, Syria, Northern Mesopotamia) and Ubaid (Southern Mesopotamia) cultures.

Halafian Period

Tell Halaf is an archaeological site in northeastern Syria, near the Turkish border, that flourished from about 6100 to 5400 BC (Figure 1). It was the first site of Neolithic culture, which was subsequently dubbed Halafian culture, characterized by findings of glazed pottery painted with geometric and animal designs (Figure 3).

Ubaid Period

The Ubaid culture flourished from about 6500 to 3800 BC in Mesopotamia and is characterized by large village settlements that employed multi-room rectangular mud-brick houses. The appearance of the first temples in Mesopotamia, as well as greenish pottery decorated with geometric designs in brown or black paint, are important developments of this period (Figure 2). Tell al-Ubaid is a low, relatively small mound site that extends about two meters above ground level. The lower level was a site where large amounts of Ubaid pottery, kilns, as well as a cemetery were discovered.