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DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-STATE COMMUNITIES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

edited by

Diane Bolger and Louise C. Maguire

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LATE NEOLITHIC ARCHITECTURAL RENEWAL: THE EMERGENCE OF ROUND HOUSES IN THE NORTHERN LEVANT, c. 6500–6000 BC

Peter M. M. G. Akkermans

Round houses are a characteristic feature of the 6th millennium BC in Syro-Mesopotamia (all dates in this paper are calibrated dates BC). Substantial evidence for this kind of architecture first came to light at Yunus in south-eastern Anatolia and, in particular, at Tell Arpachiyah in Northern Iraq in the early 1930s. Ever since then, the circular structures have usually been referred to as *tholoi* (singular *tholos*) on the basis of some broad but misleading parallels in layout with Mycenaean tombs of a much later date (Mallowan and Rose 1935, 25). Two basic types are found: buildings simply made of one circular room; and more complex, keyhole-shaped buildings consisting of a circular room enlarged by a rectangular antechamber. Generally they have a diameter between 3 and 5 m although both smaller and much larger ones occur as well. The walls were made of mud brick or pisé, either laid on stone foundations or simply set on the surface without any support whatsoever. The walls carried a mud plaster often covered by a thin white gypsum coating, giving the buildings a bright white appearance. The *tholoi* are usually thought to have had beehive-shaped superstructures made wholly of mud bricks, but flat or pitched roofs made of reeds and other organic materials were probably used as well.

By the mid-6th millennium, circular structures with or without a rectangular antechamber were immensely popular in the hamlets and villages of the Halaf culture over much of northern Syria, south-eastern Anatolia and Iraq. Sites of this period tended to consist almost exclusively of round houses although rectangular structures still occurred in (very) modest numbers. A few such rectangular buildings made of very small cellular rooms, for example, were located amidst a mass of round houses at Çavi Tarlası in south-eastern Anatolia, at Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria and at the mounds of Yarim Tepe II–III in Iraq. These rectangular buildings, it has been suggested, were special-purpose installations, serving as the communities’ communal granaries or storehouses (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 117).

Because of their extreme abundance at the 6th millennium Halaf sites, the *tholoi* have always been considered archetypical of this culture and period. It is important to realise, however, that the distribution of these round buildings cuts across the traditional cultural boundaries created by archaeologists in every possible way: not only do the circular dwellings appear to have had a much longer history, going back as far as the mid-7th millennium BC, but they also occur roughly contemporarily in places alien to the Halaf culture, such as the Yarmukian sites of the southern Levant (e.g. Gopher 1995). The Late Neolithic *tholoi*, it appears, were not simply part of the ‘checklist’ of a specific archaeological construct (culture, period and region) but served in many different circumstances.

Reviews of the round buildings of the 6th millennium Halaf culture are relatively numerous (e.g. Akkermans 1989; Breniquet 1996; Tsuneki and Miyake 1998), but very little has been said until now about the *tholoi* of the 7th millennium BC. The latter structures are astounding finds if only because of their great and unexpected antiquity. Hence the purpose of this article is to briefly consider the nature and origins of the earliest round dwellings in Late Neolithic Syria, c. 6500–6000 BC, primarily on the basis of the excavations at the site of Tell Sabi Abyad on the Balikh. The paper is in honour of Eddie Peltenburg, who has been a friend for many years as well as an outstanding researcher in the field of Near Eastern archaeology, and who happens to share an interest in prehistoric round houses, particularly on the island of Cyprus (see, for example, Peltenburg 2004).
S web

Seventh Millennium Origins

The long held belief that the northern Levantine tholoi originated in the Halaf epoch (c. 5900–5300 BC), and not before, derived principally from the absence of any such structures in occupations of an earlier, pre-Halaf, date (although it must be added that the absence of evidence was primarily negative in the sense that the number of excavated sites of this earlier period were minimal). However, excavations since the start of the 1990s at several sites in Syria, such as Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Halula, Tell el-Kerkh and Chagar Bazar, have begun to explore settlement strata of the late 7th millennium BC which, significantly, contained circular architecture. Most relevant in this respect is the extensive fieldwork at Tell Sabi Abyad in the Balikh region of northern Syria (Fig. 3.1), which has revealed a great number of round dwellings in association with rectangular buildings in occupation levels predating the onset of the Halaf culture by many hundreds of years. The site has provided the earliest Late Neolithic circular architecture known in the Levant so far.

The earliest round structures at Tell Sabi Abyad (Fig. 3.2) occurred in the extensive exposure termed Operation III on the north-western part of the mound where work succeeded in establishing a long sequence of Late Neolithic (or Pottery Neolithic) occupations, radiocarbon dated to between c. 7000 and 6200 BC (cf. Akkermans et al. 2006). Although the stratigraphic analysis is still in progress, at least 13 main levels of settlement (often divided into
sublevels) were identified, some of them occurring in the broad horizontal exposures high on the mound, others in the deep but relatively narrow soundings on the slope. Circular buildings occur at Tell Sabi Abyad at an astonishingly early date, i.e. in Operation III from Level 5 onwards, c. 6500/6450 BC according to a number of radiocarbon dates. These earliest tholoi were between 3 and 5 m in diameter with walls about 40–50 cm thick, made of both sizeable, greyish to reddish-brown, irregularly shaped clay slabs and what seem to have been small, handmade mud bricks joined by a distinct grey mortar (Fig. 3.3). Different sources of clay must have been exploited for building purposes, each with its own qualities. There were no particular foundations other than thick layers of mortar into which the first layer of bricks of different sizes was pressed. Entrance to these buildings was through narrow doorways about 45 cm wide, which were preferably located in the south wall. Low clay thresholds were also present. Although it cannot be proved due to matters of preservation, it is tempting to regard these doorways as low portholes as such features were the usual kind of passage in the local settlements of this period (Akkermans et al. 2006).

The buildings were covered inside and outside with a red or grey, often renewed mud plaster, which in one instance carried a thick white gypsum coating. Two tholoi had a mud brick platform about 30 cm high, one covering about one fourth, the other about one third of the building’s interior. Two other tholoi contained a horseshoe-shaped hearth close to the wall opposite the doorway, each almost 1 m long and 0.5 m wide (cf Fig. 3.1). Their floors consisted of a smooth layer of burnt clay on a foundation of large sherds. One hearth had a partly intact, beehive-shaped roof made of clay slabs, 55 cm high.

In these early levels of settlement, c. 6500–6200 BC, the round structures occurred in very small numbers (the paucity of round buildings has nothing to do with sample size but is a reality when taking into account the very large area of excavation, i.e. over 1800 m²). A total of six tholoi have been found so far, in Operation III Levels 5C to 2B, respectively. In each of these strata only a single circular building stood amidst a range of large and small, single or multi-roomed, rectangular features. Moreover, their occurrence was not continuous in the sense that there were intermediate sub-levels without round buildings. Depositional and radiocarbon evidence suggests that the tholoi were relatively short-lived and used over perhaps one generation at most, then abandoned and left to the elements (in view of the collapsed wall debris in them).

Only in one case did the round buildings show evidence of remodelling or reconstruction in the same place: the Level 2B tholos was (partially) founded upon the remains of the lower, Level 2C tholos. Significantly, the rectangular, multi-roomed architecture situated on either side of the tholos had also been rebuilt in roughly the same place and on the same alignment, suggesting a continuous use of architectural space over an extended span of time, perhaps by one family. In this case, it seems, there was a straightforward, mutual relationship between both the round and rectangular architecture on the spot; both types of building may have served the needs of one and the same group of people although probably for different purposes when taking into account the difference in layout. The link is less clear in the case of the other tholoi, which all stood isolated in the yards at some distance from the rectangular buildings.

**Round Houses in the late Seventh Millennium, 6200–6000 BC**

The long-lived settlement in the north-western part of Tell Sabi Abyad (Operation III) came to an end at about 6200 BC. The desertion did not involve a total abandonment of the site, however. Two new foci of occupation were founded, partly on virgin soil, partly on slope wash at the foot of the original mound (Operations I and II). Late 7th millennium settlement also included parts of the slope of the original site to the east and south although not always permanently. Interestingly, the shift in the area of habitation seems to coincide with many innovations and changes in the local organisation of settlement, architecture, material culture, economy, etc. (cf Akkermans et al. 2006). One of those changes involved a substantial increase in the use of round architecture although always in association with rectangular buildings. While, as we have seen, only a handful of circular structures were employed in the early levels, there were dozens of such buildings in the layers of the late 7th millennium, c. 6200–6000 BC.

The round houses of this period were between 2.5 and
3. Late Neolithic architectural renewal: The emergence of round houses in the northern Levant

5.5 m in exterior diameter (Fig. 3.4). Their mud-brick or pisé walls, about 25–45 cm wide, carried a mud plaster both inside and outside, occasionally coated with a thin, white gypsum layer. The floors consisted of trampled earth, sometimes with an additional clay plaster or a layer of pottery sherds pressed into the mud for additional strength. Remarkably, in a few cases the plaster on the wall and floor had been heavily burnt. This reddish, burnt plaster was a characteristic trait of many circular buildings at Tell Sabi Abyad in the early 6th millennium Halaf period, but it was apparently used in the late 7th millennium as well. I assume that it served as a solid, hard coating, keeping out moisture and vermin (Akkermans 1989, 59). The tholoi walls stood directly on the slope of the mound without any foundation, and as a consequence the bases of the walls sometimes differed by as much as half a metre in elevation. In order to create a flat surface for living and working, the tholoi interiors were planed with fresh clay or wall fragments from other (collapsed) structures. The entrances to the tholoi were between 40 and 45 cm wide and were usually provided with a low clay threshold. In several instances the threshold contained a perforated limestone or a re-used fragment from a basalt grinding slab with signs of hollowing and polishing, which probably served as a pivot stone. Occasionally, a sherd pavement lay in front of the doorway. The passages were usually to the south or to the west, occasionally to the north but never to the east.

Set against their wall, some tholoi had a rounded or horseshoe shaped hearth as large as 1.8 m across with a smoothed, burnt clay floor on small limestones packed in mud (cf Fig. 3.4). The hearths had been renewed often, up to 12 times in one case, indicative of long use. In a few cases, shallow pits entirely filled with ashes were sunk into the floor next to the hearth. One building had a small, round pedestal shaped fireplace in its centre, slightly raised above the floor. It was covered with a layer of white plaster with a shallow, red-burnt hollow in the centre. Fireplaces also stood outside the tholoi, right next to their entrance or set against their wall. Sometimes half of a large, broken pottery jar laid on its side was used as a fireplace.

Installations such as platforms, seats or benches were virtually absent. In one tholos there was a low, white-plastered bench or dais about 30 cm high and 40 cm wide set against the wall between the hearth and the doorway. A large jar neck had been sunk into it upside down, perhaps for use as a stove (ashes and charcoal were in it; cf Nieuwenhuyse 2007, 59).

Compartmentalisation was a main characteristic of many (albeit not all) round houses in the late 7th millennium. The interior space was divided by one or more walls into smaller compartments for living and working (Fig. 3.5), some of which were provided with doorways while others were not (access to them must have been high up in the wall). The partition walls may have extended up to the roof level, creating small rooms and alcoves; alternatively, they may have been in the form of low barriers demarcating grain bins or other special-purpose installations. Very often the dividers were little more than two short walls perpendicular to the tholos wall, delimiting a roughly triangular compartment of such restricted size that it cannot have served any purpose other than storage.

Also new was the occasional addition of a rectangular antechamber to the circular room. Such keyhole shaped buildings were a common feature at many sites of the 6th millennium Halaf culture, but their occurrence in 7th millennium deposits is most unusual. In the case of Tell Sabi Abyad, the few examples known so far seem to have been initially free-standing circular structures, which
were extended at a later time by means of a rectangular room or incorporated into a much larger, multi-roomed rectilinear building. One small tholos in the south-eastern area (Operation I, Level 5) had a circular, white-plastered room about 3 m in diameter flanked on either side by a rectangular room, each measuring roughly 1 by 1.5 m (Fig. 3.6). The lack of bondage between the walls suggested that the side rooms were added to the tholos at a somewhat later time. Access to the building was from the south through the main circular room. One rectangular side room was almost completely occupied by a large horseshoe shaped oven with a domed cover.

The tholoi are usually thought to have had a vaulted roof made entirely of mud bricks, primarily on the basis of assumed parallels with the ‘beehive villages’ which until recently dotted the countryside of northern Syria and south-eastern Anatolia (Fig. 3.7; see also Copeland 1955; Aurenche 1981). However, it is doubtful whether this perspective is correct. Not only is there no historical relationship whatsoever between the two forms of architecture, but the archaeological evidence itself suggests either a flat or a pitched roof made of timber and reeds rather than a beehive shaped mud brick cover. Sunk into the floor in the centre of several tholoi at Tell Sabi Abyad was a concentration of limestone boulders, which probably served as a foundation for a wooden post upholding the roof (cf Akkermans 1989, 32; 1993, 63). Other round buildings at the site contained clay fragments with impressions of reeds and wooden poles in their room fill, clearly showing that their roofs were made of wooden rafters covered by reed mats, which in turn were probably covered by a thick mud layer (a kind of construction also used in the rectangular structures at the site).

Both stratigraphic and radiocarbon evidence at Tell Sabi Abyad suggest that the late 7th millennium tholoi had a restricted lifespan. Within a single building phase lasting for about 20–30 years (Akkermans and Nieuwenhuyse in press) the buildings were often used for a short time then simply left to decay. Quite a number of them appear to have been supplanted two or three times by new ones founded upon the lower, levelled building remains. Their construction required little investment in terms of time and energy; the work could probably be completed by five or six persons within a week or so (cf Akkermans 1993, 302).

Late Neolithic Round Houses in Perspective

The earliest architecture of the Epipalaeolithic to Neolithic Near East consisted of round or oval, sometimes semi-subterranean dwellings 3–6 m in diameter. By 9000 BC the round houses were slowly replaced by rectangular structures in many shapes and sizes, which remained predominant for several thousand years. The recurrence of circular monocellular buildings around the middle of the 7th millennium has no immediate cultural or technical roots; it implies both an innovation in architectural design and a fundamental departure from the long lived tradition of rectilinear construction.

In the first 200 or 300 years of their existence, the round houses were little more than a sporadic supplement to the existing architectural repertoire in the villages of the Late Neolithic, increasing swiftly in importance only after c. 6200 BC. Apparently it took many generations for these buildings to gain widespread use and acceptance, perhaps because there was initially little need for them or because a social resistance of some sort accompanied their introduction.
Alternatively, we may consider the scarcity of round buildings in the early levels as intentional and meaningful, related to the use of these structures in the communities. The *tholoi* were unique with respect to their layout and conspicuous appearance, as well as their highly restricted occurrence. Hence, they may have served specific purposes very different from the usual rectangular architecture which stood abundantly around them. The persistent presence of a single round building in each of the upper occupational phases at Tell Sabi Abyad is indicative of the limited yet steady demand for these special purpose installations and their success over a prolonged period of time.

However, it is still very difficult to establish what the assumed special function of the earliest *tholoi* might have entailed. There were no artefacts or installations in the buildings other than those mentioned above to provide clues to their use. *Tholoi* were carefully raised architectural features, but this was the case for most if not all of the rectangular structures as well. Their occasional white plaster and hearths are other traits shared with the many rectilinear buildings in the vicinity, suggesting regular, domestic arrangements. Any activity in the round buildings must have been on a relatively small scale, involving only a few people, given their single room and restricted size. It is tempting to attribute ritual significance to these rare and exceptional structures although there is no proof to either confirm or reject this idea. Were the circular buildings simply another form of domestic architecture of this period?

The early *tholoi* scarcely differed from the many circular structures so characteristic of the late 7th and, especially, 6th millennium BC. There is widespread agreement that the *tholoi* of this period principally served domestic purposes (eating, drinking, sleeping, socialising, etc.). The abundant occurrence of the *tholoi*, the hearths and other installations often found in them, and the nature and distribution of artefacts in and around them are all mentioned as indicators of their use in daily life, *i.e.* as ordinary dwellings for living and working, granaries, storerooms or animal pens (see, for example, Oates and Oates 1976; Breniquet 1996). Moreover, in the case of 7th millennium Tell Sabi Abyad it has been argued that the larger *tholoi* must have been houses because they contained the most extensive (single room) interior spaces and as such were the only local features suitable for constant habitation. The rectangular buildings at the site of this period are considered primarily to represent storehouses divided into many (very) small, cellular rooms (Verhoeven 1999).

The shift from rectangular to circular buildings, which began around the middle of the 7th millennium or shortly afterwards and which steadily increased in importance in the course of time, has not yet been satisfactorily explained. A variety of perspectives have been proposed, ranging from a revival of much older building traditions that had still survived in remote hinterlands to adaptations resulting from a degrading natural environment and differences in social structure and community organisation (*cf.* Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 103–131 and references therein). The late 7th millennium communities themselves remained as they were before, *i.e.* predominantly small and dispersed, in the order of 0.5–1 ha, with the number of inhabitants restricted to a few dozen. The architectural change, however, was slow but radical in the sense that it entailed the virtually complete replacement of the large, multicellular, rectilinear edifices by small, monocular, round structures. Although the once dominant rectangular houses did not disappear altogether, they were given a new meaning as buildings primarily intended for storage rather than domestic living and working. In light of the above, an entirely new architectural rationale – either utilitarian, societal and/or ideological – came into existence in many parts of the Levant in the late 7th millennium, which focussed on small group size and corporate efforts: the round houses were meant to accommodate a single person or a small household of five or six individuals at the most while the storage buildings were for the benefit of the entire group, whether that community was a single household or several such units (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 151).

The new architecture often seems to have had a transient character. Although the rectilinear storage buildings may have remained in use for 20 or 30 years with little or no noticeable modification, the circular structures were used briefly then replaced, often in the same place and alignment. Only the larger *tholoi* experienced a more sustained occupation, given the repeated renewal of their central hearths. It is tempting to assume that many of the round buildings were used seasonally and subsequently left to their fate, especially because their construction required little investment in terms of time and labour. In this respect, it seems that the circular architecture of the late 7th and 6th millennia cannot be detached from another trait typical of this period, *i.e.* the focus upon mobility and the temporary living in small and autonomous groups dispersed over the landscape. *Tholoi*, it seems, were easily established and easily deserted and so were the settlements in which they stood so prominently.

**References**


Akkermans, P. M. M. G. and O. P. Nieuwenhuys (eds) in press.