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Notes on Some Features of Possible Ritual Significance at MPPNB Shaqarat Mazyad, Southern Jordan

**Bo Dahl Hermansen
and Charlott Hoffmann Jensen**

Introduction (Fig. 1)

The aim of this paper is to report a range of features and finds recovered at the MPPNB site of Shaqarat Mayad which may have had a function beyond the purely utilitarian; and to raise questions and offer some preliminary interpretations, regarding their possible meaning to the Neolithic inhabitants of Shaqarat Mazyad.

Shaqarat Mazyad is situated at 35°26'23" East/30°26'45" North in the sandstone mountain area some 13 km north of Petra. The present day vegetation of the area is predominantly stone oak as well as shrubs and other minor herbs (Gebel 1986). The site was discovered by Diana Kirkbride in 1964, while surveying the region (Kirkbride 1966: 54). In 1984 Hans Georg K. Gebel made a systematic survey and sounded the site during his work in the Greater Petra Area (Gebel 1986, 1988). Most recently, a Danish expedition has excavated the site since 1999 during four consecutive campaigns (Kaliszan *et al.* 2001, Jensen 2002, Jensen in press, Hermansen n.d.).

During the MPPNB, the site of Shaqarat Mazyad seems to have been a small village, but due to erosion its original extent is not known. As seen in Fig. 1, the architecture at the site is organized in clusters of roughly circular housing units. The units A, B, C, D, and E, have been excavated to floor level, whereas the Units H, K, L, and R, have only been incompletely exposed and the floors not reached. Like the latter, the larger units, Unit F and Unit J-G, are incompletely excavated with floors only reached in the south-western part of Unit J. Thus, a functional interpretation of the housing units in the village is not yet feasible.

Stone Installations (Figs. 2-5)

A peculiar architectural feature, observed regularly at Shaqarat Mazyad, is an installation, constructed of stones, which is always located next to the entrance inside the circular architectural units that characterize the habitation of the site (Units A, B, C, D, F, and R). Three of these installations have been fully excavated (Units A, B, and C); two have been partly excavated (Unit F and R); and one, which seems to have been demolished already in antiquity, has been traced (Unit D). In the remaining circular units, no such installations have been exposed so far. However, their presence in all the completely excavated (A-D), and two of the partly excavated units (F and R), would seem to indicate that they were a regular, albeit not necessarily "universal" feature of the circular housing units at Shaqarat Mazyad. As we can see from the photos (Figs. 2-

4), these installations vary considerably in form and construction. But what characterizes the well preserved examples is that they were marked by a vertical slab which extended above the construction itself and, hence, would have served as a focus of attention for anybody entering or already inside the circular units.

Turning our own attention towards the fully excavated examples inside the Units A, B, and C, these were constructed of roughly hewn, local, sand- and limestone slabs on edge (Unit A and B) or of boulders (Unit C), in some cases filled with an extremely hard-packed mortar, with an admixture of smaller stones. The installations are clearly abutting on the house walls, and the plaster floors are interrupted at their bases, not continuing below them. This indicates that such installations were built after the house walls but before plastering the floors. However, the size, form, and mode of construction differs from case to case. In the most well preserved case, Unit A, (Fig. 2) the installation is constructed as a cist, filled with hard packed mortar and stones as described above, and then covered with horizontal slabs, which would have allowed the installation to be used as a table, or perhaps an altar, or both. Whether this was the case with the installation in Unit B is not entirely clear due to the state of preservation (Fig. 3). In Unit C (Fig. 4), the stone installation was constructed of boulders mixed with hard packed mortar, and this, too, may have served such purposes, although it was apparently not covered by horizontal slabs as the installation in Unit A.

Few artifacts were found inside these installations, and the only ones which seem to have been deliberately placed, were neatly manufactured ground stone artifacts, especially the mortar and pestle in Fig. 5, found inside the stone installation in Unit A. These artifacts were apparently deposited, or perhaps dropped in, since the mortar was found upside down, before the installation was filled with stones and hard packed mortar, and may thus have served as a sort of foundation deposit. Otherwise the few scraps of bone and flint objects, recovered from the fill in this and the other constructions are in no way particularly distinguished, neither in form, finish, nor location, although the bones still remain to be investigated.

Moving now to the partly excavated stone installation in the larger Unit F (Fig. 6), the installation in this unit roughly matches the description of those in the other units. Not yet completely excavated, it is not possible to make a complete description. However, there is no evidence that it was covered by stone slabs. Neither does it seem to have been filled to the top with hard packed mortar or stones, as in the Units A and C. Rather, the fill excavated so far consisted of soil, with a concentration of long bones near the surface that remain to be excavated during the next field campaign. Given the general similarity of the stone installations in Units A, B, C, D, F and R, in form and location it would seem reasonable to suggest that the function and meaning of these features may have been more or less the same. How exactly to interpret them will depend on the analysis of the bones recovered in the installations and any further finds from the incompletely excavated installations in Unit F and Unit R.

The relatively uniform location of these installations within the house plans may also be of interest since it helps us understand how the inhabitants of Shaqarat Mazyad organized interior space. They are all located in the interior of houses, next to the doorway. And, if an axis is drawn through the entrances and dividing the internal space in two halves, it becomes apparent that in all cases except Unit R, these installations are located to the left of the entrance when seen from the interior of the house, and *vice versa* when seen from the point of view of anybody entering the house. Only in Unit R it is located on the opposite side. This difference may be significant in so far as the installations recovered until now are all placed north-east, east, or south-east of the axis, i.e. roughly to the east.




Vertical Slabs as Foci of Attention (Figs. 6-11)

As mentioned earlier, vertical slabs were inserted to mark the stone installations next to the entrances of the housing units, and would, consequently, have served as foci of attention inside the houses. Similar slabs were also applied at the doorways of Units A, B, C, and E. They are

Shaqārat Masī'ad

Main Excavation Area 2002

0 m 1 m 2 m 3 m 4 m 5 m

-  = Wall
-  = Entrance
-  = Reconstructed walls

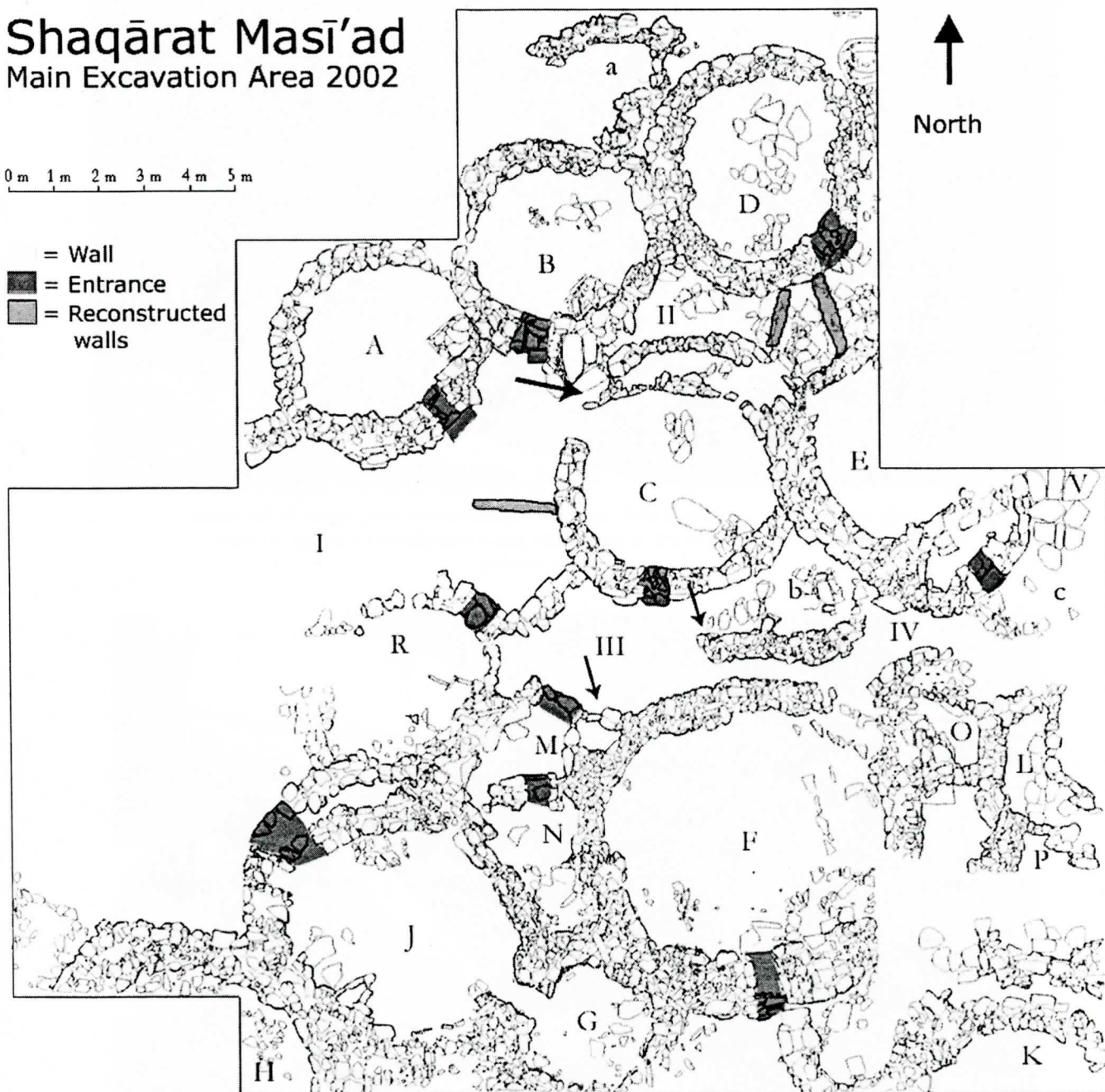


Fig. 1. Plan of the main excavation area. See text for references to arrows.



Fig. 2. Unit A seen from northwest with stone installation in the east corner of the room. Unit B can be seen in the upper left corner of the photo with the vertical slab in front of the installation visible.



Fig. 3. Close-up of stone installation in Unit B. The entrance to the unit is visible above the arrow.



Fig. 4. Stone installation in Unit C.



Fig. 5. Objects found at the base of the installation in Unit A.

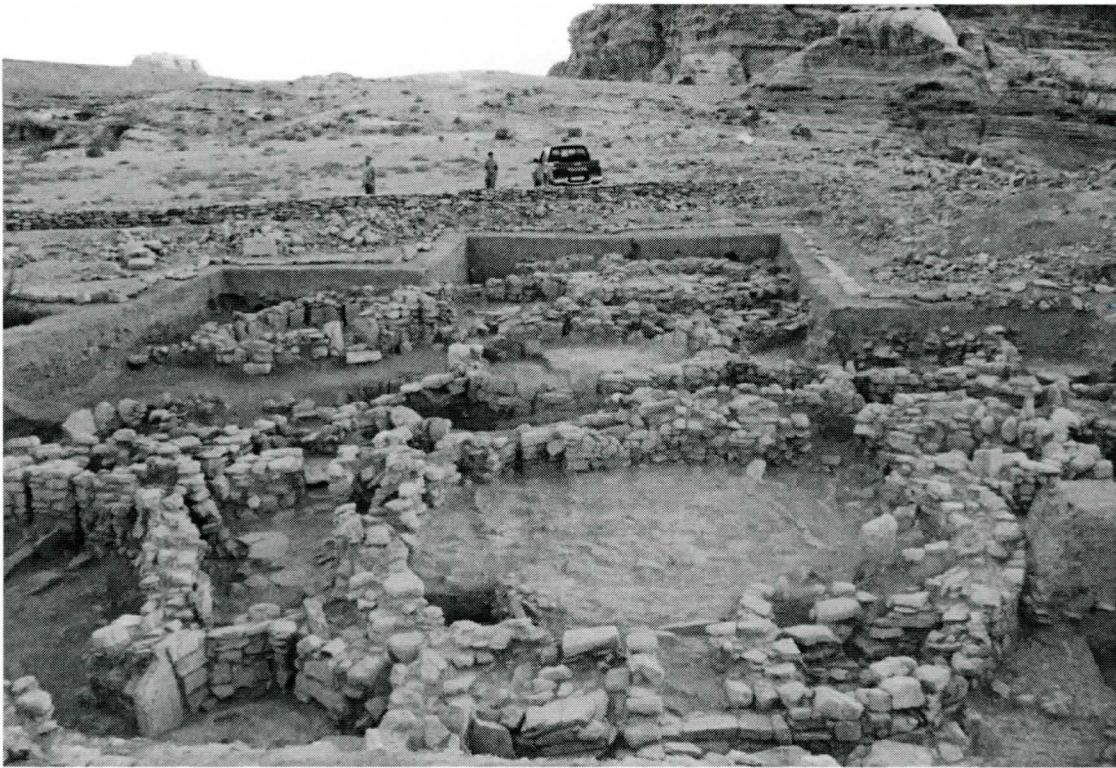


Fig. 6. Excavation area seen from the south with Unit F in the lower center of the photo. The wide entrance is situated at the base of the photo, the vertical slab in the southeast corner of the building. The vertical slabs flanking the entrance to Unit C can be seen in the center.



Fig. 7. The blocked entrance to M. An incised groove is visible on the edge of the slab flanking the right side of the entrance.

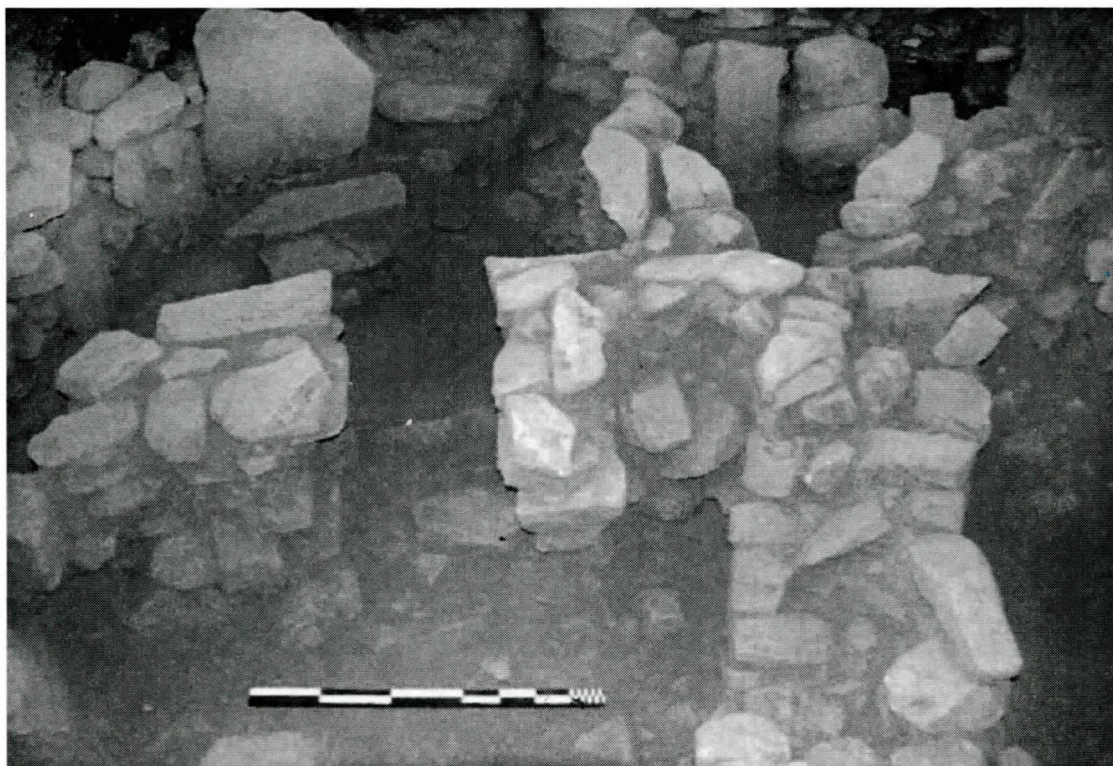


Fig. 8. Unit M with large vertical slab and pavement. The entrance between M and N is situated at the center. The top of the vertical slabs on the north side of the entrance are visible.



Fig. 9. View of the excavation from the north. Vertical slabs near the narrow entrance to Space II can be seen just south of Unit B in the center of the photo. The slabs in Space III are situated next to the blocked entrance to M in the upper right part of the excavated area on the photo.

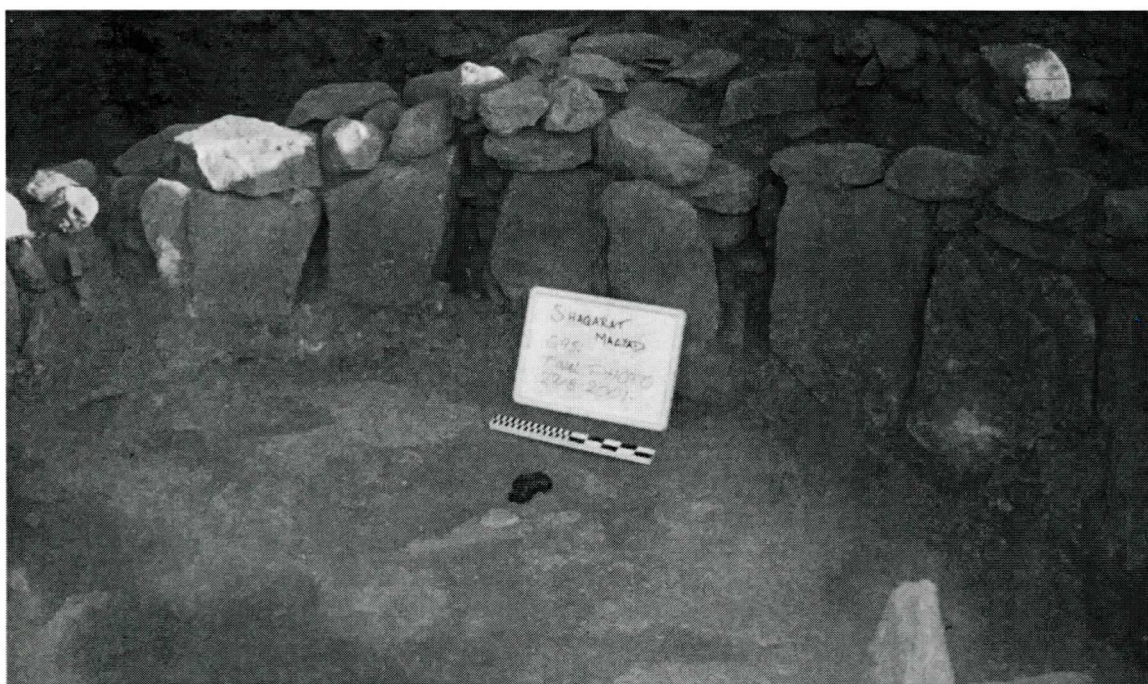


Fig. 10. Vertical slabs along the inside of the wall in Unit A. The stone installation is visible in the lower right corner.

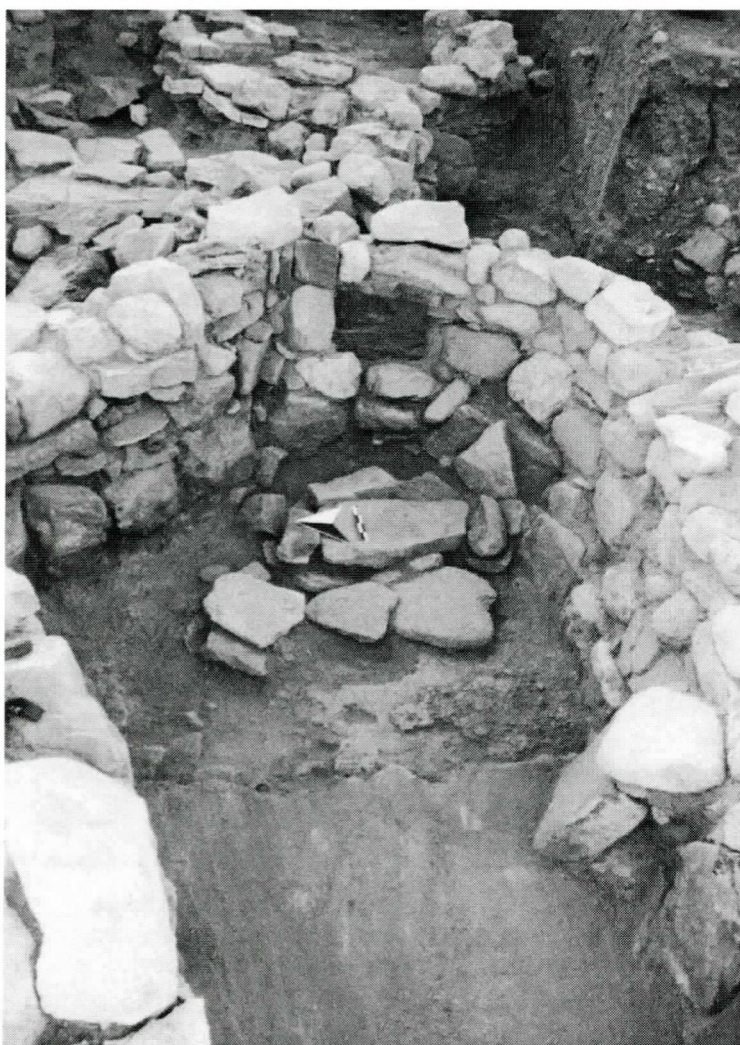


Fig. 11. Dark stone at the east end of enclosure b with stone pavement in front. Upright standing slabs on the inside of the wall close to the entrance are visible in the lower right corner of the photo.

situated on the exterior of the walls, flanking the doorways and facing anybody approaching from outside (Fig. 6). A similar vertical slab is also seen at the entrance to at least one of the circular buildings in Kirkbrides Level V in Beidha (Kirkbride 1967: pl. IIIA). Interestingly, the doorways at Shaqarat Mazyad are quite narrow, and also equipped with a raised threshold of stones, spanning the width of the walls and thus providing a physical barrier that would have to be transgressed in order to pass through the door.

Vertical slabs are also found at the entrance to Unit M (Fig. 7). Here, however, it is the edges of the slabs that face the visitor, approaching the doorway from outside. The slab to the right of the entrance is marked on the exterior by a deep groove. This is interesting because inside Unit M, a free-standing vertical slab with a stone pavement in front of it has been recovered to the right when entering the unit (Fig. 8). So the groove in the slab to the right of the entrance may perhaps have been meant to signify the location of the arrangement inside the room.

The entrances from Unit M to Unit N and from Unit G to Unit J were also flanked by vertical slabs much like those of the doorways to Units A, B, C, and E. The significance of this is not clear, but at least in the latter case, there is evidence to suggest that Unit G is later than Unit J. Hence, this doorway may originally have served as an entrance to Unit J.

Vertical slabs have also been found in other contexts, both inside housing units and in the areas between houses (Fig. 9-11). In most cases, we are dealing with stones set in clusters that seem visually to define limited architectural segments. The meaning of this eludes us, but the arrangements of vertical slabs in the interior walls of Unit A, B, and C certainly do set these wall segments apart from the rest of the architectural setting, and this would probably have been the case even where the walls were covered with plaster which, indeed, seems to have been the case in the interior of the houses (Jensen in press) as is also seen in other contemporary villages, such as Beidha (Kirkbride 1967: 6). In other cases such clusters of vertical slabs seem to demarkate boundary situations. This seems to have been the case with the exterior arrangements of vertical slabs at the entry from Space I to Space II and III (Fig. 9) and at the entry to Enclosure b (Fig. 11), all marked by arrows in Fig. 1. So far we have found no evidence that these exterior features were covered by plaster, and hence they may well have been visible to anybody passing by.

A more liberal employment of vertical stones has been observed for the interior walls of Unit M-N, but this building differs considerably from other housing units in the excavated parts of the village. As seen on the plan (Fig. 1), Unit M-N blocks the space between the units J and F. With their peculiar layout and limited space, these inserted rooms apparently served a special purpose. This impression is enhanced by the fact that the large vertical stone slab, mentioned above, was placed in front of the Northern wall of Unit M with a pavement in front of it (Fig. 8). Such a free standing slab, albeit larger and in a different position, has also been recovered inside one of the "ritual buildings" at contemporary Beidha (Kirkbride 1968: pl. XXVIII A), where it gives the distinctive impression of having served a ritual purpose.

At some point in the architectural development of the site, Space III was separated from Space IV by the curved wall of Enclosure b and also from Space I by a blocking wall (Fig. 1). Enclosure b originally had a plaster surface, but was later partly paved with stones. Interestingly, the main concentration of this pavement is right in front of a dark brown, rectangular stone, set on edge in the curved wall (Fig. 11), and focusing any viewers attention towards the east. This feature is indeed conspicuous and if not covered by wall plaster, and so far there is nothing to suggest it was, it would certainly have attracted the attention of anyone inside this small enclosure. Its significance eludes us, but perhaps it is of some significance that it is oriented towards the east, especially since an apparently similar, dark brown stone has been observed in the wall of a house from one of the round house phases at Beidha (personal observation, August 2002). Here, too, attracting attention towards the east.

Summary and Interpretation

In the previous paragraphs, we have described a range of features in the excavated architecture at Shaqarat Mazyad, which stand out from the architectural background as something special. These features include 1) stone installations next to the entrances, just inside the houses, which are mostly marked with a vertical slab; 2) a free-standing vertical slab with pavement in front of it in Unit M; 3) a conspicuously placed dark brown, stone set on edge in the eastern wall of Enclosure b; 4) entrances and internal doorways flanked by vertical slabs; 5) clusters of vertical slabs in the interior walls of some houses; and 6) clusters of vertical slabs in exterior architectural features.

We are not suggesting here that all these features served a ritual purpose to the exclusion of more practical uses, indeed, neither necessarily excludes the other. But it does seem that the use of upright standing stones was not random or coincidental. Thus, we may ask at this point whether some of them might not have served to evoke the presence of the sacred? This may have been the case with the vertical slabs that mark the stone installations inside the doorways, but more to the point, we suspect that, on analogy with the example in Beidha, the vertical slab in Unit M with pavement in front of it could have served as a focus of ritual activity. Likewise, the dark brown stone in the focus of the curved wall of Enclosure b may well have served such a purpose. As mentioned, its placement in an eastern wall seems to be replicated inside a house in nearby Beidha. Of course, this apparent similarity may be purely coincidental, but on the other hand a preference of a roughly eastward orientation also seems to characterize the location of specific architectural elements such as the stone installations next to the entrance inside the circular housing units. We therefore suggest that the east may have played an important role in the universe of the MPPNB inhabitants of the region around Shaqarat Mazyad and Beidha, and that this stone deliberately served to focus attention in that direction.

Presently, it is not possible to assert that the stone installations inside the houses served a ritual rather than a practical purpose. But we do suspect that the vertical slabs, used to mark them, may have served to evoke the sacred in some way. If so, their location just inside the doorways may have been of symbolic significance. In general terms this is because within a "transpatial system"¹ as the village of Shaqarat Mazyad seems to have been, doorways to individual houses provide a passage through the boundary between the enclosed space of house interiors and the global system around (Hillier and Hanson 1984: 144ff). Hence, they are often associated with features that emphasise the boundary conditions and facilitate control of incursion. Such features might include physical barriers, such as the pronounced thresholds and narrow doorways found at Shaqarat Mazyad, as well as visual markers. And we suggest that the vertical slabs flanking the entrances to houses and rooms in Shaqarat Mazyad may have served to evoke just that kind of notions. If so, the reason for placing the stone installations, with their vertical slabs, just next to the doorways may also have been bound up with such an understanding, although more utilitarian considerations cannot be excluded. Indeed, we can see no contradiction between a symbolic and a utilitarian interpretation.

As regards the clusters of vertical slabs in interior house walls, it is difficult presently to understand them in terms of specific notions, but they would certainly have served to set the architectural segments in question apart from the ordinary and that even if they may have been covered with plaster. Conversely, the arrangements of vertical slabs in exterior architectural features were located at points which indicate that they could have signified border conditions in the passage between more or less well delimited areas of the Neolithic village. As mentioned above, there is no indication that these exterior features were covered by plaster.

To sum up, at this point we interpret the free-standing slab with pavement in front of it in Unit M and the dark brown stone set on edge in the eastern curved wall of Enclosure b as foci of

¹ "A transpatial system,, is a class of spatially independent but comparable entities which have global affiliations, not by virtue of continuity and proximity but by virtue of *analogy* and *difference*" (Hillier and Hanson 1984: 144).

ritual attention. The vertical slabs marking the stone installations inside the house doors may also have served to evoke the sacred in some way, and the vertical slabs flanking many doorways at the site would, among other things, have signified the boundary conditions involved in passing through the passages. The same interpretation is applied to the exterior arrangements of vertical stones. A more detailed interpretation will have to await further excavation and contextual analysis, which will primarily focus on the complete exposure of Units F, J, R and E as well as Enclosure b and the outdoor areas Space II and IV. An expansion of the excavation area to the east and south will hopefully contribute to the understanding of internal circulation patterns and functional relations at the site.

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