Site E-96-1: The Complex Structures or Shrines

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INTRODUCTION

About 500 m south of Site E-75-8 there are around 30 clusters of unshaped or roughly shaped large rocks that, as a group, form a large ceremonial complex. Because they are partially covered by modern wind-blown sand, the first impression is that these big stones are bedrock outcrops. A closer inspection, however, revealed they were not bedrock, rather, they rest on several meters of playa and are well away from the nearest exposures of bedrock. The exact number of these features is unknown because they are partially buried in modern windblown sand and closely resemble outcrops of quartzitic sandstone. They can only be distinguished with certainty by excavation or drilling. We have completely excavated only two of these structures, tested a third, and drilled two others. None of the excavated or tested rock clusters in this area were bedrock; however, several other very similar features along the eastern margin of the playa basin were tested and turned out to be bedrock.

After their discovery, we thought these features marked elite graves, but excavation failed to disclose any traces of human remains. The features may have been monuments to elite individuals who died elsewhere during seasonal movements with the cattle herds, or perhaps they were shrines, or structures erected during some now unknown ceremony. While their function remains a mystery, it is clear that they represent significant investment in energy and resources. It is also obvious that to build these structures required a leadership with considerable management skills and control over a group of people for extended periods of time. This suggests an incipient social complexity that is unexpected for Saharan Late Neolithic groups. Because they involve both surface and subsurface architecture, we identify these as "Complex Structures or Shrines."

All of the known Complex Structures occur in two groups near the southwestern margin of Nabta Playa, where they are found either on the surface of a large flat remnant of silts or on a smaller remnant 300 m to the east. These silts were deposited during the final part of the El Nabta/Al Jerar Humid Interphase, and therefore the structures must have been built after 7100 bp (Schild and Wendorf, Chapters 2 and 3, this volume). How much later or over what interval of time is not well established.

The main cluster (Site E-96-1) is grouped in an area about 200 m long and 100 m wide (Figures 17.1 and 17.2), and the secondary cluster of five Complex Structures located on the playa remnant to the east occurs in an area about 70 m long and 30 m wide. Both groups have a general north-south alignment, and both are well away from any contemporary settlement or concentration of cultural debris.

Many of the stones in these Complex Structures are still standing upright and are slightly imbedded in the top of the playa silts. Many others have fallen over. In each cluster the stones are arranged in an oval, with an even larger stone, sometimes two or three, in the center of the ring. These rings, except for one large cluster with eight interlocking subclusters, are from 5 to 7 m long and from 4 to 6 m wide. The long axis of all of the clusters, and the large horizontal stones in their centers, are oriented slightly west of north-south.

A large scattered group of similar stones occurs at the northern and southern ends of the site. These may be stockpiles of unused blocks, or possibly they had once been similar clusters that were torn apart and scattered. None of these scattered clusters were tested.

Apparently the same general procedure was used to build all of these Complex Structures. We say apparently, because all of those we excavated, tested or drilled shared several similar features. The first step in their construction must have been to locate a tablerock buried under 2 to 4 m of playa clays and silts (Figure 17.3:3). Tablerocks are thick lenses of hard, quartzitic sandstone that remain when the surrounding softer sediment has been removed by erosion. Here, the tablerocks were probably formed during the initial deflation of the Nabta Basin, long before the deposition of the playa sediments. There are no surface indications of their presence, but an extensive field of similar tablerocks may be seen in the Cretaceous badlands.
beginning 700 m to the south. An acute observer might have noted that this area of tablerocks comes to the edge of the playa and might pass under the playa sediments.

How and why the builders of these Structures located the buried tablerocks is not known. They may have used probes or dug pits. Evidence for either method would be very difficult to identify today, because subsequent churning of the playa sediments obscures their presence. Thus, no pits were observed in the stratigraphic trenches dug beyond the megaliths. It is unlikely that the tablerocks were found accidentally during the excavation of wells, because this playa remnant is high and near the edge of the basin, an unlikely area for placing water wells. Whatever technique was used to find the tablerock, when it was located, a large and deep enough pit was dug to expose the entire circumference of the rock and a small part of the softer yellowish cemented sand below and around it. The pits that were dug to expose the tablerocks were up to 5 m in diameter at the base and 3.5 m or more deep. Because of the high clay content of the fill, the outlines of the pits were very difficult to see and follow during our excavations. Swelling and cracking from repeated wetting and drying produced well-developed vertisol phenomena that obscured the outlines of the pits except in the lowest part. The walls could only be clearly seen around and about a half meter above the level of the tablerock. We do not know if the upper pit walls were vertical, or if they flared outward near the top. Dug through heavy silts and clays, the pits required a major effort, although not significantly greater than that expended in excavating the larger water wells.

Once exposed, at least one of the tablerocks was extensively shaped (Structure A), but in the other excavated structure the tablerock was left as an irregular block modified only by removing two or three large flakes (Structure B). After the tablerock in Structure A was shaped or modified, the pit was then partially refilled, and a large, secondary stone weighing over three tons was carefully placed about 50 cm above the center of the tablerock. This secondary stone also was carefully shaped and smoothed on two sides, with a large, head-like projection at one end. After the secondary stone was set upright in the center of the pit, with the head oriented toward slightly west of north, it was held in position by two large slabs placed against the sculpture at the north end. The pit was then refilled to the level of the original surface using the dirt removed from the pit, together with occasional medium-sized rocks and slabs that were probably the debris from shaping the tablerock.

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Figure 17.1 — Site E-96-1, Map of Western Cluster of Complex Structures

(map by R. Schild and Ali Mazhar; drawing by M. Puszkarski)