

A team from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem excavates at Hilazon Tachtit cave in northern Israel. Last year, they discovered the 12,000-year-old remains of a female shaman, who was buried with an unusual collection of artifacts, including 50 tortoise shells.

The shells of 50 Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoises. Parts of wild boars, cows, leopards, gazelles, and stone martens. The wingtip of a golden eagle. A severed human foot. And a set of tools. What can this startling collection of artifacts found last year in a cliffside cave in northern Israel mean?

"I think this is the burial of a shaman," says Hebrew University of Jerusalem archaeologist Leore Grosman. "It's an interpretation, of course. They didn't leave a note telling me." For the past 13 years, Grosman has been poring over every artifact and speck of dirt recovered from Hilazon Tachtit cave. Now she is trying to understand the story surrounding the 12,000-year-old remains of a female shaman, the first ever discovered in the eastern Mediterranean.

Why did the Natufians spend so much time and energy burying this woman in an elaborately prepared and laboriously carved pit high in a cliff? Usually they buried their dead in simple graves next to their living areas. Grosman admits she is not sure, adding, "I don't have a time machine." But she says that at the time the shaman was buried, the Natufians were evolving from a nomadic foraging culture to a sedentary, agricultural lifestyle. In addition, Natufian culture was beginning to make way for Neolithic ones. The Natufians may have needed special locations in the landscape with sanctified or spiritual meaning, like this cave.

Grosman believes the site became a cemetery because the shaman was buried there. "She was the first," she says. "They found a place for her, then began to bury other people there. Her presence is what made the location sacred."

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Se: <http://www.archaeology.org/0903/abstracts/shaman.html>