

# Gobekli



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Humanity has always searched for god. The more people come together with that goal in common, the higher the collective energy. Mountains can sometimes be moved, and sometimes temples can appear seemingly out of nowhere, as if sprung from the very ground itself. The ongoing argument concerning the rise of civilization is centered almost wholly around the domestication of plants and animals. The prevailing view of V. Gordon Childe's principle " that social structure and organization were bent to the demands of technology. (Childe 1954: 23-4), is now directly challenged by what archaeologist Klaus Schmidt is determining from the excavation of Gobekli Tepe; " that far from causing sedentism, agriculture actually responded to it. " (James 2007: 784). The archaeological fieldwork surrounding the excavation site of Gobekli Tepe, the world's oldest man-made temple, brings forth no evidence of an organized, socioeconomic settlement that supported the labor necessary to construct such a grand ceremonial complex.

Even the secondary contextual evidence of the immediate area surrounding finds only the activity areas of small groups of hunter gatherers from that same time period. The discovery of Gobekli Tepe, dating back 12, 000, years is now the main counterpoint to the argument that complex, permanent settlements had to form first in order to support the construction of large scale cultural monuments. Six miles from the ancient city of Urfa, Gobekli Tepe, Turkish for hill with a navel, rises 1, 000 feet above the Urfa plain.

It is surrounded with vistas as far as the eye can see, the 360 degree panorama being comprised of the Taurus Mountains to the north, the Karadag Mountains to the east, the Harran plain to the south, the sightline

finally being broken only by the crags that hide the Euphrates river valley to the west. It lies at the northernmost tip of the Fertile Crescent, which is said to be the cradle of civilization. The entire site is spread over 22 acres of plateau, with the hill itself rising up from that 15 meters in height by roughly 300 meters in diameter (Author unknown).

The excavation site on this hill has to do with the actual temple complex itself, which is a series of circular or oval megalithic buildings 30 to 90 feet across. Out of the seven buildings that have been dated absolutely, only three have been excavated, totaling only an acre in area - less than 5% of the entire site. Geomagnetic surveys lead experts to believe there are 16 to 20 more such possible structures that spread over a 12 acre area. The buildings are formed at their outside perimeter by unworked stone walls about six feet high.

Immediately inside these walls are massive, evenly spaced, T-shaped stone pillars nine to ten feet high, weighing on average ten to twenty tons, which are thought to have been roof supports. On the interior of these pillars there exists another wall sporting a low bench which runs around the circumference, and looks inward to where there exists an even larger pair of stone monoliths; these central pylons average as much as 50 tons and run 16 to 17 feet high, this design being mirrored in each of the other excavated buildings surrounding.

Interestingly, the floors are of burnt lime or what is known today as terrazzo, a design element not seen again until ancient Rome several millennia in the future. Many of the columns are elaborately carved, mostly with animal motifs; however, food prey such as gazelles, red deer, wild boar and cattle

make up only a small portion of the relief carvings, with the bulk of the carvings depicting animals of a more frightening nature, such as spiders, scorpions, snakes, and vultures (Curry 2008: 56, 57, 60; Thomas 2007: 2; Scham 2008: 22-26; Symmes 2010: 46-48).

There are two markedly different levels to Gobekli Tepe, “ the older [deeper] structures belong to the pre-pottery Neolithic A period, which is designated as Natufian with a date range of 12, 000 to 9, 000 ya, [...] these structures are more elaborate, and include most of the T-shaped stones and animal carvings. [The newer, top level belongs to] a period known as the pre-pottery Neolithic B which as an age range of 9, 000 to 8, 000 ya. ” (Author unknown). What is most riveting however, is its age.

Using organic material embedded in the facade of its stone pylons, Gobekli Tepe’s lower levels have been carbon to as early as 12, 000 years ago, making them the earliest architectural forms ever discovered (German Archaeological Institute). This predates nearby sister site Nevali Cori by about 500 years (Author unknown), and the world’s first city Catalhoyuk by 1, 500 years (Symmes 2010: 48). The vast, more complex scale, as well as the marked artistry and sophistication above that of its cruder sister sites, makes the very existence of Gobekli Tepe practically an impossibility.

Ian Hodder, director of Stanford’s archaeological program states that Gobekli Tepe is “ unbelievably big and amazing, at a ridiculously early date; many people think it changes everything [that] all our theories are wrong. ” (Symmes 2010: 46 ). Regardless of how out of place it may be in both time and scope Gobekli Tepe does exist, and one of the primary questions that still lie unanswered pertains to what its exact purpose truly was. The gulf

that separates us from Gobekli Tepe's builders is almost unimaginable though I stood among the looming monoliths they didn't speak to me. They were utterly foreign, placed there by people who saw the world in a way I will never comprehend. " (Curry 2008: 60). That it is a communal meeting place for a large number of people there can be little doubt, along with the idea that not only is it the first monument ever built by human hands, but our species' first temple as well, its figurative navel marking the birthplace of organized societies yet to come.

The archaeological evidence points out in every way that this is not a domestic site but a religious one (Symmes 2010: 48). Like many other sacerdotal sites, Gobekli Tepe is situated up high on a barren plateau, made higher still by burying and then building on top of the preceding levels. There are no features such as hearths or middens (Curry 2008: 57), nor is there any evidence of any kind of settlements close by.

There is no water there and everything from tools to meals would have had to been brought up to the site from somewhere else (Curry 2008: 57; Thomas 2007: 22-26; Symmes 2010: 46-48). It is hard to think that anything less than religious fervor could have compelled people to hew huge blocks of stone and then transport them from quarries as much as a kilometer away (Scham 2008: 24). More definitively, what is the focal point that would spur small bands of hunter gatherers to congregate together in spiritual practice, and what were they making obeisance to?

As mentioned earlier the greater balance of the animals carved in bas relief are creatures with poisonous stingers and sharp claws, those that would cause fear and pose some sort of threat, the aggressive imagery maybe

being meant to deal with those uncontrollable predatory forces in nature; that to surround themselves with the objects they feared the most would perhaps inure them against the resultant psychological grip of fear.

This in turn would give them some feeling of power over their environment allowing them perhaps to take the next logical steps in the mastery of their environment, namely the corralling of animals and regulating the growth and yield of grains and legumes. This growing belief that they could at least to some degree tame their world perhaps lent itself to a belief that man may be created in god's image, as evidenced by some of the larger monoliths having been sculpted to show arms and shoulders along with finer features like elbows and jointed fingers (Symmes 2010: 47).

Symmes goes on to cite Glenn Schwartz, an archaeologist from Johns Hopkins University, who points out that it “ is the first time you see humans with that idea, that they resemble gods” (Ibid) The head of the Gobekli Tepe project is Klaus Schmidt of the German Archaeological Institute, and he takes that particular position even further. Schmidt was once part of the team at Nevali Cori led by the renowned Harald Hauptmann, where human remains had been found within the confines of the ritual centers there.

This differs from Gobekli Tepe in that Nevali Cori is a human habitation site, while clearly Gobekli Tepe is not. Still, Schmidt puts forth that Gobekli Tepe “ isn't just a temple; I think it is probably a funerary complex. I believe that ancient hunters brought the corpses of relatives here, and installed them in open niches by the [temple] stones. ” (Thomas 2007: 2). Even further, Schmidt firmly believes that below the floors of the earlier layers he will find

the burials of important people and that ancestor worship was an integral part of the temple's purpose (Scham 2008: 26).

As stated some of the larger pillars have carved body features, but the would be faces are left blank which points to “ the worship of ancestors or humanlike deities. ” (Symmes 2010: 47). The past is a chain of events, but like evolution our history is not necessarily linear. Sometimes the connections through time and also their meanings are unclear and may ever remain so; what is clear is that the start of every path begins with a location, a point of focus. The same is true of Gobekli Tepe-that an energy or power resided at its location long before any architectural development occurred. Schmidt's thesis is simple and bold: It was the urge to worship that brought mankind together in the very first urban conglomerations. ” Patrick Symmes further cites Schmidt who “ speculates that nomadic bands from hundreds of miles in every direction were already gathering here for rituals, feasting, and initiation rites before the first stones were cut. ” (Ibid). It is this devotion that is essential to the entire site; veneration of a high, barren place- a navel pointing to the womb of heaven, and a veneration of the lush valley surrounding, with possibly a veneration of ancestors as well.

Even though this last is a question that remains unanswered until actual remains are found, at the core of everything is that they did start cutting stones, massive ones, compounding a hundred fold the collective focus of energy already invested there. At the onset of the Neolithic Revolution the tools used to carve these monumental blocks of stone were made of stone themselves; the amount of manpower needed to fashion, transport, and then

erect these massive behemoths of stone could have only been the work of scores of people.

The “ estimate [is] that at least 500 people were required to hew the 10 to 50 ton stone pillars. ”(Scham 2008: 25). Nomads coming together over the course of several decades to maybe even a millennium. What spurred their desire to undertake such a thing, and further more, how was it harnessed and who directed their efforts? Harald Hauptmann of Germany’s Heidelberg University, and also Schmidt’s mentor “ speculates that an elite class of religious leaders supervised the work and later controlled the rituals that took place at the site. ”(Ibid).

Now we come to the core of the argument itself. The old view as posited by V. Gordon Childe over fifty years ago when he coined the term “ Neolithic Revolution”, is the belief that agriculture was the touchstone for everything, that “ the rise of agriculture required early farmers to stay near their crops and animals. ” (Balter 1998: 1442); and as a result settled down into sedentary communities that became more complex as time went by, and only then did they have the extra time, means, and organizational skills to build temples and to then maintain them.

The new view is the suggestion that “ the extensive, coordinated effort to build the monoliths literally laid the groundwork for the development of complex societies. ” (Curry 2008: 58). Klaus Schmidt adds to this, insisting “ the need to build and maintain this temple drove the builders to seek stable food sources, like grains and animals that could be domesticated. The temple begat the city. ” (Symmes 2010: 46). Before the temple was begun nomadic groups probably only came a couple of times a year, perhaps



coinciding with the solstices, however once construction started it is certain that they stayed for longer periods of time. First [...] came commitment to places and then the farming to let worshippers stay permanently. " Long before the time V. Gordon Childe had put forth his theory, French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, who had hypothesized that the organization of Greek and Roman cities were based on kinship and the cult of the hearth and ancestors, " argued [...] that rites moulded ' early society' [...] explaining how critical was the site of worship in connection with [its] respective social group. (James 2007: 785). The climate then was more akin to subtropical, and there would have been a multitude of foodstuffs such as wild grains and legumes, most notably that " The wild progenitors of all seven Neolithic founder crops (einkorn wheat, emmer wheat, barley, lentil, pea, bitter vetch, and chickpea) as well as flax are found together only in this core area of the Fertile Crescent. " (Lev-Yadun et al. 2000: 1602), and also nuts and berries, and a wide range of prey animals.

Joris Peters, an archaeozoologist from the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, " examined more than 100, 000 bones from Gobekli Tepe, [more than half being] gazelle bones plus [...] wild [...] boar, sheep, and red deer. " (Curry 2008: 58); certainly enough resources to sustain a large temporary population for short periods of time. However edenic it may have been, they must have sensed at some point that the natural resources were starting to dwindle, " Rising human populations and over-exploitation of wild foods could have driven people to take up farming. " (Pringle 1998: 1450).

I certainly agree that it would have been an easy and logical step to utilize and then cultivate wild plants and animals in order to feed a population of

laborers. To summarize, there are the physical aspects of Gobekli Tepe which while mysterious as to what the symbols found there could possibly mean, and may never be interpreted well enough to offer any sort of insight. “ Jacques Cauvin of the Institute of Eastern Prehistory in Jales, France, who argues that the Neolithic Revolution in agriculture was preceded by a “ cultural revolution” in religious practices and the use of symbolism. ; and even though the birth of agriculture couldn’t have been an easy or quick one, “ a mental transformation [must have taken place] that allowed them to see their environment differently and exploit it ‘ more selectively and more actively’. ” (Balter 1998: 1445). There is a growing body of evidence supporting the new theory that the building of monumental structures was the catalyst for the initial formation of sedentary settlements, which has been strengthened in particular by the excavation of Gobekli Tepe, which has been dated at 12, 000 years.

In conclusion, it would appear that Gobekli Tepe is exactly what it seems to be-a temple, erected for the sole purpose of veneration; and given its size to be used by large gatherings of people, the assemblage of which would far outnumber any small bands of hunter-gatherers that would casually happen by. Whether a veneration of ancestors which in time would lend itself to an echelon of gods in their own image, or an awe born out of fear of an environment that was not easily understood, illustrated by animals that pose a threat to their continued existence, that actual focus may never be discovered fully.

That the progression from the foraging of mobile populations to sedentary settlements concerned with plant and animal domestication was longer and

more circuitous than previously thought, still doesn't preclude the fact that in the grand scheme of things agriculture rose quickly and diversely in various locales. Still, domestication events had to start somewhere, and beyond that there needed to be solid, long term reasons for people to turn their minds towards what is initially a less instantly gratifying means of subsistence.

Given its age and the huge amount of labor needed (the earliest structures alone would have meant decades of work), Gobekli Tepe's construction is the only thing that would have turned people's minds inwards to devise ways to feed a growing congregation of builders gathered together in the same place to achieve a vitally important common goal, a goal so important as to keep people there for extended periods of time. Thus we have the idea of personal territory being born not out of agricultural property, but out of sacred lands that need to be cared for.