

A monumental discovery, Southern Turkey

WORDS David Stock

Göbekli Tepe (or 'Potbelly Hill' in English) is a Neolithic hilltop sanctuary located at the summit of a mountain ridge in the South Eastern Anatolia region of Turkey. The recently unearthed site was most probably erected by hunter-gatherers in the 10th millennium BC and is therefore the oldest known human-made religious structure in the world. This particular milestone is found on the northerly fringe of the Fertile Crescent, a comparatively moist and bountiful tract of land in principally arid or semi-arid Western Asia.

It was first noted in a survey conducted by Istanbul University and the University of Chicago in 1964. American and Turkish anthropologists traversed the region but wrongly hypothesised that the broken pieces of limestone lying on the ground were evidence of a Byzantine cemetery or military outpost. German archaeologist Professor Klaus Schmidt recognised the importance of Göbekli Tepe some three decades later whilst searching for a new excavation site in southern Turkey. He quickly surmised

that the scattered stone chips predated the Byzantine era of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and that he had fortuitously arrived at an historic place where scores or even hundreds of people had worked in millennia past. Schmidt was equally intrigued by the gently rounded top of the hill itself, which despite being only modest in height, appeared to him to be a deeply incongruous and most likely human-built addition to the Anatolian landscape. In collaboration with Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI) and the Şanlıurfa Museum, he set to work the following year.

Inches below the surface, the team, which initially consisted of Schmidt and 5 colleagues, struck an elaborately fashioned stone. Energised and heartened by this discovery, a growing band of German archaeologists, German and Turkish graduate students, and local labourers eventually unearthed a ring of standing pillars. Schmidt and his team have successfully excavated four of these stone circles (or round structures) and others were detected underground during a geomagnetic survey in 2003. Despite these

The excavated pillars feature a wide range of intricate carvings.



truly exceptional finds there are concerns that farming communities may have unknowingly destroyed much archaeological evidence in the decades preceding the dig. The hilltop had been under agricultural cultivation prior to Schmidt's arrival in Turkey, and successive generations of farm workers had unwittingly moved rocks or placed them in clearance piles. Some of the pillars had seemingly undergone numerous attempts at destruction after being regrettably mistaken for ordinary rocks by the local populace.

The four excavated structures each have a diameter of between 10 and 30 metres and are composed of enormous limestone pillars invariably shaped like giant spikes or capital T's. These bladelike monoliths are positioned an arm span or more apart, and are interconnected by benches and low stone walls. Two larger pillars were placed in the middle of each circle in order, perhaps, to help support a roof. Some of the floors were made of burnt lime terrazzo, others of bedrock, from which pedestals for the towering central pillars were carefully carved in high relief. The stone was quarried on the plateau (approximately a

quarter of a mile from where the structures were found) with the distinguishing shape of the megaliths incised into a limestone bed. Pressure applied with levers then broke the sedimentary rock along natural fracture lines and the pillars were freed. Unfinished pillars were left lying in situ while those extracted from the earth were hauled unstintingly towards the site. The limestone posts diverged in size with the tallest measuring 18 feet (five and a half metres) in height and weighing upwards of 16 tons. The manpower required for this endeavour must have been considerable given the absence of wheels and any discernible beasts of burden. It is widely believed that an elite class of religious leaders supervised this backbreaking labour and later controlled whatever ceremonies took place there.

A pillar was refined and shaped before being raised into position to form part of a round megalithic building. At this stage of history, nothing of comparable scale is known to have existed in the world. Prior to the unearthing of Göbekli Tepe such a complex was not thought possible for a community so ancient, and with such primitive

The site lay hidden since the 8th millennium BC .Photo:Teomancimit





When the largest 16 ton limestone columns were raised some 5,000 years before the construction of Stonehenge, no comparable structure is known to have existed. Photo: John West

quarrying tools. Much of the human race lived in small nomadic groups that survived by foraging for plants and hunting wild animals. Construction of the site would most probably have necessitated and consequently begat the coming together of more people in one place than had occurred before. The development and appearance of the site is all the more extraordinary when one considers that those who made it and worshipped there existed in a world without writing, metal or pottery. Astonishingly, the people at Göbekli Tepe became steadily worse at temple building, with the earliest rings remaining the biggest, as well as the most technically and artistically sophisticated. As time went by, the limestone megaliths became simpler and smaller, and were evidently raised with diminishing amounts of exactitude and care. The recurring building at the site suggests that the imposing pillars eventually lost their significance or appeal and were unceremoniously buried in order to make way for a newer, generally inferior set of rings.

Arguably the most captivating aspect of the excavated pillars is their tremendous decoration. They are covered in a menagerie of animal bas-reliefs, which depict lions, bulls,

boars, foxes, gazelles, donkeys, snakes and myriad other reptiles, insects, arachnids and birds, particularly vultures. The surrounding countryside was much more lush and capable of sustaining this variety of wildlife when the site was constructed. Chiselled vultures can also be seen in the iconography of Neolithic sites at Çatalhöyük and Jericho. A possible reason for their prominence was the early Neolithic practice (in Anatolia and the Near East) of deliberately leaving the deceased exposed in order to be consumed by vultures and other scavenging birds. The carved reliefs of animals and other enigmatic pictograms had to have been created by skilled artisans, whose unexpected appearance in the early Neolithic is telling evidence that hunter-gatherers were capable of a complex social structure. Parts of the hill were littered with ancient flint tools; such as knives, choppers, and projectile points. Few humanoid figures have surfaced at Göbekli Tepe, but they include the engraving of a naked woman (supposedly quite similar to Neolithic findings in North Africa) and a bas-relief of a decapitated corpse encircled by voracious birds. Some of the pillars picture human limbs, which suggest that they epitomise stylised human beings or anthropomorphic deities. The wider stone member atop the T-shaped monoliths is



Precious Göbekli Tepe archaeological finds preserved at Sanliurfa Museum. Photo: Klaus-Peter Simon

thought to symbolise the head, thus giving many of the pillars an explicitly humanlike identity.

By the beginning of the 8th millennium BC the megalithic structures of Göbekli Tepe had irrevocably lost their importance. With the advent of agriculture and animal husbandry, the site appears to have become unnecessary and rather anachronistic. It was backfilled for the last time approximately 10,000 years ago with the remaining enclosures concealed by 300 to 500 cubic metres of debris; which mostly consists of small limestone pieces and various stone tools and vessels. The skeletal remains of human beings (as well as animals) were also discovered by Schmidt and his team, although there are no noticeable signs of domestic habitation. The somewhat unusual decision to bury the site, as opposed to simply abandoning it, sheltered the limestone from the Turkish climate and preserved it for posterity. Göbekli Tepe towered over the surrounding plateau and its nomadic inhabitants for centuries before finally disappearing from view at least 5000 years before the construction of Stonehenge or the Great Pyramid of Giza. Since their discovery the limestone pillars of the disused sanctuary have posed more questions than can be presently answered. What is almost beyond doubt is that the contents of the hilltop will profoundly change our understanding of a crucial stage in the development of human societies.

It used to be thought that agriculture gave rise to towns, and later, to writing, art

and religion. Anthropologists have assumed that organised religion began as a viable way of lessening the tensions that arose inevitably when hunter-gatherers settled down, became farmers, and developed large societies. Villagers would be more likely to coexist harmoniously if they were all committed to the collective enterprise, and a shared set of beliefs. Though primitive religious practices had emerged tens of thousands years before, organised religion seemingly emerged when a common vision of a celestial order was required to unite such uncharacteristically large and potentially disparate groups of people. It could also have been used to justify the social hierarchy that customarily develops in bigger, multifaceted societies. Those who rose to prominence in newly established communities were seen as having a special connection with the gods. Villages united by a communal view of the world and their changing place within it, were destined to be more cohesive than embryonic clusters of discordant people. The formation of Göbekli Tepe by peripatetic wanderers in the 10th millennium BC suggests that organised religion may have preceded the rise of agriculture and other aspects of civilisation. Professor Schmidt believes that the temple was an early manifestation of our fledgling desire to master the natural world (rather than being merely a part of it) which brought about our gathering for sacred rituals in much greater numbers. In other words: "First came the temple, then the city." ⑤

Charles C. Mann, 'The Birth of Religion', National Geographic, vol. 219, no.6, pp. 34-59, June 2011.



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