

Section 3 – Settlement

Göbekli Tepe

Göbekli Tepe sits on top of a mountain ridge in the south-eastern Anatolia region of Turkey, a few kilometres north-west of the town of Şanlıurfa. It is a tell, an artificial hill, about 15 metres high and 300 metres in diameter. The site was first noted in 1963, but not properly identified. In 1994 Klaus Schmidt, who had been studying a nearby site at Nevalı Çori, investigated. He saw parallels between the initial finds at Göbekli Tepe and those he had been working on at Nevalı Çori. He quickly discovered monumental pillars, weighing up to sixteen tonnes, and realised that this was a find of huge importance.

Further investigation revealed that the site was first established during the tenth millennium BCE, and activity there continued until around 7500 BCE. No pottery has been found in any of the levels, and all are consistent with Epipalaeolithic or Neolithic technology. The site is culturally fascinating and significant.

The best-known and most impressive features are the T-shaped pillars made from massive blocks of limestone. These required a co-ordinated effort to quarry, move and set up. Schmidt estimates that as many as 500 people were required to remove the pillars from the quarries and haul them to the site, a distance of up to half a kilometre. The pillars weigh between ten and twenty tonnes, with one still in the quarry weighing fifty tonnes. The stones, which were set up in numerous circles, were buried and then new circles built on top, with the last level, once again, deliberately covered over in a short space of time. The backfill is comprised of earth, stone chips, weapon points, bones and refuse.

No human remains have been found to date, but Schmidt believes these will be found, perhaps in niches in the rock. On the other hand, given that burial was to become a practice of great symbolic importance, it may be that the stones themselves were being buried in some type of ritual.

Although large numbers of animal bones, mainly antelope, have been found at Göbekli Tepe, the nearest signs of human settlement are several kilometres away. The site appears to have been purely symbolic or religious; it had no permanent population, but many people gathered there. Schmidt believes it may have been a cult centre that attracted worshippers from as far as 160 kilometres away. Such a large amount of food implies that the people working to build

the site, and those who visited it, were being sustained by the efforts of others who continued to hunt, gather, prepare and cook food for them. Activities may have been seasonal, with the people coming together at certain times of the year to worship and carry out cult activities and celebrations, including the construction of the site itself. This level of organisation seems much higher than had previously been considered possible in hunter-gatherer culture at that time.

The stones are carved with many representations of animals. However, no acts of violence of any sort are depicted and there are no hunting scenes or images of prey animals. There are no pictures of warfare or even of armed men. The animals are all predators and not the antelopes, wild pigs and so on that the people hunted and whose butchered and cooked bones litter the site. This artwork is interesting, especially when we consider the examples of Lascaux and Chauvet, where hunting scenes are much in evidence.

It is possible that the stones, some of which have arms and legs and are anthropomorphic, represent clans. They may have had a funerary purpose, as totems for all the clan members who died and were not buried but were left to excarnate where they died, their remains being fed upon by the types of animals depicted on the stones. These totems were then buried. This explanation would suggest a very strong connection with the natural world, which is consistent with what we know of other hunter-gatherer cultures.

While the specific cult significance of the stones may never be known, the existence of this site tells us much about the people who made it. They were hunter-gatherers who were semi nomadic, returning to this site over and over, but not living on it. It may have been a focal point that held together a culture of semi-sedentary people who returned to it annually. The sheer size of the megaliths and the difficulties of quarrying and moving them indicate that the society was organised, yet there are no signs of social hierarchy, of differences in status or even of a priestly class.

Building Göbekli Tepe was an ongoing process that lasted two millennia. It was not a chance coming-together or an isolated event. The monument is the product of a sophisticated culture that was successful for thousands of years.

The patriarchy, with its organisational structure based on male status, is often considered essential to the development of civilisation. It has been argued that without this system of chiefs and workers, the workforces required to build monumental architecture could not be made effective. At Göbekli Tepe we see exactly the opposite: a culture with no sign of patriarchal control organising itself in such a way that it could efficiently quarry, transport, carve and erect massive megalithic structures, requiring a workforce of many hundreds.

Wherever the patriarchy has existed, it has proclaimed its presence in the art it left behind. The depiction of war and violence is a sure sign that the culture has become patriarchal. We also see

indicators of hierarchical status in wealth, habitation, diet and burial methods, the building of grand palaces and defensive works. There is none of this here, so we should be sceptical that the patriarchy was in operation and seek an alternative hypothesis. The people who built Göbekli Tepe collaborated like a workers' collective in order to do the work, not like an army of obedient workers directed by a hierarchy. There were no great chiefs or leaders, and everyone was equal.

By the time Göbekli Tepe was built, it is probable that people had been become semi-sedentary. Most likely each group had a small number of sites or camps that they moved among, depending on the seasons and the availability of food. The transition from semi-sedentary life, moving between caves or living in tents or similar shelters, to living in permanent, established homes was not so great a leap. The only requirements were permanent sources of food and water.