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Site Analysis of Göbekli Tepe.

Introduction

Göbekli Tepe is a site of circular stone enclosures situated on a limestone plateau in south-east Turkey. As one of the earliest monumental sites yet to have been discovered, Göbekli Tepe, a Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) site dating to the 10th and 9th millennium BC, is unparalleled to any other dating to this time. The site sits exactly in the boundaries of the Fertile Crescent, an area with suitable climate conditions to be able to start growing edible plants and thus begin the steady rise of agriculture, animal husbandry and therefore the need for knowledge of seasonal cycles for crop rotation or preparation (Watkins, 2009). The people who built this monumental site were hunter gatherers and had not as yet become sedentary agricultural communities (Dietrich et al, 2012: 35 ; Henley, 2018: 479). Scholars who are still investigating this unique place rely on theoretical approaches such as iconographic interpretation, repeated symbolism and scientific analysis when coming to understand if this space was used for religious or other purposes (Gell, 1998). The site currently consists of four circular enclosed areas (named A, B, C and D) dating to the PPNA layer III, and smaller rectangular enclosures (named E, G and H) which date to the later period of PPNB layer II (figure 1). There are depictions of wild animals, phallic symbolism and anthropomorphised figures carved into the stone pillars, which are a predominant aspect of the repeated architecture of the enclosures (Schmidt, 1998). Enclosures A, C and D seem to be 'thematic' bearing iconography of just one type of animal throughout; for example, snakes are predominant in Enclosure A and phallic lions dominate Enclosure H, while boars take centre focus in Enclosure C (Busacca, 2016: 325; Notroff, 2017:blog). By far the largest amount of iconography is situated in Enclosure D, the largest enclosure of the site (Busacca, 2016: 325; Haklay and Gopher, 2019: 346). This has led some scholars to suggest Göbekli Tepe is a 'temple' or 'sanctuary' intent on focusing attention for cultic activity (Schmidt, 1998, 2010, ; Dietrich and Notroff, 2015: 81). We need to remain critical when using modern-day words with modern-day associations when describing antiquity: it should be noted that when the term 'temple' or 'sanctuary' is applied to a space, it can be potentially reductive or lead us to view this site through the lens of contemporary religions.

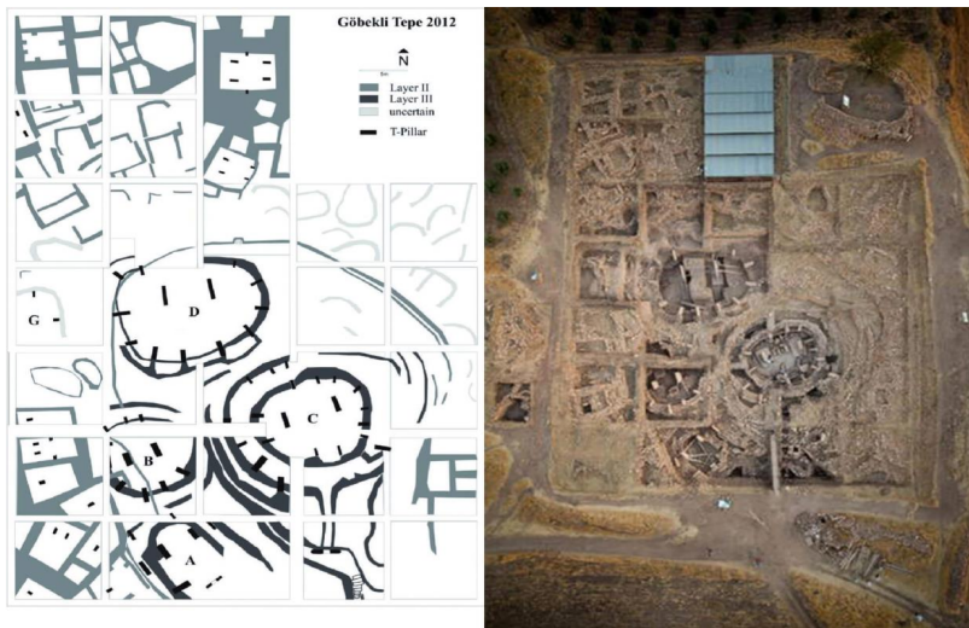


Figure 1 A drawn site map and aerial view of the main excavation area (South East Hollow), DAI, Göbekli Tepe Project (Modified image from Dietrich et al, 2014 and UNESCO)

Some aspects of the carved iconography look bone thin and starving, while the addition of a headless man carved onto Pillar 43 suggests acts were happening here which were unlike everyday activities. Unique modified human crania found here also points to a potential cult that focused on death and dying (Gresky, Haelm and Clare, 2017).

Göbekli Tepe was built in the Fertile Crescent during the Early Aceramic Neolithic period (10,200 – 8800 BC), during the start of the ‘Neolithic revolution’ (Watkins, 2009:622). Peoples of ‘pre-farming communities’ were experiencing a time of climate change and the steady rise of plant domestication (Lewis Williams, 2005: 31-33; Watkins, 2009: 624). Perhaps the need for a central gathering space was necessary for the changing perspectives of the PPN. A broader culture of a PPN social network is theorised and potentially, the emergence of social hierarchical structures (UNESCO, 2017: webpage; Milo, 2020; Schmidt, 1998: 5). It has been suggested that the “switch to domestication came about as a result of frequent ritual and construction activities”, possibly shamanistic activities held at the site (Lewis Williams, 2005: 33; Schmidt, 1998:5).

The same critique we hold for the term ‘temple’, we should apply to the term ‘shaman’; this term came from anthropologists studying peoples demonstrating cultural practices associated with authoritative elders, herbalists, celebrants and witch doctors of Siberia in the 15th century (Price, 2002: 3). Broadly speaking, ‘shamanism’ has come to mean

the “belief in spirits, and existence of other worlds, states of being or planes of consciousness”, while a shaman is the “mediator between one perception of the world and another” (Price, 2002: 6). To be able to place such terms onto the people of Göbekli Tepe might be reductive, or lead us to a false modernised version of what we believe might have taken place in this space. *good observation*

An aspect of the Göbekli Tepe site is that it is frequented with recurring ‘T-shaped’ pillars. Pillars like these have been found at settlement sites Nevalı Çori, Hamzan Tepe and Karahan Tepe - sites of sedentary PPN activity (Çeik, 2010: 257). Repeated used of pillars throughout sites of the Fertile Crescent, further suggests a broader culture of peoples who shared similar stories and social bonds. Many modern-days scholars have made anthropological comparisons due to the uniqueness of the site, likening structures to Nevalı Çori and South Western North American Kivas, as well as comparing those who made Göbekli Tepe to hunter gatherer cultural practices studied today (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, 2002: 73; Lewis-Williams, 2005: 31). These comparisons often make a presumed ‘human-to-animal linkage’ due to the stone iconography, ‘animistic ontologies and shamanism’ (Busacca, 2016: 313). *perhaps draw this out as something to critique*

Göbekli Tepe is a “1st degree archaeological conservation site”, and as of 2018 was added to the World Heritage List, giving it legal and scientific protective status (UNESCO, 2017). Its significance relating to tourism and conservation has led to the site now being covered with a large rooftop (Figure 2), which allows for funding of further excavations that are currently ongoing. As of yet, the insides of the limestone walls of Göbekli Tepe have not been examined. Considering that the peoples of contemporaneous sites such as Çatalhöyük buried their dead under floors and in the walls of their dwellings, there might be remains in the dry walls of Göbekli Tepe yet to be uncovered (Çamurcuoglu, 2015: 88).



Figure 2: The site of Göbekli Tepe, currently protected by UNESCO and World Heritage status. 2021 Image capture.

Initiation space

Due to the symbolism of wild animals, incorporation of male genitalia throughout the site, its elevated position in the natural surroundings and findings of hunting projectiles, I put forward that Göbekli Tepe was a site in which people were initiated in (Schmidt, 1998: 2-4). Initiation is a pattern repeated throughout cultures all over the globe and for thousands of years. This place was possibly a gendered space, but this is not to say it would have been restricted to either one gender or another; however, the incorporation of phallic iconography hints to the space being predominantly used by males.

Briefly summarised by Guthrie, “A common explanation of anthropomorphism is that it comforts us. However, much anthropomorphism is frightening, not comforting” (1993: Figure 5-6, 132-133). Initiation ceremonies for young people coming of age, or into a new group were often extremely challenging, sometimes painful, and certainly intimidating or alarming to the individual being initiated. It is not hard to imagine these rituals making an indelible memory on the psyche. This, however, is the entire social reason for holding initiation ceremonies, it is an extreme example of what one might have to face in adult life. The hardening of character would need to be utilised in a life-or-death situation, and in the context of PPN cultures, this would have had to factor in poisonous snakes and hungry wild predators. Humans are social creatures; we form social units. The groups of the PPN would have relied heavily on each other and would need to know who to rely on in times of

emergency. Those who had been in contact with the original 'trial', or danger beforehand, would more likely be to react in a way that could save someone's life. Campbell states the these rites are "thresholds of transformations" in which "the mind is radically cut away from the attitudes, attachments and life patterns of the stage being left behind" (1993: 10). These rites are usually accompanied with methods to alter the state of consciousness by way of ingesting psychotropics or dancing, through painful body modifications or with music. No one technique is indicative of another; however, usually some method is used in these rituals to symbolise vigorous transformation. Circumcision, painful trials and coming-of-age moral lessons, Eliade states, can be a "symbolic ritual of mystical death", a metaphorical 'killing' of the youth, to allow the adult to come forth (1964: 53). Henley reminds us that the Göbekli Tepe enclosure spaces were likely to have held much "educational and memorial aspects" in the space, in which 'social lessons' could take place, or where groups joined together for hunting and feasting (2018: 480-481).

If this space was used for initiation rites, the use of music is likely to have been incorporated. Some have suggested the pillars to be lithophones much like the Singing Stones of Preseli; Debertolis, Gulla and Savolainen (2017) claim that by tapping the central pillars a resonance "as powerful as a drum" is created. Low-level frequency has been recorded and they suggest it would have 'bounced' off one pillar to the other. The authors of this theory, however, admit themselves that this is preliminary research, and that the results need to be viewed as inconclusive as of yet. If further studies come to show that the two pillars were used for frequency and reverberation, I would further back up that the enclosures were used for different ceremonies with 'totemic' animal spirits residing in each one. Perhaps it is these central anthropomorphic figures which are an archetype of a young person, who is going through a transformative shamanic ritual, such as examples in the Trois-Frères Cave in France or South African Western Cape San Bushman cave paintings (Lewis Williams, 2002).

Pillar 43 seems to be depicting an anthropomorphised bird form accompanied by a headless man and scorpion. The bird is making a gesture of presenting a circle, and is looking at it with a focused gaze (Figure 3). Magali (2015), Schmidt (2010) and Dietrich (2016) have theorised that these central pillars could be a person or shaman in trance, performance or ritual and, in the context of Pillar 43, could be wearing a vulture mask or headdress. The broader PPN culture appears to have held a shared connection with snakes, death, wild animals and birds. Intentional de-fleshing and skull modification might indicate this site to be a place for sky burial or necrophilous practices (Gresky, Haelm and Clare, 2017). The inclusion of vulture iconography might suggest vultures were watchers of this limestone

plateau, with a shared significance for those who used Göbekli Tepe. A mortuary culture seems to have been an aspect of the wider culture of the PPN, as at sites such as Çayönü, Nevalı Çori and Catalhöyük other modified skulls have been found (Gresky, Haelm and Clare, 2017: 1).



Figure 3: Pillar 43, Enclosure D Vulture cult and the rising of Sirius?

Although some have theorised that many groups visited the site in totemic gathering of ‘clan meetings’ due to the different enclosures holding different carved iconography, I would disagree with this theory and suggest the presence of relational ontologies (Henley, 2018: 481). I propose that differing agency was held for the different animals depicted and specific ceremonies took place in each of the enclosures, with the peoples who visited the site holding shared stories regarding each of the different creatures. Spreading exchange networks between groups and perhaps meeting at places like Göbekli Tepe would help to encourage new partnerships, heritage and social structures.

Construction & planning

The T-pillars at Göbekli Tepe have been erected in circular structures for 'layer III', while the early, middle PPNB 'layer II' enclosures are more rectangular in shape. Enclosures B, C and D all date to the PPNA layer, and they have been erected on top of the natural bedrock shelf. Two central platforms protrude from this worked rock for two large central pillars to stand on (Dietrich et al 2012:35; Haklay and Gopher, 2019: 347). It is from the limestone rock present throughout the plateau that the T-pillars have been hewn, sourced from the western slope of the Göbekli plateau (Dietrich, 2016: blog). A natural strata allows for uniform blocks to be extracted with ease and thus creates a repeated symbolism of building material used throughout the site. Stone axes and wooden levers were utilised to extract the stone, and a smoothing agent such as pumice or sand was likely to have been used (Dietrich, 2016a: blog). A large number of people would have been required to build these enclosures, and there has been speculation on a need for a hierarchical, organised society to have been necessary to rally a group sufficient in numbers (Schmidt, 1998: 4). Some have theorised that to entice peoples to make monumental structures, a feast and provision of food would have encouraged group coordination (Watkins, 2009: Dietrich 2012b: 684). There have been discoveries of large stone troughs at the site; analysis and findings of calcium oxalate within suggests that beer was made and stored in these vessels (Dietrich, 2016b: webpage). This finding has led some scholars to believe that beer making was pre-emptive to bread making, and perhaps helped to encourage the domestication of grains for alcoholic beverages used within these ritual feasting contexts (Milo, 2020). It is an interesting notion to think that these feasting and drinking ceremonies may have helped encourage the rise of agricultural practices (Milo, 2020).

Enclosures B, C and D are in direct relation to each other, according to Haklay and Gopher, who showed that there was preplanning undertaken before the structures were erected (2019). The geometry of the central points of Enclosures of B, C and D align to an equilateral triangle, with Enclosure D (the largest and most filled with iconography) at the apex of the shape (Figure 4). Enclosure C has several concentric 'rings of walls and pillars' encircling it, a passageway and a U shaped porthole which marks an entrance (Dietrich et al, 2013: 31).

Enclosure D is the emphasised structure out of these three connected enclosures, the central pillars face south (figure 4) (Hakley and Gopher, 2019: 351). Magali (2015) suggests that these central pillars in Enclosure D are aligned to witness the rising of Sirius, due south,

if one was standing between the central pillars here. He argues that during the time of Göbekli Tepe's construction, Sirius was becoming 'brighter and brighter' in the sky. The new visibility of Sirius may have been viewed as a 'birthing' of a 'new star', a phenomenon which is possibly depicted on Pillar 43 (Figure 3) (Magli, 2019: 341).



Figure 4 Geometric planning of the main three circular enclosures.

Pillar 10 in Enclosure B, and Pillar 18 in Enclosure D, I would suggest, are shamanistic style celebrants or an archetypal version of the initiates visiting the site. The fur pelt carved onto both has often been associated with ritual celebrants such as shaman or witch doctors, this 'second skin' tool aids transformation in ritual ceremony comparative to the ritual of shamanic, animistic ceremonies such as trance dance, in which initiates change themselves into a human – animal hybrid, taking on a view of the world from the perspective of that creature (Harner, 1990; Lewis Williams, 2002: Figure: 9, 117).

Due to the scale of the enclosures and the focus attention centrality of these pillars, it has been suggested by McBride (2014: 9) that these enclosures were used for performance while "those around the perimeter watched or listened". In the centre of the enclosures stands two of the T-shaped pillars on top of raised platforms, while around the perimeter other

pillars are intermittently placed. In between each pillar there is a 'niche and bench' pattern attached to the walls of the circle (Dietrich, Notroff and Schmidt, 2013: 6). McBride (2014:5) considers this to be part of intentional planning to mark a distinctive difference between domestic and ceremonial space. The interior allows for participants to view a ritual being held within the centre (2014: 5). I would further this suggestion of 'audience/speaker activity' by suggesting one notch per person, allowing ample space to lie down and sleep (McBride, 2014: 9). Some comparative examples I put forward for this theory are the ancient Egyptian 'dreaming temples' and Greek Asklepios complex, as shown in Figure 5: please note the familiar T-shaped pillar in the back ground and inclusion of the snake in this carved wall relief, dating to 380 - 370 BC.



Figure 5 "A Greek Asklepios 'sleeping temple' – "In the foreground a young man is being treated by a physician, perhaps in a dream: in the background, an image of the innermost sanctuary where the chthonic counterpart, the sanctuary snake visits and licks the sleeping patient. Stone relief, ca. 380 - 370 BC." (Photographed from source: Taschen, Book of Symbols, p.196)

In the archaeological record there are finds of feasting debris which suggests that social activities were happening at Göbekli Tepe (Dietrich et al, 2012b: 675). New plants and new species of animals might have been appearing in nature, responding to the warming climate. An interesting aspect of the builders of Göbekli Tepe is that they were experiencing the slow rise of plant and animal domestication *during* the years in which this site was built. Peoples

perspectives or ‘world views’ likely developed along with the climate and the new demands of their environments. Public rituals are communicative; they follow a pattern and the contents of those patterns are formalised. Many formalised rituals communicate through intangible heritage such as song or dance, with symbolic gesture and language not used in everyday actions. These rituals become learned, memorised and instilled into the next generation (Bradley, 1998: 89, Connerton, 1989). Connerton (1989) writes about ontological perception through an embodied experience of incorporating and inscribing symbolic practice. Inscribing practice (which humans require to store and hold information) and the longevity of gesture allows for the memories of groups to be sustained. Did the message of the rituals held at Göbekli Tepe cause an uprising and give reason for the site to be covered on purpose? If this is the case, it is interesting to note that no iconoclasm or defacing of iconography has occurred - the only hint at something of this manner is a graffiti etching of a female form in menstruation found in the later layer II. If this site was used for male-centric initiation rites, did someone travel to Göbekli Tepe to include the female “initiation, coming of age ceremony” of menstruation in defiance of the acts being performed here? (Lincoln, 1987: online).

A high up place

The elevation of Göbekli Tepe is 785 meters above sea-level, and it is the highest vantage point in the region (Çelik, 2011:241). It could be said that by travelling to a high peak in the landscape and gaining a larger perspective of the land creates an emotion of boundlessness in the psyche: you are enveloped in the greater sense of the landscape. One can view specific places of importance from a far distance, perhaps seeing these places from a site can allow for a sense of ‘distributed personhood’ (Knappett, 2006: 246). By gaining the high vantage point, groups could have scouted and tracked a greater amount of pastoral game. Sympathetic hunting magic has been suggested to be present in the images of Neolithic French caves (Lewis Williams, 2002: 48). Did those who used the Göbekli Tepe site come here before hunting expeditions? To empower increase adrenaline to fuel the hunting mission with extra energy and fervour? Busacca furthers this idea that the images are the intermediaries between the animal and human relationship. These animals could be viewed as protective deities with ferocious attributes, but perhaps assimilating with a deified snake or lion could help to defend a person from these dangers.

Perhaps the rituals being held at Göbekli Tepe were more of a ‘calling back’ of these creatures. If the climate was in flux, behaviours would have been adapting and perhaps this site of Göbekli Tepe was a place for people to call back nature into being. If Guthrie’s new theory of religion is accurate, in which we humanise the world, it appears to us that we are the ones changing the environment, and possibly we feel we must maintain the order of the societal structures in our cultures (Parker Pearson et al 2011; Taylor, 2009). This can be compared to sun ceremonies such as ritual feasts held at Durrington Walls, U.K. during midwinter and pilgrimage to the monumental site of Stonehenge. The mid-winter ritual was a large celebration to metaphorically ‘call back’ the sun. Furthermore, I would compare this to the theory of Bron Taylor’s Dark Green Religion (2009) in which, at the time of writing, a global movement of people have grouped together in a cohesive effort to stop mass pollution and destruction of the planet in a way to ‘call back’ a healthier environment.

However, if “Durrington Walls was a place of inhabitation and feasting, but Stonehenge was not”, when comparing Göbekli Tepe to Stonehenge, Göbekli Tepe was the place for feasting *and* dwelling when in use (Parker Pearson et al., 2015: 2). Göbekli Tepe does not have the ‘feasting space’ and ‘camp site/sleeping space’ separated, therefore I would put forward that the enclosures were sacred *and* profane, a place where a group could perform, feast and initiate, at different times of the year, throughout different seasonal and celestial cycles. Although I disagree with Banning’s statement that Göbekli Tepe could be an “undocumented form of Early Neolithic household”, I do agree with him in his suggestion that this place was a site with blurred sacred and profane associations (Banning, 2011: 639).

Conclusion

It is challenging to define what Göbekli Tepe was used for and why it came to be eventually backfilled and concealed due to the large expanse of time distancing us from the culture of the PPN. Can we really say for sure that Göbekli Tepe was a space for religious purposes or as a temple? As this site is unique and unparalleled to any sites made during the 10th millennium BC, holding special iconography interior design and a high-up vantage point, I would suggest that this space is an initiation place for coming-of-age ritual ceremonies, for social interaction, enjoyment and special times of the year or for teaching younger generations (probably men) how to deal with serious, potentially life-threatening phenomena. The high vantage point could have been important, especially a view to the south and the rising of Sirius, to which the central and largest ‘attention-focusing’ pillars are aligned to

(Hakley and Gopher, 2019). I am inclined to agree with Busacca (2016), who suggests that Göbekli Tepe was a “place of encounter” where people made rituals that created relational ontologies of natural phenomena. These rituals allowed for a person to become equivalent with an ‘essence’ of whichever phenomena was depicted in the space. If the animals were simply being placed here as ‘art for art’s sake’, one would expect to see a greater inclusion of floral motifs or more abstract patterns (Lewis Williams, 2002: 42). With the thematic animal iconography being placed in each enclosure, I would say that PPNA peoples came here to relate to each different animal in the different spaces, and as the site was covered over during sometime in the PPNB, the space perhaps fell out of favour in line with new, changing perceptions in the Neolithic revolution.

Those who built Göbekli were in a continuous generational line of builders, living in an area “a radius of 200 km around the site”; the newly discovered Karahan Tepe, some 23 miles away from Göbekli, could give us new insights on where the builders and frequenters lived (Banning, 2011: 644; Çelik, 2011). In addition, a new snake carving has been uncovered at Karahan as well as stones with the T-shape, continuing the broadening scope of the PPN culture. Of course there could be a potential for far more layers to be found at Göbekli Tepe and the walls of the two layers that have been uncovered still not been fully examined. Considering dead ancestors were buried in walls and under houses at contemporaneous PPN sites, perhaps further clues to ritual, hierarchy and altered states of perception can still be answered. The constantly changing paradigms of the archaeological field means that new discoveries are likely to change our perspective on the site and the peoples who used it. What is exciting is the chance for archaeologists and anthropologists to discover a new ‘pantheon’ of Neolithic recurring figures and forms, with the field ever increasing in theoretical knowledge and material analysis.

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FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

74/100

Instructor

This is a very well researched and well written piece of work. You have really engaged with the site and present it very clearly - supported with a good use of images. and a thorough reading of the literature. Likewise you have interwoven the theory throughout your discussion and used this very well to support your arguments and ideas.

Your take on GT is very original and you have made your case persuasively. I enjoyed reading this - well done!

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

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Text Comment. good observation

Text Comment. perhaps draw this out as something to critique

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Comment 3

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