

# the temple of **EBIDIN**



**the truth behind the mythic landscape of  
gobekli tepe**

by *Filip Coppens*

**F**ive millennia separate us from the birth of ancient Egypt around 3100 BC. Add another five millennia and we are in 8100 BC, coincidentally the start of the Age of Cancer. Add another millennium and a half, and we have the date when Göbekli Tepe, in the highlands of Turkey near the Iraqi and Syrian borders, was constructed.

Archaeologically categorized as a site of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (c. 9600–7300 BC), the world's oldest temple sits in the early part of that era and so far has been carbon-dated to 9500 BC. It is the time-frame when Plato's Atlantis civilization is said to have disappeared. And it was built an incredible 5000 years before the rise of what many consider to be the "oldest civilization", Sumer, not too

far south of Göbekli Tepe as one goes down the River Euphrates and leaves the highlands of the Taurus Mountains in Turkey.

Göbekli Tepe is an incredible site. David Lewis-Williams, Professor of Archaeology at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, says that “Göbekli Tepe is the most important archaeological site in the world”. It is a small hill on the horizon, 15 kilometres northwest of the town of Şanlıurfa, more commonly known as Urfa – which has been linked with the biblical Abraham (some claim that Urfa was the town of Ur mentioned in the Bible) and which once hosted the Holy Mandylin, linked with Christ’s Passion. Once also known as Edessa, Urfa is on the edge of the rainy area of the Taurus Mountains, source of the river that runs through the town and joins the Euphrates. Urfa was (and still is) an oasis, which could explain why Göbekli Tepe was built nearby. A life-sized statue of limestone that was found in Urfa, at the pond known as Balıklı Göl, has been carbon-dated to 10,000–9000 BC, making it the earliest-known stone sculpture ever found. Its eyes are made of obsidian.

An old Kurdish shepherd, Şavak Yıldız, discovered the true nature of Göbekli Tepe in October 1994 when, after spotting something, he brushed away the dust to expose a large oblong-shaped stone. A survey of the site had been carried out by American archaeologist Peter Benedict in 1963, but he identified the area as a Byzantine cemetery. When German archaeologist Harald Hauptmann and Adnan Misir and Eyüp Bucak of the Museum of Urfa began excavations in 1995, they soon learned that the site was so much more.

Göbekli Tepe is a series of mainly circular and oval-shaped structures set in the slope of a hill, known as Göbekli Tepe Ziyaret. “Ziyaret” means “visit”, but this is often left out of the name. And though some translate “Göbekli Tepe” as “Navel of the World” and “Gobek” does mean “navel” or “belly” and “Tepe” means “hill”, the most correct translation of the site’s name should be “bulged-out hill”.

The more sensationalist media have made attempts to link Göbekli Tepe with the biblical Garden of Eden. Göbekli Tepe is indeed old,

but it is not unique; nor was it a garden. However, over the past 50 years the time-frame for the beginning of civilization has been gently pushed back from the rise of the Sumerian civilization to the construction of Göbekli Tepe. Alas, it has been a voyage that has not received the attention it should have had.

### PUSHING BACK THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION

The discovery of the biblical town of Jericho and its stone walls, dated to approximately 8000 BC, was the first to push back the date of the birth of ‘civilization’. ‘Ain Ghazal is often seen as a sister site of Jericho and, with its 15-hectare area, is the largest Neolithic site in the Middle East and four times as big as Jericho. American Gary O. Rollefson, its principal archaeologist, was able to date the town to 7250 BC, and there is evidence of agriculture in the area dating back to c. 6000 BC – later than the establishment of the town itself. In its heyday, 2000 people lived at ‘Ain Ghazal. However, by 5000 BC the town was completely deserted. Thirty statues have been found there, measuring between 35 and 90 centimetres; they are human in appearance but may represent deities or the spirits of ancestors.

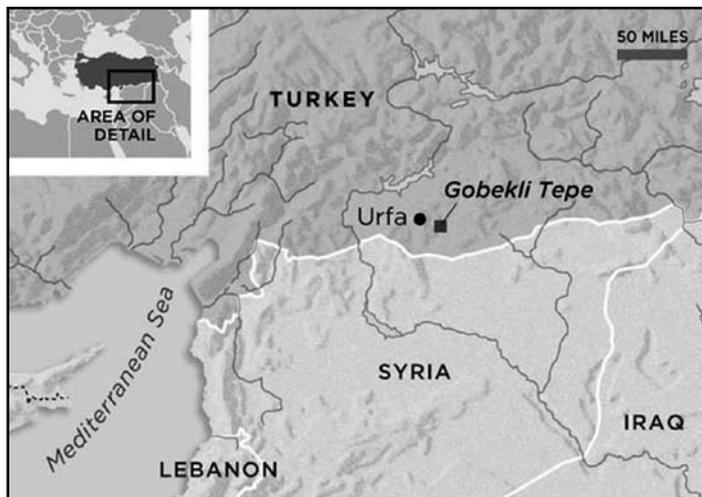
Jericho’s discovery added weight to the argument that the Bible is history, not myth. But when it was next learned that there are even older sites than Jericho, “unfortunately” not located in Palestine but further north in Anatolia, southeast Turkey, media interest in these new discoveries seemed to wane.

The most famous of these sites is Çatal Höyük. It was discovered in 1958 by British archaeologist James Mellaart, who began excavations in 1961 and eventually dated the site to 7500–5700 BC. It is the largest and best-preserved Neolithic site found to date. Mellaart described it as “a Neolithic Rome”, and it is indeed worthy of the name ‘town’. Its constructions show clear signs that its inhabitants possessed a religion – labeled by some as a Mother Goddess cult,

although this theory has been the subject of much controversy. What is known is that the dead were buried beneath the floors of the buildings, and that several of these structures contain depictions of bulls. Some people have gone so far as to suggest that there may be a common origin between Çatal Höyük and the Minoan civilization on Crete, despite the fact that 3000 years separate the two.

Çatal Höyük was the first of several discoveries to slowly unveil the Turkish region's ancient history. Göbekli Tepe is but one of several extremely old sites and is the oldest discovered so far. However, the existence of these sites has only been reported within the specialised press, although each site has a 'wow factor'.

The site of Çayönü, located around 96 kilometres from Göbekli Tepe, conforms to a design that is known as a "grill plan", as it looks like a grill. This reveals that careful planning went into its construction. Americans Linda and Robert Braidwood, together with Turkish archaeologist Halet Çambel, began to excavate Çayönü in 1964 and found that the floors of the buildings were made of terrazzo (burnt crushed lime and clay), even though at the time of the discovery it was thought that this had first been used by the Romans. The site also revealed the use of metals and the earliest evidence of



the smelting of copper, though some nevertheless argue that the copper was originally cold-hammered rather than smelted. The use of copper should not come as a total surprise, as the site is within range of copper ore deposits (as well as obsidian) at Ergani in nearby Diyarbakır Province. And all of this in a site dated to 7500–6600 BC. Çayönü is often seen as the site that began the epoch that would culminate in Çatal Höyük.

Çayönü offered evidence of the first farmyard pigs, but it also revealed a hoard of human skulls, one found under an altar-like slab and stained with human blood. Some have concluded that this is an indication of human sacrifice, while others have been unwilling to go that far based on a single type of artefact. Other archaeological evidence suggests that some people were killed in huge death pits, while children were buried alive in jars or roasted in large bronze bowls. Çayönü is therefore civilization, but perhaps not as we like to know it.

Another important site is Nevalı Çori, in Hilvan Province between Diyarbakır and Şanlıurfa. Here, Harald Hauptmann began excavations in 1979 and was able to uncover large limestone statues. In 1991, the site was submerged with the construction of Lake Atatürk Dam. It shares many parallels with Göbekli Tepe and is dated to 8400–8000 BC. All the artefacts retrieved are now in museums, including a life-sized egg-like head with crude ears and a carved ponytail, found in a niche at the centre of a north-western wall. Interestingly, the ponytail is actually a curling serpent that ends in a mushroom-like cap. Whatever being the figure is meant to represent, German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt believes it was worshipped as a deity.

Nevalı Çori set the stage for Göbekli Tepe: shortly after its disappearance under the waters, Göbekli Tepe emerged from the sands. Many people highlight the T-shaped pillars of Göbekli Tepe as the 'signature' of the site. However, such T-shaped pillars were also found in Nevalı Çori. Site-wise, Nevalı Çori is more square

than circular in design, although a square precinct has been found at Göbekli Tepe, too. Although there are several parallels between the two sites, Nevalı Çori's pillars are nevertheless smaller and its shrine is located inside a village.

### THE GÖBEKLI TEPE SITE REVEALED

In comparison, the site of Göbekli Tepe is small. British author Andrew Collins has compared its size to that of “three tennis courts”. Its principal excavators are Klaus Schmidt and Harald Hauptmann of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul. All of the complexes in Göbekli Tepe that they have unearthed so far are typified by structures containing T-pillars.

These pillars were used as “drawing boards” and many depict animals, with an apparent preference for boars, foxes, reptiles, lions, crocodiles and birds, as well as insects and spiders. Most of these were carved out of the flat surfaces of the pillars. However, some are three-dimensional sculptures, including one find, made during the 2006 excavation season, of a reptilian creature descending on the side of a T-pillar, demonstrating that whoever created this had mastered the art of stone carving – on a par with much of what we would see thousands of years later in Sumer and Egypt.

So far, four circular/ovalshaped complexes have been excavated. The walls are made of unworked dry stone and the floors of terrazzo. The interior of the walls usually have several T-pillars set along them in a radiating pattern, the depth of the pillar normally against or near the wall so that the two main surfaces of the pillar could be carved and seen by whomever was inside the complex. A low bench runs along the entire exterior wall of each complex.

The structures are situated on the southern slope of the hill, orientated roughly north–south with their entrances to the south. All the T-pillars were excavated from a stone quarry on the lower



Image credit: Gevork Nazaryan

southwestern slope of the hill. One pillar remains *in situ* in the quarry; it is seven metres long and three metres wide, and if fully excavated would have weighed around 50 tonnes, underlining that building with stones that weigh tonnes did not begin in Egypt or in England with Stonehenge.

Complex A, the first circular structure to be excavated, is nicknamed “the snake column building” because depictions of the snake somewhat dominate the carvings on the T-pillars. One is of a ‘net’ containing snakes. Another pillar, however, depicts a triad of bull, fox and crane, positioned one above the other. Some pillars only feature a bull, others only a fox, and so on.

Complex B measures nine metres in length when measured from east to west, and 10 to 15 metres north to south (part of it is still to be excavated). It is nevertheless the only complex dug to floor level, revealing the terrazzo floor surface. Two central pillars have a large fox depicted on them. One central pillar, no. 9, is 3.4 m high; pillar no. 10 is 3.6 m high; their weights are 7.1 and 7.2 tonnes respectively. The complex was clearly built to ‘house’ these monolithic pillars, which prove how well-versed our ancestors were in working with

gigantic stones; not merely in quarrying them but in shaping and decorating them as well. Archaeologists believe that 200 T-pillars originally stood at Göbekli Tepe. If each weighed ‘only’ five tonnes, it would still mean that 1,000 tonnes of pillars were excavated and decorated, and it highlights the importance of the site and the effort that went into creating it.

Complex C is nicknamed “the circle of the boar”, as it depicts various wild pigs. There remain nine pillars around the wall, but several were removed at some point in the past. One pillar shows a net of birds. As later cultures are known to have caught migratory cranes in nets, could this be a custom that was practised much earlier than assumed? Complex C is also of interest because a U-shaped stone has been found there which is deemed to have been the access stone. This stone has a central passage 70 centimetres wide, and one side of the U is topped with a depiction of a boar; the other side unfortunately is missing. Again, the U shape and the boar underline the craftsmen’s technical expertise in carving, which is shown even more so on pillar no. 27, featuring the earlier-mentioned three-dimensional reptilian creature. This intricate sculpture could be regarded as being on a par with Michelangelo’s statue of David.

Complex D is nicknamed “the Stone Age zoo”. Pillar no. 43 has scorpions, and some pillars are indeed so profusely decorated with animals – much more intensively than in the other complexes – that the description is quite apt. Once again, there are two central pillars (nos 18 and 31), though other pillars reveal symbols, like one in the shape of the letter H as well as one with an H turned 90 degrees. The site has revealed other symbols, specifically a cross, a resting half-moon and horizontal bars – evidence that the origin of writing is likely to be much older than is currently assumed. Pillar no. 33 is the ‘star’ of the complex. Schmidt states that the shapes on this pillar come close to the Egyptian hieroglyphs, hence he posits the existence of a pictographic language in the 10th millennium BC.

Combined, these four complexes – and others, still unexcavated – are a series of ovals and resemble the layout of the oval-shaped Stone Age complexes found on Malta. This is all the more remarkable as Malta’s oval shapes were considered unique, though some of the megaliths on Sardinia also display some oval-like tendencies but not as profoundly as at Göbekli Tepe.

A ‘rock temple’ lower down on the slope is equally oval in shape and has an opening to the “burial chamber”. Whereas at other sites these openings are so narrow that a human could not navigate to the interior, here it is wide enough to enter. Elsewhere on the site, on the northern slope of the hill, there is a rectangular complex named “the lion column building”. Its four pillars have depictions of leonine creatures, which could also be tigers or leopards. One pillar has a 30-cm-high graffito of a squatting woman who appears to be giving birth.

#### SPECULATION ON GÖBEKLI TEPE

Excavations at Göbekli Tepe are still ongoing; only a quarter of the suspected 200 T-pillars have been discovered so far, and not all the structures have been unearthed. In short, further surprises may be in store. It is therefore early days to draw major conclusions, but what could it all mean? The site definitely demonstrates that things which we thought were much more recent are far older – and all present in one site, sitting in a region which shows that a civilization worthy of that name existed there in the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, thousands of years before anyone would have dared to guess until recently.

Klaus Schmidt has labelled Göbekli Tepe “the first temple” and “a sanctuary of the Stone Age hunter”. He sees the site as part of a death cult, not specifically linked with a sedentary group but a type of central sanctuary for several of the tribes living in the region. The carved animals are believed to have been there to protect the dead. At

Çayönü, as previously described, one structure has a cellar that was found to contain human skulls and bones. So far, though, Göbekli Tepe has no evidence of habitation and therefore appears to have been purely a religious centre.

Once again, it appears that, just as the ancient Egyptians did, the civilization that constructed Göbekli Tepe had far greater regard for their religious buildings than for any structures of a practical or more materialistic nature. Still, with only Complex B excavated to floor level, no tombs or graves have been found to date.

Some have voiced criticism as to whether hunter-gatherers could have created such a structure as Göbekli Tepe. The many flint arrowheads (and the lack of construction tools) found around the site would seem to support this criticism, and one could even see these artefacts as part of sacred hunts rather than as part of the daily activities to put food on the table – if indeed tables even existed then.

Schmidt maintains that the hunter-gatherers convened at the site at certain times of the year. Whether these meetings were determined by solar or lunar cycles is anyone's guess, but it is nevertheless an interesting question to ponder. Equally, one could logically conclude that those who constructed the site lived there and were a dedicated resource supported by others who sustained them with dietary and housing needs. Archaeologists have estimated that up to 500 persons would have been required to extract the 10- to 20-tonne pillars and move them from the quarry to their destination, a distance ranging from 100 to 500 metres. However, Schmidt actually believes that maintaining the community of builders was the real reason behind why our ancestors 'invented' agriculture: they began to cultivate the wild grasses on the hills to sustain this sedentary population. In short, he believes that "religion motivated people to take up farming".

As well as appearing to have ritual significance, Göbekli Tepe, with its large and exquisitely decorated stone blocks, reveals that its creators had an extraordinary ability and familiarity with stone masonry and carving. That our ancestors in 10,000 BC were so skilled

is an archaeological discovery that is wiping out long-cherished beliefs about the origin of civilization.

As for the carvings, why were certain animals chosen? Why do the depictions seem to have no clear or apparent organisation but appear to be a rather random collection? Truth is, we don't know. In later civilizations, all of these animals were given divine attributes. Some cultures chose to depict snakes because these animals shed their skin, which they saw as a symbol of rebirth. Others opted for the same animal for different reasons. So far, there is no way of knowing what beliefs the creators and users of Göbekli Tepe held.

Some observers have pointed out that some of the cranes are depicted with human-like knees and have suggested that a form of shamanism was practised inside this temple. Sister sites have revealed sculptures of a mixture of animal and human, specifically that of the body of a bird with a human head. As it happened, thousands of years later the ancient Egyptians used this symbol as a hieroglyph to depict the *ba*, the human soul freed from the body at death or during shamanic flight.

Andrew Collins has specifically underlined the shamanic potential of these sites in modern-day Turkey. The image of the previously mentioned naked woman depicts her hair in the shape of a hemispherical mushroom cap. The side of one pillar at Göbekli Tepe features a series of serpents with mushroom-shaped heads, four winding their way downwards and a fifth one climbing up to meet them, while the other side shows several interwoven serpents wearing mushroom-like caps, eight emerging at the top and nine at the bottom. Is this evidence of a ritual involving hallucinogenic mushrooms or similar mind-altering substances?

The bones of vultures have been found at Nevalı Çori, Göbekli Tepe and Jerf el-Ahmar (in Syria). A communal cave site, Shanidar, in the Upper Zagros Mountains of northern Iraq, contained a series of severed birds' wings covered with red ochre. The remains have been dated to c. 8870 BC. The wings are believed to have been used

in some ceremony, but precisely in what manner remains unknown. However, it is known that, in the distant past, the people of this region placed the bodies of the dead on high constructions and let vultures eat the flesh of the dead. Depictions of such a Neolithic excarnation tower have been found on a mural in Çatal Höyük. Interestingly, human bones have recently been found in the soil that once filled the niches behind the megaliths at Göbekli Tepe. Schmidt argues that "...the ancient hunters brought the corpses of relatives here, and installed them in the open niches by the stones. The corpses were then excarnated." Not just vultures but wild animals seem to have taken part in this ritual. This may explain why so many animals are depicted on the T-pillars: perhaps the people who constructed these sites felt that 'something' of the dead lived on in these animals.

### CRADLES OF CIVILIZATION

What is known is that Göbekli Tepe and its sister sites have pushed back the age of monolithic building much further in time. Previously, we looked to the likes of Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids, but now we find that our ancestors were hauling massive stones to build their constructions around 12,000 years ago. Even if a structure like the Sphinx were suddenly found to be 10,000 years old, the immediate reaction might now perhaps be: "So what? It is not that unique." Furthermore, if the dates for some of these sites in Turkey pre-date the assumed time-frame for such events as the disappearance of Atlantis or the Great Flood, it means that these ancient ancestors cannot be neatly placed as "survivors from a deluge".

Our ancient history has grown much more interesting and complex. The cultures that followed the establishment of Göbekli Tepe had domesticated pigs, sheep, cattle and goats and cultivated wheat species such as einkorn. Indeed, recent analysis has shown that the first cultivation of domesticated wheat occurred at Karacadağ,

a mountain 32 kilometres from Göbekli Tepe. Other domesticated cereals such as rye and oats also originated here. According to Schmidt, this adventure began c. 8000 BC.

It is easy and tempting to label this region as 'the cradle of civilization', but the fact of the matter is that it has already been proven that corn (maize) was engineered in Mexico at the same time, only underlining how the frontiers of 'civilization' are being pushed back on both continents. In fact, there is evidence of Barbary sheep being cultivated by our ancestors in North Africa as early as 18,000 BC. Furthermore, several grains of emmer wheat have been found at the Palestinian site of Nahal Oren, suggesting cultivation of this crop occurred there as early as 14,000 BC.

In any case, it is clear that Göbekli Tepe is not alone. It may be receiving much of the focus, but another site, Karahan Tepe, 63 kilometres east of Urfa in the Tektik Mountains, deserves attention. Discovered in 1997 and investigated by archaeologist Bahattin Çelik of the Turkish Historical Society, it has been dated to c. 9500–9000 BC. It has a number of T-pillars as well as high reliefs of a winding snake and other carvings similar to those at Göbekli Tepe. Covering an area of 325,000 m<sup>2</sup>, Karahan Tepe is much bigger than Göbekli Tepe. The stone pillars are spaced 1.5 to 2.0 metres apart and protrude



above ground level, waiting for an archaeologist to expose them fully. Other carved stones include a battered torso of a naked man and polished rock with forms of goats, gazelles and rabbits.

It is too early to draw any extraordinary conclusions from these sites, apart from the fact that our history is no longer as we know it. But just as Jericho proved in part that the Bible contains historical facts, these sites may yet substantiate some of the Sumerian myths which claimed that agriculture, animal husbandry and weaving had been brought to mankind from the sacred mountain Du-Ku, which was inhabited by the Anunna deities. Though it's unlikely that this mountain was Göbekli Tepe, we are probably in the correct general vicinity here at the frontier of the Taurus Mountains.

Around 8000 BC, descendants of the creators of Göbekli Tepe turned on their forefathers' achievements and entombed their temple under thousands of tonnes of earth, creating the artificial hill – a 'belly' – that we see today. Why they did this is unknown – doing so would have required an extraordinary amount of time and effort – though ultimately it was a decision that preserved the monument for posterity. Schmidt argues that the local landscape began to change around that time: as the trees were chopped down, the soil began to lose its fertility; the area became arid and bare, and the people were forced to move elsewhere. Could it be that they began to make their descent and, millennia later, established what is known as the Sumerian civilization? Such a scenario is just one possibility.

Even in ancient Egypt, religious constructions were often abandoned if not dismantled after a while because they belonged to a particular 'cycle' of time that had since passed. If that were the case with Göbekli Tepe, it would mean that knowledge of astronomy is older by millennia. The past five decades have so radically reshaped our understanding of the period 10,000–4000 BC, specifically the level of 'civilization' our ancestors had achieved in those days, that this shouldn't at all come as a surprise. And it seems that it's a given that somewhere, even older towns are waiting to be uncovered.

However, it is equally clear that entering into the mindset of these hunter-gatherers—how they saw these animals and what they believed happened to the dead—is a difficult subject which will require years of study. Alas, it is an area where few archaeologists dare to tread, and in all likelihood they will hop from one site to the next, as they've done for several decades, to 'only' uncover the fact that civilization is much older than we've assumed. Already, other sites are vying for Göbekli Tepe's fame. The previously mentioned site of Jerf el-Ahmar, located along the Euphrates in Syria, has been dated to 9600–8500 BC. Other sites will certainly soon submit their applications. It's likely they will all reveal that they are part of our history, but not as we know it.

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