

Göbekli Tepe

World's First Cult Site

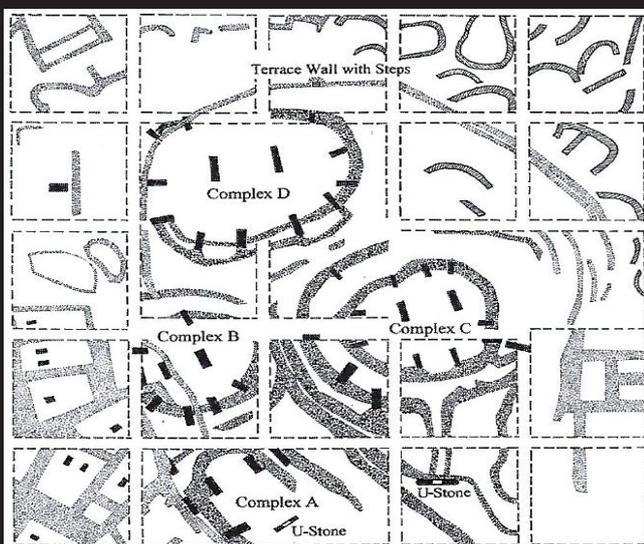




There are so many amazing archaeological sites in the Near East that it is difficult to list them by importance. Because each of them stands for a particular significance in human history. Goebekli Tepe stands out as the worlds first cult site with numerous circular and rectangular megalithic temple buildings. Let's look at the different periods to better understand the many different sites in this region.

Near East Timeline

We start with the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic Period lasting from 37,000 to 11,000 years ago. Thereafter followed the Neolithic Period until 7,000 years ago. During this time the so-called Neolithic Revolution took place in the fertile crescent spanning from the Taurus mountains to the Mediterranean coast. Nomadic clans began to settle down to domesticate animals such as cattle, sheep and goats followed shortly after by horses. Parallel they started organized farming with grains and fruit. This led to a rapid growth in population.



The famous Tell Halaf and Ubaid Period ended around 5,500 years ago. Just to put that into perspective the very first Egyptian Pre-dynastic Period with first rulers of small kingdoms started only a few hundred years thereafter.

Important Neolithic Site

Goebekli Tepe falls into the beginning of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period dated about 11,000 years ago. Experts assume it was erected for fertility cult ceremonies. Multiple circles and rectangular buildings were erected over time and not at once. Three archaeological levels with various sublevels were excavated so far. Detailed excavations started 1995 by a team led by German archaeologists.

Interesting Facts

1,000 years after its erection, for comparison this time period represents about thirty generations, all cult buildings were buried deliberately and filled up to the top with earth. This have been done for unknown reasons by descendants of their creators. Fortunately, it was an unbelievable advantage for archaeologists, who could excavate an undisturbed cult site. That is really rare in modern archaeology.

Geographic Situation

This cult site is situated at fifteen kilometers northeast of the town of Sanhurfa and near the village of Oerencik and lying at an altitude of 720 meters above sea level. The small fifteen meters high hill site called today by archaeologists Goebekli Tepe has a bottom level diameter of only three hundred meters. Nevertheless, it is the biggest Neolithic cult site with temple like buildings worldwide and the oldest megalithic structure found so far too. 2018 it was listed as UNESCO world heritage site.

Who done it?

This is still a mystery and lots of uncertainties pertain. Experts only can guess who the creators were. Were they still roaming hunter gatherer clans or first pastoral shepherds? Or even the first settled farmers in the area? Maybe they were also a mix of communities joining in for the effort to erect a first cult site for their common beliefs and rituals?

Site Selection

Choosing the hill top as cult center with far reaching views was typical for many such sites. Archaeologists found twenty and more circles lying on the south and western slope of this hill. To erect these cult buildings, it must have taken an enormous amount of work with a large need of human labor force for quarrying, stone mazing, transporting and finally erecting the super heavy stone pillars.

Needed Work Force

The question is still unanswered how were these heavy stone pillars transported to the hill top. We know they were quarried right next to site about five hundred meters away. Experts established that it needed about five hundred men to erect one circle with on average eight to ten monolith pillars. Interestingly no residential traces were found here nor nearby, as well as no water sources or springs. Where did all these workers lived?

Monomental Cult Circles

Now let's look at this extraordinary cult site



in more detail. So far six circular temple like buildings were excavated. The total number of megalithic structures is assumed to be about twenty or more. The complex C structure is the largest and was possibly the first to have been built around 12,000 years ago during Pre-Pottery Neolithic "A" Period. It has an internal diameter of twelve meters and the external measurements are thirty meters due to four concentric walls being built around.

Later Changes

Later circles were smaller and built 11,000 years ago during Pre-Pottery Neolithic "B" Period. And towards the end of constructions the cult buildings became rectangular. As no entrances in the walls were found, experts assume access via roofs with ladders similar to Catal Hoeyuek.

Extraordinary "T" Pillars

All cult circles were erected with enormous





roof support stone pillars. The heights of these monolith “T” pillars reaches up to six meters maximum. For stability they were fitted into hewn holes in the bedrock. The first structures were round semi-underground buildings with two central “T” pillars as roof support. Further pillars were placed at a right angle along the lime stone walls as wall and roof reinforcement with stone benches being constructed between them.

Circle Details

So far approximately over two hundred “T” shaped monolith pillars weighing ten to twenty tons each were identified by excavators. The today open top circles have terrazzo floors and measure up to twenty meter in diameter. The monolith pillars are on average three to six meters high and are made of well hewn sandstone.

Intriguing Pillar Decorations

Nearly all pillars are skillfully decorated on both sides with animal reliefs such as wild boar, wild donkey, jumping fox, wolf, aurochs, lion, bear, gazelle, snake, spider, frog, scorpion, bald ibis, duck and some wild plants. In addition, mixed

creatures were carved in positive relief on them like vulture and crane with headless bodies being pictured beneath them. Like in Catal Hoeyek experts assume a sky burial ritual.

Human Depictions

But there are also human depictions on these pillars. For example, long arms with hands were carved on wide sides with hands embracing the short side. This led to the theory that pillars represent stylized humans or ancestors. But what do a phallus like statue tell us? And what is the reason for a naked female depiction and a ground stone carved like a sacrifice bowl? Same is true for some cup holes on top of “T” pillars.

Interesting Theory

The question has not yet been answered, if the “T” pillars really served as roof support? That means, was there a roof at all? Or were they possibly platforms for sky burials? One hint exists through the depicted vultures and headless bodies. This might also explain why no settlement was found in the vicinity. But the conclusion might be, that first temples were built dur-





ing Neolithic times and later settlements.

Goebekli Culture

The site was first frequented by non-sedentary hunter-gatherer societies who did not yet farm but built temples. This is certain as no traces of domestication of animals nor plants were found. Their culture and rituals as well as provenance of builders are so far still unknown. The site possibly was also used for sky burial purposes, where bodies were left for vultures to feed on and clean bones so secondary burials could take place. These secondary burials of bones possibly were done in baskets like it was then practiced in Catal Hueyuek 2,000 years later.

Shaman Rituals

One theory assumes the possibility of a shaman based culture. And these shamans might already have converged to a kind of priest class society. Latest research points into the direction that Neolithic socialization took place much earlier than we previously thought.

Similar Sites

At least eight similar “T” pillar sites exist in the region, but Goebekli Tepe is the largest. These sites are Nevali Cori, Karahan Tepe with a huge number of 250 pillars, Hamzan Tepe, Sefer Tepe, Tasli Tepe, Harbetsuvan Tepe, Urfa and Kilisik. These were all local cult sites for close by settlements. But Goebekli Tepe was an important regional cult site where people gathered from far away possibly for regular annual events and ceremonies.

Nevali Cori for example is a Pre-pottery Neolithic “B” Period settlement with its own cult site situated on eastern shores of Euphrates. Unfortunately, it is now lying below the water level of the Ataturk Dam. The distance to Goebekli Tepe is about seventy kilometers.

Picture Credits

We thank the archaeologists, photographers and museum to make some of their pictures and sketches available.



