

The Göbekli Tepe “Totem Pole“. A First Discussion of an Autumn 2010 Discovery (PPN, Southeastern Turkey)

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During the 2009 excavation season, the head of an animal sculpture made of limestone was identified on the surface of the southern slope of the south-eastern hillock of Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt, forthcoming). All attempts made to remove this sculpture from the surface soil failed. Subsequently, a small sounding was excavated in order to remove the head and to document its context. This sounding revealed that, in actual fact, we were dealing with what appeared to be the head of a large sculpture that was set in a stone wall. In 2010 a larger part of the same area (L9-46), measuring 5.00 x 6.00 metres, was excavated in order to better understand and to document the architectural context of this find. Only now have we realized that this relatively large sculpture is reminiscent of the “totem poles” known from the northwest coast of North America. It had been set in the north-eastern wall of a rectangular room and was not visible originally due to the wall completely covering the pole.

Following the documentation of the position and the context of the find, which belongs to Layer II (EPPNB), it was removed from the wall in accordance with the rules of the General Directorate of Antiquities of Turkey. It has the remarkable length of 1.92 metres (Fig. 1a-c) with an average diameter of 30 cm. Its weight, which as yet could be not determined exactly, must lie in excess of 500 kilograms, as even 10 workmen had serious problems lifting and carrying it.

The pole features three main motives, one above another. The uppermost motive depicts a predator, probably a bear or a large felid – a lion or a leopard – due to two preserved features of the head: the ears and the eyes. The frontal part of the head had been obliterated in antiquity; the surface of the break is covered with a thin limestone coating. Below the head, a short neck, arms and hands are visible. Their human like shape is remarkable. Although we might postulate that this depicts a “Mischwesen”, such as the “Löwenmensch” from the Aurignacian site of Hohlenstein Stadel in Southwest Germany, we still cannot eliminate the possibility that these features were intended to depict animal arms and legs and not human limbs.

The arms (or legs) are holding another head, which again lost its face in antiquity. Significantly, the motive of a wild beast holding a human head is well known from several sculptures from Nevalı Çori and Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt in press). For this reason it is very probable that the lost face of the head being held by the “Löwenmensch” (or bear/ lion/ leopard) was that of a human. This suggestion is further strengthened by the fact that human arms are depicted below the head.

The hands are placed opposite one another and on the stomach of the individual. This is a manner which is clearly reminiscent of the T-shaped pillars.

Below the arms and hands a second person is visible. Fortunately, the face of this individual is completely preserved. In comparison to the first human, the head of the second person is relatively small. Also depicted is the upper part of the body, including the arms and hands. Below the hands there is an unidentified object. It seems likely that the person is depicted giving birth, albeit that a very different explanation is also conceivable, e.g. the person could be presenting his phallus.

Below the arms of the predator (or “Löwenmensch”) at both sides of the pole, large snakes are visible. Their large heads (one is partly damaged) are situated just above the head of the small individual. Below the heads of the snakes, structures are visible which might be interpreted as the legs of the uppermost human.

It seems obvious that such a piece made of stone must also have had parallels in wood which have failed to survive the millennia. However, it should be noted that fragments of a quite similar totem pole-like object made of limestone were already discovered some 20 years ago in Nevalı Çori (Fig. 2; comp. Hauptmann 1991/1992, 1993; Hauptmann and Schmidt 2007 Kat. Nr. 101; Schmidt, in press, Fig. 16 and 17). This object was found in the Terrazzo Building in an EPPNB context; the pole was broken in several pieces and buried in the north-eastern bench of the building. Consequently, the pole itself could be of much older date, in fact it could even date to the PPNA period. The same may be true for the recent find from Göbekli Tepe, which had been invisible behind a wall. A detailed study of these remarkable objects and their contexts will be published elsewhere.

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Fig. 1 Sculptured stone pole from Göbekli Tepe Area L9-46. **a** front part <GT10_9532>, **b** left side <GT10_9577>, **c** right side <GT10_9650>. (photos: N. Becker, DAI)

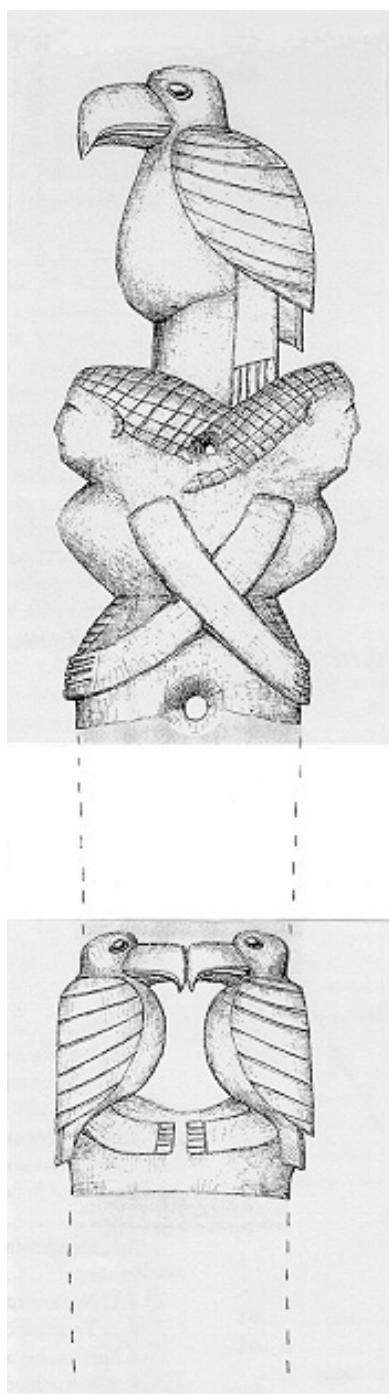


Fig. 2 The "totem pole" from Nevalı Çori (reconstruction and drawing: K. Schmidt)

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