Early Neolithic imagery in flux. A case study on the reliefs of Building F at Göbekli Tepe, southeastern Turkey

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ABSTRACT - Stone is often regarded as the ideal medium for the long-term preservation of knowledge, as it is resistant to change. Early to middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey has repeatedly been treated as a prime example for such external memorial storage in durable stone. The present paper challenges this view. A close examination of pillars and their reliefs in Building F reveals the fluid character of imagery with repeated and frequent phases of erasure and re-making. It is argued that it is not the durability of stone that made it suitable for the preservation of 'cultural memory', but the possibility to re-shape the image carriers continuously over a long period of time, which resulted in processes of transmission, learning and memorization.

KEY WORDS - Pre-Pottery Neolithic; Göbekli Tepe; pillars; reliefs

Zgodnjeneolitske podobe v razvoju. Študija reliefov v stavbi F v Göbekli Tepeju v jugovzhodni Turčiji

IZVLEČEK – Kamen velja pogosto za idealen medij dolgoročnega ohranjanja védenja, saj je odporen na spremembe. Göbekli Tepe je pogosto predstavljen kot odličen primer ohranjenega spomina v kamnu v zgodnjem do srednjem predkeramičnem neolitiku v jugovzhodni Turčiji. V članku zavračamo ta vidik. Natančen pregled stebrov in njihovih reliefov v stavbi F kaže na stalno spreminjanje značaja podob s pogosto ponavljajočimi se fazami brisanja ter ponovnega ustvarjanja. Trdimo, da ni obstojnost kamna tisto, kar ga je naredilo primernega za ohranjanje 'kulturnega spomina', ampak možnost kontinuranega preoblikovanja nosilcev podob v dolgem časovnem obdobju, ki je rezultiralo v procesih prenosa, učenja in pomnjenja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE - predkeramični neolitik; Göbekli Tepe; stebri; reliefi

Introduction

Stone is often regarded as permanent, stable, immobile and resistant to change (*Robb 2009; Croucher 2012.139*). Monuments made of stone have therefore been identified as a prime medium for the preservation of long-term or 'cultural' memory as opposed to more unstable everyday or 'communicative' memory (*Assmann 1988*). It has been argued that their permanence and imposing presence make them ideal links between the living and the dead (*Parker-Pearson, Ramilisonina 1998*). Similar opinions have been

voiced for the Early Neolithic of southwestern Asia. The increased use of stone has been described as a major difference between the Epipalaeolithic and the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), serving to preserve "ideological concepts for future generations" (Benz, Bauer 2013.16-17). However, the permanence of stone and images carved from or into stone has been called into question, and recent work stresses the temporality of the material not least based on the frequent changes made to monuments (Díaz-Guardamino 2021 with references). For Iberian stelae, Maria Díaz-Guardamino has argued that it is not the durability of the unchanged monument but the resilience of relationships, the constant preoccupation with stone images that underlies their function in stabilizing group identities (Díaz-Guardamino 2021). Early to middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey has repeatedly been treated as a key site for early external memorial storage in stone (Morenz, Schmidt 2009; Morenz 2014; Watkins



Fig. 1. Göbekli Tepe. The main excavation area in the southwestern depression, Building D in the foreground (© DAI, photo N. Becker).

2004, with references), with a focus on its richly decorated limestone pillars. Most interpretations so far describe a predominantly 'static' site with reliefs in a 'finished' state. In this article we want to challenge this view based on insights deriving from a recent indepth study of the pillar reliefs (*Dietrich, Schmidt in print*). We choose one structure, Building F, and its pillars as a representative case study.

Göbekli Tepe

Göbekli Tepe is located about 15km to the northeast of Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Turkey (*Schmidt 2012; Kurapkat 2015*). The mound rises up to 15m high on a drawn-out limestone plateau on the Germuş crest. The plateau's lateral outcrops once served as the quarries for the site's megalithic structures (*Schmidt 2009.23–33*). Göbekli Tepe was first recognized as an archaeological site in 1963 during a joint project by the University of Chicago and Istanbul University

under the direction of Robert Braidwood and Halet Cambel. In his account of his visit at the site, Peter Benedict described its surface to be formed of elevations of red soil separated by depressions whose slopes were reported to be littered with flint artefacts (Benedict 1980.179, Nr. V52/1, 181-182). It was not until 1994 that Göbekli Tepe's true potential was recognized by Klaus Schmidt during a systematic survey of the region's Neolithic sites (Beile-Bohn et al. 1998). His longstanding experience from fieldwork at Nevalı Çori under Harald Hauptmann helped him to recognize surface finds as fragments of T-shaped pillars from Neolithic buildings and large-format limestone sculptures, as just recently recorded at this site (Hauptmann 1993; 1999; 2011). Fieldwork at Göbekli Tepe began in 1995 under the direction of Adnan Misir from the Sanliurfa Museum and Harald Hauptmann from the DAI's Istanbul Department, with Klaus Schmidt as the field director. Schmidt continued to pursue annual systematic investigations until his untimely passing in 2014.

After an initial survey and prospective soundings at the site slopes as well as investigations of some features on the plateaus (Beile-Bohn et al. 1998), work soon began to concentrate within the south-eastern depression (Fig. 1-2; Schmidt 2001; 2008a; 2009; 2011; 2012). Here, four monumental stone buildings (Buildings A-D) of a type so far not known from contemporary sites were uncovered. The four buildings were found to be laid out according to a basic pattern comprising large T-shaped monoliths weighing several tons arranged in an approximate circle or ellipse while held in place by stone walls as well as so-called walled 'benches' in front of the walls (Fig. 1), although these 'benches' were not necessarily meant for seating. In Building C, for example, they seem far too tall (Piesker 2014). A pair of similar but much taller monoliths with heights of up to 5.5m stands freely in upright position roughly in the structures' centre. The inner diameter of the buildings varies between 10m and 20m. Seen from the side, Schmidt (2012.69-72) recognized the pillars' particular T-shape as a stylized reference to the human body, as also suggested by the occasional occurrence of low reliefs depicting arms, hands, as well as garments (Köksal-Schmidt, Schmidt 2010). Two parallel bands run down the frontside of many pillars, identified as a stole-like garment; 'V'-shapes in the neck area have been preliminarily identified as 'necklaces'. The circle pillars are always looking towards the central pair, and most of the numerous animal reliefs decorating them are oriented in the same direction (Peters, Schmidt 2004). A depleted structure discovered on the plateau was designated Building E; the discovery of Buildings G, H and F followed later.

During excavations, Schmidt preliminarily ascribed the large structures to an earlier layer III, which according to the finds and radiocarbon dates was thought to date to the PPNA and probably also to the early PPNB (Kromer, Schmidt 1998; Pustovoytov 2002; 2006; Pustovoytov, Taubald 2003; Pustovoytov et al. 2007; Dietrich, Schmidt 2010; Dietrich 2011; Dietrich et al. 2013). His layer II was considered to be more recent; it is characterized by smaller rectangular buildings (Schmidt 2012.228-235; Kurapkat 2015.18-22). Direct stratigraphic overlays between the architecture of layer III and that of layer II were observed in only few locations (Schmidt 2000.18-19; 2012.128, 228; Kurapkat 2015.81-82). In the main excavation area in the south-eastern depression, the space taken in by the monumental buildings had been deliberately spared from later overbuilding and delimited by the so-called terrace wall (Fig. 2; Schmidt 2010a).

Layer II after Schmidt is characterized by significantly smaller rectangular structures with lime plaster floors not unlike those observed at contemporary Neolithic sites (*Garfinkel 1987; Hauptmann, Yalcin* 2000). If at all present, the size and the number of pillars significantly decrease in this layer. In general, only the two central pillars were maintained, the largest ones reaching heights between 1.5m and 2m. The most impressive architectural representative of this layer contained numerous spoils and was initially referred to as the 'lion pillar building' after the large felines depicted on both its central pillars



(Fig. 3), although these animals have been identified as most likely being leopards (*Peters*, *Schmidt* 2004.184). This is the only rectangular building whose pillar images reveal more than the already mentioned anthropomorphic features. The structure was exhaustively discussed by Dietmar Kurapkat (2015.30-38).

The main criterion for the definition of the abovementioned layers, which initially served as a rough reference for classifying finds and features during the excavations, was the change from round to rectangular buildings, analogous to architectural developments observed elsewhere in south-eastern Turkey at Early Neolithic sites presenting long occupation sequences (Özdoğan 2017), such as Çayönü (Özdoğan 2010; Erim-Özdoğan 2011). These 'architectural horizons' will require more scrutiny in the forthcoming study of the site's stratigraphy. It also became clear at an early stage that the radiocarbon data pointed to partial simultaneities between the buildings of layers II and III (Dietrich 2011). Numerous in situ finds of grinding stones and limestone basins set into floors would suggest food processing activities, contrary to earlier assumptions of the non-domestic character of the rectangular buildings (Dietrich L. et al. 2019; 2020; Dietrich L. 2021). Several locations at the site were found to contain small, curvilinear features, especially in the deep soundings west and north of Building D, but also in the northeast of the main excavation area, and in deep soundings on the northwestern elevation (Schmidt 2011.47-48). There is a strong possibility that they were dwellings associated with the monumental buildings' earlier phases (Kinzel, Clare 2020), although to what degree the site may have been permanently occupied still needs further study. The uppermost, disturbed horizon was designated layer I, consisting of the thick deposits which formed at the mound's foot through erosive processes, and the plough horizon.

To verify whether the high concentration of special architecture was a feature only of the south-eastern depression or characteristic of the whole site, comprehensive geophysical surveys were conducted in 2003, 2006, 2007 and 2012 (*Dietrich* et al. 2012. *Fig. 3; 2016.56–57*). The investigations by ground penetrating radar in particular revealed evidence of monumental architecture over the entire mound. To test the results, the site's south-western summit was investigated in a large excavation trench in an east-west alignment of eight excavation squares measuring

9x9m and joining with the main excavation area (Fig. 2). The rectangular buildings were found to continue into this area. The test trench led also to the partial uncovering of another large circular structure (Building F) with an inner diameter of 10m (Fig. 4; *Schmidt 2008a.67–69, Fig. 10*). Owing to its location just below the surface, the building's date and stratigraphic position remained uncertain. The pillar dimensions were more reminiscent of those recorded inside the rectangular buildings, while the round outline and the diameter of 10m corresponded to the monumental buildings.

Building F has been described only preliminarily so far (*Schmidt 2008a.67–69*), the pillars and their images have never been fully published and discussed before. As the building is of special importance for the interpretation of the site, this will be done in the following sections.

Building F

Building F is located on the western slope of the south-western hilltop of Göbekli Tepe (excavation areas K9-87 and K9-77). About two-thirds of the almost oval building with two central pillars was explored between 2006 and 2008 (Figs. 2, 4–5). The



Fig. 3. Göbekli Tepe. The so-called leopard's pillar building (© DAI, photo M. Morsch).

inner diameter of the structure is about 10m. However, the pillars are much smaller than those in Buildings A-D and H. The central pillars are oriented in a south-eastern direction, as opposed to south-southeast in Buildings A-D. Since its northern part is outside the excavated area, the total number of pillars in the ring wall cannot be determined yet, although six have been identified so far. The ring wall of Building F consists of two mantles retaining a fill of relatively large rocks and smaller rubble. The outward facing sides of the stones had been processed evenly, the gaps between them were filled with smaller limestone chips. The wall is preserved to about 1.20m above the bench platforms (about 1.70-1.80m above ground level) and is 70-90cm wide. The lime plaster floor inside is even. Benches lean onto the ring wall, and end in coping platforms at

about 70-85cm above floor level. In some cases, the platforms abut directly onto the ring wall, sometimes smaller stone slabs fill the gaps in-between. The quality of the bench masonry corresponds to that of the ring wall. The benches rise to between three to five stone courses above the lime plaster floor (height approximately 55cm). To the west a large slab in upright position replaces the bench wall. The pillars in this area are located behind the bench instead of being integrated into it, as observed in the rest of the building's excavated part. No traces of an access to the structure were found inside the excavated area.

Given its location directly below the surface, a stratigraphic linkage of the building to the rest of the site proved problematic. Although its contemporaneity with the other round buildings remains uncertain,

the latter is nevertheless suggested by the structure's circular shape, its size, which corresponds to that of Building B, as well as by the wealth of ornaments appearing on the pillars as compared to the rarely reliefed ones in the rectangular buildings.

The northern section drawing of area K9-87 is informative for the reconstruction of the fill processes in Building F (Fig. 6). Noteworthy is a dark brown, sandy silt layer containing



Fig. 4. Göbekli Tepe. Building F (© DAI, photo K. Schmidt).

very few stones just above the lime plaster floor in the centre of the building (Fig. 6.1). It cuts a lighter layer (Fig. 6.3) to the east and therefore likely marks an intrusion, probably the base of a pit that was refilled with sediments mixed with humous topsoil. It is covered by a continuous layer of grey-brown soil with numerous large stones (Fig. 6.2). This is likely the upper part of the filling of the intrusive pit or the result of a second intrusion into the refilled building as the layer's upper limit matches with the preserved height of the central pillar stumps. Pottery sherds, partly from vessels with handles, distinctly post Pottery Neolithic, were found in this layer, they still await examination and final dating. One or multiple post-Neolithic destruction events directed at the central pillars similar to Buildings C and H (Schmidt 2008b; Dietrich et al. 2016) are therefore likely.



sandy silt layer containing Fig. 5. Göbekli Tepe. Building F, 2008 (© DAI, photo S. Matzerath).

The ring wall in the northeast exhibits a marked slant towards the inside, which led to speculation about the former existence of a corbelled roof vault. However, the stones are very irregular, partly unworked, and of different size, and thus this seems unlikely. Above this layer is a grey-brown deposit with many small pebbles and a few large stones (Fig. 6.4). Immediately next to the ring wall, several events of wall collapse are detectable (Fig. 6.5, 6). A thin humous layer follows on top (Fig. 6.7). As result of the post-Neolithic disturbances, Building F does not provide evidence for the discussion on intentional backfilling of buildings at Göbekli Tepe.

The pillars of Building F

The recorded measurements for the pillars are dependent on the state of excavation - at any rate, the visible height is always indicated. Cases in which measurements are missing signify that they were unfeasible. The naming of the pillars followed conventions originally established during excavations, closely connected to the layer III-I scheme. The attribution of Arabic numbers to the pillars in the monumental round buildings of the so-called layer III follows the order of their discovery, whereas Roman numbers refer to the pillars unearthed in the rectangular buildings of the so-called layer II. This distinction was reasonable as far as it concerned the main excavation area, where it referred to different building types with pillars of different sizes in at least partly consecutive stratifications. Building F - a large round construction with small pillars - calls this categorization into question. Therefore, Arabic numbers are now assigned to all pillars and the correspondences are given below.

Central Pillar 70 / formerly Pillar XXXVII

Relief bands, arms, hands, fox. Area: K9-87; height: 1.57m; width (shaft): 0.62m; width (head): -; thickness: 0.31m (Fig. 7). Pillar 70 is the northern central pillar of Building F. It is severely damaged, but a partial reconstruction of the shaft was possible through assembling several of its fragments; the T-head is lost. The pillar stands in the building's lime plaster floor. A flat stone slab on a 45cm high earth mortar pedestal had been placed on the floor in front of the pillar. Arms rendered in relief are displayed along the shaft's broadsides, whilst the hands converge at the front. Vague fingers arranged as parallel bands join in a pointed triangle covering the relief bands. A fox whose head is no longer preserved appears in the arm bend on the shaft's left broadside. Remarkably, the animal's tail is missing as well, either because of the masking effect of the elbow, or due to the later execution of the latter. However, this second possibility seems less likely, as the depth of the reliefs is almost identical for both motifs.

Central Pillar 71 / formerly Pillar XXXVI

Arms/hands. Area: K9-87; height: 0.83m; width (shaft): 0.65m; width (head): -; thickness: 0.38m (Fig. 8).

The southern central pillar of Building F is also embedded in the floor and preserved as a stump. One of the fragments bears the remnants of a representation of fingers, thus also giving evidence to the former existence of arms and hands. As with Pillar 70, a small stone slab had been placed on an earth mortar pedestal in front of it. Its northern side has traces of plaster, which originally probably covered the whole pedestal.

Pillar 72 formerly Pillar XXIII

No reliefs so far. Area: K9-77; height: 0.50m; width (shaft): 0.77cm; width (head): -; thickness: 0.33m. Pillar 72 in the west of Building F is a severely weathered pillar stump already visible at the surface prior to the excavations.



Fig. 6. Göbekli Tepe. Area K9-87, north section (© DAI, drawing O. Dietrich, based on drawings by S. Matzerath, Julia Wagner).

Pillar 73 / formerly Pillar XXIV

No reliefs so far. Area: K9-87; height: 1.10m; width (shaft): 0.60m; width (head): -; thickness: 0.22m. Pillar 73, a severely weathered and fractur-

ed stump, stands in the west of Building F.

Pillar 74 / formerly Pillar XXV

Relief bands, 'V-shaped necklace', arms, hands, leopard(?), human. Area: K9-87; height: 1.10m; width (shaft): 0.68m; width (head): -; thickness: 0.24m (Fig. 9).

Pillar 74 stands in the south of Building F. Its shaft is broken, and the T-head is missing. A so-called V-shaped necklace as well as relief bands and hands are visible on the front side facing the building centre (Fig. 9.1, 3). Contrary to representations on other pillars, the hands appear like mere parallel strips converging in a triangle, but owing to the arms on the broadsides, the interpretation is safe. The hands cover the relief bands. The upper area of the pillar's rear side facing south shows an animal with an upward bent tail which during the excavations was identified as a dog, even though it may also be interpreted as a leopard according to other matching motifs (Fig. 9.2). Below appears a human figure in frontal view, whose body is supplanted by wide square shoulders. The figure has been unearthed down to the level of its

knee. Faint lines visible below the chest may trace the outline of the ribs. Remnants of relief bands especially recognizable in the upper part of the current pillar rear side point to the pillar's relocation and



Fig. 7. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 70 (© DAI, photos S. Matzerath).

reuse. Each broadside exhibits a distinct offset just above the bench platform. Below appear rough chisel marks pointing to transformation work after the pillar's repositioning inside the bench.



Fig. 8. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 71 (© DAI, 1-2 photos N. Becker; 3 photo Ç. Köksal-Schmidt).

Pillar 75 / formerly Pillar XXVI

Arms, hands, 'V-shaped necklace'. Area: K9-87; height: 0,82 m; width (shaft): 0,52 m; width (head): -; thickness: 0,23 m (Fig. 10).

Pillar 75 is located in the southeast of Building F. Its head is broken off, the offset marking the shafthead-transition is still present. The pillar fragment had been walled into the bench masonry and fixed between the bench platforms by aid of wedge stones. Traces of a so-called V-shaped necklace are noticeable on the front side (Fig. 10.2), from whose broadside emanates the shallow relief of the left arm (Fig. 10.3), which reaches down to the barely visible hand at the front (Fig. 10.2). The relief supplants an earlier arm, which is also rendered as a shallow carving (Fig. 10.4). However, the arm is bent towards the actual rear side of the pillar. The remains of an even earlier, more pronounced arm relief likely pointing in the same direction have survived in the lower area. The pillar can therefore safely be attributed to a secondary context, and its carvings have been refashioned in (at least) three different stages. Though lacking relief decorations, the opposite side reveals



Fig. 9. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 74 (© DAI, 1,3-4 photos N. Becker; 2 photo S. Matzerath).

an offset at the bench level, the pillar's wider part being concealed by the latter (Fig. 10.1). Possibly, an earlier relief had been erased here to also place an arm motif on this side. The last re-fashioning of the pillar was apparently not finished.

Pillar 76 / formerly Pillar XXXIV

Predator (leopard?), bird. Area: K9-87; height: 1.13m; width (shaft): 0.55m; width (head): -; thickness: 0.24m (Fig. 11).

Pillar 76 stands in the east of Building F. The T-head and a part of the shaft are missing. The left broadside bears the carved image of a predator (leopard?) and details of a significantly deeper relief of a bird displaying a markedly curved beak, perhaps that of a vulture, protruding from the level of the bench platform. Though it seems to be executed as an outline only, the body area of the predator relief shows numerous chisel marks, leading to the assumption that the outline represents the remnants of an earlier, erased relief. The opposite broadside is extremely uneven, suggesting that the pillar had weathered on this side lying at the surface for a longer period be-

fore being reused.

Pillar 77 / formerly Pillar XXXV

Relief bands. Area: K9-87; height/length: 2.15m; width (shaft): 0.45m; width (head): 0.62m; thickness: 0.22m (Fig. 12).

Pillar 77 stands in the east of Building F. The head was found immediately next to the pillar stump and refitted. The pillar reveals relief bands on its rear narrow side, an indication of an (at least) secondary position. The rest of the surface shows chippings and flaws, but appears not to have any reliefs.

Building F. Installations and imagery

So far, no access is known for Building F. It is thus uncertain whether it was entered from the roof or from elsewhere in the yet unexcavated area. In the case of an entrance opposite the front side of the central pillars, as in Building C (*Schmidt 2008b*), it might still be found in the unexcavated area. Both central pillars are severely damaged, as shown above likely in the wake of a post-Neolithic intrusion event (Fig. 6).

For both central pillars, arms and hands can be reconstructed. Pillar 70, which was partly reassembled from fragments, has the motif

of a fox inside the arm bend. The motif is repeated only once at Göbekli Tepe so far, on Pillar 18, one of the central pillars of Building D (Köksal-Schmidt, Schmidt 2010). However, there may be a potential link to another group of images that consists of moving or leaping solitary predators. These individually depicted animals on armless pillars could be pars pro toto representations of the more complex scene. The motif of a leaping solitary predator on the shaft broadsides, whether in the arm bend or not, seems to be particularly prevalent on the central pillars. So far, in addition to Pillars 18 and 70, which include arms and animals, four pillars are known to match with this category: both central pillars in Building B (Pillar 9 and 10: Schmidt 2012.124-128, Fig. 51-52), the western, central Pillar (37) in Building C (Schmidt 2008.28), and the eastern central Pillar (51) in Building H (Dietrich et al. 2016.59, Fig. 7). The question whether this similar characterization of the central pillars could hint at a depiction of the same entity is open to discussion (see Becker et al. 2012 on the possible character of the central pillars).

Stone slabs had been placed on pedestals in front of both central pillars in Building F. As they are integrated into the floor plaster, they belonged to the original configuration of the building. Their function is unclear.

One possibility is that they had been equipped with lighting facilities as tentatively observed in other buildings; another is that they were used to place other important items in front of the pillars. In Building D the remains of a foxtail in anatomical composition were found close to Pillar 18, in the lower area of the building's backfill (*Peters* et al. 2014.175), and during excavations concentrations of finds like axes, decorated limestone balls or sculptures have regularly been recorded next to the pillars, particularly the central pillars (*Dietrich* et al. 2019a). A large, now fragmented stone plate had been integrated into the lime plaster floor between both pillars (Figs. 8/3), and it is reminiscent of a stone bowl in the floor of Building B (*Schmidt 2012.128–129, Fig. 51*).

Some of the ring wall pillars have not been fully excavated yet. As one moves from west to east along the ring wall, the pillar stumps 72 and 73 so far reveal no reliefs. Pillar 74, whose head is missing, has relief



Fig. 10. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 75 (© DAI, photos N. Becker).

bands, arms, and hands, as well as a small animal on its rear side, possibly a leopard, and a standing human figure in frontal view (Fig. 9.2). Representations of humans are very scarce on the pillar reliefs, which contrasts with a large repertoire of anthropomorphic sculpture (Dietrich et al. 2019a). The reason behind the apparent hesitation to depict humans on reliefs remains elusive. There are two further cases in which humans are depicted with some security on pillars. The lower shaft of Pillar 43 in Building D has a damaged depiction of a headless human apparently riding a large bird (Fig. 13). This image has been interpreted as referring to a shamanic soul journey (Borić 2013), an interpretation that needs an indepth discussion that goes well beyond the scope of the present paper. The second image was found on a large pillar fragment (Fig.14) discovered in 2010 just north of Pillar 18 in Building D (Schmidt 2010b.245, Fig. 11). A vulture with spread wings and a large quadruped predator, possibly a bear) dominate the



Fig. 11. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 76 (© DAI, photos N. Becker).

fragment. Another quadruped relief above the bear is partly cut off. In front of this animal appears a human head. A bent human arm may signal a more complex and probably narrative scene. Whether the human figure is being attacked by the animals is not entirely clear. The human depicted on Pillar 74 on



Fig. 12. Göbekli Tepe. Pillar 77 (© DAI, photos N. Becker).

the other hand appears static in his frontality, and no action is indicated. This conforms to the standards of plastic anthropomorphic images, where a large group consists of standing humans with a clearly defined frontal viewing axis, the images often being stele-like and not going into depth (*Dietrich* et al. 2019a). A

prime and completely preserved example is the so-called Urfa man (Hauptmann 2003). Because of the conspicuously long and small neck and the narrow thorax as compared to the very broad shoulders the person on Pillar 74 evokes the impression of partial skeletonization. This would liken the depiction to a group of animal images with pronounced depictions of ribs, which could be seen as a reference to death (Schmidt 2013b) but also could have been meant to evoke slick dexterity, tension during the prowl prior to attack or increased ferocity from famishment. On the other hand, the peculiar anatomy of the human figure could be also explained by the depiction of a cape-like garment.

Pillar 75 also has clear anthropomorphic traits as it displays a 'necklace' as well as arms and hands. Pillar 76 shows a predator (leopard?) and a bird, whilst Pillar 77 has relief bands. All well-investigated pillars are in (at least) secondary position and some were apparently being reworked still during the building's terminal phase. The functional period of this building can be suspected to have lasted for a considerable time, judging from the numerous conversions. With continuing work, the discovery of more ring walls, as documented in other buildings at Göbekli Tepe (*Piesker* 2014), would be no surprise.

Discussion. Building F and Early Neolithic imagery in flux

As stated in the introduction, Göbekli Tepe has mostly been seen as a static site with fixed image programs that convey cultural concepts closely related to its builders. Every monumental building so far excavated at Göbekli Tepe has a 'preferred' depiction, an image that occurs much more frequently than the rest (*Peters, Schmidt 2004.209–212*). This predominant depiction has been tentatively interpreted as having an emblematic or totemic role for a group of people using the respective building. In Buildings A-D and H a certain animal species dominates the iconographical range. Building F, on the other hand, has so far produced the largest assemblage of anthropomorphic features on pillars among all buildings at Göbekli Tepe, but few animal depictions.

This could contradict the former interpretation as emblematic images. However, an interpretation in the sense of a chronological development is possible, too. There is a general tendency of a reduction of the quantity and range of images between the monumental round and the small subrectangular or rectangular buildings (*Peters* et al. 2014.172). The latter have nearly no zoomorphic reliefs but the anthropomorphic characterization of the pillars still exists in a few cases. This fits with observations from Nevalı Çori, where some of the pillars of the EPNNB-MPPNB 'cult building' also show arms, hands, V-shapes and stoles but not a single animal relief (*Hauptmann 1993*). Building F could be relatively late in the sequence of Göbekli Tepe's round buildings.

The more complex arrangements of animal reliefs, described by Schmidt as 'Großbilder' ('extended images'), have been interpreted as likely depicting mythological scenes (Schmidt 2013a). The canonical and repetitive character of the imagery that also includes 'abstract signs', has been taken as evidence for external memorial storage (Watkins 2004). In this line of thought, Göbekli Tepe's buildings could be seen as arenas for learning and the preservation of knowledge. The exact mode of the learning processes likely associated with the imagery have only partly been discussed so far. Unpleasant or even traumatic experiences during imagistic rituals (Whitehouse 2000), meant to produce lasting 'flashbulb' memories, have been proposed as one possible scenario of use for the subterranean monumental buildings with their intimidating imagery of snarling predators and



Fig. 13. Göbekli Tepe. Detail of Pillar 43 in Building D (© DAI, photo K. Schmidt).

powerful animals in aggressive postures (*Dietrich* et al. 2019b). Another way to generate lasting effects of memorization of the stories behind the imagery is constant engagement with the buildings and images.

The data presented above speaks in favour of a transformative and processual attitude towards the rather soft and easily workable stone as an image carrier at Göbekli Tepe. Building research has also revealed that the buildings were subjected to frequent changes - de-constructed, re-constructed, and repaired (Piesker 2014; Kurapkat 2015). The same is true for the pillars and their reliefs. Pillar 75 is a prime example of a relief surface very much giving the impression of a palimpsest. Older images are (partially) erased by pecking and grinding, new ones are applied, the pillar turned around and the formerly undecorated spaces filled with images. The intensity of the changes becomes clear from the amount of material substance removed from the pillar surfaces. On Pillar 74, the offsets reach about 5cm; for several pillars surface reductions of more than 10cm are observable. This is significant regarding pillar size and another argument against the differentiation into larger (older) and smaller (younger) pillars. It would



Fig. 14. Göbekli Tepe. Decorated pillar fragment from Building D (© DAI, photo N. Becker).

not be surprising if at least some of the 'small' pillars were the result of constant re-shaping of originally much larger pillars. Although hypothetical at the moment, this certainly is a starting point for future research.

Karina Croucher (2012.140-142) had already considered that the process of making images might have been more important at Göbekli Tepe than the actual images. Indeed, many pillar reliefs were partly or completely hidden by walls. Drawing on ethnographical data, she proposes that the images and stone itself could have been perceived as animated: Stone absorbs and conducts temperature, and working soft stone may have echoed practices of body decoration. When viewed in flickering light, the images could have appeared animated. The knowledge of stone carving, of bringing the material to life, would not have resided with individuals in Croucher's view, but constituted the knowledge of a group, handed down by their ancestors. Even if not every detail of this interpretation can be proven and conclusions drawn from ethnography are fraught with doubts, Croucher's approach offers an interesting perspective on our findings from Building F and the other monumental enclosures at Göbekli Tepe: the transformative character of the imagery and the image carriers.

The intensity of activities inside the buildings clearly transcended functional purposes like maintenance or repair (*Clare* et al. 2018) and seems ritualized. The constant engagement with the imagery implies processes of handing on and learning its meaning, which could have helped to actively preserve key concepts related to the identities of the builders. Drawing on

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) thoughts, what was at work at Göbekli Tepe could be understood as social practices in the form of ritualized work, serving to uphold group identities, knowledge, and the habitus of the hunter by constant occupation with important buildings and re-making of imagery. It is not the durability of stone that made it suitable for the preservation of 'cultural memory' at Göbekli Tepe, but the possibility to re-shape the image carriers continuously.

We have already referred to the chronological tendency towards fewer images on the pillars and the decline of

imagery centring on wild animals. Radiocarbon data and material culture hint at a period of use between 9600–8000 BCE for Göbekli Tepe (*Schmidt 2001; Dietrich* et al. 2013). The end of the site thus roughly coincides with the final establishment of plant cultivation (*Dietrich L. 2021*) and livestock husbandry (*Peters* et al. 2014.177) in the region. Within this slow process, animal images seem to have lost their importance successively, while anthropomorphic elements lasted until the end of Göbekli Tepe. The advent of food production could well have made the knowledge and the acts of learning associated with the site obsolete, in a world that now was transformed irrevocably by human actors.

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