

Göbekli Tepe, Southeastern Turkey. A Preliminary Report on the 1995-1999 Excavations.

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Résumé

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Abstract

The PPN mound of Göbekli Tepe is situated on top of a mountain north of the Harran plain, near the town of Sanliurfa in Southeastern Turkey. No comparable site is known so far in the Near East in terms of the topographical setting, its megalithic architecture, large scale stone sculptures and several other unusual items. The importance of the religious function of this site can hardly be denied. To the common model of Early Village Farming Communities of the Near East, molded by ecological and economical factors, Göbekli Tepe offers a quite different point of view.

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GÖBEKLI TEPE, SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 1995-1999 EXCAVATIONS

K. SCHMIDT

Abstract : *The PPN mound of Göbekli Tepe is situated on top of a mountain north of the Harran plain, near the town of Şanlıurfa in Southeastern Turkey. No comparable site is known so far in the Near East in terms of the topographical setting, its megalithic architecture, large scale stone sculptures and several other unusual items. The importance of the religious function of this site can hardly be denied. To the common model of Early Village Farming Communities of the Near East, molded by ecological and economical factors, Göbekli Tepe offers a quite different point of view.*

Résumé : *Le tell PPN de Göbekli Tepe est situé au sommet d'une montagne de la plaine de Harran, près de la ville de Şanlıurfa au Sud-Est de la Turquie. Aucun site comparable sur le plan de sa localisation topographique, de son architecture mégalithique, de ses sculptures sur pierre de grande échelle, et d'autres objets très inhabituels, n'est connu à ce jour au Proche-Orient. L'importance de la fonction religieuse de ce site peut difficilement être niée. Au contraire du modèle habituel des premières communautés villageoises, qui répondent à des facteurs écologiques et économiques, Göbekli Tepe frappe par son aspect très différent.*

Key-Words : *Upper Mesopotamia, Fertile Crescent, Golden Triangle, PPN, Neolithization, Megaliths, Pillars, Religion.*

Mots Clefs : *Haute Mésopotamie, Croissant fertile, Triangle d'Or, PPN, Néolithisation, Mégalithes, Piliers, Religion.*

INTRODUCTION

The mound of Göbekli Tepe, northeast of the town of Şanlıurfa in Upper Mesopotamia, was first mentioned by Peter Benedict in his article "Survey Work in Southeastern Anatolia"¹, which was included in the monograph resulting from the 1963-1972 work of the Joint Istanbul-Chicago Universities' Prehistoric Research in Southeastern Anatolia². Benedict reported about the site numbered as V 52/1 : "A complex of round-topped knolls of red earth with slight depressions between, located on a high limestone ridge trending SE. The

ridge is otherwise barren of soil. The overall diameter of knolls is 150 m and the rocky red soil rises to 20 m above the limestone top. The two highest knolls have small cemeteries covering the top. The ridge lies at the end of a steep-sided grassy gully 2.5 km NE of village of Karaharabe. The ridge-top site and grassy W slopes are littered with flint artifacts. No water in vicinity"³. Two pages later he counted his collection of artefacts : 5 pottery sherds, not classifiable, 6 pieces of obsidian and 2,996 pieces of excellent quality flint."⁴

One has the feeling that Benedict was wondering himself about his observations, but his questions about the real struc-

1. BENEDICT, 1980.

2. ÇAMBEL and BRAIDWOOD, 1980.

3. BENEDICT, 1980 : 179.

4. *Ibid.* : 181.



Fig. 1 : The mound of Göbekli Tepe from Southwest.

ture of the “knolls” on top of the limestone ridge can be found only between the lines. The site of Çayönü, for example, which also was reported for the first time in that survey report, was called a mound by Benedict, with a height of 3-4m⁵. It is quite obvious that Benedict didn't expect a pre-pottery mound of such a size as Göbekli Tepe, and not in such a position in the landscape. The large limestone slabs covering the knolls he could only understand them as the remains of a cemetery.

The time was not ripe to recognize the real importance of this site. Excavations following the Joint Istanbul-Chicago Survey were concentrated on Çayönü, an important and unexpected site in view of its elaborate architecture. Göbekli Tepe passed into oblivion, and it seems quite clear that no archaeologist returned to the site until the author's first visit in 1994⁶. The “knolls” of red earth could easily be recognized as an artificial mound (fig. 1), a höyük or tepe in Turkish or a tell in Arabic. It is a compact mound, but its surface is structured by depressions in several peaks, the “knolls” of Benedict's report. With the knowledge of Çayönü⁷ and Nevalı Çori⁸, it was easy to recognize in the large limestone slabs smashed fragments of PPN megalithic architecture. Often fragments of large T-shaped pillars, typical for the terrazzo building at Nevalı Çori, could be identified, some of it with the typical reliefs of the so-called “ties”, arms and fingers⁹. It was not only its size nor its unusual topographical setting that makes

Göbekli Tepe outstanding compared to other Neolithic sites : the limestone slabs and pillar fragments, and even large-scale sculptures, found on the surface during the first visits, lay all over the mound, indicating that the entire area had been used for the construction of megalithic architecture, not just a specific part of it. The function of these buildings can only be characterized as associated with ritual purposes, and no serious claim for domestic use is tenable. It is clear that Göbekli Tepe was not an early Neolithic settlement with some ritual buildings, but that the whole site served a mainly ritual function. It was a mountain sanctuary¹⁰.

It overlooks the springs of the Balikh to the east (called Cülap çay in the region), the Harran plain to the south and the hills around Urfa to the west and north. Coming from Mardin, Göbekli Tepe is a dominating landmark for a distance of more than 20 km.

Up to 1999 five campaigns of excavations were undertaken by the Museum of Şanlıurfa and the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul. The excavations were located at the southeastern peak, at the southeastern and the southern slopes, and at several areas on the limestone plateaus around the mound (fig. 2).

Several preliminary reports have been published about the excavations so far¹¹. The focus of these reports centered on the sculptures and the reliefs depicted on the T-shaped pillars, which are characteristic for all exposed layers (figs. 3, 4). Beyond a general evaluation of the site, some brief observations about the lithic industry are included in the current article.

GÖBEKLI TEPE : A RITUAL CENTER

Since Göbekli Tepe is a place that is not comparable with the very large range of known Neolithic sites in the Near East, this report will be a little speculative in some aspects. It is not possible to lay down exactly essential data as is usual in scientific reports. It is not due to insufficient work, but to the specific situation at Göbekli Tepe. Only buildings of unexpected size have been unearthed so far, buildings buried intentionally by up to 3 m of earth fill¹²; till now, no

5. BENEDICT, 1980 : 169 R55/1.

6. Comp. the quotation in HOURS *et al.*, 1994 : 144.

7. Comp. HOURS *et al.*, 1994.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Comp. BEILE-BOHN *et al.*, 1998 : fig. 28.

10. Comp. SCHMIDT, 1995.

11. BEILE-BOHN *et al.*, 1988; HAUPTMANN, 1999a-c; HAUPTMANN and SCHMIDT, 2000; SCHMIDT, 1995, 1997, 1997-1998, 1998a-c, 1999a et b, 2000a et b.

12. Observations confirmed e.g. by Catherine Kuzucuoğlu during a visit at the site in 1999; comp. ÖZDOĞAN and ÖZDOĞAN, 1998.

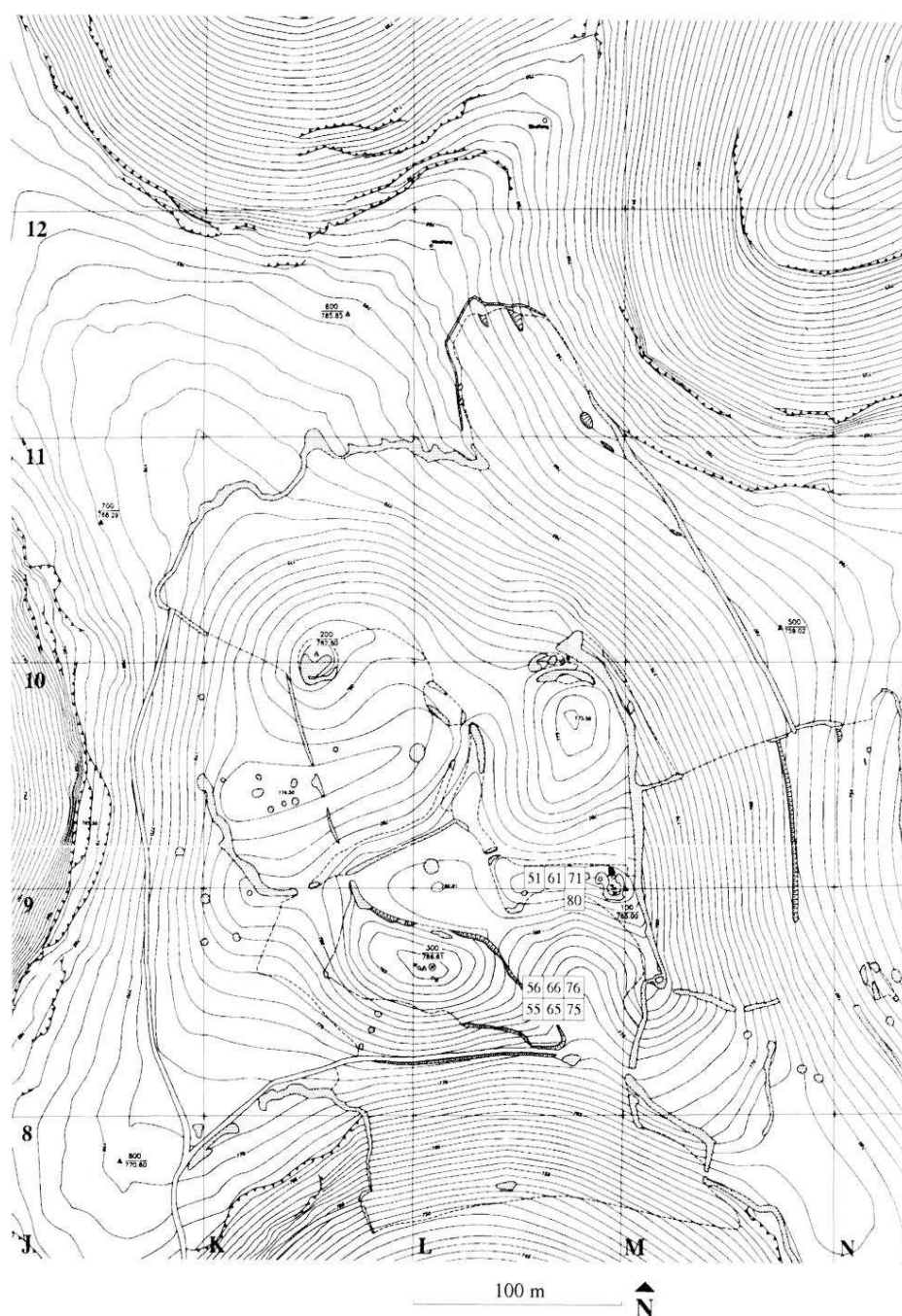


Fig. 2 : *Göbekli Tepe, the excavated areas.*

structures below the fill had been exposed. Therefore no sealed deposits have been encountered that would allow one to determine exactly specific levels or layers. Also, since there is no connection so far between the three excavation areas at the southeastern peak and the southern and southeastern slopes, a continuous numbering of the several layers is not yet possible.

The analysis of the animal bones revealed a rich fauna of wild species, including wild cattle, wild ass, gazelle and wild pig, but no domesticated species have been identified¹³. The same is the case with the botanical remains. Only wild species.

¹³. For the analysis of the material 1995-1998 of all trenches, see von den DRIESCH and PETERS, 1999; PETERS *et al.*, 2000.



Fig. 3 : Göbekli Tepe, structure A, pillars 1 and 2.

such as almond and pistachio, as well as wild grain, have been found up to this point¹⁴. The grassy slopes reported by Benedict are still today large areas of the occurrence of wild cereals. Karacadağ, a volcanic mountain favored as the homeland of cultivated einkorn by genetic analysis¹⁵, is on the horizon to the northeast from Göbekli Tepe.

Göbekli Tepe, at least in the lower layers with the megalithic pillars, was not really Neolithic, but Proto-Neolithic or Mesolithic, if one wants to use an old-fashioned definition in Near Eastern Archaeology. The construction of the megalithic buildings was accomplished by a hunter-gatherer society. The largest T-pillar, found still in a quarry situation on the northern plateau, has a weight of more than 50 tons¹⁶. How could the manpower be amassed at the mound to move such pillars? It seems obvious that only organized meetings of several groups of hunter-gatherers from the territories around Göbekli Tepe would be able to provide the capabilities for such an undertaking, meetings rooted in a ritual background.

14. NEEF, in prep.; the samples of carbonized seeds analysed by Neef are small and restricted to the lower levels of trench L9-65, excavation 1997.

15. HEUN *et al.*, 1997.

16. DEUTSCHES ARCHÄOLOGISCHES INSTITUT, 1997 : 551, fig. 1.



Fig. 4 : Göbekli Tepe, structure B, pillars 9 and 10.

The work in the quarries, which are located all over the limestone plateaus around Göbekli Tepe, and the construction of the megalithic enclosures could not have been done in a few days by a few people. Hunter-gatherers living at Göbekli Tepe for an extended time would have caused a serious over-exploitation of the local natural resources. So the hypothesis emerges that one solution was developed in the controlled use of some of the resources, mainly the cereals, which led to incipient cultivation. Its starting point was not a natural disaster, from which people could have escaped to other regions. Their idea, to meet again and again at a specific place, seems to be a basic factor of the origins of neolithization.

Beyond "ritual" we don't know the exact function of the site, the exact time range of its buildings and the distances represented across territories from which people came for the

meetings at the site. We don't know what ideas were intended to be expressed by the T-shaped pillars, which clearly seem to have an anthropomorphic design: what gods or demons or ancestors were visited at that place? We don't know if Göbekli Tepe really is a unique site, or if similar unexplored sites exist in other regions, and how far apart such places would be? But we know that the events at Göbekli Tepe have a terminus *ante quem* with the final LPPNB, and today we also know that Jacques Cauvin's title *La naissance des divinités – La naissance de l'agriculture*¹⁷, Cauvin's connection between the profane and the sacred, is a perfect guide to understand the change of the hunter-gatherer societies to the Neolithic way of life, not only through economic or ecological reasons, but by the impact of a transcendental sphere. This is far from the Early Village Farming Communities of Robert Braidwood, and V. Gordon Childe's Neolithic Revolution is getting a new facet, the religious one.

The excavated areas, ten 9 × 9 m trenches, are too small to detect clearly identifiable borders of the buildings exposed. The architectural remains of the younger layers are restricted to stone walls and rooms, all with terrazzo floors and some strange installations including large stone rings and T-shaped pillars (in total thirteen in situ so far), but without fireplaces, ovens, or other usual traces of "domestic life". It is the same with the "Löwenpfeilergebäude" ("Lion Pillar Building")¹⁸. Despite its name, it seems most probable that it is not a complete building but a cellar-like structure sunk into the mound. Regardless of the mentioned size of the buildings of the younger layers, they seem to be miniatures of the structures exposed in the lower layers, found at the southern slope. The average height of the thirteen pillars found so far in the younger layers is only 1.5 m the 16 pillars exposed *in situ* in the lower layers seem to be of more than 3 m height (most of them have not been completely excavated). Only two pillars of the younger layers show reliefs (lions), but reliefs are visible on eight pillars from the lower layers. One of the most important results of the 1999 season was that we now understand that the pillars of the older layers, exposed in trenches L9-66/76 (fig. 5), don't belong to the building complex called the "Schlangenpfeilergebäude" ("Snake Pillar Building")¹⁹, but to separate structures, which seem to form round or oval enclosures²⁰.

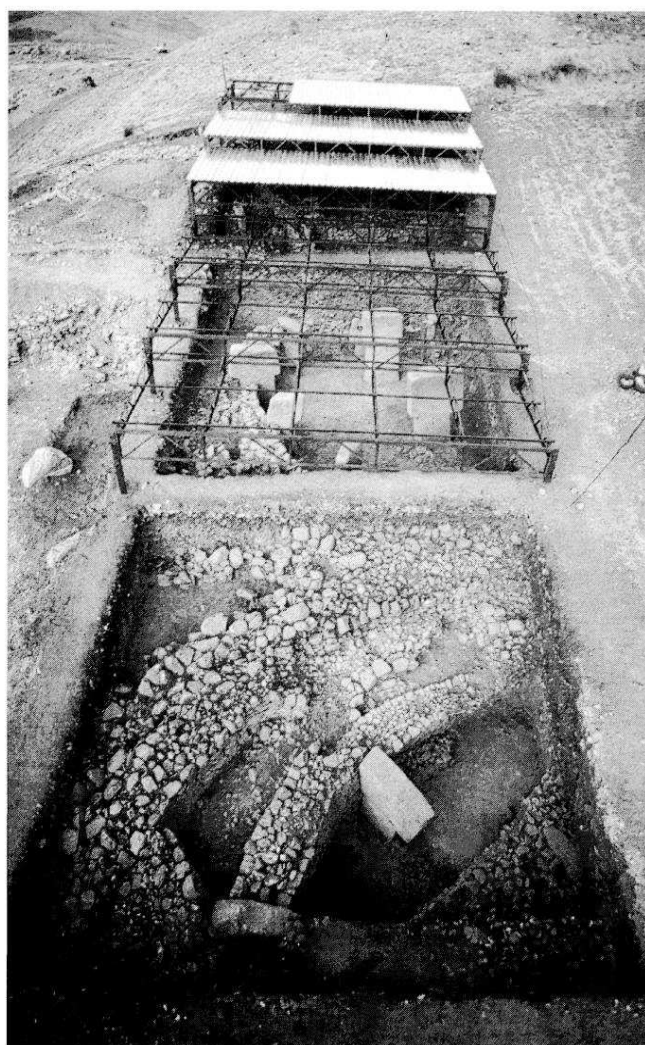


Fig. 5 : Göbekli Tepe, the lower layers in area L9-66/76 from east.

STRUCTURE A

The "Schlangenpfeilergebäude", excavated in 1996 and 1997 in Trenches L9-65/75, is now designated as Structure A (fig. 6). It includes Pillar 1 with five snakes, a net of snakes (?) and a ram (?); Pillar 2 with a bull, a fox, a crane and a bucranium (fig. 3); and Pillar 5 with a snake²¹. Pillars 3 and 4 are without reliefs. Several sculptures were found in the fill debris²². Two 14C dates from the fill are around 9000 BC (cal.)²³. The pillars of Structure A seem to be part of an

17. CAUVIN J., 1997.

18. E.g. SCHMIDT, 1998a : 30, fig. 8-10.

19. *Ibid.* : 32, fig. 11-17.

20. A detailed documentation of the architectural remains of Göbekli Tepe is undertaken by D. Kurapkat and A. Stiehler, Institut für Baugeschichte, University of Karlsruhe : in prep.

21. For references to reliefs and sculptures see catalogue : SCHMIDT, 1999a.

22. Comp. the catalogue SCHMIDT, 1999a.

23. KROMER and SCHMIDT, 1998 : due to the lack of carbonized materials, no more c14-dates are available until now.

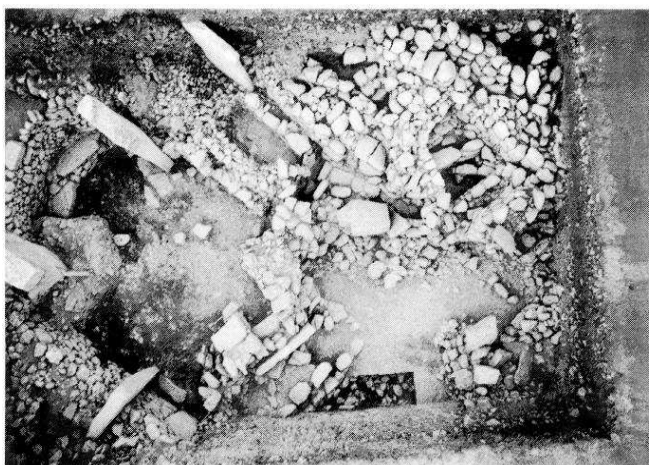


Fig. 6 : Göbekli Tepe, area L9-65/75, Structure A, vertical view 1997.

oval or square enclosure, whose southeastern section is deeply disturbed. The floor has not yet been exposed, but a bench between Pillars 1 and 2 was reached at a depth of 3.15 m below the pillars' tops.

STRUCTURE B

The 1998-1999 excavations were concentrated in the areas north of Structure A in Trenches L9-66/76. Pillars 6 to 9 were found in 1998, and Pillars 10, 14, 15 and 16 were added in 1999. The earlier assumption that the new pillars belonged to the same structure as the "Schlangenteilergebäude" couldn't be confirmed (fig. 7). Pillars 9 and 10 (fig. 4), each with a relief of a fox, are in the center of a second enclosure. It is made of stone walls and included Pillars 6, 7, 8, 14, 15 and 16. A floor or a bench has not yet been reached, but it is presumed that the floor level will be found at a depth of more than 1m below the level reached so far. On the southern face of Pillar 6 there are the reliefs of a reptile and a snake. On Pillar 14, mostly hidden by the enclosure walls, there is an as yet undeterminable relief. Pillars 6, 7, 8, 14, and 16 were clearly set radially in relation to the two pillars in the center. Thus the orientation of Pillar 15, which was oriented parallel to Pillars 9 and 10, was surprising. Pillar 15 was found just at the end of the excavations while cleaning the western profile of the trench. Its unexpected orientation seems to be repeated by Pillars 3 and 4 of Structure A. In Structure B a pillar is missing at the wall opposite to Pillar 15. It may be hidden within the balk or may have been destroyed by the activities of later farmers.

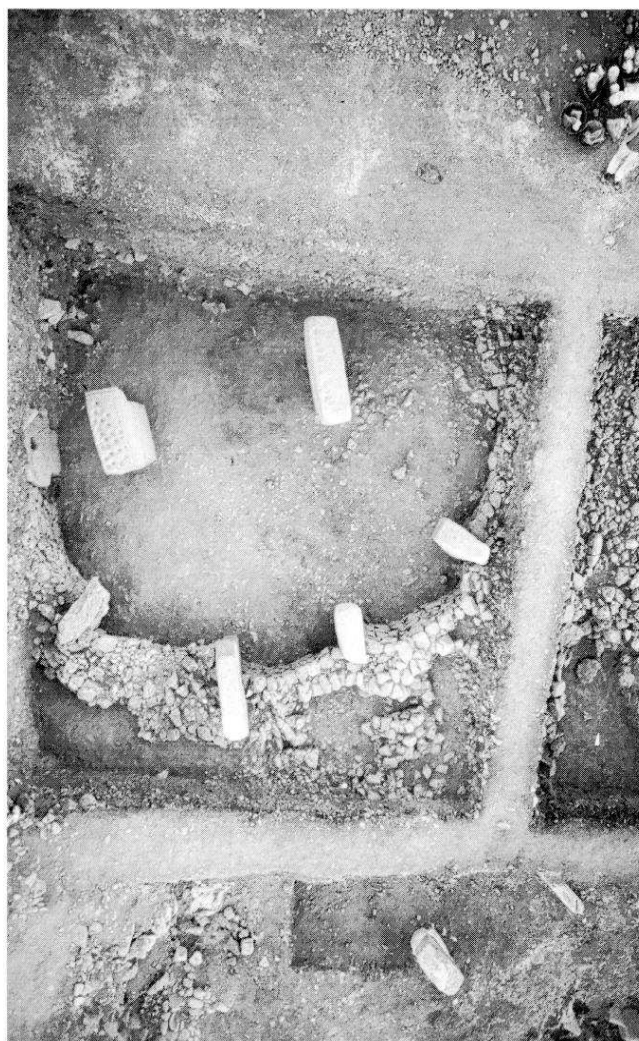


Fig. 7 : Göbekli Tepe, area L9-66, Structure B, vertical view 1999.

STRUCTURE C

East of Structure B, the western section of a third enclosure that included Pillars 11, 12 and 13 was found (fig. 8). Pillars 11 and 13 are mostly hidden by secondary walls, and so far there are no evident reliefs. But there are several reliefs on the southeastern face of Pillar 12, which has been excavated to about half of its predicted length²⁴. On the T-shaped upper part there are five birds trapped in a net (or wild asiatic asses jumping over rocks, as recently proposed by von den Driesch), suggesting a reduced portrayal animals. This is the first occurrence of a pillar in the earlier layers with reliefs on the T-head's surface.

24. SCHMIDT, 1999b : fig. 7.



Fig. 8 : Göbekli Tepe, area L9-76, Structure C, vertical view 1999.

On the pillar's shaft there is a threatening boar baring its teeth. Just in front of it a sculpture of a similar boar was found in the fill²⁵. On the pillar, below the boar, a fox is depicted, but only its head could be revealed, as a secondary terrazzo floor, connected with the wall partially covering the pillar, was reached at the level of the body of the fox.

All animals are depicted as male, and no clearly female symbol is visible up to this point²⁶. All three structures are directly under the surface, and it can be demonstrated that clearly they were not filled by erosion. The three enclosures, decorated with sculptures and reliefs, should most probably be regarded as open *temenoi* without roofs. In later building layers, a certain reduction of size and a transformation of the enclosures to rooms with small pillars are observable. But the pillars still have the characteristic T-shape of the earlier layers.

The lithic industry of the fill of the enclosures of the earlier layers seems to be no later than PPNB. Except for some medieval sherds from the uppermost levels, finds from younger periods do not occur. Since several PPNA types such as el-Khiam, Helwan and Aswad points are observable in the fill, a pre-PPNB date for the *temenoi* cannot be excluded; it even seems to be most probable.

But a preliminary analysis of the lithics is impaired by the situation that no "sealed deposits" had been unearthed so far. All the material belongs to the fill of the buildings, which can not be confidently attributed to a certain level or layer.

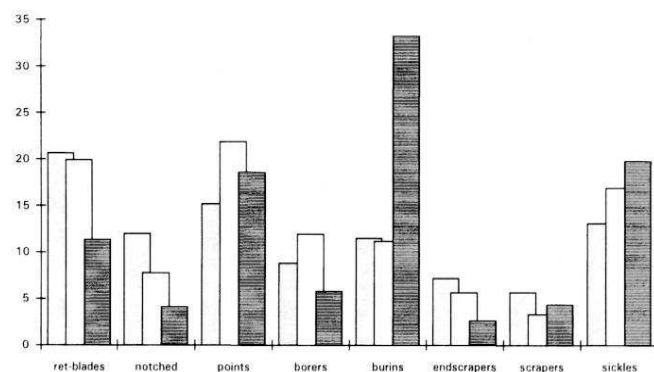


Fig. 9 : Göbekli Tepe, percentages of tool groups, columns from left to right : trenches L9-56, L9-66 and L10-51.

Nevertheless, some general observations can be made. The primary production used typical naviform cores. All stages of production are well represented in the material²⁷. This is surprising, as no flint sources exist on the limestone plateau: all the nodules had to be transported from the nearby valleys to the top of the plateau. Obsidian was not used except for some rare examples of blade fragments, which are very rare.

The distribution of tool classes is shown in figure 9, which includes the percentages of three different trenches. In Trenches L10-51 and L9-56 architecture of younger layers was exposed, and in Trench L9-66 (Structure B) the material is from the older building layers. The material of the three trenches is not strictly stratified but comes from the fill of the exposed buildings. Even so there is a general chronological order as follows: clearly the youngest fill was exposed in Trench L10-51 on top of the mound, sediments of middle age range in Trench L9-56, and the oldest material came from Trench L9-66.

Some observations can be stressed. The percentages of retouched blades, notched pieces and endscrapers are high in L9-66, medium in L9-56 and low in L10-51. Burins are conspicuously high in L10-51. The sickles are quite interesting, low quantities in the older material and high in the younger. If one accepts the general attribution of pieces with gloss to cereals (despite all the uncertainties regarding other materials producing similar traces of use wear), the increase of sickles could easily be associated with the idea of incipient cultivation at Göbekli Tepe.

25. SCHMIDT, 1999b : fig. 8.

26. The incision of a naked woman on the bench between the lion-pillars should be secondary, comp. SCHMIDT, 1997-1998 : 166, fig. 19.

27. A detailed report in preparation.

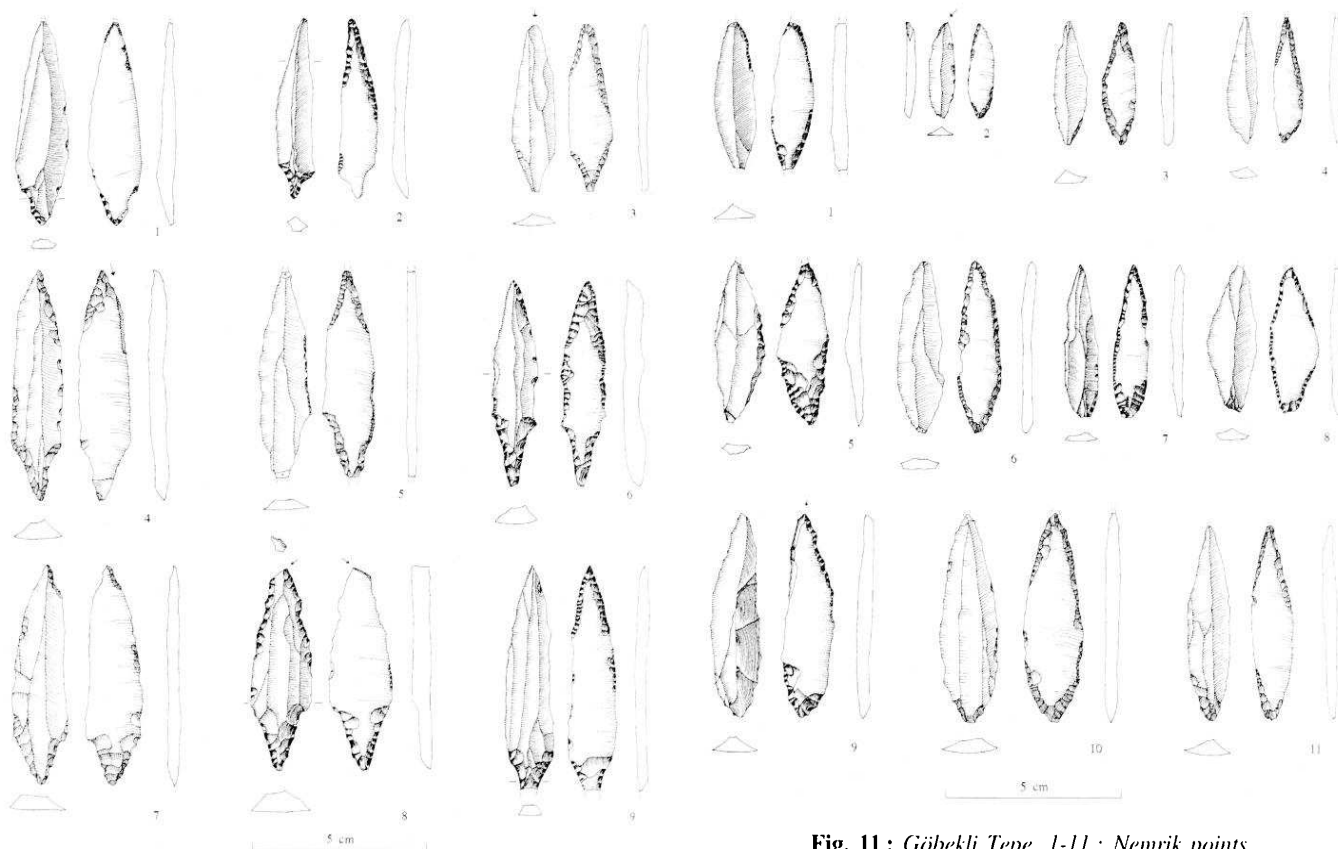


Fig. 10 : Göbekli Tepe, 1-9 : Byblos points.

Fig. 11 : Göbekli Tepe, 1-11 : Nemrik points.

The percentages of points follow different lines. They range from 15 to 23 % with a maximum in L9-56. Because the group of the points is most indicative for chronological and chorological questions, additional details are presented here. Byblos (fig. 10) and Nemrik points (fig. 11) are quite common. Large Byblos points (the BAI Group of S.K. Kozłowski²⁸) occur, but they are quite rare; smaller examples are more common (fig. 10), often with a gradual approach to the Nemrik points. Only two examples of El-Khiam have been found so far²⁹.

Nevalı Çori points exist, but they are quite rare. It is surprising, regarding the close similarities of the iconography of Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori. Nevalı Çori points are quite common in the lower levels of the eponymous site³⁰. There, sculptures and T-shaped pillars were found³¹ that offer close comparisons to the younger layers of Göbekli Tepe. Nevalı Çori points seem to be also common at Jerf el Ahmar on the

Syrian Euphrates³². There, a Mureybetian settlement with houses with unusual installations was excavated³³. Incised figurative decorations on several shaft straighteners and stone slabs from Jerf el-Ahmar again offer close iconographic comparisons to Göbekli Tepe. Since Nevalı Çori layers I and II are EPPNB and Jerf el-Ahmar is a PPNA site, the low number of Nevalı Çori points at Göbekli Tepe should not be due to chronological reasons.

The eastern connection of numerous Nemrik points at Göbekli Tepe introduces a possible chorological explanation.

Helwan points are common at Göbekli Tepe, increasing in the lower levels of the fill of Structures A-C (fig. 12). The Aswad variant also occurs³⁴. The presence of Helwan points should clearly attest the existence of PPNA layers in the lower part of the mound, but it has not yet been possible to show which building layers can be precisely dated to that period. But the two radiocarbon dates of around 9000 BC (cal.) mentioned earlier are well in accordance with the appearance of Helwan points.

28. KOZŁOWSKI, 1999.

29. SCHMIDT, 1998a : fig. 4.1.

30. SCHMIDT, 1994 : 242, fig. 6-8.

31. HAUPTMANN, 1999a-c.

32. STORDEUR, pers. com.

33. STORDEUR, 1998, 1999; STORDEUR and JAMMOUS, 1995; STORDEUR *et al.*, 1996, 1997.

34. SCHMIDT, 1998a : 25, fig. 4.7.

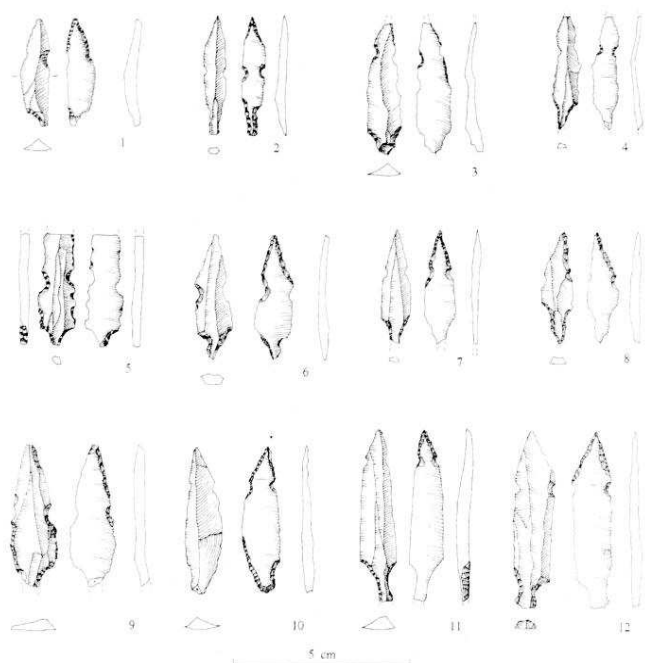


Fig. 12 : Göbekli Tepe, 1-12 : Helwan points.

Distinctive late PPNB types such as Çayönü tools – made exclusively on obsidian – or Palmyra³⁵, Amuq, or Ugarit points are not known from Göbekli Tepe. Flat retouched pieces are very unusual. Altogether this suggests strongly that the end of Göbekli Tepe is to be dated before the LPPNB. Further investigations might change that impression, but the entire lack of pottery (except for the medieval sherds) at least demonstrates an end of Göbekli Tepe before the PN period.

S.K. Kozłowski introduced “The Eastern Wing of the Fertile Crescent” to the discussion as a counterpart of the western Levantine area. He distinguishes three main, contemporary traditions : the northern Trialetian, the Levantine Khiamian, and the eastern Nemrikian. The distribution maps show a core area, a region touched by all three traditions : the region around Urfa. With incomplete knowledge of the recent excavations at Göbekli Tepe, Kozłowski published maps that could be used as a working hypothesis to determine the geographical sphere from which people came to Göbekli Tepe to their “Olympic” meetings : from far away in all directions. The few el-Khiam points, the Aswad and Nevalı Çori points, and the large numbers of Nemrik points perhaps can be used as indicators for such a research strategy to look for the “homelands” or territories represented by the artifacts found at Göbekli Tepe, a strategy used by Kozłowski in drawing

the maps in his “Eastern Wing”. But it seems a little too early to draw the final distribution maps of the early Holocene cultural spheres, for the research is not ready to paint a complete family tree with all the roots, branches and twigs of the Neolithic *fossiles directeurs*. Northeastern Turkey remains virtually unexplored (not only in the Neolithic period), and in the Caucasian and Pontic areas one might suppose that research took little notice of sites without pottery not located in caves.

O. Aurenche and S.K. Kozłowski added a further geographical term to the Neolithic map of the Near East, the “triangle d’or”³⁶. It includes the Taurus region between the Upper Euphrates and the Upper Tigris, the Balikh and the Upper Khabur. It is just the region, which was called Upper Mesopotamia by H. Louis³⁷, where favorable climatic conditions prevail and important sites like Çayönü or Nevalı Çori were discovered. Again, Göbekli Tepe fits well into the picture, for it is in the “heart” of the golden triangle. As unsatisfying as our knowledge about Göbekli Tepe is at the moment, it is a site that will develop new impetus for the discovery of comparable Early Neolithic ritual centers in the Near East.

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Klaus SCHMIDT

Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte
Kochstr. 4/18
D-91054 Erlangen

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35. SCHMIDT and BEILE-BOHN, 1996.

36. AURENCHÉ and KOZŁOWSKI, 1999 : fig. 13.

37. LOUIS, 1985 : 268.

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