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GÖBEKLI TEPE, TURKEY
A brief summary of research at a new World Heritage Site (2015–2019)

Istanbul Department of the DAI
by Lee Clare

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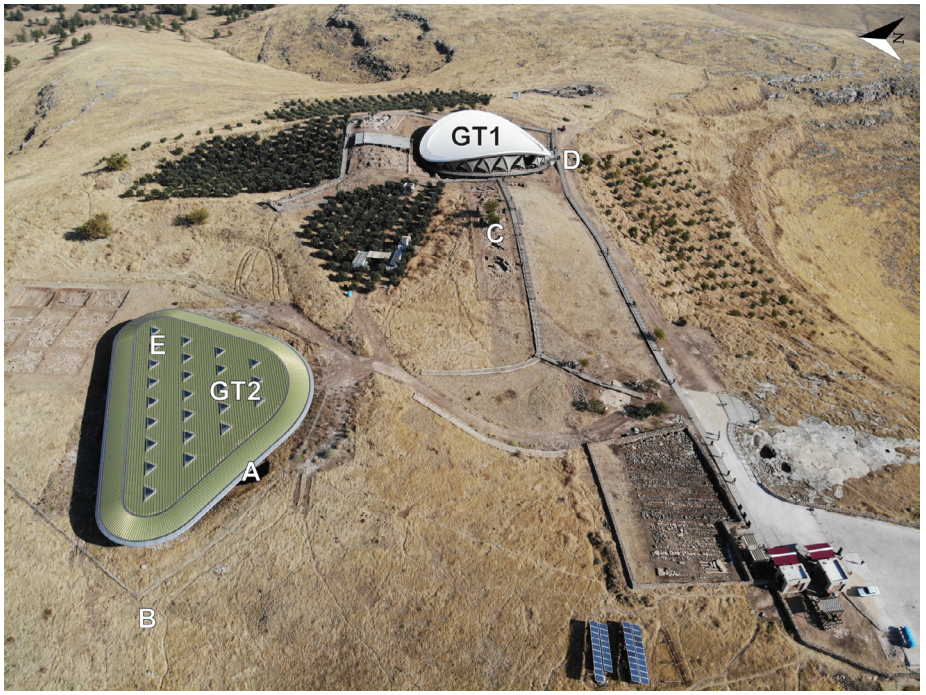
Göbekli Tepe (~9.500–8.000 calBC) is a prehistoric site in Southeast Turkey that dates back to an early stage in the transition from hunter-gathering to farming economies in the Near East. Research undertaken in the period 2015–2019 has included the excavation of deep-soundings and the re-evaluation of some two decades of excavation records. This work is leading to a revision of former interpretations of the prehistoric site which still fuel the popular media image of Göbekli Tepe as home to the »World's First Temples«.

1 Upper Mesopotamia, which today includes modern-day southeastern Turkey, northern Syria and northern parts of Iraq, was one of several core zones which saw the emergence of Neolithic lifeways in the tenth and ninth millennia calBC. It was from these core areas that subsequent centuries saw the gradual dissemination of the Neolithic into adjacent parts of Anatolia, the Middle East and beyond. Today, the tell site of Göbekli Tepe ↗, located some 90 kilometres east of the Euphrates in Şanlıurfa province, is a key



1 Aerial view of Göbekli Tepe from the west showing the two shelters constructed over the southeastern (GT1) and northwestern (GT2) excavations with locations of the features mentioned in the text. A: domestic contexts (K10-13/K10-23); B: round-oval agglutinative round house structures (DR2); C: southern knoll with excavated rectangular structures; D: subfloor burial (DR1); E: carved »cistern« in bedrock. (Photo: Göbekli Tepe Project, 20.11.2019)

archaeological site for studying the manifold processes in the run-up to plant and animal domestication and the emergence of the Neolithic in this region.

2 Soon after the initiation of excavations in 1995, Göbekli Tepe soon found itself interpreted as a purely ritual site, a conclusion based on three main observations: 1) the presence of »special buildings« with elaborately carved monolithic T-shaped pillars; 2) the absence of domestic structures; and 3) its lack of reliable water sources. More remarkable still was the realization that Göbekli Tepe produced no evidence for domesticated plants and animal species; in other words, the communities responsible for the construction of the special buildings were still living as hunters and foragers.

3 The interpretation of Göbekli Tepe as a mountaintop sanctuary that was constructed by huntergatherers soon prompted a fitting narrative. At ritually significant times in their calendar, it was argued, different groups living in its catchment congregated at this natural landmark to construct the special buildings. Further, the efforts deemed necessary for construction, including the freeing-up of labour and the supply of victuals to the hungry workforce, would have presented huntergatherer economies with unprecedented challenges which, it was postulated, could only be met by the advantages afforded by plant and animal domestication. Subsequently, religious zeal was catapulted to the fore as a serious contender among the potential triggers for Neolithisation (domestication), an idea that was ground-breaking at the time because it contradicted earlier notions that (organized) religion only emerged much later in economically and socially »more advanced« societies.

4 Meanwhile, the construction narrative of the special buildings at Göbekli Tepe as a series of religiously-motivated events has featured in innumerable publications by members of the research team. Therefore, it was the archaeologists themselves who delivered and subsequently cultivated the now popular opinion that Göbekli Tepe is the site of the »World's First Temples«. Remarkably, in the last three years, attempts made by the media to reinforce this hypothesis have even included references to Göbekli Tepe as the »Zero Point in Time«. This paradigm will doubtlessly prove difficult to dispel, especially given its prominence in current marketing strategies

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2 Left: aerial view of the sounding spanning trenches K10-13 and K10-23 showing small agglomerative round-oval structures (top left) and a slightly larger round-oval building (right) bordering an activity zone with hearth (cf. Fig. 1, A). Right: a selection of bone tools recovered from the same sounding. (Photos: N. Becker, Göbekli Tepe Project, May 2015)

3 Left: view towards the west along a channel excavated for a rainwater drainage pipe for the shelter GT2. Right: overview of agglomerated (round-oval) structures revealed in this same trench (cf. Fig. 1, B). (Photos: L. Clare, Göbekli Tepe Project, September/October 2017)

around the UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, this is the situation in which we currently find ourselves: New insights from several deep-soundings excavated in the reporting period for the anchor points of the two recently constructed protective shelters have exposed the weaknesses of the temple-narrative, meaning that a revision of the popular scientific view is now unavoidable (Fig. 1). Specifically, the latest observations relate to the existence of domestic buildings and the harvesting and distribution of rainwater at Göbekli Tepe. Additionally, through an increased emphasis on building archaeology studies, more details pertaining to the functions and biographies of the different buildings are emerging.

Domestic contexts

5 A deep-sounding excavated in 2015 and 2016 straddling the trenches K10-13 and K10-23 in the northwestern part of the site revealed, among other features, a series of round-oval structures in an agglutinative arrangement and a slightly larger, multi-phase round-oval building (Fig. 1: A. Fig. 2). These buildings, which had been constructed upon or just above the natural limestone bedrock, bordered a small activity area that produced a sequence of hearths and evidence for stone and bone bead production with unusually high frequencies of bone tools. Although ^{14}C (AMS) ages are not yet available, building archaeological and stratigraphic considerations in combination with the recovered flint tool assemblage suggest that they belong to an early occupation phase at Göbekli Tepe, most likely coinciding with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA ~9.500–8.700 calBC).

6 Remarkably, in the following year (2017) the remains of several further agglutinated round house structures appeared on the nearby western slope of the mound during the excavation of a narrow channel for a rainwater drainage pipe (Fig. 1: B. Fig. 3). It is likely that these buildings, which were also constructed just above the natural bedrock, are also of PPNA age, though it remains unclear whether they were contemporaneous with the structures from the aforementioned deep-sounding.

7 In the subsequent Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (EPPNB) period (~8.700–8.200 calBC) domestic activities continued at Göbekli Tepe. Now, in addition

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4 Aerial view of rectangular-shaped structures on the southern knoll of the mound excavated by Klaus Schmidt (cf. Fig. 1, C). (Photo: M. Gülebak, Göbekli Tepe Project, May 2016)

5 Kidney-shaped burial cut discovered in a rectangular space (room) prior to excavation (left) and post-excavation (right) (cf. Fig. 1, D). (Photos: C. Lelek Tvetmarken, Göbekli Tepe Project, October 2017)

to the round-oval structures characteristic of the PPNA, the first half of the ninth millennium calBC saw the gradual appearance of more rectangular-shaped structures (Fig. 1: C. Fig. 4). Although known from earliest excavations at Göbekli Tepe in the 1990s, these buildings have never before featured prominently in published research (with the exception of a small number of building archaeological studies), attention instead focusing on the large round-oval special buildings. Remarkably, recent fieldwork is beginning to shed more light on these edifices, even suggesting that in some cases the round-oval spaces were intentionally modified to rectangular over time. Additionally, the number of agglutinating rectangular structures discovered on the slopes and knolls of Göbekli Tepe since 1995 and the continuity of space, as indicated by the conversion of round into rectangular spaces, could point to a dense domestic occupation at the site in the EPPNB, parallels for which are so far unknown in the Şanlıurfa region. Building archaeological and absolute chronological studies will illuminate this important chapter of Göbekli Tepe in the coming years.

8 The proposed function of the round-oval and rectangular structures as domestic units find considerable support from the studied lithic assemblage at Göbekli Tepe, the compositions of which (tool types) are wholly characteristic of domestic contexts. Additionally, in autumn 2017 a multi-phase rectangular building partially exposed during the excavation of a further rainwater drainage pipe channel in the southeastern part of the site revealed a kidney-shaped sub-floor burial cut (Fig. 1: D). Such interments are a common feature of PPN domestic sites and in the case of the Göbekli Tepe burial the preliminary analyses have shown that it contained the disturbed remains of at least three individuals (Fig. 5).

Rainwater-harvesting

9 A feature from another sounding excavated in 2015 in the northwestern part of the mound could also point to the continued presence of huntergatherer populations at Göbekli Tepe. Located just 15 metres east of building H in the northwest part of the site, a sizeable and still only partially excavated rock-carved pit with a diameter of some 8.0 metres and a depth of 2.8 metres

6 A large pit carved into the limestone bedrock is so far unique and might have served as a cistern for the collection of rainwater (cf. Fig. 1, E). (Photo: L. Clare, Göbekli Tepe Project, April 2015)

came to light in trench K10-55 (Fig. 1: E. Fig. 6). At present, little is known about the function(s) of this feature, which was found to contain, among other things, large numbers of worked limestone slabs, in some places piled up nigh on to its full height; however, given the evidence of prehistoric »rainwater-harvesting« from the adjacent plateau, including carved channels and »cisterns« in the natural bedrock, its interpretation as a component in an on-site water-acquisition system is a distinct possibility. Support for this interpretation comes from nearby trench K10-35 where a sounding excavated by Klaus Schmidt in 2013 revealed a carved channel in the natural bedrock. Notably, this channel section, located just 12 metres to the west of the new »cistern«, had been carefully protected with a cover of limestone slabs.

Special buildings and site chronology

10 Since 2016, there has been a new and intensified focus on building archaeology at Göbekli Tepe. While previous studies continued to reveal the complex biographies of many of the excavated buildings, more recent fieldwork in 2018 and 2019 has been dedicated to the 3D-modelling and related building-archaeological studies of the special buildings A, B, C and D. Notably, these studies have incorporated absolute dating evidence from radiocarbon (AMS) measurements of organic residues from the mud-mortar of the buildings (which have proven far more homogeneous than those made previously on samples from their fill) to show that these multi-phase structures were much longer-lived than previously acknowledged; indeed, in some cases their final building phases are consistent with a construction date around the mid-ninth millennium calBC, which is in excess of five centuries after their initial foundation. Consequently, there is now a clear chronological overlap of the round-oval special buildings (Layer III after Schmidt; PPNA; ~9.500–8.700 calBC) and the rectangular structures (Layer II after Schmidt; EPPNB; ~8.700–8.200 calBC). This realization has led to the abandonment of Schmidt's tripartite chronological sequence for Göbekli Tepe which also included an uppermost Layer I (plough-horizon) (Fig. 7).

11 A second but no less serious insight from recent studies relates to the fill of the special buildings in the low-lying southeastern part of the site (main

7 Building D with an unexcavated area of fill between the two large T-shaped pillars. The fill is a dense matrix of limestone rubble interspersed with flint artefacts, animal and (small amounts of) human bone. Stratigraphic and architectural studies now suggest that the fill is comprised of settlement deposits which ›slipped‹ into the building from the higher-lying adjacent slopes of the mound. (Photo: L. Clare, Göbekli Tepe Project, September 2018)

excavation area). While previous conclusions postulated an intentional (ritually-motivated) backfilling of these structures at the close of their active use-lives as buildings, a review of the available evidence now suggests an inundation by displaced archaeological deposits from adjacent higher-lying knolls and slopes of the mound. This interpretation explains the source and the catchment of the debris, which as we now know contains mixed PPNA and PPNB materials, and the heterogeneity of previous radiocarbon measurements made on organic samples from this matrix. Details of the multiple slope slide events, as well as mitigation efforts undertaken by the prehistoric population to protect the special buildings, are an area of continued research.

World Heritage inscription

12 The 1st July 2018 saw the inscription of Göbekli Tepe in the UNESCO World Heritage List at the forty-second session of the World Heritage Committee in Manama, Bahrain. It is the eighteenth site in Turkey to be inscribed and alongside Hattusha (1986) and Pergamon (2014) the third UNESCO site with a research project based at the DAI's Istanbul Department. The inscription of Göbekli Tepe was the culmination of many months of dedicated work on the part of the General Directorate of Cultural Assets and Museums, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey, the Şanlıurfa Museum, and the German Archaeological Institute. In late 2018, the Turkish Ministry of Culture proclaimed 2019 »Göbekli Tepe Year« which – combined with the attention afforded by the UNESCO inscription – led to a very tangible increase in tourism with more than 400.000 visitors to the site in that year.

13 This brief summary of research (2015–2019) at Göbekli Tepe is based on recent and pending publications by members of the Göbekli Tepe research team.

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