



## The Göbekli Tepe excavations – Frequently Asked Questions

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*The following is a contribution from the official weblog of the Göbekli Tepe research project (<https://tepetelegrams.wordpress.com/>). Although the information contained is accurate in detail, you may consider referring also to our scientific publications for academic scopes. A list of the publications this post is based upon can be found at the end of the document. Most are freely available on the internet. If you cannot find a paper, or want to give us general feedback (always welcome) do not hesitate to write: [gt@dainst.de](mailto:gt@dainst.de).*

### ***An Early Neolithic Monumental Site in Turkey***

About 15 kilometres to the northeast of the modern metropolis of Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey, the tell of Göbekli Tepe is situated on the highest point of the barren Germuş mountain range. This mound with a height of 15 metres and an area of about 9 hectares is completely man-made – covering what has to be considered the earliest yet known monumental architecture constructed by humankind, raised by intentionally burying it about 12,000 years ago. Since 1995 annual excavation work has been conducted under the direction of Prof. Klaus Schmidt from the German Archaeological Institute. After his death in 2014 excavations were continued by his team led by Müslüm Ercan (Şanlıurfa Museum) and Lee Clare (German Archaeological Institute).

This document gathers answers to a number of questions frequently asked in the past and is intended to give a short overview on the Göbekli Tepe excavations and research results so far.

### **1. When and how were the prehistoric enclosures at Göbekli Tepe discovered?**

Göbekli Tepe has been known to archaeologists since the 1960s when an archaeological survey by a team from the Universities of Istanbul and Chicago, under the direction of Halet Çambel and Robert Braidwood, observed numerous flint artefacts littering the surface of the site. At this time the monumental architecture remained undetected, eventually to be discovered by Klaus Schmidt on his tour of important south-eastern Turkish Neolithic sites in 1994. In addition to the high density of flint tools and flakes, his eye was caught by large limestone blocks, which reminded him of the T-shaped heads of pillars excavated at Nevalı Çori, a Neolithic site just a few kilometres north of Göbekli Tepe, where he had been working for several years before. Excavations began at Göbekli Tepe in the very next year, at first with support of Adnan Mısır, then director of the Urfa Museum, and Harald Hauptmann, director of the Istanbul Department of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), with funding from the sponsoring society ArchaeNova, and later with financial backing from the German Research Foundation (DFG). Whereas at Nevalı Çori the T-shaped pillars were only observed in one special building with apparent ritual function, at Göbekli Tepe they were to all intents and purposes ubiquitous, immediately underscoring the significance of this Neolithic site.

### **2. What has been excavated at Göbekli Tepe, how are the enclosures constructed?**

What makes Göbekli Tepe so unique is the monumental Neolithic architecture discovered at the site. Installations comprise monolithic T-shaped pillars arranged in a circle around a central pair of larger (more than 5 metre tall and also T-shaped) pillars. While most are adorned with depictions of various animals (mainly smaller species of wild animals, including numerous birds, predators – especially fox – and spiders and insects) mostly in low- but sometimes in high-relief, several pillars also feature arms and hands, the latter of which can be described as positively human-like. In two examples the hands are shown resting on a belt, from which also hangs a loin cloth (also in low-relief). For this reason, the T-shaped pillars are interpreted as anthropomorphic statues. So far, four comparatively large circular enclosures with T-Pillars have been partially excavated (Enclosures A-D). In the case of two of these enclosures (C and D) their floors were fashioned through artificial smoothing of the

underlying natural rock, their central T-Pillars also placed into sleeves/pedestals carved from the rock. At least one of the enclosures (Enclosure B) features a lime-plaster floor (so-called Terrazzo floor), probably intended to mimic the natural rock floors found in other enclosures. A further installation (Enclosure E) has been identified on the western plateau of the site; although none of its pillars were preserved, their carved foundations, including the sleeves for its central pillars, are clearly visible. A sixth, seventh and eighth enclosure (F, G and H) were recently discovered and are currently under excavation.

### **3. How old are the monumental enclosures at Göbekli Tepe and how are they dated?**

From 'traditional' archaeological dating methods, i.e. typological comparison of stone artefacts and other finds, we know that the thick archaeological deposits at Göbekli Tepe belong to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN). Radiocarbon ages made on organic remains recovered from the fill of the enclosures as well as wall plaster also tell us that the oldest layers at the site can be assigned to the PPN A (approx. 9.600-8800 calBC) and to the early and middle PPN B (approx. 8.800-8.000 calBC). Late PPNB and younger periods are clearly absent at the site. However, it still cannot be ruled out that on-going excavations will at some point produce evidence for older (late Palaeolithic) remains at the site.

### **4. How big is the site, how much of it has already been excavated, and are you expecting more important finds?**

Göbekli Tepe measures some 300 metres in diameter and is approx. 15 metres high. The entire mound consists of archaeological deposits, in other words it is entirely man-made. At present, only a small part of the site has been excavated, though results from geophysical investigations, including ground-penetrating radar (GPR), suggest that numerous enclosures with T-shaped pillars remain hidden beneath the surface. On the other hand, the excavation of a site also means the destruction of archaeological contexts, at least to a certain extent. For this reason, it is our aim to excavate only as much of the archaeology as is absolutely necessary to answer the many still unresolved questions.

### **5. Who built the enclosures and for what purpose?**

This is one of the key questions of our own research. Based on the chronological and cultural contexts of finds from Göbekli Tepe, we can safely assume that the enclosures were constructed and used by hunter-gatherers who – owing to the natural rhythm (migrations) of wild animals – were most certainly half-nomadic, but who started to adopt fully sedentary, later food-producing, lifeways. Meanwhile, international research in Upper Mesopotamia has brought to light several early hunter-gatherer villages which would have been contemporaneous with Göbekli Tepe, e.g. Çayönü in the Turkish Tigris area, as well as Mureybet and Jerf el Ahmar in the Syrian Euphrates region. The absence of characteristic settlement remains (domestic features like fire pits and hearths as well as find categories typical from settlement contents, i.e. clay figurines, awls, and points of bone) at Göbekli Tepe suggests that the site was occupied only on a seasonal basis, perhaps for the celebration of religious festivals.

### **6. Could it be a burial ground (*necropolis*)?**

This is also a distinct possibility. The iconographic repertoire from Göbekli Tepe comprises numerous depictions of vultures, hyenas, human heads and headless bodies. Combinations of these motifs are already known from neighbouring sites where they are associated with complex burial rites. A similar context is perfectly conceivable for Göbekli Tepe, albeit that the corresponding finds have so far not been made. Nevertheless, we should note that the avifauna from the site is dominated by scavenging corvids, vultures also being frequent. The presence of these birds may be a further indication for the practice of excarnation (*Sonnenbestattung*) at Göbekli Tepe.

### **7. Why is Göbekli Tepe so important, what is so exceptional about the enclosures excavated there?**

Göbekli Tepe is most important due to the insights it is currently providing into developing social systems in this early period. Indeed, until very recently we would never have expected that hunter-gatherer societies disposed over such complex organisational structures essential for the construction of such monumental installations. Without a shadow of a doubt,

construction would have required considerable manpower – certainly exceeding the number of people living in a single hunter-gatherer group. Further, it would have needed careful planning and coordination, suggestive of some level of social stratification within and between different groups. Additionally, food would need to have been made available for workers, and demands may soon have exceeded returns of prevailing hunting and foraging strategies. In this case, steps may well have been taken to exploit new food sources; remarkably, genetic investigations have shown that the domestication of einkorn wheat (one of the oldest known cultivated crops) can be traced back to the vicinity of the Karacadağ, a mountain close to the Göbekli Tepe site. This observation fits well with our own observations, lending support to our hypothesis that the construction of the Göbekli Tepe enclosures was in some way connected to the transition from hunter-gathering to food-producing (Neolithic) lifeways.

#### **8. What do the reliefs and the other animal depictions found on the pillars mean?**

This is a difficult question to answer. The wide range of varying motifs and recurrent symbols (and combinations thereof) suggests that these are not mere decorative elements; rather, depictions have an extraordinarily complex – mythological – content. The symbols themselves are plain to see (naturalistic portrayals interchange with strongly abstract signs) and yet the meanings behind them, so obvious to the people in the Neolithic, remain hidden from us today. Of particular note is, however, the absence of what might be termed mythological hybrids and monsters; all animals depicted at Göbekli Tepe occurred naturally near the site, i.e. are species of Eurasian wild fauna. The numerous wild and dangerous-looking animals found adorning the pillars may have fulfilled some kind of protective function, perhaps comparable to totem animals found in more recent foraging cultures, or they may have acted as ‘guardians’ of the enclosures. Interestingly, the symbols and motifs discovered at Göbekli Tepe have also been found at numerous other Neolithic sites, where they were applied to stone vessels, to so-called arrow-straighteners, and to various other objects. This suggests the existence of larger community with a common belief system, shared mythological traditions and iconography, and whose ritual centre may have been located at Göbekli Tepe.

**9. Is it true that the enclosures were purposely buried? Why?**

Yes, it is quite correct that the different enclosures at Göbekli Tepe were intentionally filled (or buried). Currently, we still do not know how long each of the enclosures was in use prior to burial, and we still have no definitive evidence about the duration of the filling (burial) process. What we do know is that the entire mound (as it stands today) comprises archaeological deposits (i.e. it is man-made) and is the result of many filling activities which ended around 8.000 calBC. Reasons for the interment remain a matter of speculation: perhaps it is an expression of fundamental social changes which led to new ways of life in which the 'old' sanctuaries became obsolete; on the other hand, it is highly probable that the enclosures were destined for burial from the very beginning, their ritual filling an integral part of their concept.

**10. Did the enclosures have roofs?**

This is an area of our research being undertaken in close cooperation with building researchers and other specialists. Although clear archaeological evidence is still lacking at the site, it is perfectly conceivable – and technically feasible – that the different enclosures did in fact have roofs.

**11. Are there any possible astronomical interpretations for the positioning and alignment of the pillars?**

Certainly, ample consideration must also be given to these lines of enquiry, especially as observations from the night sky would have played an important part in the life of Neolithic hunter-gatherers, including the people that built Göbekli Tepe. We are working with experts in the field of archaeo-astronomy, albeit that so far any links between astronomical phenomena and the orientation of the individual T-pillars and/or enclosures could not be identified.

**12. Can the megalithic enclosures at Göbekli Tepe be compared to other famous sites like Stonehenge?**

Although a small number of other sites with T-shaped pillars are known from the vicinity of Göbekli Tepe, and even though these have not been investigated to the same degree, so far they are clearly lacking the monumentality attested at this site; in this respect Göbekli Tepe is still very much unique. Certainly, the Göbekli Tepe enclosures could be compared to Stonehenge due to their shared megalithic character, and it is perfectly acceptable that both sites functioned as important ritual centres, yet it must be stressed that there are no direct connections between Göbekli Tepe and the 6000 year younger Stonehenge.

**13. In the media the enclosures at Göbekli Tepe have been referred to as the “oldest temples of mankind”. Is this correct?**

The term “temple”, depending on one’s definition, is perhaps not the best chosen for Göbekli Tepe, especially as this particular term is most readily associated with ‘proper’ buildings, i.e. the houses of one or several deities. In the case of Göbekli Tepe it would perhaps be more apt to speak of the world’s “oldest so far excavated ritual centre”. In other words, in contrast to Western European (natural) cave sites with their extraordinary Palaeolithic artwork (interpreted as ritual sites in the broadest sense) Göbekli Tepe was erected entirely by human hand. Be this as it may, the term “temple” is perhaps not entirely wrong in that it aptly describes the significance of the site in a cultural-historical context.

**14. There are rumours that Göbekli Tepe can be related to the ‘Garden of Eden’ described in the Bible. Is there any truth to this?**

We disagree wholeheartedly with any parallels drawn between Göbekli Tepe and the ‘Garden of Eden’, for which there is absolutely no archaeological evidence. Certainly, Göbekli Tepe lies in a chain of hills north of the Harran plain, the scene of numerous biblical narratives, though this is where any associations with the Bible end. Anything more is pure conjecture.



**15. What are the future plans for archaeological investigations at the site?**

At present, it is planned that our excavation work will continue at Göbekli Tepe until such a time that our comprehension of the monument provides us with at least some of the answers to the many still open questions. Of course, this work itself will throw up new questions which in turn will also need answering. A further important aspect is the preservation of the exposed archaeology and its protection from the elements. For this purpose we are currently in the process of implementing a permanent shelter, also designed to facilitate tourist access to the site.

**16. Is Göbekli Tepe open to the public? Can it be visited by tourists?**

Göbekli Tepe is open to the public and meanwhile there are numerous local businesses specialised in trips to – and guided tours of – the site. Even without professional help, Göbekli Tepe is still very easy to reach: it is signposted already from Şanlıurfa and is well known to local taxi drivers. At this point, we must stress that due to health and safety regulations the fenced in excavation area is strictly off-limits to visitors; our permanent security staff at the site will be happy to advise you.

**17. How long will the investigations at Göbekli Tepe continue?**

The Göbekli Tepe project, located at the German Archaeological Institute, is particularly fortunate to have entered a long-term support agreement with the German Research Foundation, thus providing us with several more years of fieldwork at the site. All the same, it is extremely difficult for us to publish an exact timetable for our excavations at Göbekli Tepe. In this context, reference might be made to other big projects, e.g. Pergamon or Troy, which now look back on excavation histories of more than a century.

**18. Is it true that aliens built the Göbekli Tepe enclosures?**

No.



*The Göbekli Tepe Research Project is an interdisciplinary long-term project addressing the role of early monumentality in the origins of food production, social hierarchisation and belief systems as well as questions of early subsistence strategies and faunal developments in Neolithic Anatolia, Turkey. Excavations and archaeological research in the frame of this project are conducted by the Orient and Istanbul Departments of the German Archaeological Institute in close cooperation with the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Museum. The archaeobiological part of the project is conducted by the Institute of Palaeoanatomy, Domestication Research and the History of Veterinary Medicine, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich.*

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