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The Symbolic World of Göbekli Tepe and the First Cities: An Eliadean Approach

Preamble

First noted in geographical surveys in 1964, Göbekli Tepe, an archaeological site situated about 15km north-east of the Turkish city of Sanliurfa, was made famous in the 1990s by German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt. From 1995 until his death in 2014, Schmidt argued for the religious significance of this site. Mircea Eliade, the great twentieth century historian of religions, passed away in 1986, many years before Schmidt published his findings on Göbekli Tepe. Nevertheless, Eliade's heuristic devices of *axis mundi* (centre of the world) and *imago mundi* (image of the world) can help us make sense of the symbolic significance of Göbekli Tepe; a significance that demonstrates that religion—expressed through a variety of symbols—is a necessary precursor to civilisation, to the first cities. These themes will be addressed below. Firstly, I will define symbolism and its role in Göbekli Tepe as a precursor to urban settlement. Secondly, I will explain how the anteriority of religion to urban settlement—or the civic enterprise in general—by way of inference, exhibits that religion—expressed through symbols—is a *necessary precursor* and condition for the first cities in the Near East and Mediterranean.



Geographical location of Göbekli Tepe (Source: Wikipedia)



Aerial view of the excavation site of Göbekli Tepe. (Source: Wikipedia)

Defining Symbolism

Mircea Eliade famously affirmed that archaic (8,000-500 BC) man is fundamentally *homo religiosus*, which translates roughly into the “religious man or person,” or “man as inherently religious.” David Dorin’s translation of the following passage in the Romanian edition of Eliade’s *Patterns of Comparative Religion* is relevant for this point:

The main religious stances of human [beings] had been given once and for all, since the moment the man became conscious of his existential situation inside the Universe.((From Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de Istorie a religiilor* [Patterns in Comparative Religion] (București: Humanitas, 1992), 422-423 translated by Dorin David in his article ‘*Homo Religiosus* in the Scientific Work and Fantastic Prose of Mircea Eliade,’ *Bulletin of the Transilvania*

For Eliade, the birth of human consciousness was marked by religiosity. This has been reiterated by Karen Armstrong who affirmed that “men and women started worshipping gods as soon as they became recognisably human.”((Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Vintage, 1999), 3.)) Indeed, in her *Short History of Myth*, Armstrong began her discussion with Neanderthal graves from the Paleolithic or Old Stone Age (broadly speaking, from 30,000-10,000 BC) that displayed an interest in ideas “that went beyond everyday experience.”((Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Melbourne, VIC: The Text Publishing Co., 2005), 2.)) The construction of Göbekli Tepe, marked by hunter-gathering, falls within this period. We shall thus presuppose that religious ideas continued—even as an impetus for human settlement—especially in the consecutive epoch which is called the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age (10,000-8,000 BC). Armstrong continued that although today “we separate the religious from the secular,”

[t]his would have been incomprehensible to the Paleolithic hunters, for whom nothing was profane. Everything they saw or experienced was transparent to its counterpart in the divine world ... The most ordinary actions were ceremonies that enabled mortal beings to participate in the timeless world of ‘everywhen.’ For us moderns, a symbol is essentially separate from the unseen reality to which it directs our attention, but the Greek *symbolleîn* means ‘to throw together’: two hitherto disparate objects become inseparable ... When you contemplated any earthly object, you were therefore in the presence of its heavenly counterpart.((Ibid., 15-16.))

Armstrong, who referred to Eliade often in her book,((Ibid., 5, 15-17, 20, 23, 25, 27-28, 33, 35, 41-42, 44, 57, 70.)) betrays her indebtedness to him here, firstly in relation to symbols, which according to him “respond to a need and fulfil a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being.”((Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.)) In other words, these “hidden modalities” are expressed through symbols, which connect and facilitate participation in heretofore disparate aspects of reality as denoted by the etymology of *symbolleîn* outlined above. Paul Ricoer shed light on the meaning of symbolism, which is connected to its etymology, when he stated that the symbol consists of

any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.((Paul Ricoer, ‘Existence and Hermeneutics,’ trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The*

Conflict of Interpretations, ed. Don Ihde (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 3-24, 12-13.))

For Eliade, it was these “figurative” meanings that reflected the “deepest aspects” of “prehistoric humanity.” For him, however, they were not “indirect” and “secondary”—as for Ricoeur—but came before “language and discursive reason.”((Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 12.)) This assessment is of course consistent with what we have seen so far, since the symbols of Göbekli Tepe certainly came before the written historical record which began with cuneiform in Mesopotamia in the mid-fourth millennium BC (which itself implies the beginnings of discursive reasoning). As regards *language*, it is important to note that while hunter-gatherers did not have anything resembling historical forms of spoken human communication—that is, the sort of communication reflected in the written record from c.3,500 BC onwards—they nevertheless communicated through sounds, physical gestures, and *symbols*. Below we shall see how this definition of symbolism, which conditioned human beings from the outset, can be applied to Göbekli Tepe; and in turn we shall demonstrate that religion—expressed through symbols—was a precursor to human settlement.

Religion as a Precursor to Human Settlement (and Cities): Evidence from Göbekli Tepe

In his famous article published in 1950 entitled ‘The Urban Revolution,’ archaeologist and philologist Vere Gordon Childe asserted that before the Neolithic age, which began around 8,000 BC, the way of life of nomadic hunter-gatherers—marked by primitive technology—could not acquire, manage, and/or facilitate the production of the necessary resources for settlement and growth.((Vere Gordon Childe, ‘The Urban Revolution,’ *The Town Planning Review* 21:1 (1950): 3-17, 4.)) In the middle of the Neolithic age, however, something dramatic took place.

About 5,000 years ago irrigation cultivation (combined with stock-breeding and fishing) in the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus had begun to yield a social surplus, large enough to support a number of resident specialists who were themselves released from food production. Water-transport, supplemented in Mesopotamia and the Indus valley by wheeled vehicles and even in Egypt by pack animals, made it easy to gather food stuffs at a few centres. At the same time dependence on river water for the irrigation of the crops restricted the cultivable areas while the necessity of canalizing the waters and protecting habitations against annual floods encouraged the aggregation of population. Thus arose the first cities—units of settlement ten times as great as any neolithic village.((Ibid., 8.))

This is a utilitarian analysis of the first settlements, which grew as a result of the need to provide stable irrigation to crops that were being cultivated in a specific place by settlers, who, as a result of their resilience in breeding stock, fishing and stockpiling food, had an abundant supply. It is an assessment that is not without merit. In fact, from what Childe called a “social surplus” could be inferred the emergence of the first specialist artisans. Nevertheless, it was not within Childe’s purview to address the *ideas* or *beliefs* that may have also impelled Neolithic humans to settle as groups or communities.



The T-shaped pillars of Göbekli Tepe in the form of a circle (Source: Wikimedia commons)

Scholars have searched for an answer to this question in the recent discoveries at Göbekli Tepe, which means “navel hill” in Turkish.((Andrew Curry, ‘Seeking the Roots of Ritual,’ *Science* 319 (2008): 278.)) A Pre-Pottery Neolithic tell—i.e. an archaeological mound created by human occupation or activity—this site has been excavated continuously since 1995 by the German Archaeological Institute and the Archaeological Museum in Sanliurfa, and consists of “several sanctuaries in the form of round megalithic enclosures.”((Klaus Schmidt, ‘Göbekli Tepe – The Stone Age Sanctuaries. New Results of ongoing excavations with a special focus on sculptures and high reliefs,’ *Documenta Praehistorica* 37 (2010): 239.)) About five per cent Göbekli Tepe has been excavated, roughly four of the circular enclosures, with “ground penetrating radar and geomagnetic surveys”((Andrew Curry, ‘Göbekli Tepe: The World’s First Temple?’ *Smithsonian Magazine* (November, 2008.)) discovering many more including what might be satellite

sites.((‘New sites Discovered around Turkey’s ancient marvel Göbekli Tepe,’ Daily Sabah (Jun 28, 2021.))

Charles C. Mann, a journalist for National Geographic who visited the site in 2011, described it aptly as follows:

...the site is vaguely reminiscent of Stonehenge, except that Göbekli Tepe was built much earlier and is made not from roughly hewn blocks but from cleanly carved limestone pillars [ranging between 7 and 10 tons, the highest of which are 5.5 metres] splashed with bas-reliefs of animals—a cavalcade of gazelles, snakes, foxes, scorpions, and ferocious wild boars. The assemblage was built some 11,600 years ago, seven millennia before the Great Pyramid of Giza. It contains the oldest known temple. Indeed, Göbekli Tepe is the oldest known example of monumental architecture—the first structure human beings put together that was bigger and more complicated than a hut. When these pillars were erected, so far as we know, nothing of comparable scale existed in the world.((Charles C. Mann, ‘The Birth of Religion,’ *National Geographic* (June, 2011): 34-59, 39.))

Mann went on to affirm that the site has caused much confusion for archaeologists, who once assumed, like Childe, that “the Neolithic Revolution was ... a single event—a sudden flash of genius—that occurred [5,000 years ago] in a single location, Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now southern Iraq, then spread to India, Europe, and beyond.”((Mann, ‘The Birth of Religion,’ 40.)) But since this discovery, researchers have had to admit that the Neolithic revolution was a gradual process that occurred at various times and degrees in different places.

What I would like to focus on is a more surprising discovery to come out of Göbekli Tepe. What was necessary for the Neolithic revolution at 8,000 BC—or any urban development—to take place are the irrigation and farming techniques illustrated by Childe, without which the first permanent settlements could not have come to be. But it is striking that Göbekli Tepe is bereft of any sign of domestic habitation.((Schmidt, ‘Göbekli Tepe – The Stone Age Sanctuaries,’ 239.)) Again, I turn to Mann’s observations, within which he refers to Schmidt.

Hundreds of people must have been required to carve and erect the pillars, but the site had no water source—the nearest stream was about three miles away. Those workers would have needed homes, but excavations have uncovered no sign of walls, hearths, or houses—no other buildings that Schmidt has interpreted as domestic. They would have had to be fed, but there is also no trace of agriculture. For that matter, Schmidt has found no mess kitchens or cooking fires. It was purely a ceremonial center. If anyone

ever lived at this site, they were less its residents than its staff.((Mann, 'The Birth of Religion,' 48.))

This place, according to Schmidt, is “the first man-made holy place” that we have discovered.((Schmidt interviewed in Curry, 'Seeking the Roots of Ritual,' 278.)) This bold statement contradicts assumptions that many archaeologists have worked with, namely, that developments in agriculture that “gave early people the time and food surpluses that they needed to build monuments” helped them to develop “a rich symbolic vocabulary,” by which of course is meant religious belief systems.((Ibid.))

Anthropologists have further surmised that organised religion developed as a way of maintaining the cohesion between hunter-gatherers who had, in the Neolithic age, settled down.((Ibid., 56)) But in the case of Göbekli Tepe, which is, as far as we know, the world's first temple structure, worship seems to have been the *catalyst* for social cohesion. According to Schmidt, its t-shaped pillars—two of which are in the very centre of the complex—have been erected to symbolically represent the anthropomorphic entities that they worshipped.((Ibid., 244.)) “supernatural beings from another world.”((Schmidt, 'Göbekli Tepe – The Stone Age Sanctuaries,' 247.)) Applying insights from Mircea Eliade, the vertical posture of these pillars, along with their circular placement, also has religious/symbolic significance; for it is not entirely self-evident that they should have been erected vertically or in a circle *unless* there were some motivating ideological factor.

This factor could have been that, generally speaking, ancient persons were motivated to dwell and worship in or near centralised locations where a hierophany—or manifestation of the sacred—took place.((Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1987), 21)). This manifestation both revealed and connected the three general levels of reality—heaven, earth, and the underworld((Ibid., 36-37.))—and thus would prompt human beings to actualise and facilitate this intersection of the three cosmic layers by erecting structures that symbolically connected or encompassed them. The sacred dimension was reflected in the belief that heaven, comprising one of the three main tiers of the universe, was the abode of the gods or spiritual beings in particular.((J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vii.)) Eliade called former, intersecting objects *axes mundi*, the latter, encompassing structures *imagines mundi*.



*Close-up of one of Göbekli Tepe's T-shape pillars depicting a fox
(Source: Wikipedia)*



*The depiction of vultures on the transverse bar of a pillar in enclosure D is
thought to be the world's oldest pictograph (Source: Wikipedia)*

The pillars of Göbekli Tepe can thus be interpreted as *axes mundi*, connecting at the very least the heavenly (or celestial) and earthly realms in their vertical orientation. The circle is a cosmic symbol, delineating the firmament's trajectory over the horizon and encompassing the four cardinal points((Eliade, *Images and*

Symbols, 52)). Thus, their circular placement may be imitating the sky, as an *imago mundi* that they might have identified with heaven; although we cannot know this for certain. In any case, both interpretations are in line with the etymology of the word *symbolleîn* that we saw above means “‘to throw together’: two hitherto disparate objects become inseparable”((Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 15-16)). That these pillars are covered with reliefs depicting a vast array of animals that could be part of a “mythological cycle,” would also make them *imagines mundi*. Additionally, Schmidt has argued that these animals might be serving as *apotropaia*—the use of evil creatures to ward off evil.”((Schmidt, ‘Göbekli Tepe – The Stone Age Sanctuaries,’ 245.))

Whatever the case may be, Schmidt’s theories have turned the assumptions of archaeologists and anthropologists on their head, insofar as he believes that the “construction of a massive temple by a group of foragers is evidence that organized religion could have come *before* the rise of agriculture and other aspects of civilization.”((Mann, ‘The Birth of Religion,’ 57.)) This, of course, includes the city or metropolis, which in any case only begins to take shape in a way that is recognisable for modern Westerners with the ancient Greek poleis or city-states around 800 BC. Certainly, Göbekli Tepe demonstrates that religion preceded villages and towns (that also predated cities in the way we have come to know them) which would have comprised domiciles organised around temples or religious structures for most of the population (peasants, farmers, tradesmen, etc.). We shall now turn to the role of religious symbolism in the first cities as confirming, albeit anachronistically, our thesis that religion—expressed through symbols—preceded and is even a necessary condition for human settlement.

The Role of Religious Symbolism in the First Cities



Partially reconstructed Mesopotamian ziggurat of Ur—one of history's most ancient cities—in modern day Iraq (Source: Wikimedia commons)



The precinct of Amun-Ra in the Temple of Karnak, near Luxor, Egypt (Source: Wikipedia)

The earliest cities, then, which sprung up in Mesopotamia and Egypt at the beginning of the Neolithic Age c. 3000 BC, owe their characteristic emphasis on

religion to the religious impetus that gave birth to the first settlements. It was religion that preceded their construction and that maintained them via various means including the building of, for example ziggurats (in Mesopotamia) and temples (in Egypt) that were the focal and dominant structures in their civic space.((Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. D. Lorton (London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.)) These structures were *imagines et axes mundi*, intersecting and encompassing the levels of the cosmos as the Mesopotamians and Egyptians described them in their myths. Beyond these two civilisations, we discern similar phenomena throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean; phenomena that continued through the Middle Ages and up to the dawn of modernity. Thus, we can affirm that religious belief was the principal causal factor that influenced human beings to come together as communities, as opposed to an attempt to consolidate these communities after they had come together for utilitarian reasons (as argued by Childe). This means that human settlement was organised around, and thus conditioned by, sacred symbols.

Above we saw that according to Armstrong and Eliade *all* pre-modern societies—archaic, ancient, and medieval—were able to symbolically discern in mundane objects—whether natural or human-made—a hierophany, or manifestation of the sacred, which for Eliade was

...the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world.((Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.))

We also saw what Eliade would have described as a human being’s response to a hierophany, that is the construction of objects made to encompass and facilitate participation in the sacredness that intersected all of reality. Here it is important to affirm that these human-made *axes mundi* and *imagines mundi*, such as Mesopotamian ziggurats that were made to look like cosmogonic mountains((Ibid., 40.)) or Egyptian temples that recapitulated their vision of the cosmos, were usually always based on ‘profane’ or natural objects, such as mountains already mentioned, gardens, trees, and vines,((Ibid., 36.)) (to name a few) that were, primarily—and in an anterior manner—conduits for this manifestation of the sacred.

According to Eliade, ancient, medieval, and early modern peoples((Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 17.)) experienced a dialectic tension between sacred and profane existence.((Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12-13.)) The hierophany was always sought after.((Ibid., 11.)) It was immutable, changeless, and divine: a key to the fecundity of being inaugurated by God or the gods *illo tempore*,((Ibid., 80-81.)) comparable to what Armstrong later called “the timeless

world of ‘everywhen.’” Moreover, the locus of the hierophany, the object that revealed the sacred that both imbued it and transcended it, consecrated that point as a centre of the world insofar as it revealed “the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation.”((Ibid., 21.))

Such objects “can be only at the very center of the universe, for the whole of the habitable world extends around” them.((Ibid., 37.)) They would eventually be discerned in the distinctive structures that constituted the symbolic centres of settlements and later cities up to the dawn of modernity, and—beyond ziggurats and temples—also included palaces, monuments, and churches.((Ibid., 12.)) Yet while ancient and medieval settlements and cities were indeed loci of hierophanies within which the whole of the cosmos could be participated in, nevertheless the city also needed, paradoxically, to be actively cosmicised through symbolic rituals. This was necessary because, according to Armstrong, who went on to analyse hierophanies from the Neolithic period to the early Bronze Age (3,300-1200 BC):

in the cities, the rate of change accelerated, and people became more aware of the chain of cause and effect. The new technology gave city-dwellers a more complete control over their environment, and they were becoming increasingly more distinct from the natural world.((Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 58.))

Within cities, the chaotic flux of events, and the distinction from nature, became difficult to bear, and Dean A. Miller highlighted the consequences of the dissociation between nature and human beings, that took place with the rise of the first cities:

The city—whatever it *is*—from the first is *not* merely a more complex, oversized village. Man raised, and moved into, a multiplex structure that immediately began to pose psychic problems and take a physical toll, at the same time that it optimized his production of goods and freed his mind from certain old controls. There is original sin here: the sin of isolation, of differentiation, of the appearance of the mental attitude that separates Subject and Object—Man from his physically nutritive environment once extensive with him.((Dean A. Miller, *Imperial Constantinople* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1969), 12.))

The dissociation between human beings and nature, between the subject and its co-extensive object, that resulted from the chaotic flux of early city life had to be addressed, and this was done precisely via the organisation of settlements around temple-structures that symbolically repeated, in architectonic form and through the rituals that took place within them, the cosmogony or creation of the natural

world through which, we have seen, the sacred was revealed. (In Christianity, the intersection between heaven and earth in the narrative of Christ's life—framed cosmically—was depicted.) Moreover, since the God or the gods were believed to have created the world, then the cosmogony could be considered the first great hierophany *illo tempore*, and this is what people participated in when they erected their temples or churches in the topographical and symbolic centres of their cities.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated, via the use of Eliadean conceptual categories—which were deployed in recent years by Karen Armstrong and others—that Göbekli Tepe is an important religious site. Its symbolic imagery and arrangement shows that religion was a principal motivating factor for human beings to come together in Neolithic times, at least in this specific place. While we know about the dominance of religion in the first cities in history—in Mesopotamia and Egypt and elsewhere—nevertheless with Göbekli Tepe we can discern the significance of religion *even before* the earliest human settlements. Religion, expressed through symbolic structures—in this case limestone megaliths—that functioned as *imagines et axes mundi*, was thus a motivating factor for human beings to establish their communities.

This process, however, was paradoxically hastened in the city space. This is because of the rupture in this space between human beings and their co-extensive natural environment which they believed revealed the sacred. In response to this, it became even more important to recapitulate—again through religious symbols—the natural world, the cosmos, as it was originally envisaged in ancient myths, or any manifestation of the divine in history. We see this in ancient civilisations in the Near East and Mediterranean, and it continues—albeit in a different, Christianised form—in the Middle Ages, in Christendom and beyond. Could we perhaps infer that the beginnings of this the cosmicising process can be discerned, as a seedling, in chronologically distant Göbekli Tepe? Were the creators of this site—of whom we know very little—attempting to recreate a sacred natural environment that they had been separated from? These are questions that we may perhaps never answer; but none of that detracts from the religious and symbolic significance of this site.

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religious symbolism in ancient and medieval cities both diachronically and cross-culturally.