

# Settlement, Survey, and Stone

Essays on Near Eastern Prehistory  
in Honour of Gary Rollefson

Edited by  
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# Like a Carpet of Snakes – Towards an Iconography of the PPN in Upper Mesopotamia

*Klaus Schmidt and Çiğdem Köksal-Schmidt*

*More than 120 T-shaped pillars have so far been found at the PPN site of Göbekli Tepe. These are often adorned with low reliefs depicting various animals, abstract signs and, in some cases, garments and belts, thus underlining the anthropomorphic design of these pillars. The combination of motifs observed on several pillars features a clearly narrative aspect, and most of these are monumental compared to similar images known from other PPN sites where they are typically found engraved onto small stone or bone objects. Some of these images give the impression of miniature reproductions of the reliefs from Göbekli Tepe. In this paper it is suggested that the “Großbilder” from the pillars represent a formal coinage for a specific theme; in so doing they provide an artistic solution for the transmission of specific contents.*

Today the site of Göbekli Tepe is well known because of its most prominent features, the monumental stone enclosures and their monolithic T-shaped pillars, some of which reach heights of 5 m or more (Schmidt 1997/98; 2012). Göbekli Tepe can be interpreted as a place of meeting and congregation, and as a ritual centre of late hunter-gatherer groups living in the area from the mid-10<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> millennium cal BC. The T-shapes are a symbolic representation of anthropomorphic beings, often decorated with low reliefs depicting various animals: bulls, boars and others four-legged beasts; different kinds of birds, including cranes, ducks and ibises; and also snakes, spiders and scorpions. So far, more than 120 T-shaped pillars have been found at Göbekli Tepe, numbered in order of their discovery (Pillars from layer II are numbered with Roman numerals, the most recent is Pillar LIX, while pillars from layer III are assigned Arabic numbers, Pillar 62 being the latest discovered), together with depictions of more than 200 hundred animals and more than 50 abstract signs.

Any understanding of the (so far incomplete) catalogue of images from the site and – more importantly – the diversity of the combinations of various motifs, including the addition of numerous abstract signs, is an area which can only be explored using methods which go far beyond those usually applied in prehistoric archaeology. André Leroi-Gourhan’s interpretation of the art of the European Upper Palaeolithic was an attempt to understand the huge variety of images from the Ice Age (Leroi-Gourhan 1971), and Joachim Hahn’s investigation of Aurignacian figurines raises the question of whether *power and aggression* are the message of these carvings (Hahn 1986). David Louis-Williams and

Jean Clottes also made significant contributions, providing a more global perspective and in doing so preparing the stage for our comprehension of post-Pleistocene rock art (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1997). However, recently discovered PPN imagery, and especially the material from Göbekli Tepe, differs quite considerably from Upper Palaeolithic artwork. In Palaeolithic cave art, animals are depicted on the natural rock surface. The suggestion that Ice Age painters were seen to *enchant* the rock surface, beckoning animals to emerge, seems quite probable. Human motifs are very rare in the Ice Age and where they occur they are usually small compared to the animals. The main difference visible at Göbekli Tepe is the very prevalent position afforded to humans. More than 120 monolithic T-shaped pillars have been discovered at Göbekli Tepe, and all have an anthropomorphic meaning. The animals, not painted but depicted in low relief on the pillars, are reduced to mere attributes of the anthropomorphic beings. While narrative scenes are very rare in Ice Age art – the shaft scene of Lascaux remains unique – at Göbekli Tepe such scenes are quite common. For this reason, it is time that we turned our attention to iconographical methods, following art historians like Aby Warburg, in the interpretation of this rich new material. This short article is intended as a small contribution to future and more extensive work on an “iconography of the PPN in the Near East” (c.f. Peters and Schmidt 2004).

An extensive narrative scene has been identified on Pillar 56 at Göbekli Tepe (Figure 1). Referred to in the German language as *Großbild*, it is a scene that is found repeated in miniature on shaft straighteners from Jerf el Ahmar



Figure 1: Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 56 (photograph Nico Becker, copyright DAI)

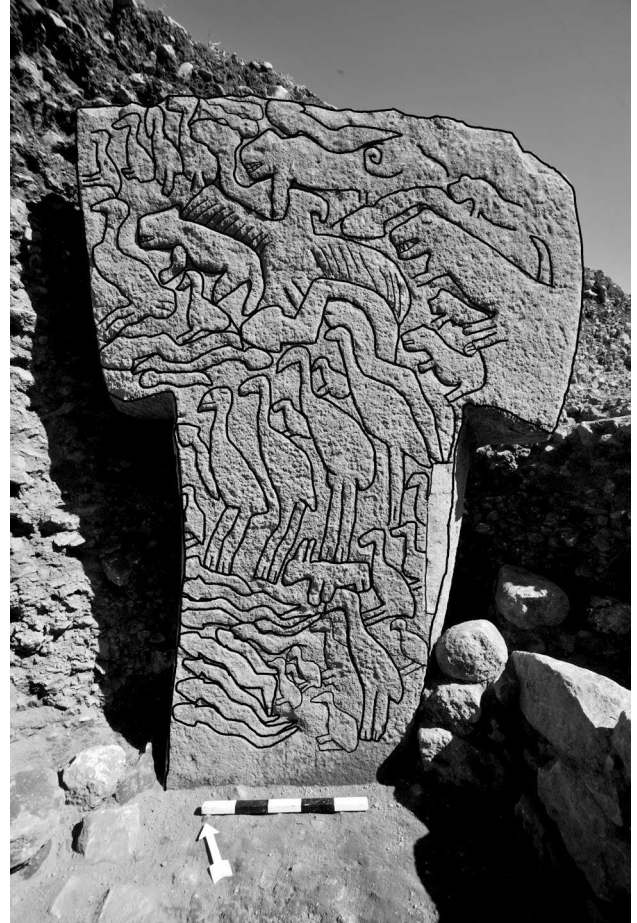


Figure 2: Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 56 schema (graphics Nico Becker, copyright DAI)

(c.f. Schmidt 2013). The main actor of the *Großbild* on this pillar, which carries depictions of more than 50 animals, is a large bird, probably an eagle or a vulture (Figure 2, animal no. 15). This bird is the only animal (with one exception, see below) that is depicted facing right, i.e. towards the exterior of the enclosure, while all the other animals, mainly snakes, birds and some quadrupeds, are shown moving to the left. It also appears that bird no. 15 is using its talons to attack the snake below it (no. 18). The sharp angle of the winding body of the snake may indicate that the bird has already prevailed and that the snake is dying or already dead.

Clearly, the image is more than a mere decorative element of the pillar. It is the illustration of something, probably a mythological story, which centres on the fight between the large bird and countless enemies, including the snake. In addition to the eagle or vulture there is only one other animal depicted facing right: snake no. 22. Perhaps this snake was the sole ally of the bird, though its role could have been very different, of course.

Two shaft straighteners from Jerf el Ahmar seem to repeat the *Großbild* adorning Pillar 56. There are several observations which strengthen this assumption; these have been published elsewhere (Schmidt 2013) and will not to be

repeated here. Much more exciting is the identification of a second *Großbild* that is also repeated in miniature, though in this case on an object not from a contemporaneous site like Jerf el Ahmar but from Göbekli Tepe itself. (The reptile-like animal depicted on Pillar 6 is repeated on a stone plaquette, again from Jerf el Ahmar, though it is just one animal, not a combination of motifs.) During the 2013 excavation season a fragment of a decorated stone plaquette was discovered in one of the deep soundings excavated in the run-up to construction work on a canopy on the north-western part of the mound (trench K10–13). It is not yet possible to determine the stratigraphic position (layer II or III) of the fragment. The dimensions of the object are  $3.2 \times 3.1$  cm with a thickness of 1.4 cm (Figure 3; published also in Dietrich *et al.* in press, fig. 12). Although only quite a small fragment, given how thin it is it is unlikely that the complete object was a shaft straightener.

One face of the plaquette is void, while the other features the depictions of two heads, each with two eyes. The shape of the heads is well known in the repertoire of PPN images: these are clearly depictions of snakes. Below the heads, the tops of the bodies are visible, and below the left head there is a net-like pattern. If it were not for an earlier find made at the



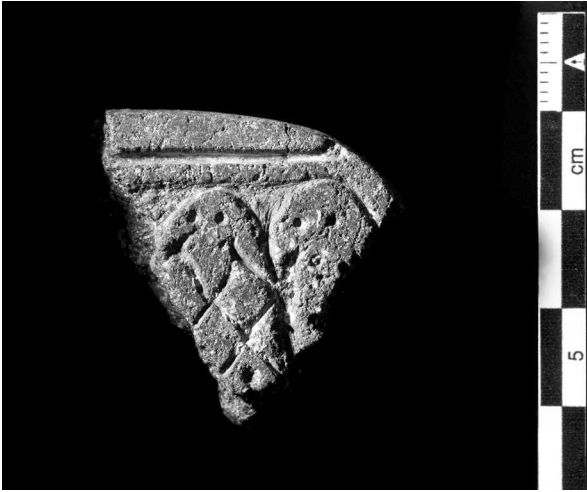


Figure 3: Göbekli Tepe, fragment of stone plaquette with snakes (photograph Nico Becker, copyright DAI)

site (a relief on the left broad side of Pillar 1) this particular image would be practically impossible to decipher.

Pillar 1 is the western central pillar of Enclosure A and belongs to layer III (PPNA). It was discovered in 1996 and 1997 when it was excavated down to a stone bench which frames the foot of the pillar (drawings and photographs have been published e.g. Schmidt 1997/98, 165 fig. 16; 1998a, 4 fig. 5; 1998b, 36 fig. 13, 37 fig. 14, 39 fig. 16 (right); 1999 pl. 5; 2012, 113–114 fig. 45). The (excavated) dimensions of the pillar are truly megalithic. It has a height of 3.15 m, the width of the head measures 1.50 m, and its shaft is 0.53 m thick. Its narrow front side features a total of five snakes in low relief. While the upper four snakes are shown gliding down the pillar from the top, a fifth is shown climbing the pillar from the bottom; it is of note that the latter snake is, so far, the only one at Göbekli Tepe depicted creeping upwards. All five snakes are moving on and between two straight, parallel bands which are typical for the frontal faces of the pillars and which are interpreted as stole-like garments.

On the left side of Pillar 1, immediately below the T-shaped head, there is a strange net-like structure, a motif which at first was only tentatively interpreted as the interwoven bodies of snakes; one factor being that the upper and lower fringes of this ‘net’ were found to be adorned with eight and nine heart-shaped objects (snake heads), respectively (Figure 4). Finally, however, in 2003 any remaining caution concerning this interpretation was lost with the excavation of Pillar 33 in Enclosure D. This pillar, which also produced depictions of complex bundles of snakes, proved to us once and for all that the net on Pillar 1 must also be interpreted as a net or wickerwork of snakes. The heads of the snakes lining the upper and lower part of the net are reminiscent of carpet tassels; in fact, the whole motif resembles a carpet made of snakes. For this reason, it is highly likely that the motif on



Figure 4: Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 1 (photograph Dieter Johannes, copyright DAI)

the newly discovered plaquette is of a similar type to the one depicted on Pillar 1.

The net motif is not the only relief on this side of the pillar. Below the ‘snake wickerwork’ is a relatively small, four-legged animal, perhaps a ram. This leads us to ponder the exact meaning of this motif and why it is combined with the snake net. At present it is difficult to give any answer; in fact it is still not known whether these depictions belong to one and the same scene, or even if they are interacting with



Figure 5: Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 1 detail (photograph Dieter Johannes, copyright DAI)

the five snakes on the pillar's narrow front side. Alternatively, it is possible that they might represent totally separate images brought together by chance on the pillar shaft.

The reliefs described above – the five snakes, the net and the quadruped – are the only images known so far adorning Pillar 1. For the time being the right and the rear sides of this pillar are void of reliefs, although these have still not been completely excavated and further images may still await discovery on these surfaces. The eastern central pillar of Enclosure A is also decorated. A bull, a fox, and a crane are depicted on the south-western broad side of the pillar shaft facing Pillar 1; a bucranium adorns its rear narrow side. It should be stressed that there is no apparent relationship between the representations on the two central pillars. There is no evidence for an extended *cross-pillar* iconographic programme, although in theory this could be present.

Analogues of the 'snake wickerwork' on Pillar 1 are so far unknown from other Neolithic sites in the region. However, some roughly similar motifs are known from the Uruk culture (4th millennium cal BC) where seal impressions were applied to clay balls, which were in turn used as 'envelopes' for tokens. Among the many different recorded depictions there is one motif referred to as *verflochtene Schlangen* (interwoven snakes) by Rainer Michael Boehmer (Boehmer 1999, 105 nos 43–45 with pig). Whilst it is interesting to observe the repetition of this motif some thousands of years later, it is clear that there are no direct connections between the Neolithic examples and the Uruk 'Snake Wickerworks'.

In the case of the seal impressions the motif on the cylinder seal, which can be attributed to the individual who sealed the object, incorporates the idea that the snakes should protect the content of the clay balls. The interpretation of the snake wickerwork on Pillar 1 is a little more difficult. As already mentioned, is it not clear whether the five snakes, the net and the quadruped are all elements of one 'story' or whether they should instead be understood as wholly separate depictions. However, a further important question remains: what is the meaning of the repetition on small objects of motifs adorning the pillars at Göbekli Tepe? Might they be interpreted as souvenirs or keepsakes bearing testimony to a visit to this important place and/or as testaments to the

participation at an important event which took place there?

However, such an interpretation appears far too simplistic; indeed, it is more likely that the 'story' conveyed by these images – or in the case of the snake wickerwork, the symbolic content of this unusual motif comprising 17 animals – was the most significant aspect. The *Großbilder* provide an artistic solution for the transmission of contents; they deliver a formal representation of a specific theme. In this respect, it is a little reminiscent of the 'smiting of enemies' depicted on the Narmer Palette from the pre-dynastic Naqada III phase: the canonization of formal imagery and a link in a chain of images that can be traced back to the time of Naqada I and which remained in use through the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms of Egypt until Coptic times (c.f. Schoske 1982). Within the art of Göbekli Tepe we can list several examples of some form of canonization, e.g. the boars on Pillars 12 and 38 are depicted in a very similar way, while the same animals are illustrated quite differently on Pillars 26 and 28, but are again similar to one other. As Pillar 12 is located in Enclosure C and Pillar 38 in Enclosure D it is quite unlikely that the boar depictions were created by the same artist(s). Instead, it appears that the stonemasons had been trained in how to illustrate a boar. The same is true for most of the fox depictions at the site. The miniature reproductions seem to use the iconographic implementation of a theme already provided by the stonemasons of Göbekli Tepe though, in contrast to Ancient Egypt with its enduring culture, the artistic tradition visible at Göbekli Tepe came to a comparatively early close in the 9th millennium cal BC, during the MPPNB period. Neolithization resulted not only in an unprecedented change in material culture but also in the symbolic world. The site of Göbekli Tepe fell into oblivion.

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