The Rise and Fall of Göbekli Tepe

by Jerry Glover

The Stone Menagerie

Southeastern Turkey, 9500 - 7500 BC

As the Upper Paleolithic era shades into Mesolithic and Early Neolithic times, the earliest agglomerations into sedentary groupings of isolated clans, tribes, bands of hunters and itinerant handicraft traders which we can more easily recognise as organised social structures and culture, first occur in south-eastern Turkey, and the northernmost reaches of the Fertile Crescent in the upland region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is probably no coincidence that they also happen to be societies that exemplify a propensity for creating languages of symbolism to imbue existence with meaning and identity, for the amassed efforts of a group of sites that emerged in this region around ten millennium BC to realise impressive new expressions of iconographic language, convey vivid suggestions of how some of the first social groups identified themselves and how the earliest organised sacred belief systems were put into practice. In this massive upscaling of artistic and combined physical ambition, there are clues as regards the reasons for the prodigious success of a protean culture that emerges from a new degree of social complexity. Perhaps there is even a kernel of a clue

as to the reasons for its eradication around two and a half millennia later, a mystery that is no less perplexing than the mystery of its precise origin which occurred somewhere around 9700 BC.

Over succeeding generations, a limestone plateau on a barren plain some 15km directly northeast of modern Şanilurfa and the Ataturk Dam in south-eastern Turkey, is selected by a group of hunter-gatherers as the place where a great undertaking of monumental building should occur. As the quarrying, shaping and arranging of, sometimes larger than human-sized, monolithic stones in circle-like enclosures begins, the work gangs swell as more clans of skilled tool-users, flint knappers chiefly but miners and workers in obsidian too, are drawn across the Konya and Harran plains from villages along the higher grounds of the upper tributaries of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This apparently unpromising site for settlement consequently becomes a nexus for the trading of goods, the exchange of knowledge and the development of skills and culture. These activities take place around and within excavated enclosures where protean concepts and values relating to identity and sacredness are expressed through a new artistic paradigm: low and high relief stone sculpture, taking a variety of animals as its prime subjects along with renditions of human beings and curious abstract symbols. As the monumental realisation of the complex conveys influence on its instigators, the horizons of a high culture is discernible, one that encompasses settlements from a radius of at least 150km as word spread of the stupendous undertaking that is beginning to comprise what we know as Göbekli Tepe (”navel” or “belly hill” in Turkish).

The sensational discoveries from two decades of continuing excavations at Göbekli Tepe have overturned what had pretty much become the historical consensus of the scope of human capabilities at such a distant age, making previous definitions of ‘ancient cultures’ seem out-dated by extending the horizon of sophisticated, cohesive culture back into a chasm of prehistory that, until its discovery, was scarcely imaginable. As far away from the earliest Sumerian writing as their civilization is from now, Göbekli Tepe harks back to an era about to undergo the transition from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one where plant cultivation and animal domestication had become the dominant, if not necessarily, the preferred means of survival. This was a massive, epochal shift in human behaviour and is another mystery that might shed light on the uses of the Göbekli’s figurative and abstract symbolism, some of which will be familiar, some of which will be strange and unique.

Fig. 1. Göbekli Tepe showing Enclosure D in the foreground. (Image credit: Teomancimit)

When Göbekli Tepe's first layer had been in use as a gathering place for several centuries up to around 9400-9130 BC, it's setting affording long views across the Konya and Harran plains, possibly to forests where now there are none, its denizens started applying their considerable skills with stone and antler-pick tools in carving out dozen distinctive T-shaped megalithic pillars from the limestone bedrock of the Konya Plain and erecting them. As shown by radiocarbon dating, they comprise the oldest structure on earth. This was the dawn of architecture and yet a few of the most imposing monoliths weigh up to sixteen tons and are twice as tall as an adult male; a feat of engineering not matched for thousands of years to come. Over forty limestone T-pillars have been found, with geophysical searches indicating that the site could yield up another two hundred and fifty within at least another twenty enclosures to add to the six known. Somehow, probably with ropes, tackle blocks and long poles, much as today's men have done to rebuild the monument, small but able gangs raised the stones. Once all twelve were in place, a further roofing phase may have taken place. The first and largest enclosure, designated Enclosure D by the archaeologist Klaus Schmidt who is directing excavations at the site**[1.],** sets the blueprint, followed by the subsequent enclosures with eleven, or, perhaps more likely, twelve T-pillars erected at regular spacings around the edges of the enclosures, their narrowest edges facing inwards to create a spoked-wheel effect

when seen from above.

One of the most astonishing discoveries about Göbekli Tepe is how the enclosures came into existence; fully-formed and apparently without precedence. Instead of developing towards an idealised form, refined over successive stages as we would naturally expect from a society consolidating their knowledge from earlier workings (as at Stonehenge for example, where what has been left to us now was the final triumphant effort of the monument's builders over many centuries and several successive stages), the quality of building in the enclosures of Göbekli Tepe actually *declines* over the lifetime of the site as new enclosures were built. Göbekli's architects *began* with their definitive statement in the first enclosure of T-pillars, thereafter summoning smaller, artistically weaker versions of it – mimicking the career of Orson Welles. Considering the almost superhuman physical effort required to achieve such a thing in the first place, this seems counter-intuitive, almost impossible. However, before we recourse to outlandish theories about the T-pillars being designed and built by aliens, we must widen our perspective to see that this is far less of a problem than it first appears. For although Göbekli Tepe is unique, the appearance of its first and largest enclosure 'out of the blue', around the middle of the 10th millennium BC, is something of an illusion, one that modern mainstream depictions of the site have encouraged by not looking beyond its immediate location. The idea of Göbekli, in its most special and narrowest sense, does indeed seem to have appeared fully-formed but, in a slightly broader sense, precedents for its construction *do* exist and Göbekli cannot be properly approached without knowing something about them.

Looking into what could have sparked such a transcended level of consolidated effort in building the first of these ovular enclosures for reasons other than domestic dwellings, leads us some 90km southwest of Göbekli Tepe to one of the first places where hunter-gatherers ceased roaming and following the seasons in pursuit of game to establish permanent settlements instead. At about the same time as the initial layer of Göbekli Tepe, the stage preceding the raising of the T-pillars in Enclosure D, a site in Syria called Jerf el Ahmar was being founded, not far from the Euphrates river. What most distinguishes this settlement of multi-room buildings is a round mud-brick building, three times larger than the surrounding buildings, embedded at the centre of the village. In its semi-subterranean interior subdivided into six cells, tall wooden pillars were driven into the angles between the walls, accentuating the hexagonal shape of the building, and the structure was then roofed and covered over with earth. Elevated benches were set into the walls, faced with heavy slabs of chalk that gave embellishment by being precisely cut and polished before being set against the fronts of the

benches, covering their full lengths. The upper halves of these chalk slabs are decorated with a horizontal frieze of triangles in relief and similar decoration of large chevrons and a long vertical line undulating line is continued on one of the pillars**[2.].** This honeycomb of a structure, evidently a place where people could meet and discuss their business and perhaps engage in sacred cultic activities, not only anticipates the similar structures at Göbekli Tepe and other sites to come in the region but its symbolic decorations, strongly evoking weaving and textile-making by using repeated chevrons and snake-like undulating lines, are echoed, even more strikingly, at Göbekli Tepe's soon-to-be constructed enclosures, along with another more overtly cultic space where auroch's skulls were an intentional part of the structure. We'll get further into these aspects when looking at the symbols of Göbekli Tepe in the next section.

Another site with very early communal buildings that are contemporaneous with those of Jerf el Ahmar and the first phase of Göbekli Tepe, is Tell Qaramel in northern Syria. The stone settlements uncovered by Polish archaeologists working on this site since the late 1990s are another claimant – possibly the most justifiable, though only by a whisker – for the earliest permanently inhabited structures. Yet, for us, the addition of five round stone towers, each over six metres in diameter, is of most interest for the towers are dated to an outer horizon of 10 000 BC and positively no later than 9650 BC which happens to be practically slap bang on the dating for the initial groundplan of Göbekli Tepe. Again, as at Jerf el Ahmar, these towers were built for communal meetings, with crescent-shaped benches made of flat stone slabs and packed cobbles. Huge hearths made of pebbles with special passages formed out of vertical stone slabs leading to them, underline the theory of lead archaeologist Ryszard Mazurowski that the fires in the hearths were kept for ritual purposes. Though 180km west of the nearest Mediterranean shoreline, engraved depictions of seashells, octopus, and turtles on stone vessels and plaques reveal that the inhabitants must have had contact with other human groups and may even have ventured that far. Sophisticated symbolic thinking at the site is evidenced by the finds of oval and rectangular shaft straighteners or whetstones. These hunting tools, used for straightening arrows so they would fly truer to their aim, were decorated with animals and geometric patterns including parallel zig-zags, snakes, and criss-cross patterns (Figure 11), the significance of which becomes even clearer on the Göbekli Tepe T-pillars**[3.].** Although they may be less impressive than the towering pillars of Göbekli Tepe , the stone towers of Tell Qaramel are no less sensational in historical terms, wresting the title of the oldest such examples from those found at Jericho by pushing back the earliest date for comparable structures by two thousand years.

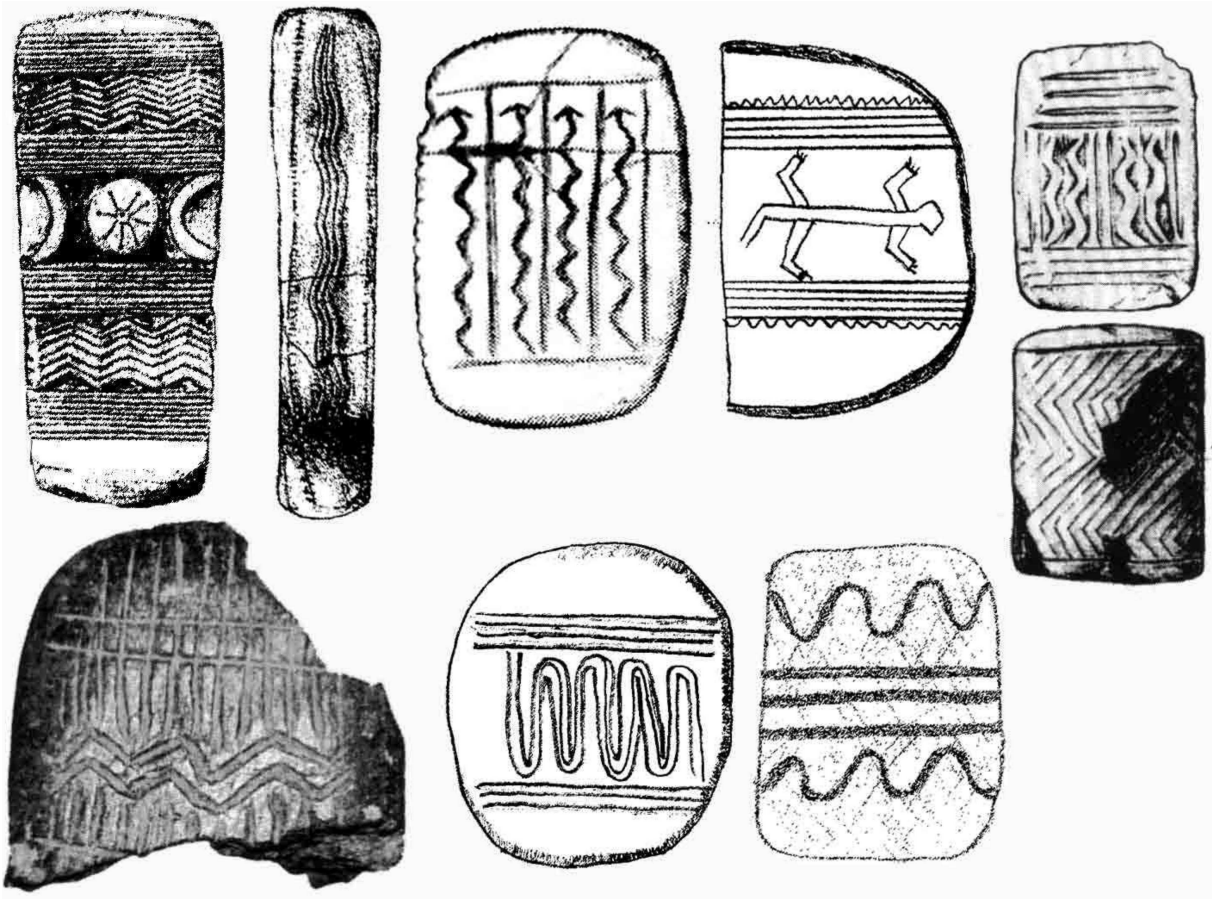


Fig. 2. Arrow straighteners from Tell Qaramel, Syria. The pair at lower right are from Netiv Hagdud in the Lower Jordan Valley.

Much further afield in southern Jordan at the base of the Jordanian plateau, another large, semi-underground communal building of the same date as Jerf el Ahmar at the site of Wadi Faynan was established with a similar 'honeycomb' layout before the installation of a tiered wall bench, decorated along its edge with an abstract pattern of parallel undulating lines, a configuration also found incised into the surfaces of stone items. To clarify, these lines at Wadi Faynan are unambiguously wavy - not angular zig-zags. The conjunction of these undulating serpentine patterns with zigzag forms which is slightly more suggestive of weaving patterns, also occurs at Tell Qaramel, and becomes even less ambiguous at Göbekli Tepe, as we will see. Massive cup-hole stone mortars set into the floor were used to grind plants and other materials and stone bowls, intentionally broken and left there amidst the bones of goat and ibex, imply that feasting went on there. Added to the geometric decorations, the assumption that the building, rather than being used for simply dining, served a probable primarily cultic purpose, is even harder to escape.**[4.]**

Even though more than 500km separates Wadi Faynan from Göbekli Tepe, with Jerf el

Ahmar situated approximately on a line drawn between them, the apparently great distance between the furthest of these locations doesn't erase the fact that the first phase of Göbekli Tepe coincides very closely with the fully-developed phases of the communal buildings at these sites and at Tell Qaramel. There are further symbolic connections between Jerf el Ahmar, Tell Qaramel, Wadi Faynan and Göbekli Tepe to be explored in more than passing terms. For now, though, enough evidence exists to posit the idea that the amazing, fully-formed sophistication of the first megalithic enclosure at Göbekli Tepe, while substantially different from those further south, was at least partly a culmination of social changes already happening in Syria and the southern Levant, changes that at the start of the 10th millennium BC were ushering in the late phase of the Natufian culture in Jordan and the southern Levant - the narrow north-south 'corridor' comprising the extent of that culture and the Mureybet culture in Syria. In this sense, the achievement of Göbekli Tepe stands more at the close of an existing continuity than at the beginning of one, the colossal summation of the experience and knowledge of people whose intellectual development hit a growth spurt in the immediate aftermath of the Younger Dryas event which caused several centuries of a colder, drier climate starting around 10 000 BC.

These changes, bringing about a cultural highpoint in the form of communal buildings with special decorations, have only very recently started to overturn the long-held idea that the first people to settle in permanent buildings did so because they wanted to live together, only later developing organised cultic practices, proto-religions, which was previously seen as an offshoot of a stable, well-fed, surplus-rich social system with time to spare. This was the explanation for this pivotal point in the history of the behaviour of the human species, assumed to be the answer to the most pressing question hanging over the transition from the Upper Paleolithic to the Early Neolithic eras: why bother to settle at all, to discard a lifestyle that had served everyone perfectly well for as long as anyone knew to take up a completely new design for life instead? While the debate about this will never be settled to everyone's satisfaction, especially now that the paradigm is becoming upended, the most cogent reason, from the most contemporary evidence, is that people put down roots in the earliest villages, not because they wanted to live in closer proximity to each other for reasons mainly concerned with survival; 'strength in numbers', but rather out of an impulse to engage communally in activities that were sacred in nature- activities that further facilitated the transition to the post-hunter-gatherer lifestyle of agriculture and animal domestication. Perhaps the shock of the Younger Dryas Event, which caused the climate to change for the worse, factors into these changes, helping to galvanize sacred beliefs thought to bring sense

and order back into a world that had suddenly and inexplicably become more hostile and unpredictable.

This shift in lifestyle from a roaming one to sedentary one also has the virtue of fitting perfectly into the initial theory of why the evidence for domestic dwellings at Göbekli Tepe is non-existent and why the place is relatively far from fresh water sources, i.e. it was meant to be the ultimate place of gathering and never intended for permanent settlement. Göbekli Tepe's reputation, in the few years since its discovery, has been purely as a 'cultic centre'. But I wondered if there was more to Göbekli Tepe than this neat, even somewhat dismissive, explanation, as a closer investigation of its symbolism as well as a comparison with the symbolism found at sites within range of its cultural orbit could suggest.

Down Among the T-Pillars

Even the most persuasive researcher is prevented from walking amidst the enclosures at Göbekli Tepe, so let us imagine that, having been granted the extraordinary privilege of being free to have a gander around, we are gingerly descending a ladder, then another, to one of the earliest parts of Göbekli; the floor of Enclosure D.

We stand at the first level of what would become the greatest collectivised effort of humanity at that time, the ground floor of the Şanlıurfa Culture and its symbolic universe, having chosen an hour of the day in which the relief carvings of the stones are best viewed, with the lengthening shadows letting nothing escape our notice and allowing us just enough time to complete a brisk virtual tour before sundown. Saving the pair of towering T-pillars at the centre of this egg-shaped sanctuary that are obviously the focus of the area we are now in, we'll look around the edge pillars first, taking a few steps southeast towards Pillar 22. As with the others, the pillar is anthropomorphic, suggestive of the human form in one of the most basic ways possible, because although the pillar has no human features as such and there is no clue as to its sex, from other examples that do have limbs, we know that its 'head' and 'body' form a highly abstracted stone version of a human being (with the qualification that other T-pillars have a more phallic shape, a theme that this culture explores in other forms). Reliefs of a snake and a fox are carved on one of its widest faces. Turning south to the next large upright, Pillar 21 has reliefs of a gazelle, a wild ass and an indeterminate animal. Continuing clockwise around the enclosure, Pillar 20 develops the animal theme with wild cattle to add to a snake and an overhead view of a lizard going down the inward-facing surface of one narrow

edge and a single fox which seems to be caught in a leaping motion across one of the wide sides. The animal theme changes on Pillars 26 and 28 with two boars, one on each pillar depicted at the tops of the inward-facing narrow edges, both facing right**[5.].** Obviously, we are in the world of close observers of these animals and since pigs had only recently been domesticated at Hallan Çemi, outside the northeastern range of the Şanlıurfa Culture complex, these animals are the quarry of hunters, not animal-husbanders, a career move that simply was not yet part of their culture. "So many of the carvings seem to celebrate the chase," said archaeologist Klaus Schmidt, "we have found many images of prey, of boars, foxes and gazelles; also images of ducks being hunted with nets. Göbekli Tepe was probably a site for funerals, but it was also a place to celebrate the life of the hunter, and the hunt itself"**[6.].**The finding of tens of thousands of animal bones, mostly gazelle with esser amounts of wild game such as boar, sheep and red deer, all bearing cut marks and splintered edges, indicates that carnivorous feasting on a reasonably grand scale took place. Bird species were also extremely important to Göbekli Tepe's masterminds, with cranes, ducks and vultures also in the repertoire of carved motifs and sizeable quantities of the bones of these species have also been found**[7.].** All these animals are depicted on the T-pillars, boar and sheep especially, in the enclosures so far excavated but so too are less appetising animals like spiders, scorpions, snakes, foxes and reptiles (Figure 12).

Fig. 3. Relief carvings of animals at Göbekli Tepe. Fox, duck, scorpion, snakes, lion, spider, wild bull, vulture, wild boar, crane.

The depiction of these wild and often dangerous animals on the T-pillars adds extra dimension to the motives for these creatures, suggesting reasons beyond celebrating their purpose as game animals – since, surely, they did not relish scorpions, spiders and snakes when there was sheep, deer, and boar to be roasted? No, something else must have been going on in the minds of Göbekli's artists.

French archaeologist Jacques Cauvin (1930-2001) perceived a "transformation of the mind" among early Neolithic hunters and farmers**[8.],** opening the way for the realisation that adopting Neolithic ways was much more than a matter of changing diets. In it was also the germination of a landscape of memory, mythology and spiritual consciousness comparable to, and in many ways greater than, what can be gleaned from the cave art and sculpture of Paleolithic eras, the Venus and animal figurines and statuettes, naturalistic cave art, etcetera.

The magnitude of this upshift in organised behaviour is immediately gleaned from the monolithic scale of Göbekli's stones, their ovular arrangements lending themselves so well to the reconstructive powers of today's artists (a special favourite of mine is the LEGO diorama version created by Gabriel Thomson)**[9.].** The nub of the special achievement of Göbekli Tepe resides in how, the carving, rubbing down, transporting, decorating and erecting of megaliths up to seven meters high, each one over a period of weeks, even months, required multi-skilled labour and the sustained effort of an entire community; a level of hierarchical organisation that marks nothing less than the beginning of the end of the transition from one massive phase of human existence, the Paleolithic lifestyle that had stood humanity in reasonably good stead for tens of millennia, to one that stands at the very dawn of what have become our present day societies. The "transformation in the mind" that is so well exemplified by Göbekli Tepe, therefore, must have been world-shatteringly awesome, so conceptually groundbreaking in terms of its mass appeal that a considerable number of people were willing to expend an almost superhuman effort in rearranging the fabric of their environment for some purpose that has yet to be fathomed.

To better appreciate the subtleties of the revolution that took place in the minds of Göbekli's creators, we need to get closer to Pillar 33 at the southwestern point of Enclosure D (Figure 13). This resplendent T-pillar shows a level of artistic sensitivity and fluidity of symbolic consciousness not seen before in prehistoric art. On the 'capstone' of the T-pillar, three or more cranes face in the same direction and underneath them on the long upright stone at least two larger cranes appear. The lower of the pair has a curious symbol just below its beak, a letter H on its side. As they had no proper writing and our Latin-Greek alphabet is far in the future, we cannot be looking at a direct representation of a 'physical' letter H, yet this moniker's stuck to it (and, let's face it, it's catchier than Klaus Schmidt's term, "antithetical elements" for the symbol), so we have to remember that this is one of those cases where the name for the symbol is only a sound shape, one that only about a half of the world's population instantly recognises.

Fig. 4. Pillar 33 in Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe with relief carvings of cranes, snakes, a spider, and the H-symbol.

Attempting to understand the mysterious H-symbol, a pictograph seen nowhere else in world art, requires that we cast ourselves off into the vast quiddity of symbolic association, giving ourselves a raft upon a solid supposition that since the animal carvings come from the world of Göbekli's people, it follows that the H-symbol should also derive from something tangible and real from the world they knew. "These reliefs open a view of a new and unique pictorial language not known before whose interpretation is a matter of important scientific debate," says Klaus Schmidt, who doesn't suffer from the 'merely decorative' blind spot in his outlook of what makes the symbolism of Göbekli special**[10.].** Unique as it is, though, this pictorial

language was, as we now know, not new. Tens of millennia had gone by from the Gravettian and Magdalanian periods where Venus-Goddess and other anthropomorphic sculptures and engravings had slowly codified into the kind of abstract symbolism found at Mezin and, we must presume, in weave patterns preserved only in fabrics long-perished.

Yet the pictographic language of Göbekli Tepe developed in its own unique way and in directions never seen before. What did the builders of Göbekli want those who went there to think the H-symbol was? What did it mean *to them,* and what can it tell us about who they were – is it even possible to know? Klaus Schmidt gave the depth of problem some scope when he wrote, "The reliefs of Pillar 33, especially demonstrate that it seems quite obvious that there was a background different from a simple totemic context... Possible interpretations of the signs could be that they transmit an apotropaic message [i.e. magically functioning to protect against evil], or that they are a mythic narrative... the question how to read the symbols will take much more time to be answered in-depth, if ever."**[11.]** After a lot of time spent puzzling these words in relation to the carvings, I had to concede the truth of this although intimations of the thought processes of the carvers of the pictographs were within reach.

The narrow inward-facing side of Pillar 33 is entirely filled with pictographic carvings centered upon an H-symbol (Figure 13). An array of wavy parallel lines that emanates from underneath the larger crane on the pillar's front side, finish in head-shapes along the edge of the narrow side, suggesting that these forms are not water, which is after all the natural habitat for the crane, but instead writhing snakes. They are almost setting a path for the birds to follow, in a sense 'luring' them towards the focus of the relief composition on the pillar's narrow edge. Two sets of three snakes run parallel to the line of the stone's edge are also on the narrow side, the upper set is facing down towards the H-symbol at the centre of the composition. Facing towards the lower edge of the H-symbol is a spider (even though it only has six legs, it is clearly arachnid). The second set of three snakes issues from the snakes' heads that run along the edge of the lower half of the pillar, 'framing' the composition by acting as a border. The upper half of this border comprises a tight formation of upside-down V-notches. The compositional decision to place the V-notches in line with the snakes' heads might look accidental, a purely aesthetic choice done to balance the themes out symmetrically, but as Klaus Schmidt perceived, there is no such thing as the 'merely decorative' at Göbekli Tepe. Some meaningful purpose, however obscure, underlies everything we see there.

Moving along past four more pillars on the western side of Enclosure D takes us to

Pillar 43 in the northwest corner, the so-called ‘Vulture Stone’ (Figure 14) where the composition of relief carvings reached a creative peak, revealing more about Göbekli Tepe’s creators than any other single T-pillar thus far found.

Fig. 5. The ‘Vulture stone’, Pillar 43 in Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe.

Taking a close look starting at ground level, rising from the bottom of this pillar is a large goose-like bird, only the head and long neck of which are visible. Riding the back of this bird is a headless man with an erect penis. Above the bird is a scorpion facing up, next to which on

the left is an animal, possibly a boar, and an upwardly-curving shape with a snake head/phallic end, probably interpretable as a penis, albeit a really long one, partly since its shape is distinct from the similar-looking tail and barb of the scorpion which is unmistakable. On the upper register of the pillar, filling the wide side of the capstone, a complex scene comprises two registers. The lower register, taking-up about two-thirds of the headstone composition, shows a total of four birds: on the left is a vulture, by far the largest of the four; on the right three more cranes are more perfunctory versions of the birds on the wide face of Pillar 33. The rest of the composition on this register comprises a bizarre geometric pattern and separate H-symbols. On the far right side, the head and neck of a bird is curtailed by a snake head/phallic shape instead of a body and legs. Directly below its beak is a horizontal H-symbol, and above these is another H-symbol, orientated vertically and positioned directly adjacent to the complete figure of the bird. The bird head with its phallically-ending neck and the full-figure of the long-legged bird on its right, overlaps with (or perhaps more accurately, emerges from) a geometric pattern of zigzagging, nested V-shapes split into two areas by an array of eleven or twelve squares. The large vulture on the left side is balancing a sphere on one of its raised wings. Also noteworthy about this bird, is its neck across which are incised three roughly parallel lines and below them a V-shaped line, giving it the slight impression of wearing a V-necked garment, which is slightly strange, no? On the capstone's upper register are three 'handbag' shapes, with animals squashed into the spaces between their handles: from left to right, a bird, a four-legged animal and an eroded form that might be an insect as seen from above, like the scorpion. The composition is topped by a further pattern of V-shapes running along the upper edge.

A few strides to the east, Pillar 30 has only a carved hole in its capstone. Because this feature appears on other pillars, sometimes incongruously in relief scenes, ascribing all that much symbolic meaning to it would overlook the practical use of these holes for raising the pillars. So, we turn towards the centre of the enclosure where two large upright stones (Pillars 18 and 31) dominate the outer ovular arrangement of T-pillars, rising above them like sentinels to a height of five and a half metres each. The idea that the T-pillars are anthropomorphic and that their capstones represent the human head is confirmed by flat relief carvings of slender arms and hands on these central pillars, the fingers wrapping around the narrowest sides. There are several possibilities as to what these severely minimalist figures represent; the builders of Göbekli Tepe being one, although the lack of differentiation between the sexes means that they could represent any combination of man, woman, brothers, sisters or twins, perhaps in a mythological context if not in a flesh-and-blood one. The artists

of Göbekli were capable of naturalistic carvings as shown by other carvings including a masterful sculptural high relief of a lion or leopard perched on the 'stomach' of a T-pillar in Enclosure C, its ferociously bared teeth executed in perfect detail, so lack of artistry cannot explain the minimalist form of these pillars; it was a conscious artistic choice which supports the idea that these pillars represent mythological figures that might have been in the culture of the people of Göbekli Tepe long before a single T-pillar was raised. Yet our idea of what constitutes mythological, something that is far removed in time from the here-and-now world of everyday life, might be strained by curious accouterments carved on these T-pillars: necklaces and belts that lend solidity to the identity of these figures as coming from within the hunter-gatherer society of the pre-pottery societies of south-eastern Turkey and upper Mesopotamia.

The western T-pillar (Pillar 31) is wearing a necklace in the form of a bucranium (the head and horns of an auroch, a species of large wild cattle, now extinct) and a belt decorated with the mysterious H-symbols and crescent shapes. The eastern pillar 18 bears a more complex necklace 'pendant' in the shape of an H-symbol, and a circle with a hole at its centre (*circumpunct*). Below that is the C-shaped crescent symbol (Figure 15).

The 'buckle' of the belt on Pillar 18 is made up of H-symbols – three 'horizontal' ones on the left, two 'vertical' ones on the right – and a larger central feature, a 'belt buckle' composed of two elements; a domed shape resembling the snake heads pointing down which is enclosed by an upturned C-shape that looks like a larger version of the crescent shape. Cut out of animals hide, possibly received as a ceremonial gift, the belt might have functioned as an insignia of position or status within a 'priesthood'. How might this belt have fitted in with their rites and what did it say about them?

Underneath this 'belt buckle' the pelt of a fox hangs from the waist of the figure. Another fox appears on this pillar in a prominent place, a living one 'held' in the crook of the T-pillar's elbow. This huge pillar statue sits quite precariously only four inches inside a slot at the midpoint of a stone platform decorated along one side with seven ducks in a row.

Fig. 6. Pillar 18 at the centre of Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe with details of the upper edge symbols (the H, circumpunct, and crescent), the belt and fox pelt.

Of the fourteen species of animal depicted in Enclosure D, snakes are by far the largest group with twenty-five examples. The next most popular animal is the fox (eight examples), then the duck (seven), the crane (four) and the auroch (two). In the single figures are the boar, wild sheep, Asiatic wild ass, gazelle, vulture, goose, scorpion, spider, and lion (or leopard)**[12.].** The pictograms of non-animal shapes comprise a separate group of carvings. There ends our tour of the T-pillars of the earliest and most highly decorated of the megalithic enclosures thus far uncovered at Göbekli Tepe. With more than a dozen to keep the archaeologists busy for the next few decades, it will be some time before we know how many more reliefs and carvings of animals await discovery under this hill yet there is already plenty to get stuck into from this feast of animal and pictographic symbolism.

Unlike superficially similar megalithic constructions of later eras, the megaliths of Göbekli are not austere and silent and thus are open to great leaps of conjecture. Daunting in their physical audacity, entrancing in their iconography, the astounding lengths the builders went to express who they were and what was important to them left behind much to tell us since Göbekli's pillars are the Early Neolithic "transformation of the mind" in solid forms, expressed with relatively little room for ambiguity. A stone picture book. This was the collegiate statement of wandering tribes and proto-villages that took around five thousand years to reach an apotheosis of social organisation and cultural achievement, one that once established, flourished for another two and a half thousand years – ten centuries longer than the Roman Empire. Even though its stones were eventually buried in some act of gentle annihilation, eradicated but not erased from the face of the earth in an act oddly resembling the deliberate burial of the monolith from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the culture's influence extended far into the future, long after the culture itself ceased to exist. The precision of the monolithic edges and the iconic straightforwardness of most of the carvings, the photogenic edges and crisp carvings with relatively little erosion to betray its tremendous age thanks to a careful covering-over with rubble, makes Göbekli Tepe seem curiously contemporary, conveying the possibility of coming across its T-pillar arrangements in an urban sculpture park, believing it to be a 21st century conception. It just doesn't *seem* anything like as old as it actually is, so great is the strain it places on the imagination to picture what constitutes very ancient architecture. For those of us trained as children to think that buildings like the Great Pyramid or Stonehenge or Newgrange are the outer markers of

extremely ancient building, how can we grasp how Göbekli Tepe stands on the threshold of another magnitude of architectural time, around twice as far back in time from those buildings as they are from our time? Plot these sites on a line divided into centuries and you will see what I mean. The distance of Göbekli from even the earliest civilizations just doesn't seem feasible.

As I gathered everything I possibly could about the Şanlıurfa Culture, Göbekli Tepe and its outlying world; relevant facts from societies that preceded it and were within its cultural orbit, I wondered what else from the findings thus far known from this eleven thousand year-old megalithic menagerie could be garnered about the people who made Göbekli Tepe, what brought them together, what it mean to them and to what possible purposes they could have put it.

Memories into Mythologies, Pictures into Symbols

A good place to start building a fuller portrait of the masterminds of Göbekli Tepe is at the centre of Enclosure D where we finished our tour beside the tallest of all the monoliths, the richly-decorated and beguiling Pillar 18. Who or what might it depict? Klaus Schmidt favours a mythological theory about the identity of the figures depicted on the pillars: "... it is clear that the pillar statues in the centre of these enclosures represented very powerful beings. If gods existed in the minds of Early Neolithic people, there is an overwhelming probability that the T-shape is the first known depiction of gods"**[13.].** In the context of a lack of finds supporting the use of the enclosures as domestic dwellings, the faceless aspect of the anthropomorphic pillars and the giant stature of the central pillars, this conjecture is highly appealing. Evidence exists in a wider context though that enables us to consider another possibility, one less cut-and-dried in the template of religion, our modern idea of which, we must remember, is shaped by the first genuine stirrings of religion that attest with no doubt as to what it was for several millennia to come.

Appearing on this pillar in a prominent place is a fox, 'held' in the crook of the T-pillar's elbow. A discovery, made in 2011 at the Ulyun el-Hammam site in Jordan, sheds light on what was going here with the finding of a grave from 14 500 BC containing the skull and right upper leg bone of a red fox and another grave with the nearly complete skeleton of a red fox, missing its skull and right upper leg bone. This grave was later reopened and the human's body was moved, a common burial tradition in this and later eras. This human grave became

particularly remarkable upon finding that the fox was killed and buried with its owner, then the fox's bones were later moved along with the human bones, a procedure signifying that the fox had a special relationship with the human. It was, too all intents and purposes, the human's companion just as we would expect a pet dog to be**[14.].** With present day customs of hunting foxes for country sport and instances of urban foxes stealing into homes and causing injury to children, extremely rare events that tarnish the image of the fox due to the overblown news coverage they receive, the domestication of foxes is mostly outside of our cultural frame of reference. Forging a bond with them is less easy than with dogs. The skittish and timid nature of foxes makes them less suitable for domestication, which is probably the reason why their canid cousins eventually won over human affection, as known from later Natufian burials where dogs were interred with humans. A pair of red foxes nevertheless won a place in the hearts of the inhabitants of these two pre-Natufian graves. Some five thousand years later at Göbekli Tepe, they were accorded very special places in the most prominent positions on central T-pillars both as live animals and as prestige garments; the fox stole or 'loincloth' hangs from the belt of Pillar 18.

Other animal parts exist in the graves of the Natufian culture, so the evidence for a 'man's best friend' relationship from the burials alone, posited by their discoverers, is not quite enough. What *can* be surmised is that over the five thousand years following the Ulyun el-Hammam burials to Göbekli's first megalithic oval, Enclosure D which rose as the culmination of emergent culture in the region going back several hundred generations, the fox's status in human eyes had grown so much that it was accorded the highest prominence in the iconography of Göbekli Tepe, given special status at the very heart of the complex. Might it have been that the fox, a creature that only the most patient and persistent human could manage to exert a modicum of control over, only ever partially allowing itself to be brought under man's will, won its special place *precisely because* it demanded such persistence and control – much more so than the dog? That these were foremost among the skills that the hunter-builders of Göbekli valued? Skills in which mastery over wild animals was even more arduous and therefore worthy of more admiration and prestigiousness than merely hunting and killing them. It might have been that those who could manage to train foxes, patiently preventing them from returning to the wild until the death of their keeper, were held in such high estimation that they were eventually accorded the highest status in society. Later as Göbekli Tepe rose, an abstract sculpture representing *all* these trainer-chiefs going back generations was included at the heart of the 'pantheon' of enclosures, whose T-pillars represent faceless, and therefore to us seemingly god-like, figures but who were also direct

ancestors of Göbekli's builders, rendering blurry the distinction between physical ancestors and mythological gods. Interned skeletons marked by stones near to Pillar 43 help support this idea.

A huge gulf of around five thousand years separates the Ulyun el-Hammam burial from Göbekli Tepe. That's plenty of time for its builders to have forgotten the literal existence of that particular fox-domesticating ancestor. But the iconography of the 'fox trainer-chief' of Pillar 18, with its handheld fox and stole loincloth, an attribute that possibly only certain people were allowed to wear, seems to show that this did not happen. Moreover, for all its impressive physical innovation, Göbekli was a repository of ancient practices that were still in a progress of development after all that time. The culture was still very much in a cohering phase. At the time when they were being built and used, there seems every reason to believe that the T-pillar figures functioned on ancestral, contemporary, and mythologically relevant levels simultaneously, not so far from the way religious buildings today do only with more emphasis towards the ancestral. This possibility and the unavailability of written texts, with only oral tradition to pass on their myths, make it seem plausible that its builders recognised more of themselves in their 'god' than we would in ours, this could help to account for Göbekli's initial success as a construction project and why it seemed like something that had to be done, no matter what effort and resources were required. If the project was predicated on a purely mythological basis – like a statue of a Greek god in a Renaissance palazzo – would it have galvanised the workforce with the same impetus than if they closely identified themselves with the figures represented by the T-pillars? That seems unlikely. The myths of Göbekli's people were particularly immanent to them, likely more than ours are to us, however vivid and alive they may seem, since their 'myths' were not 'fantastic tales of imaginary beings doing impossible deeds in a past that time forgot' scenario. They were myths from a real basis, one that was *still taking form in the present*, codifying in carved limestone. A history still being lived in the present.

The pairing of central T-pillar statues raises the question of their relationship. Are they twins, a common theme in mythology? Since their carvings are not identical, is it more probable that they are brother and sister or man and woman, the 'classic duality'? No anatomical features exist on the pillars, not unless the accouterments can tell us something about what sex the figures are meant to be.

The abstract symbols found on the necklaces and the belt – the C or U-shaped symbol, the disc-with-hole circumpunct symbol, and the H-shaped symbol – invite a deeper problem.

One well-worn way of interpreting them was to go along with what researchers often do

when faced with a symbol they don't know; ascribe them to sex and fertility. This tack seemed worth taking here because the central buckle *is* sexually suggestive in a way that chimes with the phallic imagery seen elsewhere at the site and in the region. Some of the T-pillars have rounded heads that makes them resemble phalluses rising proudly out of the ground to point at the sky. The probability of this being coincidental is low since more phallic imagery in the form of a stone sculpture of a man with a prominent erect penis has been found and at a nearby limestone quarry contemporary with Göbekli Tepe, three reliefs each showing a one meter-long phallus and scrotum were discovered as well as other finds with phallic associations from the region, all lending weight to the idea of masculinity**[15.].**

Returning to Pillar 33 in Enclosure D, Ian Hodder takes up the theme to reinforce the link between Göbekli's snakes and phallic imagery:

> If one accepts that this is a phallic pillar, then the writhing snake bodies could possibly have accentuated the phallacism... Schmidt interprets the snakes on [the pillar at the centre of the enclosure] as issuing from the stomach or from approximately the same position where one might expect male genitals.**[16.]**

This is of crucial importance since Göbekli's artists had no interest in decorating their snakes with patterns of scales to make them seem more realistic serpents. What mattered to them were; the accentuated head shape, the suggestion of undulating motion, the grouping of snakes together, all moving in parallel unison, and the significant positioning of groups of snake heads in close association with the mysterious H-symbol or with anatomically-significant positioning first noticed by Klaus Schmidt. All this amounts to a symbolic association in the Göbekli consciousness with snakes and men and the identity of the figures represented by at least one T-pillar positioned centrally in an enclosure**[17.].**

The belt buckle of the central pillar comprises two elements, one inside the other. This configuration is positioned at about the same height as the sex organs. The inner dome or snake-head shape, its rounded end orientated vertically downwards and extended upwards in the shallow channel formed by parallel edges, could be an abstracted phallus congruent with the snakes, seen everywhere. Neatly containing this shape is a U-shaped element, which may simply represent a female symbol abstracted from its function as a repository for the phallus. Both in combination might, therefore, be a pictographic symbol for sex and procreation. Continuing this idea, the H-symbol, occurring five times on the front of the belt, and twice more on each of the belt sides alongside U-shapes (rotated forty-five degrees to become C-

shapes), could represent offspring. Thus, the double-headed shape of the H-symbol could represent the fruitful union of male and female. The belt is not as such a 'tool belt' in a realistic or even semi-realistic way. More likely is that it's a configuration of abstract symbols signifying an identity, a group identity. And by its repetition on the belt, tallying individuals or perhaps entire families, we have a semasiographic sign for a family or clan for whom the statue was resonant on historically and increasingly mythological levels over centuries, the T-pillar being their ancestral figurehead. The full configuration on the belt, therefore, most likely functions as a quasi-heraldic sign for their collective identity.

This interpretation seems to fall short, however, when we know that Göbekli's people were capable of such sophisticated artistry, way beyond that of stereotypical 'primitives'. The sex and fertility aspect feels too much like lazily ascribing celestial bodies to circular symmetric symbols. The fertility aspect may have a bearing that may never be entirely ruled out, not when so much other phallic imagery has been excavated, but it seemed too glib and tenuous on its own. There was much more going on here than Romantic primitivism. Only the bucranium, occurring on Pillar 31, seems clearly derived from an animal, the bovine auroch (Figure 16). The auroch is known in the iconography of Jerf el Ahmar where its horns were set into the walls, four sets of them were found there.

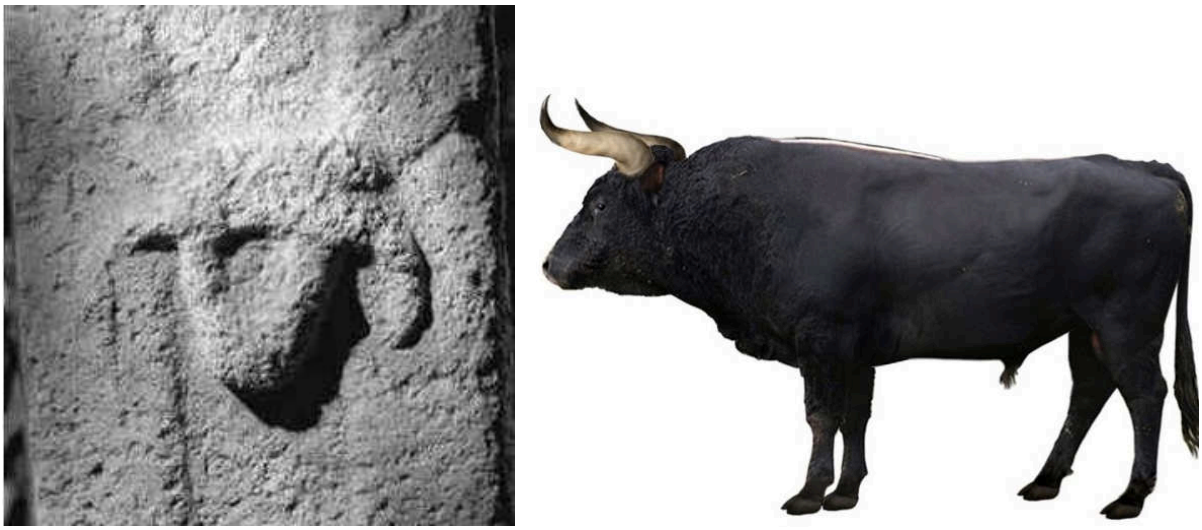


Fig. 7. Bucranium of an auroch near the top of Pillar 31, Enclosure D. Auroch reconstruction by Jaap Rouenhorst.

The inkling that these pictograms of the C-shape, H-symbol, and circumpunct *did* look like implements, made me look more closely at the repertoire of tools being used at this time to

see if they could shed more light on their meaning if only to rule the 'tool belt' theory out of the search for the source of these maddeningly opaque and tantalising signs.

Artefacts such as crescent-shaped sickle blades, which were used to improve yields of wild plants in the Natufian culture at first seemed to be a possible inspiration for the C/U-symbol. This idea was strained by having to finally admit that these tools are not anywhere near as curved enough to match the U-shape. Or was I being too fussy about my curves and angles? When does a curved line become a different curve? The maddening ambiguity meant I could not completely rule out sickle blades as an inspiration for the C-symbol, nor be entirely confident with it as a possible source.

It was a similar situation with the H-symbol because the likeliest candidates for its inspiration, arrow-straighteners, longitudinally-grooved stones that when heated and drawn down the length of an arrow helped ensure a truer flight, can look quite H-shaped from an angle looking straight down on the grooved side of one of these tools. Can the arrow-straightener, hence, be a potential source of the superficially similar symbol? Not really, because the H-symbol is based on right angles, not the smooth curve of the arrow-straightener's groove, so again the symbol was not quite the right shape for it to have been realistically carved using even the most symmetric arrow-straighteners as a guide. That also seemed to eliminate the fletcher's tool as a source tool for the symbol. The problem with both sickle blades and the arrow-straightening tools was that, even when allowing for an aesthetic of abstraction, there seemed to be no reason for the artists to go part-way towards transforming simple, real forms into abstract symbols when these objects could be realistically represented like the animals; why change the aesthetic criteria?

Trying to read the H-symbol in isolation from design contexts on the T-pillars where it appears, made me realise that this was a sidetrack and that these contexts are essential to making a deeper sense of it. A prime example is on the edge of Pillar 30 in Enclosure D where the symbol appears rotated at forty-five degrees (from that of the 'H orientation' seen on the necklace of Pillar 18) above several undulating snakes. The axis of the symbol here and the shape of the downward-facing element of the H invite a direct comparison with the snakes' heads, which are orientated in exactly the same way and are very similarly shaped. The downward-facing element of the H has gently curving edges that mirror the snakehead shape. The parallel can hardly be coincidental**[18.].**

Neither can the connection be coincidental between the creatures of Göbekli and the crafts of its people because snakes were entwined with those too. It seems an incongruous symbolic union, to put snakes with weaving. How come Göbekli's people associated the two

in this way? If you sought an animal to symbolise weaving, and snakes were in your environment, these would be the perfect choice because during weaving the weft thread is inserted over and under the warp threads that hang vertically from the loom. The weft thread moves in and out of the warp threads, and back and forth across the length of the fabric *much like the motion of a zig-zagging snake*. And as we have seen, it is the motion of snakes that the carvings emphasise.

The theme of this craft art conceived as snake imagery is made clearer by a pillar in Enclosure C where the dominant carving fuses the link between weaving, in the low-relief carving of a criss-cross mesh pattern, which covers the full width of the pillar, and snake symbolism in the form of weights shaped exactly like snake heads at the edges of the mesh pattern (Figure 17). An animal, possibly a wild sheep, is positioned underneath it and zig-zagging snakes also descend the sides of this monolith**[19.].** The main pictograph on this monument is plainly a simple weave pattern, likely a net, basket or perhaps even a tasselled rug, and its prominence underlines its significance for those who carved the stone and for those who raised it or who were drawn to it for the meanings transmitted by its carvings.

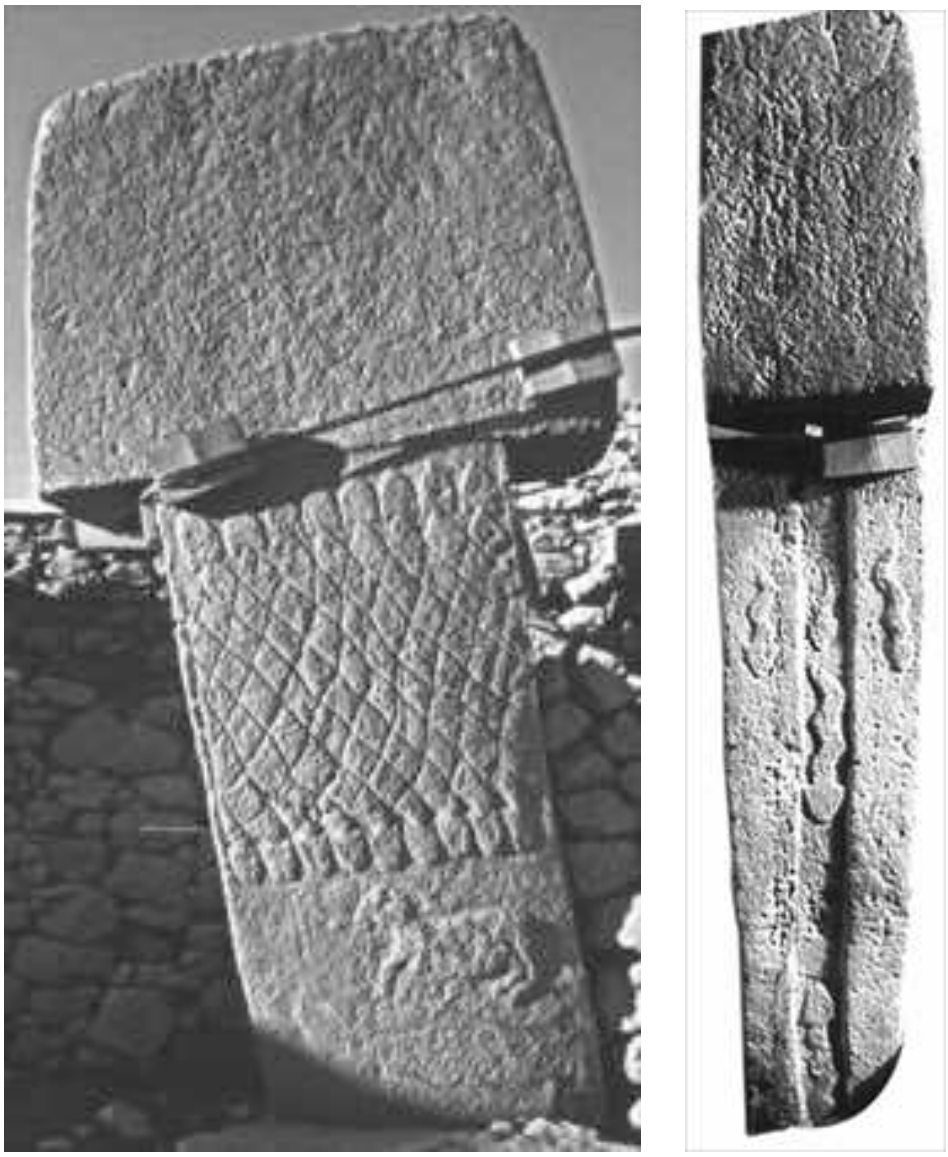


Fig. 8. Pillar from Enclosure C with relief carvings of a mesh and snakehead-shaped weights above a wild sheep and five snakes along its side.

The thematic link between snakes and weaving is made even more explicit by the carving of a descending snake on the narrow side of this pillar, its head is level with the lower snakehead net weights on the other side of the pillar. It is apparent from this that the pictographic symbol of the snake *and* the spider, a creature that, not uncoincidentally, weaves its own webs and is always depicted in close proximity to the undulating snakes on at least two T-pillar edges , share a common frame of reference at Göbekli Tepe with hunting nets and the craft of weaving, suggesting that these animals symbolised a key occupation of the hunters and weavers who assembled there. To Göbekli's people, therefore, snakes and weaving make for a perfect symbolic union to represent this most ancient and technically advanced skill, one conferring great prestige for its most adept practitioners. Pictographic forms of snakes appear

more than any other animal because weaving must have given a huge economic impetus for the whole network of communities feeding into Göbekli, it was the specialist craft that literally wove together small social units into the fabric of a unified culture.

The H-symbol's emergence from the joining together of two snakeheads/loom weights could therefore make it a symbol for the joining of two or more groups that specialised in weaving nets, baskets and matting and, likely, cloth. Possibly, it had a wider meaning that encompassed even more groups, as the occurrence of the H-symbol on the edge of Pillar 33 could suggest where the symbol is placed in the middle of a group of three snakes and a spider, all of which face towards the symbol (Figure 13.). If the three snakes symbolised one network of weavers and the spider (that weaves its web) symbolised another group of weavers who had chosen this as their emblem to further differentiate themselves maybe because they came from another region or tribal group, then the H-symbol was a pictograph representing the close association of these specialist craft groups at Göbekli Tepe. The snakes also appears to echo the motif mentioned at the end of the previous chapter from Gobustan, a thousand miles to the east of Göbekli**[20.].** Directly above and below these snakes are spider carvings and above the uppermost spider is the 'fat H' symbol. Above that symbol (which occurs all over the monoliths), are more descending snakes. The composition is framed by interweaving yet more vertical snakes that resolve into chevrons. The entire side of this monolith therefore seems to equate snakes and spiders with weaving. Or at least is decorated in patterns that resemble woven ones.

If snakes and spiders were emblematic of the craft of weaving, the H-symbol represented a wider range of people who joined together to create and use the complex, a symbol that provided its people with a unified, inclusive cultural identity. Resolving from successive phases of symbolic representation towards its purely abstract form, the H-symbol expressed a higher-order of thinking than was previously thought imaginable, perfectly encapsulating the culmination of the revolution taking place in the minds of these Early Neolithic people.

The social identity theory seemed a plausible enough one, embracing the idea that once people had learned to think on this level of abstraction, one of the defining messages they wanted to transmit was their identity, a group 'tag'. The intimacy of the animal carving with the anthropomorphic T-pillars clearly showed its people strongly identifying themselves with the animals they hunted and tamed. If the animal iconographies of other pre-pottery settlements in the region were brought into play (particularly from Jerf el Ahmar which has strong iconographic parallels with Göbekli), then the theory could be extended to suggest that

the animal carvings were tribal motifs. The belt is clearly a belt of some kind, but not in a realistic way. It is no 'tool belt', such as men wear in the garage to feel like masters of all crafts and small domestic repair jobs. It is more likely that its configuration of C and H-symbols signified groups who were the descendants of the belt-wearer: their ancestral figurehead. The symbolic frieze on the belt is therefore the semaisographic sign of the entire group involved with the complex. This idea gains support from a stone stamp bearing multiple 'C'-symbols from Aşikli Höyük (Figure 18). Suggestively, this obsidian-producing settlement in central Turkey was founded around the time of Göbekli Tepe Layer I some six hundred kilometers to the south east, after which time the symbol appeared to signify a unit of the settlement's economy, reflecting a boom in the area's obsidian trade. Perhaps, then, the elusive C-symbol signified the highly-valued and prestigious commodity of obsidian itself or knives made from it?

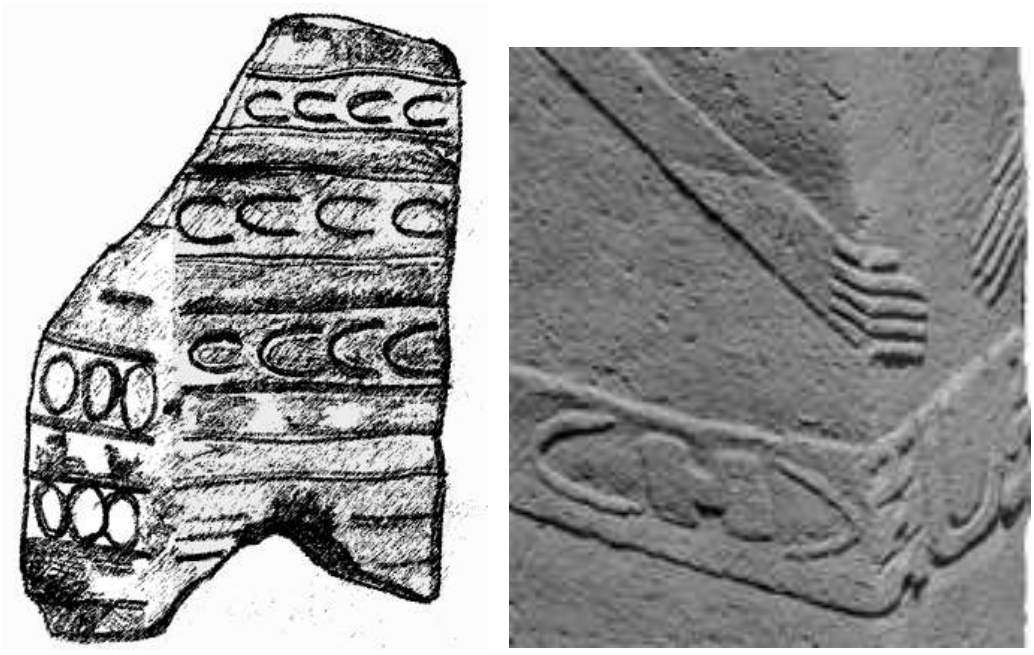


Fig. 9. The C-symbol. (left) Stone stamp from Aşikli Höyük. (right) Belt on Pillar 18 at Göbekli Tepe.

The stone tool theory seemed a more suitable way to explain the other pictogram sign appearing on Pillar 18, the circumpunct at the centre of the three necklace symbols. Despite appearing in archaeological papers as "circumpunct", it really is more of a doughnut or chunky ring shape. Hammers of spherical stones, holed through the centre for the fitting of a wooden handle, were used for the shaping of the T-pillars. They bear a certain iconic resemblance to the pictogram at the centre of the necklace configuration on Pillar 18. If the H-symbol was a symbol for the 'elder craft' of weaving, taking prime place at the top of the

necklace configuration, then the hammer stone might therefore have symbolised the newer technology of stone-working. I played with this idea for some time, asking myself, 'was that plausible?' or was the prominent depiction of one of the main tools used to make Göbekli Tepe a bit of a silly thing to do? And why depict only half a tool - a head missing a handle?

When I had just about exhausted all the research I could do on Göbekli and the region and with no more promising leads to follow up on, it was tempting to go with the hammer-stone solution for this symbol; until a paper kindly sent to me by one of the co-authors, Oliver Dietrich, an archaeologist working on the site, made me less struck with this idea. In the paper, a good size image of two large circular stone plates found near one of the central pillars of Enclosure C caught my eye. Impressive objects, they looked even more like the circumpunct symbol than hammer-stones. These stones are a part of a package of evidence for food-processing along with grinding stones, saddle querns and two charred seed cakes. Although not conclusive, chemical analysis of residues from stone vessels from Körtik Tepe, a proximal site with close iconographic ties to Göbekli, have shown preliminary evidence for tartaric acid from grape fermenting. Early cereals, researchers have found, was more suitable for making beer than bread and there are nutritional and storage reasons in favor of it. The finding of six large limestone troughs, each with a capacity of up to 160 litres, shows that Göbekli Tepe's people are not using these tools for ordinary domestic levels of consumption, they are having some fairly extravagant feasts (the level of extravagance depending on the amount of people invited to partake in it, I suppose). Since there are no signs of habitation at the site, nor are domesticated plants known there, the reasoning is that the fermented brews were prepared off-site and brought there. Not only was alcohol insinuated with mankind much earlier than most assumed, the discovery of these troughs and the chemical analyses allowed Dietrich et. al. to extrapolate a rather important and astonishing hypothesis about the transition from hunting and gathering societies to food-producing, early village farming communities: "The discovery of fermentation and the use of beer in social and religious life could thus have led to the domestication of cereals."**[21.].** Alcohol, then, was enmeshed with the transition to organised cultic practices. Picks, grinding stones and sickle tools that occur for the first time in the Natufian sphere already attest to early experiments in agriculture, intensified in the wake of migratory changes brought about by the Younger Dryas event. To fill those whacking great stone troughs with drink, Göbekli's people became even more conscious of the need for a better way of organising their storage and also their gathering of wild cereals so they started planting them to raise yields, cultivating grapes and perhaps other cereals and they experimented with fermenting. When the brewed mixtures are distributed at

special occasions, they raise spirits, allowing Göbekli's people to remember better the stories of their ancestors and to be more effective at embellishing them into mythology.

Can we discern more about this from the V-notches running down the edges of the narrow side of Pillar 33 which look like they could represent sprigs of ripening plants? The plants indicated by the V-notches might correspond to wild cereals, such as einkorn and emmer wheat, traces of which occur at some Natufian settlements, and on the slopes of Karacadağ, a volcanic mountain range in the nearby vicinity of Göbekli Tepe. The first deliberate cultivation of einkorn wheat took place just a few centuries after the building of the first enclosures**[22.].** Interpreting how humans acquired these cereals is difficult though, since their grains could have been collected in the wild, intentionally cultivated, or could have been the by-product of the collection of animal dung for heating fuel**[23.].** This makes gauging attributing the significance of plants to the builders of Göbekli Tepe and taking the step of assigning them to carvings that appear plant-like, very difficult. This interpretation cannot be entirely rejected but if these V-notches do represent cereal plants then why do they appear upside-down? This is a big problem, for if they were meant to be plant stems, no matter how simplified in their depiction, then surely the notches would appear the other way round! This pointless topsy-turveying of aesthetic sense means we must return to the theme of weaving, the V-notches are the perfect simplified representation of the houndstooth pattern produced from twill weaving, as we saw with the Mezin ivories.

If the function of the large stone plates was food-production, perhaps the 'disc-with-a-hole' pictogram symbolised this. And if the 'disc-with-a-hole' symbolised food or wine production, the C-symbol directly under it on the necklace of Pillar 18 might, after all, correlate to sickle blades, making the configuration of symbols represent two prime innovations that helped bring about this revolution in lifestyle. Proof of any theory about them is likely to be forever lost. But the notion is an aesthetically consistent way to approach these pictograms, staying within the conceptual horizons I've outlined for the origins of the H-symbol, which retains a unique position of being a semi-realistic pictograph derived from spindle whorls and snakeheads, symbolizing the idea of weaving *and a semi-abstract* conjunction of two symbols to symbolize the alliance of Göbekli's peoples, effective as a sign for their collective identity and maybe for Göbekli itself.

This is the other peak achievement of Göbekli's people besides the sheer physical one. For even if the T-pillars were only a few feet high and didn't require the might of up to fifty men to move them, as at the nearby satellite sites of Karahan Tepe, Hamzan Tepe, Sefer Tepe, and Taşli Tepe where other smaller T-pillars have come to light very recently**[24.]**, the

pictographic system they created would be as great a leap for humanity, as monumental in importance, as the pillars they call out from.

Here are the pillars and their symbols, then, and something of their people. They take centuries to build and embellish these stones, connecting them with walls of quarried limestone, always adding more until the time they had spent doing so becomes longer than even one living generation of people can know.

Without too much difficulty, we may imagine Göbekli's people arriving at their most august sanctuary, as they have many times before, some of them from the plateau community of Karahan Tepe to the west, others having taken a day or so to travel a few dozen kilometres from Hamzan Tepe, Taşli Tepe, Sefer Tepe and Jerf el-Ahmar to the south, others travelling from even further afield, a menagerie of animals accompanying them. There's been feasting and great conversation. And now, fewer and fewer are still tuckingin to the roasts as the rest make their way to the enclosures, crouching to enter through portal stones that an adult wild boar would have difficulty squeezing through. Floors have been laid inside, there are places to sit and there might be a roof over their heads. There is even more to drink to make whatever is going to happen go off even better. There together, under the animals of their clans, their ancestral monuments and their symbols, they prepare for what happens next.

Shifting Shapes and Shapeshifting

The builders of Göbekli saw themselves and their ancestors as inseparable from nature's creatures; their iconography shows this. Despite a preference for 'wild and dangerous' animals, this did not mean that these animals were meant to be feared and kept at bay. The special message of Göbekli's iconography conveys the then-perceived proximity of people to Nature, a special relationship rendered in stone relief carvings. The very closeness of this relationship in the Şanilurfa Culture of the 9th and 8th millennia BC is known from a prescient discovery made just a few years ago in the Galilee region belonging to the Natufian culture. In a grave specially constructed and arranged for a small, disabled, forty five year-old woman at the Hilazon Tachtit Cave, were found rich grave offerings comprising fifty tortoise shells, parts of a wild boar, the wing tip of a golden eagle, a leopard, two martens and a human foot**[25.].** Ofer Bar-Yosef, a Harvard anthropologist who has worked on previous Natufian excavations, said of this find, "This kind of assemblage is different from everything you find elsewhere... It's the sign of a sort of elite emerging among hunter-gatherers."

Following two years of painstaking analysis, archaeologists interpret these exceptional offerings as evidence of the grave of a shaman, a special mystic who conducted rituals.

The singular significance accorded to the role of this woman in her community means that the theory has not gone unchallenged. However, other evidence from the region indicates that, as the nomadic Natufian culture was starting to settle down into sedentary communities and was making the transition to agriculture, ideological changes that were just as important were also taking place and that there was some kind of interplay between them. In the 1950s, at the site of Zawi Chemi Shanidar cave and village in the Zagros mountains of northern Iraq, where large numbers of wild sheep and goat bones and grinding stones testified seasonal occupation and obsidian finds originating from the Lake Van area of Turkey indicated long-range contact with other tribes in the 9th millennium BC, a mass of bones was found just outside a special stone structure, mostly consisting of wing bones from at least seventeen birds. Outnumbering the bones of sheep and goats by ten-to-one, these bird remains included four bearded vultures, one griffon vulture, seven white-tailed eagles, four small eagles and one great bustard. Not only did this unique collection suggest the considerable hunting efforts on the part of the group who assembled them, the archaeologists also concluded that the bones must represent ritual paraphernalia of some kind. Recalibrated carbon dating of the bones put them in the Younger Dryas Period, the period immediately foreshadowed by, and indeed overlapping with, the construction of Göbekli Tepe Enclosures D and C (Layer II)**[26.].** Less than 100km to the south-west of Zawi Chemi Shanidar at the site of Nemrik 9, even stronger evidence for an original local cult centered on large carnivorous birds, was found in the shape of sixteen stone pestles carved into bird heads (vultures or eagles) dating to between 9650 BC and 8610 BC, again? right in the midst of Göbekli's earliest and most impressive enclosures**[27.].**

Looking west to the contemporary site of Jerf el Ahmar, some 400km on the other side of the Fertile Crescent, the bird iconography continues in an even more remarkable fashion, with two 1m high limestone pillars shaped at the top in the form of the head of a large bird of prey (Figure 10).

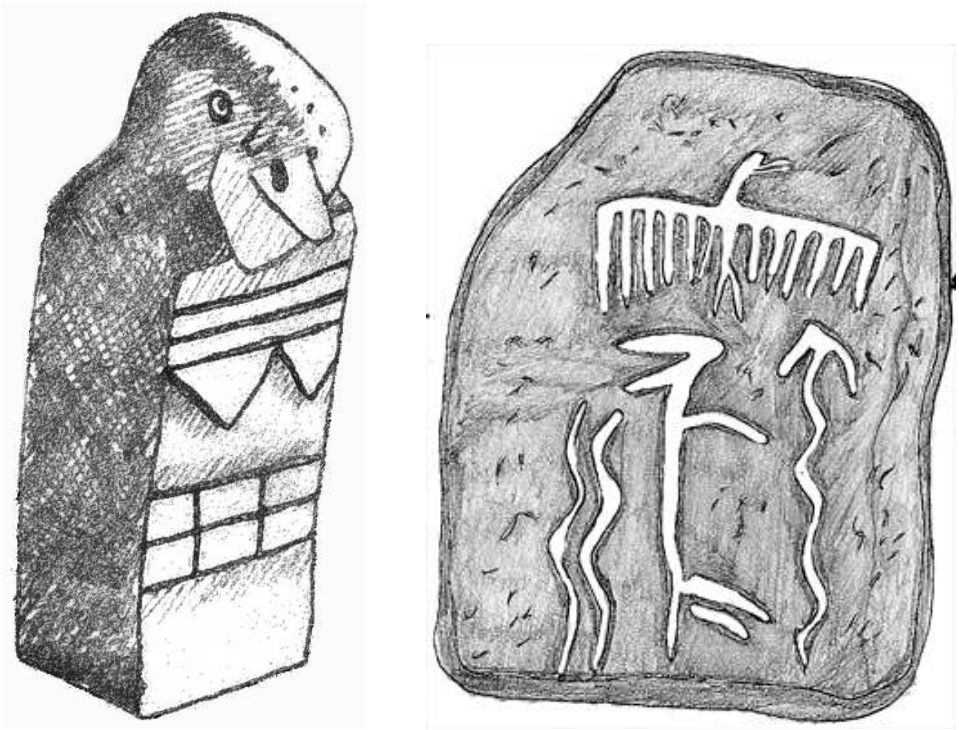


Fig. 10. (left) Pillar from Jerf el-Ahmar with the head of a larger bird of prey and registers of geometric carved reliefs. (right) Shaft-straightener from Jerf el-Ahmar with pictograms of vulture, snakes and a fox.

The people of Jerf el-Ahmar were very interested in the griffon vulture, which was exploited for its feet, its feathers and claws and bone as raw materials, a butchering pattern that suggests that, as with the bird finds at Zawi Chemi Shanidar, this bird was exploited only for ritual purposes**[28.].** On the front face of this statue is a remarkable geometric display of three registers; from top to bottom there are three (or possibly four) parallel lines, a single zigzagging line and a grid pattern of six squares. These geometric patterns occur in the iconography of several Natufian sites. At Jerf el-Ahmar, the large Natufian-style meeting room is decorated with a frieze of zigzags. The parallel lines and zigzags are found in combination on arrow-straighteners from Tell Qaramel (Figure 2)**[29.].** Black zigzagging chevrons occur on traces of mural paintings at Tel Mureybet, as does vulture iconography**[30.].** 'Meandering wave' zigzags occur along the inside wall of the communal building of Wadi Faynan in southern Jordan**[31.]** and a small greenstone plaque with a pattern strongly reminiscent of these, with additional parallel lines similar to the Jerf el-Ahmar statue, was found at Netiv Hagdad in the same region, approximately at the midpoint between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee**[32.].**

At Göbekli Tepe, the zigzagging lines were resolved into a very striking V-shaped

'necklace' worn around the neck of a male statue that was discovered in the city of Sanilurfa in 1993. At nearly two metres tall, this well-preserved piece is the earliest 'life-sized' human statue yet discovered: an eerie figure of a naked man with no mouth, hair, or legs; black obsidian blades for eyes and with his genitals in the grasp of both hands (Figure 11)**[33.].**

Fig. 11. The Urfa Man statue. Illustration by Daniel R-Z O'Neill.

As for the vulture at Göbekli Tepe, we have already noted its prominence on Pillar 43 (the 'Vulture Stone') in Enclosure D alongside other animals such as cranes and a scorpion. This vulture is balancing or throwing a spherical object with one of its wingtips and it is intriguing to recall that the neck of this vulture is carved with three parallel lines and a V-shaped 'collar', very similar to the geometric decorations on the vulture pillars of Jerf el-Ahmar. The bird also appears on a fragment of a pillar found in the debris of the same enclosure at Göbekli Tepe where it appears to be in pursuit of a wild boar. Although prominent in the few instances where it does appear at Göbekli Tepe, in the complete scheme of Göbekli Tepe's menagerie of animals, it is a creature of lesser iconographic significance than the fox, the snake and the crane; animals that feature much more heavily.

The third geometric register on the Jerf el-Ahmar vuture pillar, the grid pattern, doesn't exist in this strict form at Göbekli Tepe, it is a Natufian 'exclusive'. Grids are incised on an

arrow-straightener from Jerf el-Ahmar. The strongest link to the grid pattern and an indication of its importance, occurs at Djade el-Mughara on the Euphrates in northern Syria where French archaeologists uncovered an astonishing painted mural in 2007 (Figure 12). Dated to around 9000 BC, the painting is the oldest of its kind ever found, contemporaneous with the first stage of Göbekli Tepe, no more than a hundred kilometres to the northwest of it.**[34.]** It could easily be mistaken for a modernist abstract painting by Paul Klee with its two square metres of squares and rectangles in varying sizes, painted in alternating checks and bands of red, black and white.

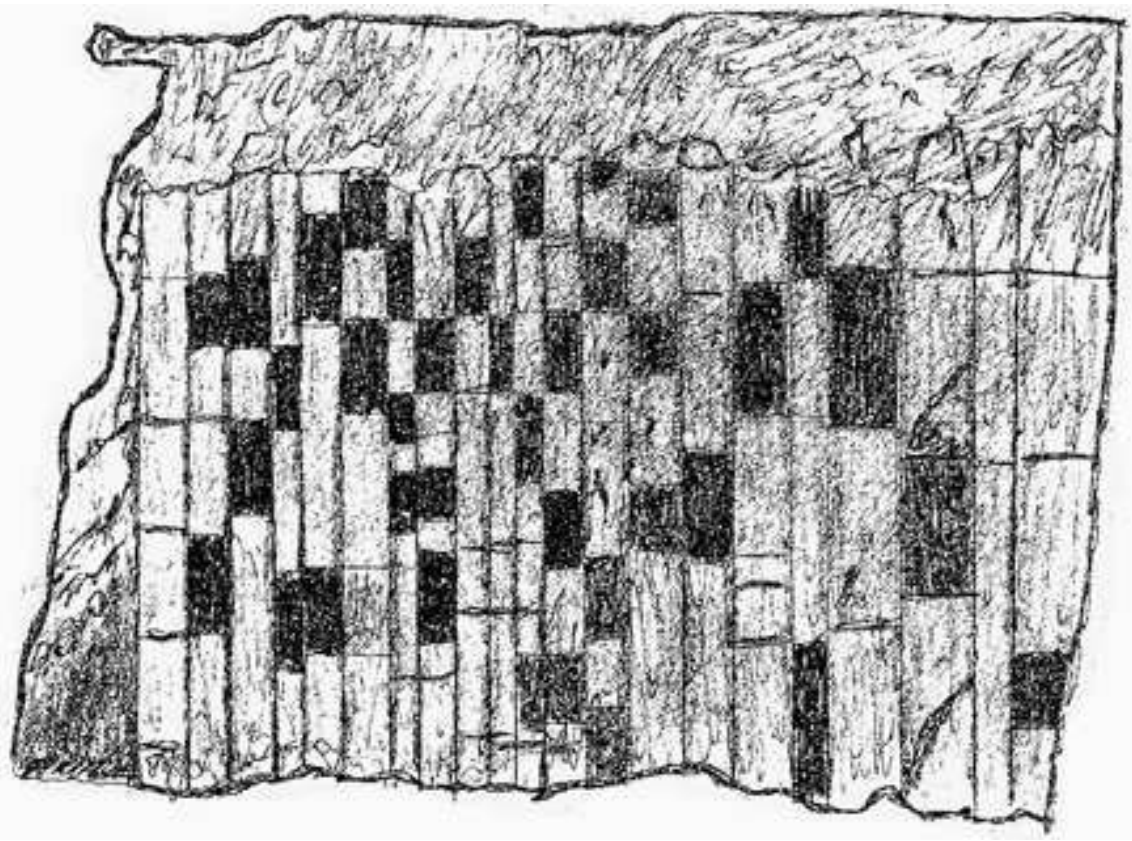


Fig. 12. Painted mural from Djade el-Mughara in northern Syria. Illustration by Daniel R-Z O'Neill.

Red ochre has a history in prehistoric art stretching back tens of thousands of years but its association with black and white in this abstract form seems to be unique. Its discovery in a large, circular, public meeting building, the defining architectural discovery of the Natufian culture, means it conveyed something very significant since the idea of 'art for art's sake' was simply inconceivable to the Early Neolithic artists. Its three-colour scheme might have signified the idea of a three-tier universe that emerged from prehistoric shamanism. Or it

could have been a kind of map, a field plan for land that was being divided up between families or clans who used the meeting-room - a sign of the agricultural ways that were just starting to emerge. It is plain to see that the mesh, zigzag and the grid designs held great meaning by this point in time, probably as an identifying sign for a group of communities, as did the parallel lines and the eagle/vulture. If the Jerf el-Ahmar limestone pillars were positioned outside the meeting room, they could have given notice to who was allowed to enter and under what authority the meeting room operated, a bird shaman or perhaps even a 'priesthood' of more than one shaman or woman, a possibility that is actually just as likely in light of the Hilazon Tachtit Cave discovery.

Shamanism is a key to unlock a facet of what transpired at Göbekli Tepe, helping us to firm-up the identity of who was 'running the show or at least that of someone whose activities were central to what took place within its enclosures. But what do we mean when we talk of shamanism, what is it?

As any Siberian with an interest in their language is hopefully able to tell you, the word 'shaman' is a Russian word that comes from a Tungus word meaning, "the ecstatic one". States of trance and ecstasy are central to the shaman's social role as a community's 'fixer' by magical means. He (or she) is, if you will, a sorcerer, with the potential for mischief. He is also a medicine man, "believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians... But beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic, and poet."**[35.]** We might also add that, in keeping with the highly theatrical attire and performances that are essential to shamanic ritual and since the role is a professional one, interwoven with community life, a good shaman is a natural extrovert, an attention-seeker *par excellence*. Those seeking a quiet life need not apply for candidacy and the only resemblance between the shaman and the contemplative mystic is their choice of a special place away from the community hub, an 'edgy' location like a waterfall, cave or a rockface. The practices of shamanism arose in hunter-herder societies because, as one vociferous critic of shamanism concedes, it is "a symbolic system conceived to deal with the functioning of the exchange with the spirits of wild animals – a contract that? legitimises the taking of game"**[36.].** Anthropologist Piers Vitebsky, who has studied the subject first-hand across the world, reinforces this with his point that when humans depended utterly on hunting, imagining that any kind of religion *other* than shamanism existed was hard**[37.].** This is probably an overstatement when we know of the widespread Mother Goddess religion within prehistoric societies but the point is taken that hunter-trapping societies are certainly ideal crucibles in which shamanic beliefs can arise and indeed are probably bound to.

At the wellspring areas of shamanism, scholars pressing ahead with its investigation broadly agree on certain characteristics that apply to shamans, not only to those who still practice it within a vast swathe of territory across Fennoscandia, the northern territories of Asia and in North America where modern shamanism preserves a continuity of traits going back deep into prehistory, but also in the Early Neolithic cultures of the Levant and the Fertile Crescent where the recent discoveries we have outlined are confirming a package of practices that were remarkably similar. Shamanism can be applied to almost anything where the desire is to effect a shift in the balance of forces that bind all creation: basically, getting help from an animate, potential cosmos by interceding with the spirits of ancestor-animals. Starting at the earliest dawn of figurative art some thirty thousand years before the present where evidence for shamanism exists, the shaman's role expanded over time to cope with baleful circumstances of almost any kind: famine; disease; your cattle wandering off to the other tribe's side of the river; evil spirits possessing your kids. Most shamans uphold the idea that the universe is divided into three tiered realms anchored vertically by a World Tree or simple post. These realms are accessible in the ecstatic trance state, at which point the shaman's spirit can be transformed, shapeshifted into that of an animal. Ritual ways of inducing the trance state include chanting, rhythmic music with an emphasis on drumming and dance and, in earlier times as attested by Bronze and Iron Age archaeology, psychoactive substances. By these means, enacted publicly, the shaman enters an altered state of consciousness in which they become orientated to the "reality of legends"**[38.]**, enabling his or her soul-body to transcend the boundaries between human and spirit worlds and by interceding with spirits of animals under a matching guise, gains benefits for the community. In hunting societies, the shaman shapeshifted into the guise of the animals most necessary to the group's survival, so for the Saami tribes of northern Scandinavia, the regions' earliest inhabitants who still practice their own form of shamanism, the identification of the elk and the shaman in his/her 'activated' state is virtually inseparable, as with wolves, bears, reindeer and even fish for the Lapp shamans of Finland**[39.].** In the pre-pottery Neolithic cultures of Jordan, southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, the best indications are that vultures, as well as other fierce animals, were most strongly identified with by the shamans and women who practised there and that by the 8th and 9th millennia BC contemporary settled communities in these regions had formed their strongest shamanic bonds with vultures.

Ever since anthropology validated its living existence in the 20th century, a vast body of literature has accumulated to explain shamanism and its historical roots, which is ironic in a way because shamanism is essentially non-literate and non-monumental. Bar a small number

of historical artefacts, almost everything we know of it is from the spoken word and direct observation of it as a living tradition. Early attempts by influential scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Ake Hultkrantz to steer our vision of it towards the now-dreaded title of a 'universal early religion', on a scale comparable with the Great Goddess/Earth Mother 'world religion' theory proposed by Marija Gimbutas and most ardently by Dr. Åke Hultkrantz**[40.],** have been tempered by the later realisation that shamanism comes in many forms and that the term is on a par with 'religion' as a term helpful for gaining little more than a general understanding of it. Some researchers have gone so far as to vociferously denounce the 'academic fiction' of shamanism, arguing that its 'church' of medicine men and sorcerers from just about every society from many periods has been grossly exaggerated. They are behind the curve because, in addition to the welter evidence that supports the existence of modern shamanism (despite the efforts of both 'progressive' and totalitarian regimes in the 20th century to suppress and stamp it out), findings from Göbekli Tepe and its related cultures serve to further validate it as a sacred system of beliefs, ritual, and art of immense, indeed unparalleled, endurance. The suggestive discoveries of the shaman burial of the Hilazon Tachtit Cave and the 'ritual paraphernalia' of Zawi Chemi Shanidar cave, finds that predate Göbekli Tepe and the Şanilurfa Culture by centuries; the unearthing of a remarkable life-size limestone carving of a 'totem pole' at Göbekli Tepe and another from Nevali Çori - a nearby site settled a few centuries after Göbekli Tepe which inherited and developed all its predecessors' cultural characteristics, must surely banish all coincidence from the equation. Excavated during the 2010 season, the Göbekli Tepe sculptured column features three main motives, each stacked on top of the other (Figure 13). The topmost register is damaged making its identification uncertain but its surviving ears indicate that it depicted a predator, either a bear or a big cat, a lion or a leopard. A short neck, arms and hands of (probably) a human are visible below the neck. Below this, held by the hands, is another head, again broken off and human arms are underneath this, the hands placed on the stomach of the individual in such a way that recalls the position of the hands on the T-pillars. Below this is another person with a relatively smaller head, arms, and hands and underneath that is a strange object, a jar perhaps or a phallus or perhaps the person is giving birth, but it looks to me most like a bulbous jar with a narrow neck. A pair of large snakes wind up the sides of the pillar, their phallic heads facing forward just above the level of the figure holding the 'jar', so that hands of the figure above are resting on them.

Fig. 13. The Göbekli Tepe totem pole with a detail of the human figure, visible in the middle aspect, below centre.

Reconstructed from several broken pieces, the object was found in a context dating to around 7000 BC but the archaeologists think it could date back to the earliest phase of Göbekli Tepe. They also believe it to be "obvious that such a piece made of stone must also have had parallels in wood which have failed to survive the millennia"**[41.],** developing the observation by Klaus Schmidt that this sculpture is literally a totem pole because it is so uncannily reminiscent of those made by First Nations people of the North American Northwest Coast, a comparison he first mooted about a similar sculpture unearthed a few years earlier at Nevali Çori - a site contemporaneous with the later phase of Göbekli Tepe's first layer and the start of its second layer. Again damaged and incomplete, this one consists of a large bird, probably a vulture, which is apparently holding a human head in its claws**[42.].** In February 2012, I had the opportunity to make a first-hand assessment of this idea when touring British Columbia and Vancouver Island, finding that the cedar totem poles of First Nations people in these regions do indeed bear much resemblance to the stone totem poles which are often topped by massive birds (Figure 14).

Fig. 14. Totem pole at the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, Whistler, British Columbia. The figures recall elements of the iconography of the totem poles from Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori.

These may be thunderbirds, a legendary creature capable of creating storms with its huge wings and lightning with the snakes it carries. In some tribal mythologies, the thunderbird could shapeshift into human form and marry into families. The bird can also represent a raven which, in the mythologies of North American Northwest Coast peoples, is creator of the world and a provider to mankind. Below this bird are successive registers of rows of small human figures and larger humans with disproportionately large heads as well as fearsome teeth-bearing predator animals, a lot of which are very reminiscent of the Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori totem poles and of the high-relief carvings on the T-pillars. Tall multiple-figure poles were first made only by the Haida and Tlingit peoples of the American Northwest Coast and by the Tsimshian people of Southwest Alaska and British Columbia. The biggest clue towards the meaning of this iconography is in the term 'totem pole' which derives from an Ojibwa word ("ototeman") meaning "kinship group". This refers to the belief that a kin group is descended from a certain animal that they refrain from eating or hunting and the figures on

the totem pole generally represent ancestors and supernatural beings they have encountered, thereafter representing them as symbols of their identity and history – family crests. It almost goes without saying that these indigenous groups also have their shamanic traditions as well, in which shamans adopt bird guises.

Should we go deeper into the cultural background of these American Northwest peoples in order to draw parallels with the iconography and culture of Göbekli Tepe and see what other inferences can tell us about what was happening there ten thousand years ago when, aside from the obvious gulf in time separating these cultures, there is another problem with making these comparisons; the six thousand miles or more that separate southeastern Turkey from the American Northwest. We should take a step back to question if Klaus Schmidt's comparison of the Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori limestone sculptured columns with the cedar totem poles of the northwest First Nations really stands up to scrutiny or if the comparison is merely a useful reference point of comparison when the similarities could more likely be explicable by coincidence. The possibility of coincidence cannot entirely be eliminated, given the vast amount of time and space involved, but we can go some way to bridging the gulfs to support the Klaus Schmidt's comparison.

Firstly, what appears to be happening in Natufian and Şanilurfa shamanistic culture between the 13th and 8th millennia BC finds parallels in subsequent shamanistic cultures from Siberia, Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the North American Northwest. Recalling the line of seven ducks at the base of a central T-pillar in Enclosure D, is the creation myth of the Finno-Ugaric peoples of northern Eurasia in which a variety of duck called a teal (probably the Eurasian teal that breeds in regions from southern Europe up to the Arctic Circle and winters across the Mediterranean and Near East) builds its nest and lays eggs in the crook of the knee of the Daughter of Creation, Ilmatar Luonnotar, ending her lonely drifting. When her knee is scorched by the heat from the duck's feathers, she dislodges the eggs which fall into the sea, sinking into the abyss where, at various levels, they are transformed into the earth, the skies, the moon the speckles of the stars, and clouds, at which point Luonnotar is able to shape the coastline and seabed and prop up the sky with pillars**[43.].** In Siberian shamanism, birds were seen as particularly effective mediators between the cosmic worlds since they perch on trees (another shamanic symbol that is rooted in the lower world, reaching towards the upper world), and also move between all worlds of land, water and sky by flying and diving. Bird feathers and bones are an important, though not exclusive, part of the shaman's costume in these regions too, especially among the Turkic peoples of the Altai where the eagle or the swan was the principle shamanic helper. Tuva

shamans of southern Siberia display the feathers of wild duck and geese, cranes, falcons, buzzards, eagle-owls, and eagles in their headdresses – some birds that, we know, were of central importance in the T-pillar carvings of Göbekli Tepe.

Cranes, for example, which are so prominent at Göbekli Tepe, are associated with femininity, wisdom, longevity, fidelity, blessing and seasonal balance and are revered as a sacred, rare and protected bird, ideas with a heritage extending back to at least the Bronze Age, known from Siberian and Central Asian rock art**[44.]**. One reason why these birds should have such a particular symbolic significance at Göbekli Tepe could lie in the striking similarities they have to people as bipedal creatures; being almost human-sized (the Common Crane stands c.120 cm tall), having social and familial groupings, as well as longevity which can be up to 40 years. Probably the most important thing about cranes, that ties in with their prominence on the T-pillars, is how all species of them *dance.* Common Cranes march stiff-legged, running and leaping with their wings spread, bowing, pirouetting, sometimes throwing and catching twigs. This can happen in a circular formation with cranes actually taking turns dancing. "Given their monogamy and careful parental care," Nerissa Russell and Kevin McGowan, writers of an award-winning Antiquity paper on the subject, say, "cranes might be associated with successful marriage. Since dances are performed both by mating pairs and by whole flocks, a crane dance might be especially appropriate at a wedding, when a couple is joined and recognised by the community", adding how the parallels between cranes and humans could have kindled the belief that cranes were reborn humans or ancestors**[45.].** The image of strutting, flapping, running humans dressed as cranes within the precincts of the T-pillars on the occasion of a wedding or another social occasion is a highly attractive one, notwithstanding actual remains of crane feathers or bones, as yet undiscovered at Göbekli Tepe such evidence has been found at the later site of Çatalhöyük in central Turkey where there are painted depictions of cranes and there is a similar frieze of at least fifteen painted and two incised cranes at the contemporary site of Bouqras in southeast Syria, all facing to the left just as they do at Göbekli Tepe. Various inferences could be made about precisely why at least one of the cranes on the 'Vulture Pillar' is shapeshifting into a snake, yet it seems fairly clear that some kind of ecstatic ceremony is being represented (Figure 15). Maybe, instead of a wedding, the crane (signifying an 'ordinary' person) is having their status raised to that of the serpentine theocracy in a ritual presided over by the senior figure of the vulture shaman?

Fig. 15. Pillar with relief carvings of animals including vulture, snake, crane and unidentified quadrupeds. Illustration by Daniel R-Z O'Neill.

Returning to these carnivorous birds that do seem to be accorded even higher status within the symbolic repertoire of Göbekli Tepe, a gigantic eagle-like bird is credited with the fathering of the first shaman by impregnating a woman, a theme in Yakut and Manchu tales of northeastern Russia. Further east, the raven god or spirit Kutcha plays a central role as a world-creator, bringer of knowledge and skills (including language, fire and net-weaving) to humans in the legends of the Koryaks, Itelmens and Chuckhi peoples of Kamchatka, storytelling traditions that parallel many of the exploits of Raven in the mythologies of First Nations peoples of northwest American coasts and islands, signaling an ancient cultural contact**[46.]** despite their separation on two continents by the Bering Strait, which was only first kayaked across in modern times in 1989.

The Na-Dené family of languages, mainly spoken in northwestern North America (by

Athabascan, Eyak, and Tlingit peoples), is most closely related to the Yeniseian family of languages spoken in central Siberia. This apparently unlikely congruence between two languages traditionally considered isolates (language families with no known relatives), first postulated though not published in 1923, received its strongest confirmation in 2008**[47.].** The proposed Dené–Yeniseian language family arising from this discovery is the first proven linguistic connection between the Old and New Worlds, implying that speakers of Na-Dené and Yeniseian once belonged to a single population in Central Asia before a group broke off to explore eastwards, migrating to the New World across the Bering Strait where they gave rise to the Na-Dené language families of First Nations people, including the Tlingit, Eyak, Athabaskan and possibly the Haida, among them totem-pole carvers. The likelihood is that this migration occurred between the first migration of Amerinds to the Americas 11 000 years ago and the third migration that took place around 3000 years ago**[48.].** Considerably narrowing down that eight thousand-year space of time, researchers from the Tower of Babel Project estimate that the Na-Dené languages came into their own form around 6700 BC when they diverged from another proposed 'Mother Tongue' language family, termed Dené-Caucasian**[49.].** Supporters of the Dené–Yeniseian language family hypothesis also now look to genetics to support their hypothesis, noting that the Y-chromosome haplogroup subclade Q1 is the predominant male haplogroup in nearly all Native Americans as well as in the Ket and Selkup peoples of Siberia, with a very small 2% in Anatolia, the region of Göbekli Tepe. Even so, the study of genetic drift is not a great help here because ideas are diffused by only a few individuals, not mass migrations. Neither do we have to assume that the influence of shamanism and totemic culture diffused from west to east just because we know there are shamanic burials and stone totem poles in very early contexts, predating what we already know from other areas. Shamanism long predated the Natufian Culture; Göbekli Tepe is just a waypoint in a timeline of shamanic traditions that runs vertiginously deep into the Paleolithic past. The assumption of a flow from west to east, past to present, can indeed be reversed to allow us to wonder if shamanism reached the Levant and southeastern Turkey, having come from a place outside where it proved itself even more resistant to outside influence. If this is so, Siberia must be considered as a source. The unfathomable antiquity of shamanism and its widespread distribution means that virtually anywhere it has been recorded, could have influenced the strong shamanic component in the belief system of the people of Göbekli Tepe. Or perhaps, as some contend, shamanism arose spontaneously in different places at different times because its core perspective of an *animist* universe, where all living things are animated by spirits that can be motivated by the rituals of a shaman, is intrinsically 'hard wired' into

human psychology which, in the hunter-herding phase of human evolution, served a beneficial purpose in giving a sense of structure and meaning to clan relations with Nature.

The scholarly history of the totem poles of the peoples of the North American northwest coasts and islands, takes as its starting point the first observations of totem poles by European explorers at the end of the 18th century. Scholars don't usually venture beyond this point when describing what is actually the history of the encountering of the American Northwest totemic culture by colonials, not the history of the culture itself which remains shrouded although it is rightly assumed to be far more ancient. Carved wooden totem poles called *Jangseung* ('spirit poles'), continue to form part of community celebrations in Korea in the present day. Typically erected in pairs, a male and a female, they bear grotesque and humorous faces in a style that resembles the faces of the North American northwest totem poles although instead of registers of animals and other figures, they carry inscriptions describing the tutelary deity whose head sits at the top of the pole, a key difference from the ancestral identity of the figures on the poles of the North American First Nations peoples. While claims are made for totem poles in China dating to the Bronze Age, around 2500 BC, they bear almost no resemblance to the ones we are looking at here. Bridging the huge, apparently insurmountable gulf in time and space between the sculptured columns of the Şanilurfa Culture (and the other related orni-shamanistic materials from Zawi Chemi Shanidar, Jerf el-Ahmar, and Nemrik 9) and those of Southeast Asia and the North American continent looks like one of the great challenges of art history but then again art historians are more in the business of studying art as a chronological series of disconnected isolates – a primary *raison d'être* for this investigation is to bridge those gaps. Thankfully, archaeologists and anthropologists are less cautious in making these connections. Perhaps the fairest thing we can say for now is that totem poles of present-day Northwest North America, Southwest Asia and the sculptured columns of Southwest Asia in the Early Neolithic, either developed in spontaneous isolation, their stylistic congruences due to some unfathomable coincidence that only psychology may ultimately explain, or they, like the Na-Dené and Yeniseian languages which until recently were believed to be isolates, resemble each other since, notwithstanding the vast gap in time and geography separating them, they once shared a cultural-religious framework most plausibly evinced by Eurasian shamanism. This is in confirmation with Hauptmann and Schmidt's inkling of the artistic resemblances, observations that have been echoed by others in the field of Early Neolithic Studies (including one which I am about to cite below).

With this background, we have a clearer sense of the extraordinary relief scene found on

Pillar 43 in Enclosure D (Figure 5), where a flock of long-legged cranes appears to be changing into phallic shapes and H-symbols and where a decapitated man is depicted riding the back of a bird, possibly a goose. These animals (and arguably that of a scorpion on the third register of the pillar) are presided over or mediated by a vulture balancing a sphere on its wing. While the scene might be mythological, the curious details such as the vulture's three-line 'collar and its V-necked attire or adornment, are reflected in a more abstracted form on the limestone pillars from Jerf el-Ahmar, and the grooved stone with the pictograms of wavy lines, a fox and a snake *underneath* a vulture (Figure 10) tells us that in the Mureybet Culture, the role of the shamanic intercessors represented by this creature had become more centrally-established in their societies. This expansion of their 'social contract' brought coherence, if not leadership, to communities that, as well as becoming more settled over the 9th millennium BC, required a deeper organizational strategy to cope with the transition to year-round farming and a resulting long-distance trade between the Natufian Culture and the Mureybet Culture, which by 9300 BC had devised a token system to track property following a rapid growth of cereal use over the previous couple of centuries. At Jerf el-Ahmar, one of the main Mureybet Culture settlements, the geometric insignia of outlying settlements; the grid sign from Djade el-Mughara in northern Syria, the zigzagging line from various Natufian communities going all the way down to southern Jordan and the triple parallel line, another Natufian emblem which might have resolved the two lower geometrics into a more overarching Natufian emblem and was subsequently carried over into the depiction of the vulture on Göbekli Tepe's Pillar 43, are all topped by the sculptured emblem of the vulture. This appears to indicate that vulture shamanism had reached a kind of apotheosis at this community, a centralisation of power and sacred ideology consolidated to a greater degree than anywhere else, expect perhaps at Nemrik 9 in Iraq and possibly at other settlements across Upper Mesopotamia that were culturally interacting with the peoples of Göbekli Tepe and communities of the incipient Şanlıurfa Culture.

At Göbekli Tepe, the iconography of the vulture tells of a different situation. Despite its deeplyembedded heritage, the importance of vulture shamanism in the organisational structure behind Göbekli Tepe should not be overstated, not when the vulture itself jostles within such a taxonomic range in the site's iconography. The orni-shamanic religion defined by the figure of the vulture had to take its place alongside Göbekli's menagerie of other animal iconography, which had a greater diversity and a proclivity towards snakes, foxes, cranes, boars, spiders, aurochs and other animals. The vulture doesn't seem to have been accorded any appreciable raising of status at Göbekli where it's easy to overlook amidst the

relief-carved collection, unlike at Jerf el-Ahmar where the vulture commands the symbolism there. On Göbekli's limestone sculptured column/totem pole, yes it does, but not on the majority of T-pillars, only on Pillar 43 in Enclosure D and on the fragment found near Pillar 18 where a vulture chases a hyena (Figure 16). So, whilst it was probably a highly resonant and pivotal *dramatis personae* in sacred ceremonies involving intercession with Nature, ritual transformation into animals and probably rituals surrounding death, the vulture shaman enjoyed social position that was much diminished at Göbekli Tepe, subsumed within the social shift that was occurring leading up to and throughout the project.

Fig. 16. Relief carving of a vulture chasing a hyena.

Given the wide cultural influence of shamanism in Southwest Asia by the first half of the 9th millennium BC when Göbekli Tepe's Layer II enclosures were built, the site's purpose as a temple or hallowed space where rituals were performed, possibly by gatherings of shamans in view of pilgrims, seems almost a given. Bird-shamanism could have served the builders usefully by adding a familiar coherence to the exponentially-greater amount of people required to make the place possible, communities from which the multifarious iconography of the T-pillars came together, people who would have been comfortably familiar with the *dramatis personae* of the bird-shaman. The Göbekli Project itself was something quite new, challenging, frightening to some, untrustworthily novel to others, a building project that far outstripped the ambition of anything that had ever been attempted before, including the stone towers of Tell Qaramel and the communal buildings of Jericho and other Late Natufian settlements, themselves impressive achievements of which Göbekli's

people must have known, even if they had not personally visited them. Taking this great leap into the unknown might well have, therefore, required the tethering to something well-known, the trusted sacred system of beliefs and practices that were passed on from an age so far back into the antiquity of Göbekli's builders that it makes the distance in time from them to us in our days, seem little more than a night-long flight for a shaman in their bird-state.

Is that all there was to it, though? Had the shamans of Southwest Asia and the Fertile Crescent consolidated a kind of priesthood in order to make their sacred systems even more efficacious and magically-powerful, one that had entailed a fundamental rethink of how sacred practices would appeal to a much wider orbit of communities? And could this have had the effect of enabling a political power to be exerted on their communities? Klaus Schmidt was thinking along these lines when quoted in article that appeared on the front page of *The New Yorker* at the end of 2011: "They were trained killers, nothing else," he says of the hunter-gatherers. He believes that Göbekli Tepe was built by a laboring class, maybe even by slaves. In his view, the reason that agriculture stuck, even though it meant more work and worse food, was that an élite caste had a vested interest in the new system: "Ninety per cent had to work, and ten per cent lived by wealth. The élite wanted to keep their advantage, and they had the power to do it." If Schmidt is right, [then] a form of social exploitation was already observable before farming.**[50.]** If shamans either comprised or inspired the ten percent wealthy elite that seized on monumental building to put on such a display of consolidated power, they must have exerted such psychological power on the collective imagination of Göbekli's people that the project was unquestioningly accepted by the ninety percent of workers with whose considerable sweat, the site was built. This form of shamanism must have been very impressive indeed, and persuasive, almost pathologically manipulative, not so much transforming into animals for the communal good, as promoting themselves into cult leaders with the agenda of gaining over their workforce. Such a shaman-priesthood would have been unique and unprecedented when such a thing has never happened either before or since, anywhere in the world, with shamans always operating alone and on the fringes of society. A decidedly uncollegiate lot. Or did this enterprise have more to its agenda than just religion, and shamans were not only those who were amongst the masters of Göbekli Tepe?

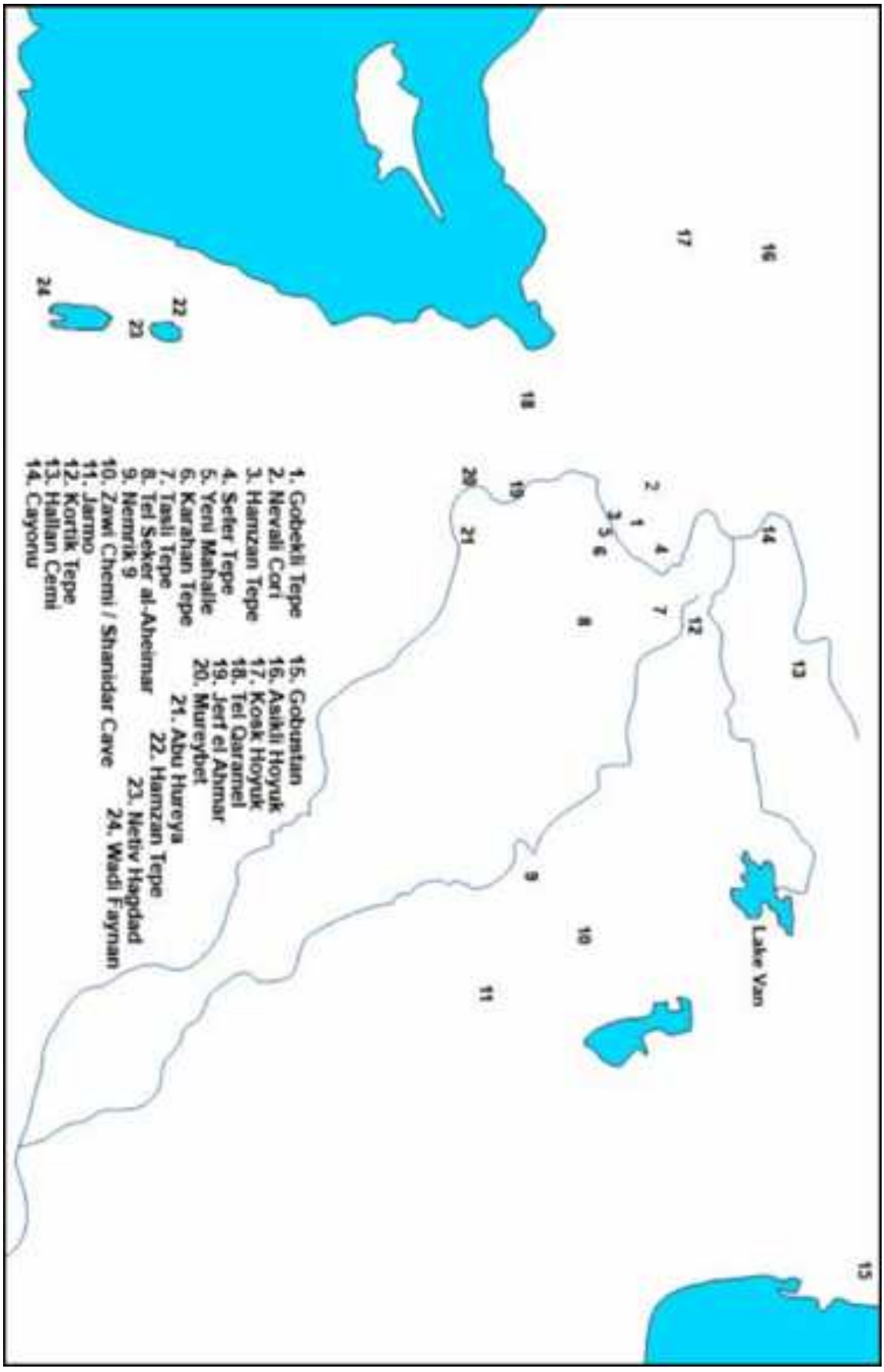


Fig. 17. Map of sites in south western Asia relating to Göbekli Tepe.

House Clans of the Animals

From the worldwide interest kindled by the unveiling of Göbekli Tepe by Klaus Schmidt (1953-2014) and his team around 2006, a standard narrative about the site started to form in the popular consciousness. In following years, the continuing press coverage and the magnifying effect of the Web has had the effect of turning this narrative into what has effectively become a modern myth about this most ancient of places. We are approaching this myth now because it impinges on other things we are going to discuss about the symbolism of Göbekli Tepe and how it related to what happened there. It arose out of the archaeological work that Schmidt had been undertaking for more than a decade and has been boiled-down in many articles and television programmes to a neat assertion that perfectly fits the space for any banner headline: Göbekli Tepe is the world's oldest temple (if the publication or programme strives to be a little highbrow, it might add "complex" to the word, "temple"). The father of this myth is... guess who?... Klaus Schmidt himself, making the epochal declaration in the Smithsonian Magazine, said "This is the first human-built holy place."**[51.],** a claim that has echoed to prevalence in popular discourse. As Göbekli's lead excavator, Schmidt should know what he is talking about in rejecting any serious claim for domestic use of the buildings, should he not? To start with, none of the usual traces of domestic life have been found there; no fireplaces or ovens and an absence of domesticated plants and animals. The buildings were unsuitable as habitations, Schmidt concluded, because the pillars are nonstructural in that they could not have supported roofs. He interpreted the carvings on the pillars as art and religious symbols, all of them forward-referencing thousands of years to the later Mesopotamian religions with their iconic panoplies of animals and gods to make parallels**[52.].** To strengthen his argument that the site was not inhabited, Schmidt argued that the site is too far from water sources and located in rather a bleak place. More recently, he has revised this interpretation somewhat by suggesting that some residents at the site may have included temple personnel but not enough to change Göbekli's status to that of a village; in his view, its special status as a distinct temple complex remains intact. Schmidt's media-accessibility, unquestioned expertise (by journalists, not archaeologists) and unquenchable enthusiasm has been lapped-up by the mass media and thus the image of Göbekli Tepe as a temple complex that served as a pilgrimage site for people with offerings, engaging in religious ceremonies in the manner of those at a kind of Stone Age Mecca, has proved irresistible, especially to those most impressed by neat, unambiguous definitions. To the casual observer (including myself when I first heard about the site), the ovular arrangements

of pillars look most like megalithic stone circles and, often, have I seen on the web, the comparison of Göbekli Tepe to Stonehenge and everyone knows how people didn't live inside that stone circle, right? Could it be that the myth of Göbekli Tepe has been served very well, partly by our assumptions about marginally similar places we already know, by playing into Schmidt's standard popular narrative, when the truth, as archaeologists who have not whole-heartedly embraced Schmidt's narrative know, is probably a bit more complex than this arguably wild interpretation-turned-accepted-media-myth first appears?

The most concerted assault on Schmidt's 'world's earliest temple' hypothesis appeared in a long paper by University of Toronto anthropologist E.B. Banning in 2011 in which he systematically dissected and criticized a prevailing academic mindset of layers of assumptions built up over many years, recording and interpreting pre-pottery Neolithic sites in the Middle East, culminating in agreement with Schmidt's theory that Göbekli Tepe was never inhabited, at least not in the sense of a normal village. Banning's questioning of what had virtually become the wisdom about Göbekli Tepe was as bold as it was merciless in its interrogation of what he believed was being taken for granted by authors trained in post-Enlightenment concepts rather than universal human truths, from the supposed unsuitability of the pillars as roof supports to evidence for ritual symbolism in domestic contexts and differences between the architecture of Göbekli Tepe and domestic buildings at other contemporary sites. In this eyebrow-raising break from academic conformity, Banning even brought to task the preconceptions and cultural backgrounds brought by archaeologists to their interpretations of the past by applying "Western concepts" of the separation of the sacred and the profane to pre-pottery settlement sites, a dualistic approach he found wanting and "Eurocentric". Besides refuting some of Schmidt's key insights based on physical evidence, much of which hinges on technical points that are fairly obscure, Banning's most interesting analysis boiled-down to questions of distinction and separation about where to draw the line between a 'special' building used exclusively for ritual and a domestic one mainly used for habitation. How can you clearly tell what constitutes a 'special' building, for instance, when there are enough examples of domestic dwellings, from ancient and modern contexts, in which rituals occur and where certain decorations have special sacred meaning? Over to Banning:

> "Many archaeologists appear reluctant to entertain the possibility that Neolithic houses in southwest Asia were rich in cosmological or spiritual symbolism even when, as at Göbekli Tepe, the symbols are ubiquitous rather than focused on only one or two buildings... evidence for ritual or conspicuous symbolism does not

automatically imply specialized temples." **[53.]**

Nearby contemporary sites have shrines or communal buildings that are appreciably different from ordinary houses, laid out and furnished differently and fewer in number, but in Göbekli Tepe's earliest layer where all the structures are oval enclosures and the next layer of rectangular buildings have plain T-pillars, the same cannot be said – different kinds of buildings there were not built at the same time. In the relative sizes and layout arrangements of the T-pillars of the larger and most decorated enclosures and the occurrence of many cupholes on top of the pillars, Banning finds clues that the enclosures could have been covered with sloping roofs, supported by beams which angled upwards from the lower pillars around the edge to the tallest pillars at the centre. He cites the huge quantity of debris used to cover Göbekli Tepe, the source of which has defied clear explanation unless it was actually produced at the site, and the large quantity of sickle blades that have been unearthed there as well, which could mean that the surrounding land was cultivated. Another potential difficulty for the uninhabited theory, in Banning's view, is the huge bedrock mortars or cisterns that lie on the slopes of the site, enigmatic features that cause him to reexamine the idea that Göbekli's surrounding terrain was arid and to which we can add the large limestone troughs we discussed earlier in relation to the fermentation of beer. It all amounts to Banning's evaluation that "the claim that the site had no residential occupation is simply not credible... Most likely, either the famous 'temples' are actually houses or houses lie elsewhere on the site and are simply not represented or not yet identified in the excavated temple."**[54.]** He, furthermore, finds it likely that the enclosures housed "co-residential groups" and not nuclear families which were not fundamental for most communities in Anatolia at this time, as attested by other sites.

This is an incredibly important move towards understanding the colossal mystery that pervades Göbekli Tepe because it frees us to think about the site's art-symbolism in terms other than religious and cosmological; mindsets that have beleaguered the understanding of Göbekli as well as many other cultures where symbolism has succumbed to a similar point of view that is as much a modern construct as the false sacred/profane-temple/house dichotomy criticized by Banning. It was greatly encouraging to find that Banning's argument on the side of an inhabited Göbekli, in the temples-versus-houses debate, culminates in suggestions that Göbekli's animals were meant to be read as emblems identifying those who actually built and used Göbekli Tepe, not arbitrary patterns of stars or mythological beings, but *real people*. I was already preparing to argue for this idea without good corroborative support until I found

Banning's paper, then my stomach lurched when this phrase leapt out of it: "The fact that particular animal themes tend to dominate in each structure", says Banning, citing a concept of 'house societies' that was originally applied to the northwest Pacific coast societies, "suggests the possibility that some of the animals in the reliefs were emblems of clans or other social units... it is conceivable that [the 'Vulture Pillar' of Enclosure D] records a story in which three clans or houses had prominent parts or perhaps documents three lineages that have some part in the house's heritage... the scenes need not be exclusively mythological and could be used in a house's or lineage's negotiations for status."**[55.]** This accords with totemistic societies where group identity is characterised by animals as carved emblems, a symbolic code observed amongst First Nations peoples along the northwest coast and islands of North America, parts of China and on the Korean peninsula. Who knows, one day a wooden prototype of Göbekli may be scanned beneath any of the enclosures, a totemic egg of a great bird that traversed continents upon the drumming, dancing, singing shamanic dreams.

Networks of the Göbekli Elite

We are really getting somewhere now since, applying this scenario to Göbekli Tepe, clans or 'co-residential groups' were demarcated inside the enclosures by the pillars bearing their own animal emblems. In the arrangement of Enclosure D, the earliest enclosure, the tallest pillars are at the centre, male and female pillars are decorated with the fox and ducks, geese and the abstract H and C-shaped symbols, signifying the agglomeration of groups or communities. Around them in a circle are the shorter pillars bearing snakes, foxes, wild cattle, wild ass, gazelle, scorpion, spider, cranes, vulture and the class of mysterious abstract symbols; Schmidt's 'antithetical elements'. This has implications for the conditions of how labour was organized, in turn leading to how wealth was generated and how status was attained from the accumulation of that wealth. Banning points all this out although he doesn't develop the fascinating implications of this argument, which reflect on what we have found out about the character of Göbekli's organisation and hierarchy, giving us no reason to suppose that another major purpose of it was for people to gather to develop practical strategies about their own survival, strategies that would have involved crafting, sharing knowledge and exchanging goods. Temples of all kinds in all religions, have always been places where commerce and devotion flourish alongside each other; we only have to think of the temple moneylenders who so enraged a certain messiah or the markets that sprang up around medieval cathedrals

and mosques on special days. Could something similar have happened within the shadows of the stones of Göbekli Tepe or did people walk up to a hundred miles or more simply to practice sacred rites and *nothing else*?

The cumulative effect of the exchange of this knowledge over millennia in southwest Asia was possibly accelerated by the geographic fortuity of the location of southeastern Turkey/northwest Syria lying at the intersection point of more ancient routes than anywhere else on the continent. Routes along which bands, clans, herders and traders from western and central Anatolia, the Levant and the Middle East, the Caucasus (some via the Asperon Peninsula, see previous chapter) and Central Asia, could stop and ease their loads for a time at this inter-continental crossroads. Some of them could have settled there. Over the 11th and 10th millennia, this brought about the recognition of the need for a permanent site and a set of clan houses was constructed, the oval spaces enclosed and supported by the T-pillars. These were hallowed, sacred spaces, not in the woolly sense of temples where people entered on their best behaviour in order to cowl before or make offerings to idols representing mythologically remote, distant beings, instead, more the sense one gets when entering a workshop or school; a place of quiet, focused work and learning. The people of the Natufian, Mureybet and emergent Şanilurfa Cultures, were moving to the centre of their collective world-view; the 'ancestral' T-pillars at the centre of the enclosures denoted an epochal step in the collective realisation that men and women, not animals, were masters of their environment. Imagine their awe at seeing such things, when previously unable to imagine even the possibility of them, no spoken report conveying anywhere near the sombre majesty of the actual enclosures.

The shaman was still an important figure and accorded high respect, their counsel sought and advice followed. The 'Vulture Stones' where the shaman commands scenes of transformative journeying, give a palpable sense of that. But as the elite that produced Göbekli Tepe must have known only too well as their project grew, the most soaring times of the secret civilization of feathered psychopomps were behind them and that their age was drawing to a close in this corner of the world. The shamans who worked alone, accounting to no-one but their theriomorphic pantheons, charged and entrusted with Nature's innermost secrets for aeons, were being superseded by a newly emergent elite comprising the most skilled and intelligent among them, those who could make things happen, things you could see and touch. The old way of interceding with Nature to steer fortune their way with shamanic practices was being diminished in its power over the imagination, not only by the sheer human achievement of Göbekli's enclosures, but also by burgeoning commercial

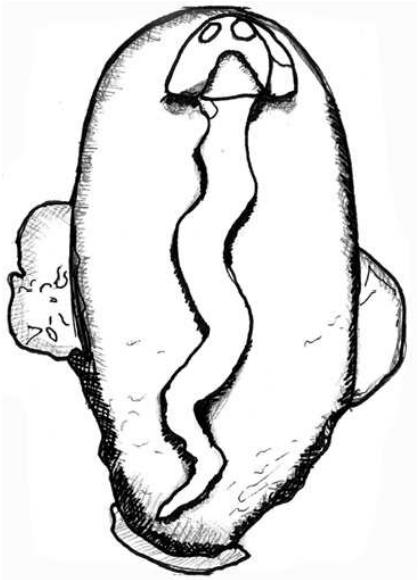
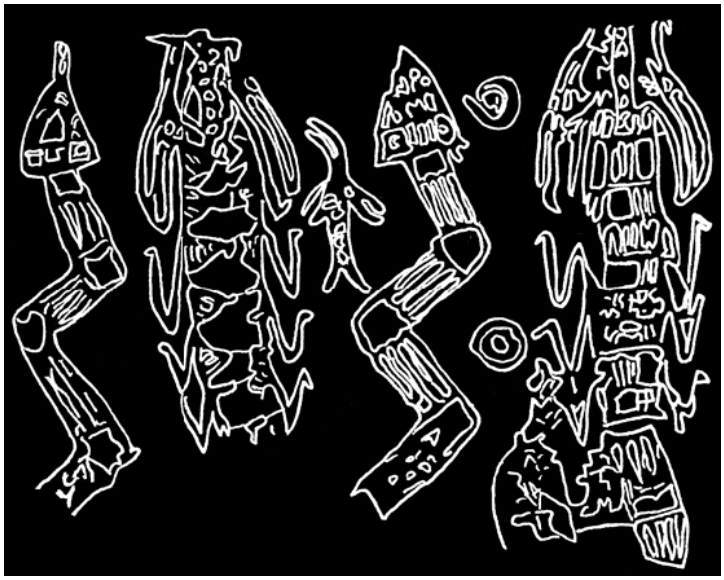
realities that were flowing along the trade routes of Southwestern Asia; communal property and precious goods. It can be assumed that prestige was conferred on those who had worked on a Göbekli enclosure and status on those with the greatest access to the most valuable resources. As they levered up the limestone slabs from their quarries, every T-pillar hoisted and set into place was creating a new kind of society, stone-by-stone, one that required a fresh concept of organised labor and the coherence of a group to administer it. We can envisage something balancing the sacred responsibilities of a priesthood with the commercial mandate of a trade federation and the technical skills amassed within a craft association. This was revolutionary because, unlike the widespread shamanistic and folk 'religion' of ideologically more-or-less consistent sacred traditions represented by the Venus figurines of the Upper Paleolithic and Magdalenian Eras which seem to have been produced by very small-scale 'cottage industries' of weavers and textile producers, the new social class that started to cohere in these regions of southeast Asia from the 10th millennium BC, was forged to administer to a set of communities merging into a new culture from which new social roles, the duties of which intersected mercantile, administrative, educative, and sacred spheres were becoming defined. The factors which allowed for this rise to prominence were likely in areas exercising specialist craft knowledge of weaving (textiles and basketry) and stone-working, as well as distribution of the regions' prized natural resources: obsidian glass, flint and food surpluses. The undulation of Göbekli's stone snakes were the dynamics of the actions and interactions of the serpent bands or clans of southwestern Asia.

By their artistic deeds and some of their practices, bearing more resemblance to us than to their own ancestors at a comparative distance in time, the people who lay the first stone of Göbekli Tepe do so on the first day of the story of the third main phase of modern human communication, the semaisographic. Following the pictographic zeitgeist that had dominated for up to a hundred thousand years, from having forged a common understanding through a 'capacity for abstraction' in Klaus Schmidt's words, these people are learning to convey their world through a lexicon of symbolism, their mental wheels oiled by fermented brews and by rituals that tapped into numinous and archetypal forces, their consciousness and their society was reconfiguring in more fluid ways. Their aesthetic is iconic of a certain primitivism perhaps, but nevertheless is as information-rich and widely understood to its people as any number of our signs today, from the real world of signs, icons and logos, to the digital maelstroms of emoticons, avatars and hashtags in all modern cultures and subcultures with their own nuances of semaisographic communication. The eruption of pictographic communication, accelerated by the invention of writing, then the printing press, then the

digital revolution over the next eleven millennia, begins in these enclosed spaces. From the pictographic to the iconographic to the semaisographic, the occurrence of all three major artistic zeitgeists at Göbekli Tepe makes it a place where the 'revolution in the mind' of these Early Neolithic humans plays out right before our eyes in ways so strange and familiar; a place where the real becomes unreal and the unreal, real.

By 8500 BC, the artistic boom experienced by the network around the nucleus of Göbekli Tepe becomes even more identifiable as a unified culture with the foundation of T-pillar outposts; Hamzen Tepe and Nevalı Çori a few kilometres to the west and south of Göbekli Tepe. Vulture iconography is present at Nevali Çori in the form of two sculptures. One is of a large bird (with its head missing), apparently clasping a human head in its claws, scaled-up to the size of a 'public' piece of art, and a smaller sculpture is of a bird with a human face which probably graced a domestic house. These and other small stone figures from Nevali Çori repeat the stock of motifs associated with the T-pillars at Göbekli Tepe while displaying a different artistry**[56.]** that was perhaps more personal and in that sense more 'folk' than the 'official' repertoire of the T-pillars.

One of the most indicative signs of the newly emergent elite comes at Nevali Çori in the form of a stone head with a dynamic high relief carving of a mohican hairstyle (another possible congruence with ancient Amerind peoples?) in the shape of an undulating snake whose phallicized head nestles inside a C-shape (Figure 18a).

a.  b. 

c.

Fig. 18. (a.) Stone head with snake mohican-style from Nevali Çori. (b., c., d.) Stone vessels from Kortik Tepe decorated with snakes, meanders, centipedes/scorpions and anthropomorphic figures. Illustrations by Daniel R-Z O'Neill.

This head might indicate an intensification of the snake 'ideology' over the five hundred years during which Göbekli's Enclosures D and C were being built. The symbol of the snake and the C-shape, a conjunction which could read both as an abstracted female vulva in which case a strong fertility theme is discernible or the tool/blade possibilities we explored earlier, although I suspect it is doubtful that the shaman-priests would have made that much of such neat distinctions when fluidity and crossing boundaries made up so much of their ritual currency. It is as if the success of the networks of the serpent clans whose central node was Göbekli Tepe – where we have seen that snake pictograms outnumbered all the other animal pictograms combined, by almost two times in the first Enclosure D and its nearest 'competitor' the fox by three times – converted this success into an uptick of wealth that catalyzed the emergence of this elite group. Within something like two to five generations, they built their own separate meeting house/temple, possibly needing extra capacity, where they could conduct their business in private away from the clan-houses of Göbekli Tepe where everyone knew what everyone else was doing. Much smaller than Göbekli Tepe, Nevali Çori shares several features with its elder neighbor such as T-shaped pillars in an enclosed space and a terrazzo-style lime cement floor, the room where the head was found. The iconography of the stone head might have been a secret, for the eyes of 'chapter house' initiates. Or, much more likely, the 'snake priests' openly displayed these heads out of self-interest; signifying their status and authority gained from a specialist knowledge. Not the old shamanic knowledge which was only of limited value but knowledge of the snake clans' weaving and stone-working expertise. By the inclusion of more communities into this

collegiate network of trade and training, finer quality baskets, rugs, blankets, and nets were being produced in greater quantities and Göbekli's 'serpent priests' were gaining more wealth, status and influence.

Other ways to distribute the symbolism were innovated, notably on vessels at Körtik Tepe, a hundred and twenty miles to the east of Göbekli and on the shores of Lake Atatürk Dam where the Tigris meets the Çayı Batman in the Upper Tigris Valley**[57.].** These stone vessels (Figure 18b.c.d.) with surfaces replete with intricate carved designs of the vertical serpentine zigzags (or meanders), transition from snakes to an abstracted geometric version of zigzagging parallel lines or (on decorated bones) lozenges ranged vertically, the final resolve of the ideogram in the Neolithic. These vertical zigzags are the dominant motif on stone vessels from Körtik Tepe, the 'symbolic dialogue' between the vertical zigzags and the descending snakes, so prevalent in the mature phase of the Natufian and Şanlıurfa Cultures, are resolved with the latter. They became a way of disseminating an awareness of the existence of the craft-religion signified by the animal, commodified in portable art. Since we know that the vertical zigzags motif preceded the multiplied snakes all the way back to Mezin, some five millennia before Göbekli due to its ultimate origin in weaving - a motif sharing the essential 'template' of the snakes motif, the best hope for a line of continuity may lie with the geneticists to unfathom, when more interesting to us is the way this symbol was appropriated by the craft association-priesthood of Göbekli and how they used it for their particular goals. This is arguably because their success had created a problem for themselves. So impressive was the first clan house (Enclosure D) that by the time word had got around that it really was such an amazing place where wonderful things were going on, being made, demonstrated, talked about and learned, they needed another clan house: Enclosure C. The social chain reaction that was underway was being fueled by the symbolism; on most days it was being seen, in the clan houses of Göbekli or right there on the kitchen hearth, by the meeting house fire or beside the bed. By promoting the motif on their T-pillars and 'advertising' their identity on the stone vessels, they could attract more people to assist in realising their grand design of the clan houses. The earlier geometric zigzag had a built-in familiarity from weaving patterns, which occur as skeuomorphic decorations on vessels and are resolved smoothly into the snake, zigzag and lozenge decorations on others, thus helping to ensure continuity. The further resolve of the snake symbol with the zigzags and the Double V, the final design in the context of its figurative presentation, became emblematic of the aggregation of talent whose authority was somehow exerted within a field of communities, an appropriate way to signify the combined might that built their sanctuary and the power that

controlled it.

Further refinements of the stone vessel decorative style from Körtik Tepe serpentine arrays share the surface with sickle blade or crozier motifs (Figure 18), perhaps the emblem of a herdsman or an incipient cultivator who had decided it was time to acquire a prestigious piece of stoneware; a decoratively pleasing and symbolically meaningful piece for use on special occasions, only 'for best'. One of the finest of these vessels known so far, has its outer surface entirely covered with a complex design that combines horizontal and vertical zigzags and meshes overlaid with a pair of ibex back-to-back. The animal that might have embodied the economic mainstay of the hunter who owned the vessel, which was intended as a prestige item, conveying his identity as one being rooted in traditions related to weaving, as most everyone in a skilled proto-economy must have been invested in somehow. Another fine piece of Körtik Tepe stoneware combines zigzags, parallel lines and concentric circles, perhaps representing a forging of the bonds between families whose identity came from two traditions identified by this contrasting geometric symbolism: parallel lines from the Natufian Sphere and zigzagging lines from either the Natufian or Şanilurfa cultural orbits. Combined together in full-surface decoration, they make a new symbolic style for a vessel that would perhaps have made for an appropriate wedding gift, thereafter displayed in a family house as a prestigious piece, charged with identity-symbolism as well as being a useful item. Curiously while bird remains are quite common at Körtik Tepe, the variety of bones including ducks, geese, owls, great bustards and ravens and the remains of wings and shoulder girdles which are well-represented as at Zawi Chemi Shandar, this interest in birds as food sources and probably for shamanistic attire doesn't translate across to the decorations of stoneware vessels**[58.].** The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence but the narrow range of iconography in the stone vessels of Körtik Tepe to the exclusion of bird iconography so well represented within the same cultural orbit at Göbekli Tepe, gives cause to wonder if 'classic' shamanism exemplified by the 'Great Bird' was either in abeyance or had ceased to be relevant at this location at this time.

Over the later part of the thousand years between 9650 and 8610 BC when the first layer of clan houses was complete, the art-iconography of Göbekli Tepe coalesced through appropriation or 'curation' from steady long-distance communication between its emerging cultural orbit of communities and the northernmost edges of the Natufian Culture with a nucleus around Jerf el-Ahmar (snake, vulture, scorpion and grid-pattern imagery), Tell Qaramel, Netiv Hagada, Djade al-Mughara, Karahan Tepe (snake imagery) and Tel Mureybet. This era was contemporaneous with; Zawi Chemi Shandar Cave (a sanctuary

'retreat' for vulture shaman in the region?), Djade el-Mughara where the three-colour grid fresco was painted, Nemirk 9 (the vulture/eagle pestles) and Göbekli Tepe Layer II (Enclosures D and C) and its satellite 'T-pillar communities' (Taşlı Tepe, Hamzan Tepe, Sefer Tepe) including the more symbolically-charged villages of Nevalı Çori (vulture and snake sculptures and T-pillars) and Körtik Tepe (geometrically-decorated stone vessels and T-pillars), as well as Yeni Mahalle (vulture imagery) and Cafer Höyük. In all, a complex web of communities which, by 9100 BC, was appearing on the horizon as the Şanilurfa Culture.

In this intersecting network of communities, Jacques Cauvin's 'revolution of symbols' reached a tipping point and a mutation or *resolution* of symbols occurred, with existing symbols being discarded or combined into a new symbol. The grid pattern, parallel lines and zigzags of the Jerf el-Ahmar and Nevali Çori totem poles topped by the great bustard/vulture/eagle - the archetypal Great Bird with its V-shaped beak, resolved into the symbol of the Double V-shaped necklace worn around the neck of the two metre statue of the Urfa Man (the Balıklıgöl Statue). With no mouth, hair or legs, his symbolic adornment and inscrutable features from which shark-like obsidian eyes, combined with his grasp of his genitals, dare the viewer to hold his gaze too long. Deliberately inscrutable, so as to focus attention on form and meaning rather than individual identity, this is social art at its most unabashed. The phallacized man, becoming an idealized everyman embodies someone for whom the Natufian and Şanilurfa communities, who gathered in their meeting houses under the sign of the zigzags, could identify to greater or lesser degrees as a shaman, a creditor, a chief or a master-craftsman – an entire elite class personified in one figure whose authority was conveyed by the Double V, symbol of their high status.

The other status symbol of the Urfa Man, and perhaps the mainstay of the wealth from which his power derived, comes via the black obsidian used for his eyes. Volcanic obsidian was big business in the Near East, prized for its razor-sharpness and widely distributed. A likely source of the obsidian belonging to the Urfa Man was Aşıklı Höyük in a region of Central Anatolia rich in obsidian resources. There, in a socially static and conservative community, was a well-organised group working under a leader or administration of leaders who conducted long-distance trade primarily in meat and obsidian volcanic glass which they specialized in craftworking to an extremely fine level. A fragment found there of the oldest obsidian bracelet known (7500 BC), has a central annular ridge that is exact to a hundred micrometres and its mirrored surface is so precise that it is measured on a nanometer-scale, an incredible feat. A stone plaque found there is ridged on one side with layers on O-shaped symbols and C-shaped symbols on the other side – the same C-shaped symbols arrayed on the

belt of one of the central pillars in Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe and on a plaque from Jerf el-Ahmar (Figure 10). The craftworkers of Aşıklı Höyük may have supplied Jerf el-Ahmar with central Anatolian obsidian glass which occurs there, although the span of Aşıklı Höyük (8200-7400 BC) misses the decline of Jerf el-Ahmar by three hundred years (This slight problem for the obsidian connection between the two communities might be mitigated allowing for the fact that only 10% of Aşıklı Höyük has been excavated and the possibility that the plaque moved to the region before the site was founded)**[59.].** The dates for Aşıklı Höyük, however, fall comfortably within the 8000-7000 BC range of Göbekli Tepe Layer I (Enclosures B and A). The Urfa Man statue with his obsidian eyes and Double V neck decoration and the C-shaped symbol which occurs at both sites, could mean that Aşıklı Höyük was an offshoot of the Şanilurfa elite represented by the statue, "established as a centre to control the processing and distribution of this exchange [of obsidian] between Central Anatolia and... Syria and Levant, which emerged several centuries before."**[60.]** The stamp seal bearing multiple C-symbols (Figure 18), which I suggest stood for units of obsidian, possibly finished knives, bears this out. The almost complete absence of cult symbolism at Aşıklı Höyük may mean its leaders had no interest in religion, yet there are public buildings that compare to 'temple' buildings at other sites in the Şanilurfa Culture, able to comfortably house several hundred people. Out of the thousands who lived at the site, this is a small number, suggesting these buildings were used either by an elite or for conducting social initiation rites of various kinds**[61.].**

Some researchers maintain that, within this field of cultures lies the historic reality behind the mythical Garden of Eden and perhaps there is indeed something in that Biblical myth that might be a fragmentary echo of the best of those times. The comparison captures only a very selective and open-ended aspect of the complexity of the times, as one might expect given the tens of centuries that passed before those texts were written, ample time for oral history to pass into myth. But I think it is worth mentioning for something very significant that happened next, since while the rest of humanity still adhered to the nomadic hunter-gatherer ways that had succeeded in raising the population of the world to around five million people by this time, this 'innocent' way of life was steadily becoming obsolete within the social field of Fertile Crescent and Levant Cultures over the 8th millennium BC. Not that Göbekli's people had any inkling of that, not while the megalithic clan houses were continuing to be built over the course of the eighth millennium BC, the iconography of their T-pillars cementing the fox, goose, duck, snake, wild boar and auroch icons that represented their respective identities, social heritage and their economic consolidation. This is indicated

by the equal size and status of the auroch, fox and crane on one of the central pillars of the smallest and, possibly, the final clan house, Enclosure A, finished around 7000 BC, where snake imagery still predominated. It could also be argued that by these signs and the ultimate completion of the Göbekli Tepe project, the hunter-herder-gatherer way of life, by far the longest lasting survival strategy pursued by humans since becoming genetically distinct, had reached its zenith.

The key techniques that would define the next epochal phase of humanity were already taking root sporadically and at different rates within this network of communities over four millennia as the first rays of the Early Neolithic age proper broke out from Upper Paleolithic skies between the 9th and 8th millennia BC. Those immediately succeeding Göbekli's builders would amalgamate these techniques in ways whose impact would make the cultures represented by the iconography of Göbekli Tepe seem archaic within just a few generations. Permanent settlements, animal husbandry, seed distribution and agriculture – the main techniques that define the epochal revolution into the Neolithic era and which should include the equally momentous revolution of semaisographic symbolism that gave considerable impetus to these forces - all finally came together at the village of Çayönü along the tributary of the Upper Tigris river around 100 kilometres north of Göbekli Tepe. Even though none of these basic innovations actually originated there, between its initial settlement (8800-8500 BC), the first importation of seeds (8000 BC), the arrival of the first herd of sheep (7300 BC) and possibly the first domestication of pigs, Çayönü has claim to be one of the very first locations from which the Neolithic revolution would exercise its prime transfiguration of humanity in all corners of the planet.

But the practical means by which this epochal change in lifestyle was realised, sowed seeds of social change that ultimately proved very costly to the founders whose symbolic innovations nourished the conditions for the nascent Neolithic revolution. The transition from the hunter-gatherer to the agricultural paradigm in southeastern Turkey was very difficult for it entailed social changes that resulted in profoundly dramatic events, events that were to overtake the crowning achievement of Göbekli Tepe and the cultural edifice surrounding it.

The Quern and the Altar

The revelation that Early Neolithic hunter-gatherers could expend so much effort building the sanctuary of Göbekli Tepe and its satellite villages with their megaliths and other communal

buildings, begs one of the great questions hanging over the transition from the hunter-gatherer-herder to animal husbandry and agricultural subsistence. When the backbreaking labour of growing and processing crops wiped-out most of the leisure time that was afforded by foraging and hunting animals and if a reinvigorated sense of sacredness impelled more elaborate forms of religious practice as the megalithic communities of the Şanilurfa Culture so vividly demonstrate, why did people change their means of food production in the first place? Why half-kill yourself to farm crops when hunting and herding delicious and often docile animals meant that you could kick back and develop your culture, raise megalithic buildings, develop your art, grow your wealth and forget about tedious and difficult farming? Why bother changing?

It took a *long* time to change. A drop in the Sea of Galilee's water level in 1989 uncovered, on its western shore, the campsite of a hunter-gatherer community, now recognised as the world's earliest farmers - *twenty-three thousand years before*. For reasons known only to them but clearly possessed by a very strong curiosity about botany, the residents of Ohalo II gathered over 140 different plant species. They identified and separated edible cereals like wild emmer, wild barley and wild oats, mixing them with other species of 'proto-weeds' which they ground and processed into flour to make dough for baking on flat stones. Mutated variants of the cereals showed signs of being domestically-cultivated over successive seasons, as did the presence of sickle blades, for harvesting. Although no evidence exists to show a continuance of this farming - it is a 'trial cultivation', more of an experiment than established farming, the find extends the previous earliest horizon of farming by thousands of years, proving yet again how these distant ancestors showed foresight and planning and were a lot more intelligent than people of the time were given credit for**[62.].** So why does another eleven thousand years need to pass before farming properly catches-on? That's a lot of generations of people who are not choosing to bother farming. The great gulf may one day be bridged by future discoveries but it also very much seems that people will do anything to avoid farming. Something else must have forced the issue, made someone go, "you're not going to like this, but there's nothing for it... we're going to have to try growing our own plants to eat."

A changing climate is partly to blame. Environmental research suggests that, some eleven millennia after farming occurred to the clan living beside the Sea of Galilee, hunter-gatherers responded to the drier, more variable Younger Dryas climate event, that caused a steep decline in yields of wild plants that were the existing staple foods, by starting to cultivate crops in more suitable areas**[63.].** Or perhaps they were more persistent with their

experimental farming, more desperate not to fail at it. These conditions stabilized around 9500 BC, however, after which agricultural techniques, sporadically experimented with since the end of the Ice Age, achieved a kind of domino effect, expanding from Late Natufian communities in the Levant to all over southwest Asia. Climate change on its own doesn't explain why people continued to develop cereal farming. Local conditions, such as the availability of certain cereals, affected how quickly communities adopted farming methods. The role of ritual and religion is another aspect, contributing towards the rising trend for sedentary living and domestication, the 'organizing factor' of people with similar beliefs and goals. The power of the belief system centered on Göbekli Tepe cannot be separated from its satellite community of settlements, some of which were taking their first agricultural steps when its enclosures were being built; indeed, the 'hunter cult' aspect of Göbekli shamanism might have accelerated the need for alternative food sources by exacerbating the dwindling supply of wild animals to eat and raising the need for greater amounts of barley which was brewed in large amounts for ceremonial uses.

There is another reason why agriculture started to become an irreversible trend. It also happens to colour the background to extremely dramatic events that are about to mark the next major phase of the Şanilurfa-Çayönü Culture.

Human skeletons at Abu Hureyra, an 8th millennium BC settlement in northern Syria, show deformities in their spinal vertebra and arthritic big toes, the result of shouldering heavy loads and kneeling at saddle querns for many hours to pound and grind grain. In the more dangerous (and therefore more valued) fields of hunting and stock-rearing, men dominated. They probably leant themselves to working the land during times of special hard labour such as at harvest times. But most of the tasks associated with the day-in-day-out effort needed for plant cultivation – tilling the soil, planting, watering, weeding, fertilizing and harvesting – were done by women, as were fibre spinning and basket-making. This is evidenced by deformities in female skeletons and it is very likely that it was women who first began to cultivate in addition to being the primary carers of their children and the ones who did most if not all of the tasks needed to produce woven goods**[64.].**

At Aşıklı Höyük, the village on the western fringes of the Şanilurfa-Çayönü Culture that was supplying obsidian from the Cappadocian highlands in central Turkey to communities in Syria and the Levant, there was an even greater discrepancy between the sexes with the average age of death for males being in the late 50s, whereas the majority of females died between the ages of 20 and 25. One young woman had received trepanation brain surgery, unsuccessfully. Another woman was buried with her husband who was more than twice her

age. Traumatic arthritis and dental diseases were common in these females**[65.].** The huge age difference between these men and women proves that the women had to bear more strenuous physical labour, *much* more strenuous. Keeping their children alive to a very ripe age (in Neolithic terms), killed them. In forager societies, the women rarely had more than one child because the burden of constantly carrying more than one non-walking infant to areas where plants were ripening was too great. Farming on land that had been settled, allowed for more children but the extra mouths to feed meant that everyone had to work harder to produce food, thus trapping families who were caught in a vicious circle of spiraling agricultural labour that physically wore down the women to their graves**[66.].**

The situation around the same time at Çayönü was even worse for both sexes but, there, the population responded to the deteriorating lifestyle conditions by modifying their architecture, burial customs and by widening dietary supplements, becoming fully-fledged Neolithic people. Over eight centuries starting around 8200 BC, the buildings of Çayönü go through five successive phases of building. Following an initial phase of settlement during which round houses are built, in the second 'Grill Building' phase, child deaths increase; most perishing as infants due to a lack of iron in their diets that led to anemia which decreased resistance to microbes. Females frequently die in their teenage years, whereas males live longer, none of them dying before reaching adulthood. Even so, the village expands and handicrafts develop in more specialized ways with lumps of native copper ore annealed (heated but not smelted) and hammered to create pins, hooks, beads and drills; the earliest known use of metal in the Middle East. Weaving is practised**[67.]**, and long-distance trade in obsidian and sea shells is established. Most children die as infants in the next 'Channelled Building' phase (from 8500 BC), where children make up a high percentage of deaths overall. In the next 'Cobbled Building' phase, the highest percentage of mortalities also belongs to infants. Child deaths intensify even further in the subsequent 'Cell Building' phase from 7500 BC and most adult burials are of females. Wild einkorn was cultivated in the earlier part of this stage, indicated by an increase in querns for grinding, sickles and V-shaped artefacts and the domestication of sheep and goats increased too, becoming a dietary staple. Rather unexpectedly, copper handicrafts, formerly reaching a peak of production, decline to zero by this stage and overall life expectancy is not great: males, on average, die at thirty-seven, females at thirty-three. Just as at Abu Hureyra, disease and hypoplasia were detected mostly on female skeletons. Deniz Erdem, whose thesis-length comparison of Çayönü and Abu Huryera informs my summary of the mortality rates at the sites, reached this conclusion:

> "One can assert in both Çayönü and Abu Hureyra, there was a marked differentiation between the males and females, possibly due to their different duties and different work places... in both settlements the conditions of the women were poorer. But burial customs, and grave goods supported with statistical analysis, indicated that there was a differentiation which was independent of sex and age." **[68.]**

This refers to how, beginning in the intermediate 'Channelled Building' phase, the way the settlement was organized and a change in burial practices indicates that new concepts had begun to permeate Çayönü with the construction of a special building consisting of two areas. One was a rectangular, windowless building, rounded at one end, dug into a slope on the eastern border of the settlement. In one of the chambers of this building, archaeologists found more than ninety human skulls neatly stacked up to the ceiling and parts of skeletons of more than four hundred individuals, in all categories of age and sex, disarticulated and interred under the floor. First built in Çayönü's middle phase, this 'Skull Building' continued through all subsequent phases of the settlement, eventually being rebuilt six times. Similarly dismembered human remains were also found beneath house floors at Nevali Çori, but the mortuary structure at Çayönü was unique in the region. In front of this room, and flanked by menhirs up to 2m high, was a rectangular quadrant. To the north of this plaza or 'town square', there were three large houses with identical fronts, equally spaced from each other, and a verandah, raised on top of an elevated platform founded on huge stone blocks. In the western part of the settlement, the houses were half as small, their build quality was poorer and of a haphazard layout and the few ordinary domestic tools that were found there were far outweighed by debris from chipping flint and obsidian. These buildings were workshops and homes for workers. In the grander 'manorial' houses at the eastern end, by contrast, large quantities of flint and obsidian were stored there in blocks of up to five kilograms, as well as stone sculptures and shells from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and high quality weapons that had been imported. The material discrepancy between the higgledy-piggledy western houses and the imposing houses overlooking the temple in the eastern area, added to the material differences. The fact that the wealth of the settlement was concentrated entirely within the eastern houses shows that a small group of people controlled all the wealth of the settlement, which was produced by a larger group of workers. In the absence of uniquely-rich tombs, the society of Çayönü cannot be described as a 'chiefdom' as such but what it did have, independent of age and sex, was a class-based two-tier society.

Far more disturbing implications stem from haemoglobin analysis of residue found on a large polished stone slab in the midst of the Skull Building, also on a large flint knife: traces of human blood mixed with the blood of animals (sheep and one unidentified species)**[69.].** Andree R. Wood, who analyzed the blood, dating it to around 7000 BC with an advanced technique called accelerator mass spectroscopy radiocarbon dating, commented; "We don't know exactly what was going on in the skull building, but human and animal blood was abundant on the slab. It reinforces an argument for at least its occasional use for the cutting up of humans as well as of animals."**[70.]** The presence of this human blood suggests two possibilities; either dead human bodies were taken to the building where they were cut up prior to reburial and at least some of the blood came from the tool users who accidentally cut themselves while preparing these bodies or the blood came from living humans, ritually sacrificed out of a desperate belief that the shedding of their blood would alleviate their terrible living conditions. With infant mortality rates unacceptably high and the adult lifespan short and fraught with disease, the elite of Çayönü created the Skull Building in which, under the guise of ostensibly alleviating the suffering their society had endured over hundreds of years by offering human lives to 'the gods' in the way other societies did with animals, they could consolidate their authority, creating over the period of the Skull Building what Bernard Brosieu called, "a destructive, patriarchal, and hierarchical society of enormous cruelty."**[71.]** The debate over the extent to which the earliest settled societies were egalitarian or hierarchical and the way that social changes related to public and personal property were woven into the first truly Neolithic societies helping shape the transition from the hunter-gatherer paradigm, is, not surprisingly, a huge and complex one and the call for further research before drawing weighty conclusions, especially when they might trespass into areas outside the specialist field of a given researcher wading into sociological and political arenas for example, is always a satisfactory cop-out in lieu of a slightly bolder theory. Yet in this small sphere at least, some resolution to these mighty questions might just be found. The human blood on the polished stone, altar-like slab and the flint knife of the Skull Building may, as the specialists say with consummate even-handedness, be blood from the hand of a mortician that slipped during the dismemberment of an already dead human body awaiting secondary burial in the elite context of the Skull Building. We should ask ourselves, though, if it is really credible that a mortician, presumably a fairly experienced one, working in a hallowed building during an event of great ritual gravity would botch their job so badly that they would leave an 'abundant' amount of their own blood on the tool of their trade and on the altar-like slab. Not a dash or a smear as you'd get from nicking yourself while preparing a

joint to roast but enough to create the thick crusts found in the Skull Building. The carelessness needed for such a spillage from the very hand wielding the knife would make Inspector Clouseau seem like a master Swiss watchmaker. Only the deliberate infliction of mortal wounds on a living person could create this much human blood.

Behind the rationale of the elaborate cult of the Skull Building, founded at a time of high infant mortality during the intermediate stage of Çayönü and its rebuilding in six successive stages concurrent with a declining overall standard of living, spiraling infant and young deaths and an accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small group; factors exacerbating the hierarchical division in this community of around two hundred people, was as an attempt to sway cosmic forces that its founders believed were decimating their society by a religious experiment, one that, in increasingly desperate times, resorted to ritual murder. Perhaps this was done as a means of social control or maybe its motivations were 'sincere' ones – no matter how repugnant and stupid they seem to us or, indeed, to those who were on the receiving end of them. The steady move towards increasing animal and plant domestication over the life of the settlement to supplement their diets, responding to a decline in wild animals for hunting and possibly climate change was a survival strategy which overall had little effect on their quality of life. A rising emphasis on crafts and trade which consolidated the authority of the elite, perhaps meant that the ritual sacrifices were a way of distracting and mollifying a population who couldn't understand why their lives were not improving.

The grinding hard labour of agriculture may have brought great regrets once it was realised that the lifestyle it afforded was no better, in fact it was worse than the constant nomadism of hunter-gathering from which it was supposed to provide an escape. But was there ever any choice? Women were not necessarily excluded from hunting; there are many traditional societies where women are experts with the bow and arrow, sometimes hunting without men. Yet with ever-increasing amounts of effort being put into monumental building, feasting, trading and a growing preoccupation with elaborate religious practices and material acquisition, it must be conjectured if another factor impelling the transition to agriculture, at least in the southeast Turkey/northern Syria region, was because men (largely) were simply not 'bringing home the bacon' to feed the larger families expedited by permanent house enclosures. For was Göbekli Tepe, in a sense, or did it become over its long decline, little more than a very grand human watering-hole, a hunters' drinking club? We've only known about the place for two decades in which time it has been compared to the most astonishing achievements ever bequeathed to us by antiquity, hyped-up as much as our language can

express, whereas the people who actually used it had *twenty-five centuries* to get used to it. How long were they similarly impressed with it and for how long did its positive benefits that it conveyed to its wider satellite communities in the form of skills and trade deals, last? The decreasing size of its enclosures suggests that its negative economic effects, probably from the completion of the first layer around 8600 BC (Enclosures D and C), were starting to outweigh the positive ones.

The Fall of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü Culture

If the plan of the theocrats who administered the 'snake religion' of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü cultural orbit was to expand their influence partly by dragooning symbolism known to as many people as possible and which had been so successful as an emblem of the fibre arts- the zigzags weave pattern, from it evolving a multi-community insignia that consolidated loyalty to a 'serpentine theocracy', it was brilliantly successful. The staggering confidence by which they set about building a hub for artisans and craftspeople, nomads and seekers, traders and hunters, shamans and wise women, laid the foundations of a culture and a proto-civilization that lasted for almost two and a half thousand years. But in getting off to such a cracking start with Enclosure D, the largest and most iconographically diverse of the megalithic houses of Göbekli Tepe, they set themselves a precedent that proved very difficult to sustain. With the added factor of the slow but gradually inexorable shift towards new patterns of living, the agrarian experiment that was already underway in some scattered communities, the geniuses behind Göbekli Tepe were unwittingly sowing the seeds of their own destruction far into the future.

Up until its foundation around 9100 BC, timescales for Göbekli's people did not exist as series of fragmentary intervals, down to the day, the hour, the second. There was a mobius strip of seasonal changes, births and deaths, night followed day. The houses, food storage areas, and communal meeting rooms of the Natufian settlements of Tell Qaramel, Jerf el Ahmar, Jericho, and Wadi Faynan show that humans were already sensitive to a chronological dimension closely tied to food gathering and preparation and special occasions for gatherings, within which there might conceivably have been sensitivity to phenomenon such as the position of the stars and phases of the moon and for which there is some evidence from Paleolithic rock art and bone artefacts, albeit from different regions. In the absence of any such special evidence from the Natufian or Mureybet Cultures, or elsewhere in Göbekli's

sphere however, the inference must be that for the immediate ancestors of 'Göbekli Man', the outlook was that the cosmos essentially revolved around him, a creature who moved to the centre of his immediate universe by gradually achieving and maintaining dominance over all other creatures, while technologically flatlined for thousands of years because there was no need to kick-start innovation when the living from hunting and foraging was, by-and-large, a good one. Against a background of changing climate patterns that was 'forcing the hand' of various communities into changing their lifestyle, some group or 'general council' of inter-cultural groups conceived Göbekli Tepe's megalithic enclosures. Until that seminal moment, time mainly concerned isolated groups of settlers who could get by fine so long as they only had to keep their immediate and extended families fed and watered. So, perhaps, the erection of the enclosures with T-pillars from 'back then' comparing with T-pillars made 'this season', the wrangling and planning all this necessitated, the raising of complex skills and know-how, brought into focus and honed their awareness of the passage of time like nothing they had ever experienced before. With monoliths from yesterday or last year or a previous lifetime still in existence and for all they knew raised *for all time*, the sense of a more-or-less eternal 'now' (or eternal year) began to fade out of human awareness, replaced by a more complex understanding of Man's place in the cosmic scheme. With T-pillars springing-up everywhere within the hundred kilometre radius of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü cultural complex as the centuries of the 8th and 9th millennia BC went by, before they knew it (i.e. in the space of a lifetime or two), there was 'history', manifested by sculptured stones that changed the landscape, *engendering a new definition of time itself*. In doing so, they were re-imagining their very conception of religion. With the past now fixed in stone and receding into history, moreover, came a growing sense of prescience: the future with all its uncertainties, a shocking and unwelcome new awareness when later less-accomplished enclosures were juxtaposed with the early, more-finely finished enclosures. With 'Then', 'Now', and 'When' growing in conceptual force, degrees of innocence were being lost, pillar by pillar, enclosure by enclosure and with each husbanded animal and each new plant successfully cultivated, the season's harvests bringing greater yields, sporadically yet steadily validating the agrarian experiment that women had fostered and who were largely persevering with; new ways of mastering Nature in which the need for the intercession of a shaman was substantially reduced. Over two millennia, the cumulative effect of these environmental and psychological trends were either imperceptible to or disregarded by the theocrats of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü Culture, who were also persevering with their ways, seeing no reason to abandon them. But over a thousand years, with progressively smaller enclosures being built until they were less

than half the size of the original ones, a clear digression of purpose indicating a lack of resources and motivation, fewer and fewer members of the clan houses lending their combined strength to the project, greater numbers drifting away than were staying to build yet another enclosure. It was becoming increasingly apparent to those in outlying communities that the waters of change were steadily undercutting the confidence and inspired awe by which the power of the great hunter-gatherer-shaman theocracy was upheld, rendering their paradigm and their influence obsolete.

Over four hundred animal and human figurines from Çayönü seem to disclose the existence of a 'folk religion' running parallel to the 'official' religion practised in the monumental buildings. The contexts in which these figurines were found, show how this folk religion was observed only in domestic settings. A humble, personal art; privately (secretly?) exercised yet shared in by the majority. Similar figurines occur at many sites all over the Middle East from the pre-pottery Neolithic era and in centuries preceding it. Simple, homely figures of regular men and women, occasionally couples or mothers and their children. No doubt, the theoocratic elite of Göbekli Tepe were aware of this 'secret religion' in their midst and since they could not eradicate it, they were impelled to make their edifices so much more impressive and imposing in order to counteract this parallel religion, impressing on their audience the validity of their superior 'official' religion. A similar thing happened in Central Europe and the Ukraine following the advent of Christianity and later Communism. Tribal groups worshipped gods and goddess with family-based rites with larger community ceremonies in connection with agricultural work and seasonal festivals. When the aristocracy introduced Christianity, the pagan gods, mythologies and practices were stamped-out in the upper classes, while the lower classes preserved them, at the same time keeping to the Christian faith, a simultaneous adherence that in the Ukraine is known as *dvoeverie,* 'double faith'**[72.].** In the Stalinist era, efforts to eradicate 'primitive' customs and ethnic identity were viciously enforced but to no avail. This seems very applicable to what is happening in the mature phase of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü Culture because the figurines are in an entirely different category from the stone figures delineating the ascendant religion of the region which convey the richer, more aggressive and hallucinogenically-fluid icon repertoire of the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü Culture animal clans under the auspice of the 'serpentine theocracy'. And as we've noted before, the closer we get to Göbekli Tepe at the epicenter of the culture, the more male and sexually-charged it becomes. The famous T-pillars, themselves, are human forms severely abstracted into phallus shapes which are both symbolic and literal, physical erections rising from the earth. Their carvings feature snakes with phallic heads, animals and

men with erect penises, animals metamorphosing into phallic snakes. The Urfa Man statue is a phallically-streamlined man holding his erect penis. The stone 'totem poles' from Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori, are gently curving phallus shapes and they are related to cult buildings whereas at Nevali Çori female figurines are mainly found all over the site, some inside but most outside the 'cult' building with its fourteen monumental T-pillars: naked and seated females, mother and child figures (two of them), and over three hundred other female figurines. They are slightly outnumbered by the male figurines found there, some of which have sashes or belts. Given the prominence of the belts on the central T-pillars at Göbekli Tepe, they are potentially symbolic of a marginally higher status or affluence, a self-made man or even a member of the theocratic elite or one aspiring to be so. But the great majority of these clay figurines are not adorned with symbols of status; they are 'ordinary people' even if their forms are often stereotypical and crudely realised. What does it mean? "It is possible to infer that the symbolism attached to the female identity", in Mehmet Özdoğan's estimation of these figurines, "would seem to be a more domestic phenomenon, to be considered as personal."**[73.]** So the women were making their own female imagery for their own reasons, and their art had nothing to do with the 'official' religion of the culture which tended strongly towards male imagery.

And so, it is very telling indeed how these clay figurines are *completely absent* at Göbekli Tepe**[74.].** We should pause to consider that for a moment, for what it means is that no-one who went there thought – or dared – to enter the enclosures with a material symbol of the more widespread figurine 'folk religion' in their possession. The absence of these figurines is a pertinent, indeed ominous, indicator of the absolute control exercised by the elite whose sanctuary at Göbekli Tepe was the region's main artistic repository, giving cause to wonder if people were frisked before they entered the portal stones to the enclosures lest a 'profane' figurine of one of these realistically sculptured human beings find its way into the T-pillar houses of the animals and the ancestors. To contravene what strongly appears to have been an embargo on figurines within the sanctuary would have been, not merely inappropriate, but sacrilegious and thus, potentially, much more serious. It makes one wonder what penalty was meted-out on those who transgressed the rule: a curt refusal of entry, some kind of fine or something more terrible – justice 'Çayönü-style'?

With these forces coming to bear on the elite who built and administered Göbekli Tepe and all that it represented about a culture accelerating into obscurity, it, therefore, comes as little surprise to find a rebellious sign from someone with ideas running counter to the prevailing ideology for within Enclosure C, a pillar was desecrated with the incised graffito of

a woman giving birth**[75.].** This graffito is the only image of a woman at Göbekli Tepe and, although unique and crudely-drawn, her significance is no less great than the welter of more finely-carved animals around her. Reclining, with an umbilical cord issuing from between her splayed legs, one arm raised in a semi-hieratic gesture and her apparent lack of a mouth, while possessing eyes and a nose, could suggest a 'universal' woman rather than a specific individual, and inevitably, given the hallowed context of this graffito and the existing tradition of female figurine art, this woman has been interpreted as a rendition of the Great Goddess. However, the nature of the image, which starkly contrasts with the relief carvings surrounding it and its unwaveringly undignified depiction of the act of birthing (which incidentally is not found in figurine art anywhere), are precisely why this 'goddess' interpretation, while not necessarily invalid on one level, misses the main point underlying its creation. Graffiti is an impromptu, unsanctioned artform, always made by someone acting independently, even if what they are intending to convey reaches beyond themselves, as with the Göbekli Woman. Maybe the artist actually was a pregnant women whose agricultural labours in one of the outlying communities drove her to the brink of desperation, compelling her to make a desperate statement in the only way she knew by making an imploring and shockingly honest portrait of herself in her most vulnerable state. Perhaps she journeyed to Göbekli Tepe in her pregnant state, her family seeking help or perhaps she had already died while giving birth and someone dear to her had carved the graffito in remembrance of her – in anger at her wretched circumstances. Whatever the personal events leading up to this deeply sacrilegious, transgressive, unauthorized, probably very risky and undeniably very *public* artwork, this expression of the most daring image imaginable in such confines was nothing less than a revolutionary act.

If there is any truth in this conjecture, then the Göbekli Woman graffito stands at the beginning of a tradition of graffiti art that protests against oppression in the same way that graffiti art by youths in Syria, just a few miles from Göbekli Tepe, helped to catalyze a revolution against a state regime **[76.]** ten thousand years after the same thing happened nearby within the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü Culture around or shortly after 7400 BC, starting at the epicentre of their culture. With a stupendous, concerted effort that must have taken hundreds of people, Göbekli Tepe was wiped from the face of the earth, its enclosures filled in with thousands of cubic metres of rubble, human and animal bones, flint tools, broken stone vessels and chippings. "When you have new gods, you have to get rid of the old ones", Klaus Schmidt wryly notes of this upheaval **[77.],** so the statues of the old theocratic-shamanic elite were toppled and smashed, their stone heads thrown in amidst the rubble after being defaced.

One was broken at the neck, despoiled around the mouth and thrown into the pit of Enclosure D beside Pillar 31, the one with the complex necklace symbols, perhaps it was an offering or simply a symbolic execution. The almost life-size statue of Urfa Man with his implacable obsidian-blade eyes that once had struck awe, was pulled down and cleft in two. The portal stones were rolled over and heaved into these new garbage pits or else broken up and scattered. This iconoclastic fervour extended 70km north to Nevali Çori, where the icons of the elite were also broken, the rioters there smashing up the totem pole topped by the archetypal 'Great Bird' and deliberately hacking at the face of the 'skinhead' statue until only the 'mohican', snake hairstyle remained. Previously part of a statue in the early phases of Nevali Çori, this despoiled statue head was embedded in the wall of their T-pillar temple in the final phase of the settlement, so it seems possible that a reverence (or a superstitious fear) was still felt for the ancestors or clans represented by the pillars which retained a status higher than the elite who acted as their custodians. As we know, the same thing happened at Göbekli Tepe where we must be grateful to the iconoclasts for leaving the T-pillars and their carvings largely untouched, an exception being a pillar known only from a fragment depicting a wild boar and a unique hyena relief that was found in the debris of Enclosure D, north of Pillar 18.**[78.]** The iconoclasts spared the chief emblems of their own clans, reserving their ire for the symbols of the elite who administered the sanctuary.

Over the next two or three generations, possibly much more rapidly, the fervour that hitherto had been most assiduously geared towards the acquisition of obsidian and monumental building, reverted to a destructive impetus as revolutionary zeal, ignited at Göbekli Tepe just possibly by a sacrilegious graffito of a birthing woman; a previously inconceivable iconic form, swept like wildfire across the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü cultural complex. Göbekli Tepe's satellite T-pillar communities (Sefer Tepe, Hilazo Tachtit, Karahan Tepe, Taşlı Tepe, Nevali Çori, Körtik Tepe) were meted out the same treatment as their spiritual and economic 'mecca': toppled, dispersed, scattered and buried. Very suddenly, on a day around 7200 BC, the social upheaval reached Çayönü, sparking a devastating revolt that swept across this cradle Neolithic settlement. The large houses overlooking the north side of the plaza were overrun and burned down. This conflagration happened so quickly that the owners were unable to save any of the precious obsidian stored inside. The Skull Building, the most potent symbol of social inequality and subservience to the elite, was ripped down and burnt, even the floor was torn up**[79.].** The stone pillars surrounding the square were toppled, the tallest of them singled out to be smashed to pieces**[80.].** For more than a thousand years, the eastern end had been kept meticulously clean and tidy, now it was turned into a municipal rubbish

dump and the poorly-built houses on the western side – effectively the slum district – were razed. The transition was very short and dramatic and, soon after, a new Çayönü rose in place of the former site settlement, entering a 'Greater Phase' with new houses built over the ruins of the large 'manorial' houses and all other houses built to the same single-room standard and of the same size as the earlier larger buildings. Apart from a structure built just north of the Skull Building with a unique terrazzo floor consisting of limestone set in lime mortar, there were no special buildings as in the previous phases. The instigators of the revolt eradicated all the signs of social differences and all traces of the ghastly religious experiment used to enforce the authority of the elite group who formerly controlled the most valuable trading products.

Foreign invasion, war, plagues and natural disasters were ruled out by Mehmet Özdoğan, director of the archaeologists who discovered this crisis, concluding instead that social upheaval was probably the cause, qualifying that this spirit of revolution also affected "most of the core area of Neolithic Anatolia"**[81.],** in obvious reference to the signs of iconoclasm and eradication that befell settlements right across the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü cultural complex, leading to its final dissolution around 6600 BC when Körtik Tepe was abandoned, although by that time the culture – if it could still be called that – was but a shadow of its former glory.

The ripples of ideological change were even felt 400km to the west at Çatalhöyük, a young Neolithic settlement on the Konya Plain in central Turkey, where, at a time roughly contemporary with the end of the final phase of the pre-pottery Neolithic Era which is linked to these critical events, the stone sculptures of males associated with cult buildings and with stylistic links to the male imagery of Nevali Çori, factors showing a common use in community-wide ritual, were destroyed, gathered, and entombed, neutralizing their former power. Beautiful female figurines made of clay already existed at this site, yet after the iconoclasm that befell the male imagery, their numbers increased along with their use in domestic rituals that suggests a sudden upswing of interest in the roles of women**[82.].** Çatalhöyük will be the starting point for the next stage of this investigation.

We leave this epoch with a seal stone bearing a final image of the Göbekli serpent motif as a single winding serpentiform, the ultimate resolution of the symbol so familiar from the T-pillars and other stone carvings. Next to it is a forked symbol pointing upwards which could be a human raising their arms or perhaps an agricultural tool like a pitchfork or rake and a symbol which is probably a resolved abstraction of the Great Bird itself: a pair of wings, a body and a very small stroke for its head. This is the only seal known so far from Göbekli and

with seals and resolved symbols becoming much more important as easily-portable signs for individual or group property in parallel with the transition into Neolithic agriculture, it indicates the completion of an important phase of the "transformation of the mind" that occurred so vividly in the Şanlıurfa-Çayönü cultural complex over two and a half millennia. In the conceptual realm of artistic symbolism, this was represented by an amalgamation of symbols that, already at the culture's beginning, were accorded high status by their recognition and acceptance within a network of communities and proto-cultures from the southern Levant to the north-eastern Fertile Crescent. These clans and skilled groups demarcated by various creatures were officiated by a chiefly or priestly federation drawn from clans most strongly adhering to an extremely ancient form of bird-shamanism identified by the 'Great Bird' symbol and, in a more concentrated and novel local manifestation, another assemblage of skilled groups and clans identified by serpent motifs. The bucranium was another important super-motif acting in triangulation with these symbols, a sign of another key economic driving force; the auroch, whose clans, initially at least, acted in consort with the elite emerging from this super-alliance of communities. The brilliantly clever fusion of amalgamated symbols on the Göbekli T-pillars and the activities done in their sight, viably the brainchild of the 'serpentine theocracy' which gained the greatest strength from this super-alliance of networked communities, enabled its innovators to gain more influence and dominance over the former group of 'old guard' alliances by being able to appeal to a wider and more technologically-advanced and socially-sophisticated people, folding-in Natufian and Mureybetian communities from the Levant, who were using a very similar symbol of wavy lines, possibly derived from the water they used in their farming and sanitation possibly from the weft and wane of weaving, to signify their identity inside their communal buildings, and skilled weavers from across Anatolia.

As the alliance of communities under these symbols further increases their supra-regional influence and economic clout, a relatively small elite of a semi-theocratic, semi-plutocratic and possibly paternalistic and male-dominated bearing rises to prominence. By maximizing the resource advantages from this alliance, they created Göbekli Tepe from which to administer and regulate their villages and wider-ranging networks, ensuring it became the epicentre upon which all routes converged, functioning as a trading hub, a workshop, a place of feasting and a sanctuary. The quantum imaginative leap that brought the 'T-pillar culture' to reality also innovated a new class of resolved abstract symbols: the Double V-shape, the H-shaped symbol, the C-shaped symbol, the disc-with-a-hole-symbol, and the bucranium or horns symbol. Simple physical forms of tools and products that

represented the foundation of a powerful new economic model that was emerging over the 8th and 9th millennia might have been the source from which these symbols were resolved, or maybe not. Whichever way one chooses to look at them, their greater significance must have been how these symbols stood for massive changes in their lives of the people who used them, how they distinguished themselves as separate from their former – but still congruent – 'animal clan' identities, the symbol-zeitgeist of the hunter-gatherer societies and for how they interacted with each other, both by exchanges of skills and the products of these skills. Apart from the Double V-shaped symbol that was rooted in the fibre arts and the related zigzags motif, already the most enduring abstract symbols to denote work and clan identity, these abstract symbols were lost in the collapse that befell the culture that produced them, buried in the backfill of Göbekli Tepe and its satellites. And indeed, the eradication of the megalithic clan houses could symbolize to us, as it might have to those who took part in it, the symbolic closure of the hunter-gatherer-forager zeitgeist, the longest chapter in the history of human survival, notwithstanding remnants of it that have survived to our times.

A proto-civilization that had lasted for nearly three millennia had foundered, yet there was no going back from the mental revolution that was fostered within it. With the 'fall of Eden' marking the end of the world's first semaisographic culture, dramatic events coinciding (but not coincidentally) with the end of the long dissolve into the dawning of the Neolithic Age, humans crossed a threshold to a new world of self-reliance and self-identification, more distinct from Nature than their forbears could have imagined; a world of new symbolic languages and new innovations to disperse them.

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CHRONOLOGY

All dates are BC / BCE, before the Common Era. Dates in brackets refer to the end of the given period. Due to the uncertainty of many dates in prehistory, dates are fixed at the mid-point between a range usually derived from radiocarbon dating results.

18 000	Mezin ivories, Ukraine (-15 000)
14 000	Gobustan rock art, Azerbaijan (-7000)
12 500	Late Glacial Maximum. Increasing rainfall in southern Levant (-9500)
11 000	Natufian culture horizon (-8500), cultivation techniques, southern Levant.
10 700	Hallan Çemi culture, pig domestication, southeast Turkey (-9210)
10 400	Hilazon Tachtit cave shaman burial, Israel (-10 000). Natufian culture
10 078	Wadi Faynan, Jordan (-8220)
10 000	Younger Dryas event (Clovis Comet hypothesis). Colder, drier climate worldwide (-9600)
	Increased rainfall in North Africa, 'Green Sahara' (-5500)
	Tell Qaramel (stone towers -9650) and Mureybet, Syria (-8000). Jericho communal buildings, Jordan. Late Natufian culture
9800	Nemrik 9, northern Iraq (-8270)
9700	Göbekli Tepe layer III, southeast Turkey (-9400)

9650 Jerf al-Ahmar, Syria (-8610), Mureybet culture horizon

9600 Netiv Hagdad, Levant-Jordan. Abu Hureyra, Syria. Year round farming in the Levant, long distance trade. Natufian culture (-8500)

9400 Rapid growth of cereal use in the Middle East

9300 Mureybet, token system, Mureybet culture, Syria (-8600)

9100 Göbekli Tepe Enclosures D and C, layer II (-8600), Taşlı Tepe, Körtik Tepe, Sefer Tepe, Cafer Höyük, southeast Turkey. Şanlıurfa culture horizon (-7000)

9000 Karahan Tepe and Djade al-Mughara, Syria

Shigir Idol, Middle Urals, Russia

Nabta Playa settled, southwestern Egypt

Roundhead culture Phase 1, Djado plateau, northeastern Niger (-6000)

8870 Zawi Chemi Shanidar, northern Iraq

8820 Amesbury settled, England

8800 Çayönü culture horizon, Syria (-8500)

8500 Nevalı Çori (-7000) and Hamzan Tepe, Turkey. (Şanlıurfa culture)

Çayönü 'skull building' and channelled building phase, Syria

Boncuklu Höyük, central Turkey (-7500)

8200 Aşıklı Höyük, Turkey (-7400) (Şanlıurfa culture)

Obsidian trade across the Middle East

Çayönü II, mixed animal domestication, Syria (-7150)

8000 Göbekli Tepe layer I (-7000), Karahan Tepe, Cafer Höyük, Yeni Mahalle, Adiyaman-Kilisik and Aşikli Höyük, Turkey. Çayönü trade, farming. (Şanlıurfa-Çayönü culture horizon)

7550 Kiffian culture, Gobero, Niger (-6200)

7500 Çatalhöyük East, central Turkey (-6800)

Pastoral rock art, Sahara (-3000)

7400 Göbekli Tepe eradication begins. Şanlıurfa-Çayönü culture collapse horizon (-6900)

7300 Çayönü III-V, animal domestication (-7150)

Dotted Wavy Line pottery horizon, Niger

7200 Çayönü revolts and collapse, Nevalı Çori dismantled, Göbekli Tepe final dissolution (-6900)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

17. Map of sites in south western Asia relating to Göbekli Tepe.

18. (a.) Stone head with snake ‘mohican’ from Nevali Çori. (b., c., d.) Stone vessels from Kortik Tepe decorated with snakes, meanders, centipedes / scorpions, and anthropomorphic figures. Illustrations by Daniel R-Z O’Neill.