

Göbekli Tepe

A Stone Age Ritual Center in Southeastern Turkey

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The photo is from the documentary film called "The World's First Temple" directed by Ahmet Yazman

View over the main excavation area
at Göbekli Tepe. In the foreground
Enclosure D, to the left Enclosure C,
in the background Enclosures B and A.

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First came the temple, later the city

Göbekli Tepe is one of the most fascinating Neolithic sites all over the world. It is a "Tell", an artificial mound formed by the construction work of man. But it is not a place for people to live; it consists of several sanctuaries in the form of round megalithic enclosures. It is clear that after a period of time, these sanctuaries were intentionally and rapidly buried, a process which seems to have been a fixed part of their useful lives right from the beginning.

About 15 km to the northeast of Şanlıurfa, in the Turkish Euphrates region, lies the Stone Age ruin of Göbekli Tepe. Excavations conducted there since 1995 under the direction of Klaus Schmidt have revealed totally unexpected monumental architecture dating to the early and middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), i.e. the time between 9600-8000 calBC. As no settlement structures were found, Göbekli Tepe has the role of a mere sanctuary. The people of Göbekli Tepe were still hunter-foragers. The finds from the site corroborate this, as the lithic inventory comprises a wide range of projectile points. Animal husbandry was not practiced there and domesticated plants are not known, according to the results of osteological investigations and botanical studies.

Göbekli Tepe is characterised by an older layer (III) dating to the PPNA, which produced monumental architecture with huge T-shaped pillars arranged in circle-like enclosures around two even taller central pillars. A younger phase (layer II, early and middle PPNB) consists of smaller rectangular buildings often containing only two small central pillars or none at all. The pillars are interconnected by walls and stone benches and are not

only decorated with varied animal motifs, but in some cases also with arms and hands, showing that they are sculptures representing stylized human-like individuals. The abstracted, impersonal, T-shaped beings clearly belong to another, transcendent sphere. The mound is the result of the rapid and intentional backfilling of the circles after some time of use.

A geomagnetic survey, including ground-penetrating radar, substantiated the prediction, based on the archaeological surface investigations, that the older round megalithic enclosures were not restricted to a specific part of the mound but existed all over the site. More than ten large enclosures were located on the geophysical map. As there are several areas on the surface of the mound without clear con-



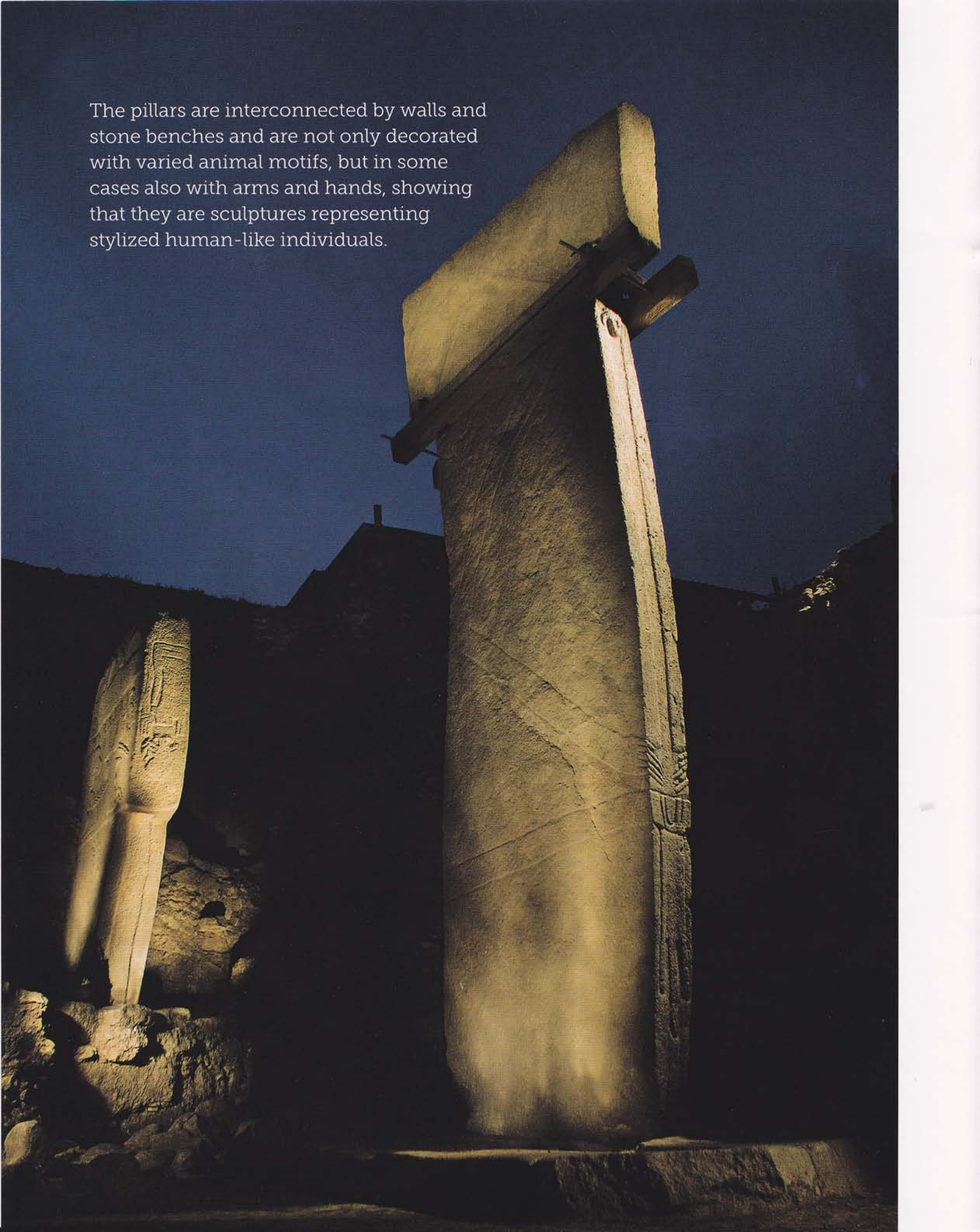
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Above
The Urfa-Statue
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Below
**The view of Göbekli Tepe, before
the excavations began.**

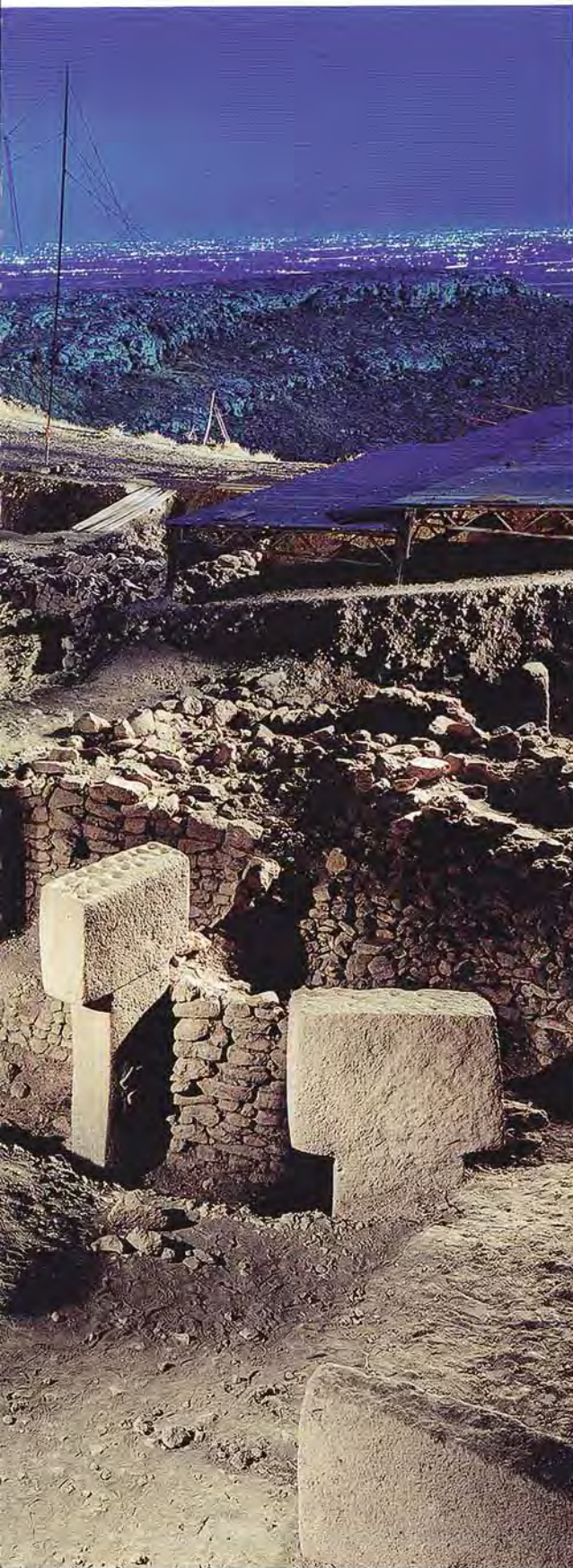


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Göbekli Tepe was a religious central place for a hunter-gatherer community with a highly developed and differentiated transcendental belief system. The early appearance of monumental religious architecture at Göbekli Tepe is also profoundly changing our image of one of the key moments in history, the emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry.

tours on the map – areas where further enclosures could exist – it seems very probable that at least twenty enclosures in total may cover the mound of Göbekli Tepe.

The excavated enclosures A-G and their particular pillars have been numbered in the order of their discovery. Enclosure A, still only partially excavated, provides a number of enigmatic reliefs, among them a “tapestry” of interwoven snakes, like a “net” made up of up to 17 animals, as seen on Pillar 1. At the pillar’s shaft, what perhaps could be described as its “stomach”, keeping in mind the anthropomorphic character of the T-shaped pillars, there are more snakes and two parallel strips. These seem to belong to some garment, like a stole, a feature which is depicted on many of the pillars in both layers III and II. Snakes are the dominant animals of this enclosure.

In Enclosure B the fox seems to take over this role. Each of the central pillars (Pillars 9 and 10) of Enclosure B has a male fox on the inner face, jumping towards the supposed entrance of the enclosure in the southeast. Between these central pillars the floor level has been reached. There, a terrazzo floor with a shallow limestone plate set into the floor in front of Pillar 9 was excavated, which could be seen as a hint about the role of libations as part of rituals carried out here.

The central pillars of Enclosure C, Pillars 35 and 37, were destroyed in ancient times. There was a large pit obviously made just to carry out this destruction. The smashed pieces were found in the lower part of the pit. By laser-scanning these pieces, a virtual reconstruction of Pillar 35 was made possible, which shows a height of 5 m. The floor, which has been completely unearthed here as well, is the natural

The upper parts of the central pillars of Enclosure D were visible for several years. Both have a stole and arms depicted in high relief.

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bedrock, carefully smoothed. Two pedestals for the central pillars had been cut out of the bedrock. In Enclosure C, three (or possibly four) concentric rings of walls and pillars can be noted, as well as several high reliefs. The motifs are dominated by depictions of wild boars. On Pillar 27, besides the flat relief of a boar, there is also the spectacular high relief of a predator. Both animal and pillar are made of one piece of stone. The omnipresence of wild boars on the T-shaped pillars of this enclosure is paralleled by other findings: of the several wild boar sculptures hitherto found at the site, most have been discovered in Enclosure C. It is interesting to note that there are no snakes depicted on the pillars of this enclosure (however, a relief of a single snake is observable on one of the large horizontal stone slabs in the southern part of the enclosure).

Enclosure D was found to the north of B and C. It is the largest one and displays excellent preservation except for some damage dating to the Stone Age, which had been repaired

by the users of the enclosure more or less successfully. There are two huge central pillars and most probably 12 pillars in the surrounding walls – 11 are visible so far, the remaining one is likely hidden in the northern baulk. In Enclosure D, depictions of foxes and snakes are most common, but in this structure there is a very wide range of figures, which include the motifs of boars, aurochs, gazelle, wild ass and others like a large carnivore, probably a felid. There are several birds depicted, like cranes, storks, ibises and ducks.

The narrative character of several of these depictions is underlined by Pillar 43, whose whole surface on the western face is covered by a variety of motifs. Dominant is a big vulture. It lifts its left wing, while the right wing points to the front. It is possible that this gesture aims at the sphere or disc that can be seen above the tip of the right wing. To the right of the vulture, another bird, maybe an ibis, a snake, two H-shaped symbols and some poultry are depicted. On the shaft beneath the head

Left
A boar sculpture and several stone vessels were discovered in situ beneath one of the central pillars of Enclosure C.
© DAI, K. Schmidt

Below
A monumental porthole stone decorated with sculptures was discovered in 2009.
© DAI, O. Dietrich





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of Pillar 43, further animals are shown. Here, a huge scorpion as well as the head and neck of another bird dominate the scene. To the right of the bird's neck, an especially interesting motif is depicted. Due to damage to the pillar it is not preserved completely, but the representation of a headless human with an erect penis is quite clearly recognizable. His condition could indicate a violent death, and his company of scorpions, snakes and vultures strengthens this impression. The sequence of pictures on this pillar shows us how impressively rich Stone Age mythology must have been and how poor our knowledge about it yet is.

The upper parts of the central Pillars 18 and 31 were visible for several years. Both have a stole and arms depicted in flat relief. The eastern Pillar 18 shows a fox on its right arm. At its breast there are reliefs in the shape of a crescent, a disc and a motif of two antithetic elements, which are not understood in terms of their meaning so far. The western Pillar 31 is wearing a necklace in the shape of a bukranium. Due to slope pressure, both pillars had been lying in an oblique position and the complete excavation of both was only possible after taking preventive measures to ensure their stability. In 2009 the floor level could be reached.

Left
Pillar 43 in Enclosure D is one of the most richly decorated.
© DAI, K. Schmidt

Below
The central pillars of Enclosure D had to be stabilized before excavation work could go on.
© DAI, N. Becker





Like in Enclosure C, the natural bedrock was carefully smoothed and again two pedestals were cut out of the bedrock in the centre of the enclosure, wherein the central pair of T-shaped pillars was erected. Both of these pillars have been preserved without any damage and with a breathtaking height of about 5.5 m.

The so-far-hidden lower part of the pillars' shafts were unearthed recently. It was no surprise that hands and fingers soon became visible on both pillars, but also an unexpected discovery was made: both pillars wear belts just below the hands, depicted in flat relief. A belt buckle is visible in both cases, and on the eastern pillar there are some decorations on the belt in form of H- and C-shaped symbols. Furthermore, another attribute is most interesting. On both belts, a loincloth – also depicted in relief cut out of the stone – is hanging down, covering the genital region. Apparently fox skins are portrayed, judging from their forms. As the loincloth is covering the genital region of the pillar statues, we can not be sure about the sex of the two individuals. But since clay figurines from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Nevalı Çori, which are wearing belts, always are masculine, it seems highly probable that the pair of statues in Enclosure D represents males, too.

From Göbekli Tepe there are also several life-size human heads made of limestone. They show a broken edge in the head area and therefore it is quite probable that they originally were part of larger statues as well. Interestingly, some of these heads were found in the filling of the enclosures, placed there intentionally beneath the central pillars during the process of backfilling – burying – of these places.

Due to the existence not only of arms and human hands, but also of belts and loinclothes on the central pillars of Enclosure D it can be clearly stated and confirmed now that the T-shaped pillars have an anthropomorphic identity. But who are they? As their faces are never depicted, they seem very likely to be related to supernatural beings, beings gathered at Göbekli Tepe for certain, but so far unknown, purposes. Their impersonal character especially reminds one of the lack of portraiture due to religious taboos in later times. Their identity and meaning is obviously a different one compared to the more naturalistic male statues like the life-size Urfa statue, which can be dated to the Early Neolithic as well. The Urfa statue has a face, and its eyes are depicted by deep holes

Left
The Göbekli Tepe 'Totem Pole'
discovered in 2009.

© DAI, N. Becker

Below
Life size human heads made of
limestone from Göbekli Tepe.

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The interpretation of the rich findings from Göbekli Tepe is challenging, but the discoveries offer at least a glimpse at the events taking place there during the Neolithic.

with inset blade segments of black obsidian. It may be noteworthy that below the eyes and the nose, no mouth was depicted. Also, the statue seems to be naked with the exception of a V-shaped necklace. It is not entirely clear, but it seems that the hands are holding the phallus. Legs are not depicted; below the body there is only a conical tab, which allows the statue to be set into the ground easily.

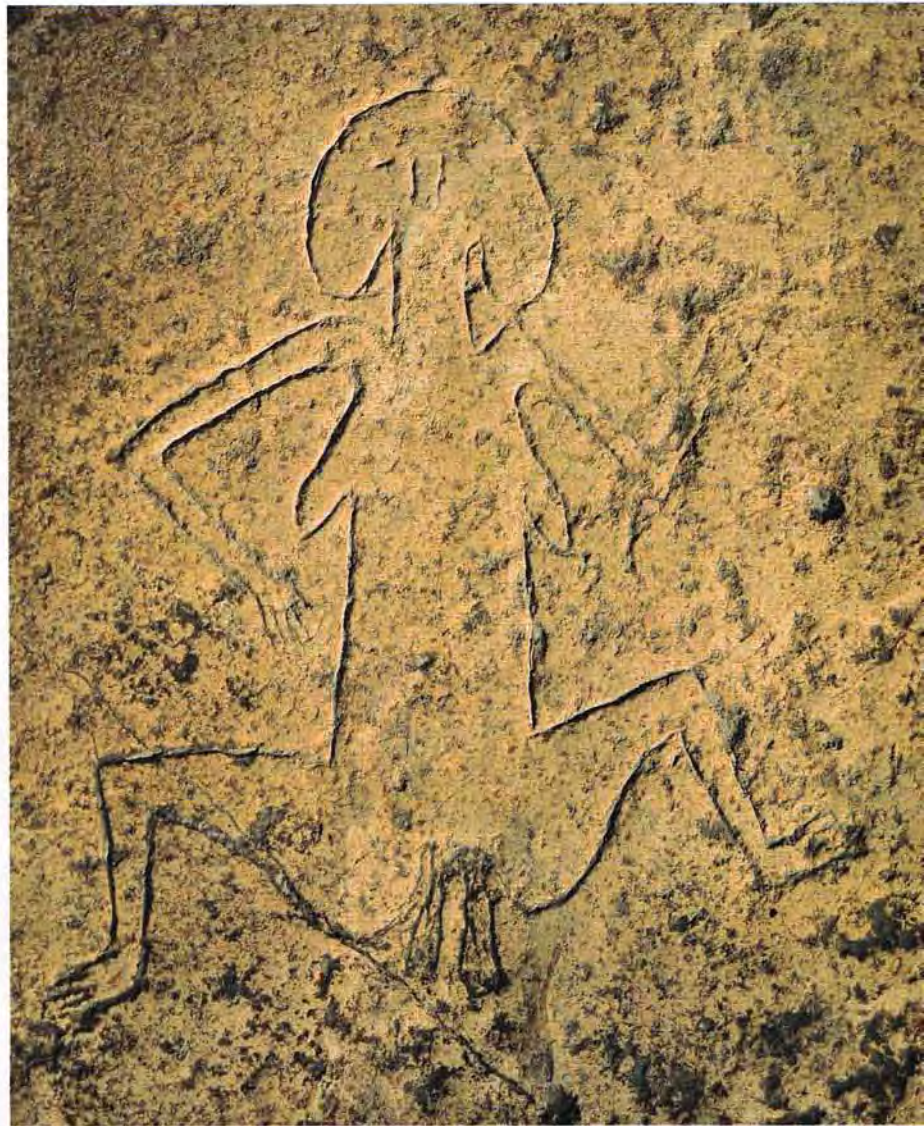
From Göbekli Tepe there are also several life-size human heads made of limestone. They show a broken edge in the head area and therefore it is quite probable that they originally were part of larger statues as well. Interestingly, some of these heads were found in the filling of the enclosures, placed there intentionally beneath the central pillars during the process of backfilling – burying – of these places. This evokes the thought of a cultic practice known from other sites of the PPN, like Jericho (Israel), 'Ain Ghazal (Jordan), and Tell Aswad (Syria) to only mention a few, where human skulls were removed from the bodies of the deceased and given a „new“ face by applying a plaster of gypsum to be displayed to the living, maybe as part of an ancestor cult. These decorated skulls were re-buried after some time – just like the sculpture heads from Göbekli Tepe. If we thus see these heads and life-sized statues as depictions of ancestors, it becomes clear that the monumental T-shaped pillars display something different, something larger and more powerful. Maybe we can describe them with all due restraint as deities.

Every excavation season at Göbekli Tepe reveals new and remarkable finds and although the overall spectrum of objects to be expected is known quite well, there are also surprises. One of these was a large sculpture reminiscent of the totem poles of North American Natives, which was discovered in 2009 and excavated in 2010. The sculpture had been set into the north-eastern wall of a rectangular room

Enclosure D from above.
© DAI, N. Becker



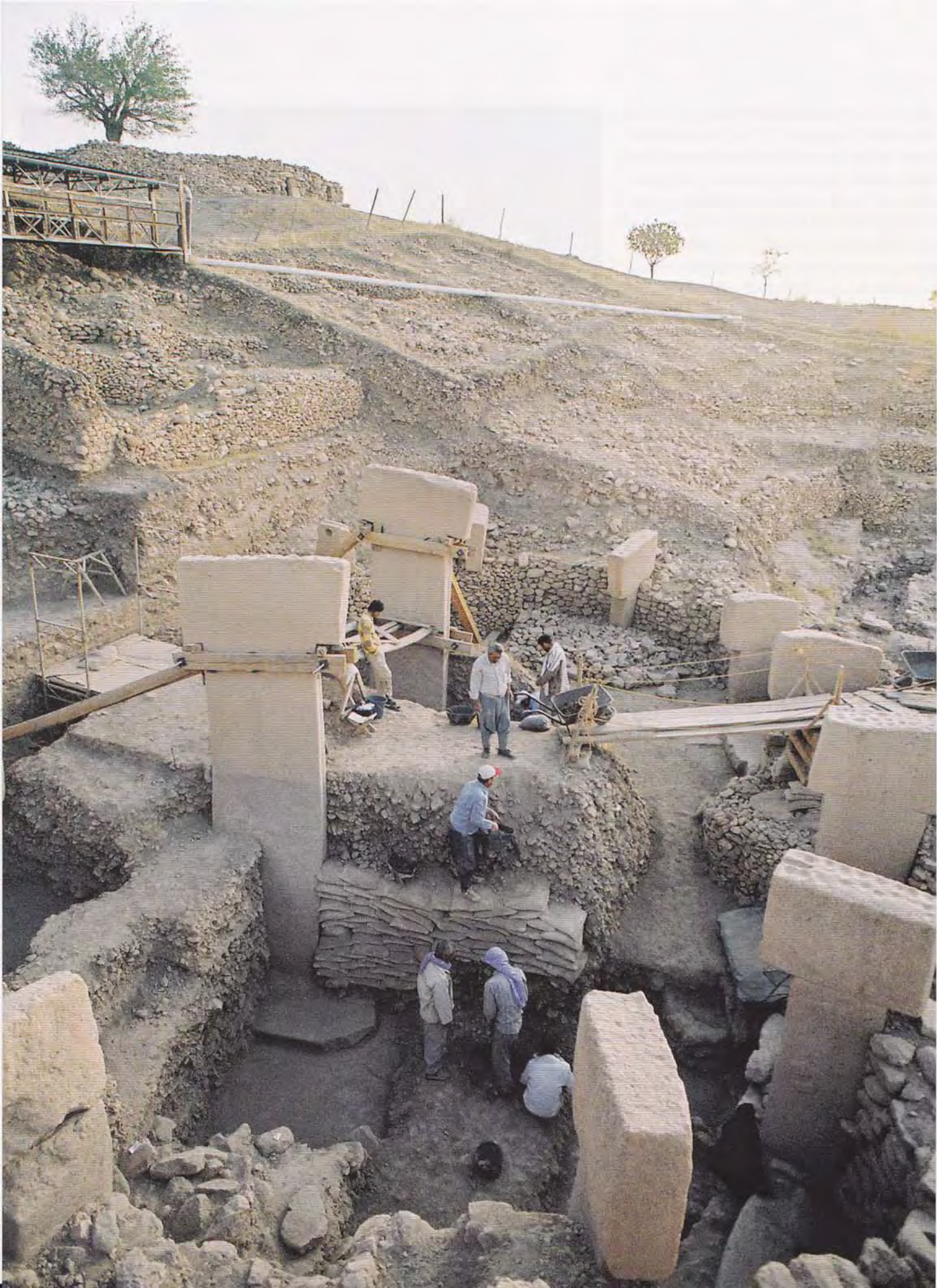
and was not visible originally due to the wall completely covering it. It has the remarkable length of 1.92 metres. The pole features three main motifs, one above another. The uppermost motif depicts a predator, probably a bear or a large felid. The frontal part of the head had been obliterated in antiquity; the surface of the break is covered with a thin limestone coating. Below the head, a short neck, arms and hands are visible. Their human-like shape is remarkable. Although we might postulate that this depicts a “Mischwesen” (a hybrid), such as the “Löwenmensch” (lion-man) from the Aurignacian site of Hohlestein Stadel in Southwest Germany, we still cannot eliminate the possibility that these features were intended to depict animal arms and legs and not human limbs. The arms (or legs) are holding another head, which again lost its face in antiquity. Significantly, the motif of a wild beast holding a human head is well-known from several sculptures from Nevalı Çori and Göbekli Tepe. For this reason it is very probable that the lost face of the head being held by the “Löwenmensch” (or bear / lion / leopard) was that of a human. This suggestion is further strengthened by the fact that human arms are depicted below the head. The hands are placed opposite one another and on the stomach of the individual. This is a manner which is clearly reminiscent of the T-shaped pillars. Below the arms and hands, a second person is visible. Fortunately, the face of this individual is completely preserved. Also depicted is the upper part of the body, including the arms and hands. Below the hands there is an unidentified object. It seems likely that the person is depicted giving birth, albeit that a very different explanation is also conceivable, e.g. the person could be presenting his phallus. Below the arms of the predator (or “Löwenmensch”) on both sides of the pole, large snakes are visible. Their large heads (one is partly damaged) are situated just above the



head of the small individual. Below the heads of the snakes, structures are visible which might be interpreted as the legs of the uppermost human. It seems obvious that such a piece made of stone must also have had parallels in wood which have failed to survive the millennia. However, it should be noted that fragments of a quite similar totem pole-like object made of limestone were already discovered some 20 years ago at Nevalı Çori.

Female image carved into a stone slab which is most likely representing a sexual scene.

In Enclosure D, depictions of foxes and snakes are most common, but in this structure there is a very wide range of figures, which include the motifs of boars, aurochs, gazelle, wild ass and others like a large carnivore, probably a felid. There are several birds depicted, like cranes, storks, ibises and ducks.



Yet another interesting recent find is a monumental portal stone discovered in 2009. It shows not only three sculptures of quadrupeds and a snake in high relief, but also has two openings unlike all specimens found earlier. Whether these portal stones functioned as entries to the enclosures, as a find in Enclosure B could suggest, remains unclear so far.

The interpretation of the rich findings from Göbekli Tepe is challenging, but the discoveries offer at least a glimpse at the events taking place there during the Neolithic. It seems clear by now that the backfilling of these enclosures after a certain period of use was intentional and already part of their concept from the start. It can be understood as a kind of burial at the end of a use-life of a sanctuary. The filling mainly consists of up to fist-sized limestone pieces mixed with flakes of silex, while tools are much more rare. A hint to the use and function of Göbekli Tepe are the numerous animal bones also present in the filling. They speak in favour of large feasts and the consumption of enormous amounts of meat. These feasts were most likely religiously motivated, but they also had a practical aspect. To construct the monumental buildings, people from a wider area had to be drawn together. Ethnographic data show us that this is best achieved through the prospect of a lavish feast, which may also have served as an occasion for several different groups to meet to arrange exchanges of goods and marriage partners as well. Again ethnography proves the social importance of such meetings for segmented societies. It seems obvious that repetitive feasts of the amplitude visible at Göbekli Tepe must have stressed the economic possibilities of hunter-gatherer groups. Maybe in response to this stress new food sources and processing techniques were explored. In this scenario, religious beliefs and practices may have been a key factor in the adoption of intensive cultivation and the transition to agriculture.

But who was gathering and celebrating there? Göbekli Tepe stands alone in its role as a sanctuary until now, but its material culture shows strong connections within Upper Mesopotamia, shedding light on a common background of beliefs, a ritual community of the

A large sculpture reminiscent of the totem poles of North American Natives which was revealed at Göbekli Tepe was the greatest surprise of the discoveries. Set into the north-eastern wall of a rectangular room, it was not visible originally due to the wall completely covering it. Pole features three main motifs, one above another. The human-like shape of the pole is remarkable.

PPN. T-shaped pillars were for the first time recorded at the settlement site of Nevalı Çori in the 1980s, a place now flooded by the Atatürk dam. There are three more sites with pillars resembling the smaller ones from Göbekli's layer II, but no excavations have been carried out so far at Sefer Tepe, Karahan or Hamzan Tepe. These places form an inner circle of sites belonging to one cultic community, although this community was not confined to them.

This is proven by a common set of symbols used over a wide area in Upper Mesopotamia, at sites like Jerf el Ahmar, Tell Qaramel, Körtik Tepe, Hallan Çemi, Çayönü, Tell 'Abr, Mureybet, Dja 'de, Nemrik and Qermez Dere, and with the exception of the cemetery of Körtik Tepe, all of them represent complex settlements with communal buildings. Shaft straighteners used for making arrows, plaquettes and stone bowls found at these sites are often decorated with animals and symbols similar to those found at Göbekli Tepe. Yet another connection is posed by zoomorphic sceptres of the so-called Nemrik type. These images offer a view on a symbolic world that was unimagined for such early times until recently, a system for storing cultural knowledge predating the invention of writing.

Pulling all these hints together, it becomes clear that Göbekli Tepe was a religious central place for a hunter-gatherer community with a highly developed and differentiated transcendental belief system. The early appearance of monumental religious architecture at Göbekli Tepe is also profoundly changing our image of one of the key moments in history, the emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry. "First came the temple, later the city" (and also the food-producing way of life) now seems to be an appropriate description of these processes ■

Workers in the excavation area
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