



Taş Tepeler: Anatolia's Land Of Great Transformation

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Taş Tepeler means “Stone Hills” and refers to an area covering some 200 kilometers (124 miles) in ancient Anatolia, now Turkey, in the vicinity of present day Şanlıurfa. The Turkish Tourist Board has started to refer to the entire area as the ‘Land of Great Transformation’. It is an apt title. As far as anyone knows, this is where our civilization began. About 12,000 years ago, this land was home to a people who were in transition from hunter-gatherers to settled communities. It was the *Neolithic* (New Stone) Age, the anthropological parameters of which are now in complete flux.



Archaeological excavations at Göbekli Tepe (Rolfcosar / CC BY-SA 3.0)

Discovering Göbekli Tepe

Up until 1994, when German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt discovered the site now called Göbekli Tepe, part of the *Taş Tepeler* complex, it was assumed that the geography and the order of events that preceded modern-day civilization were clear cut. First came the invention of agriculture, in areas such as Mesopotamia and Egypt. That led to the development of settled towns and villages, followed by the formation of organized religion. This was archaeological gospel according to all the history books. It formed the bedrock of what was taught in educational institutions from elementary schools through university graduate programs.

Then came Schmidt's discovery, and everything changed. Göbekli Tepe was first thought to be a temple. That implies organized religion. But it was built before the invention of agriculture. It obviously required a rather large and settled workforce. But it was built, unquestionably, some 12,000 years ago. So how could agriculture, long thought to be some 6,000 to 8,000 years old, have come first in line? The new order now seemed to say religion led to settled communities, which led to agriculture. That is exactly the reverse of what had been taught for generations. Needless to say, shock waves reverberated throughout the whole field of ancient studies.



Human depictions and 3D sculptures are seen after they were unearthed in Karahan Tepe. (Anadolu Agency)

Taş Tepeler Beyond Göbekli Tepe

For some time, it was fashionable to say that Göbekli Tepe was the first such project of its time, a unique, stand-alone series of connected structures that represented humankind's first venture in city, or at least temple, building. But in 1997, the discovery of Karahan Tepe, now being excavated by Necmi Karul, only 46 kilometers (28 miles) from Şanlıurfa, revealed a structure similar to Göbekli Tepe, but perhaps even older. What's more, unlike Göbekli Tepe, it appears to be both ceremonial and a settlement. Now there are 12 other sites in the vicinity that demand the attention of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Hence the name, *Taş Tepeler*, or "Stone Hills." They consist of Karahan Tepe, Harbetsuvan, Gürcütepe, Kurttepesi, Taşlıtepe, Sefertepe, Ayanlar, Yoğunburç, Sayburç, Çakmaktepe, Göbekli Tepe, and Yenimahalle. As far as anyone can guess at present, together they make up the very first example of settled life and social union that eventually formed what is now considered civilization. Here, 12,000 years ago, shelters become houses. Villages appeared. Human beings invented a specialized labor force. Beer was invented. And religion was born.

Archaeologists are busy unearthing the techniques required for building such complex structures. They are learning how the work proceeded. They have discovered when they were built. There is no end to speculation about what they were. They obviously know *where* the great transformation took place. But the big question still remains. *Why?*

Why Did They Settle At Stone Hills?

Why did hunter-gathers wake up one morning and decide to completely upend their way of life? How did they suddenly invent the methods needed to construct such massive, refined edifices, never before seen? What is the meaning of the highly sophisticated carvings of animals and intricately placed cosmological alignments? In short, what happened to completely transform the history of the entire human race? As of now, no one knows for sure. But that has not stopped people from speculating. There have been many theories advanced, sometimes very vociferously, by those competing for headlines.

*The Karahan Tepe dig site.
(Ancient Architects / YouTube
screenshot)*

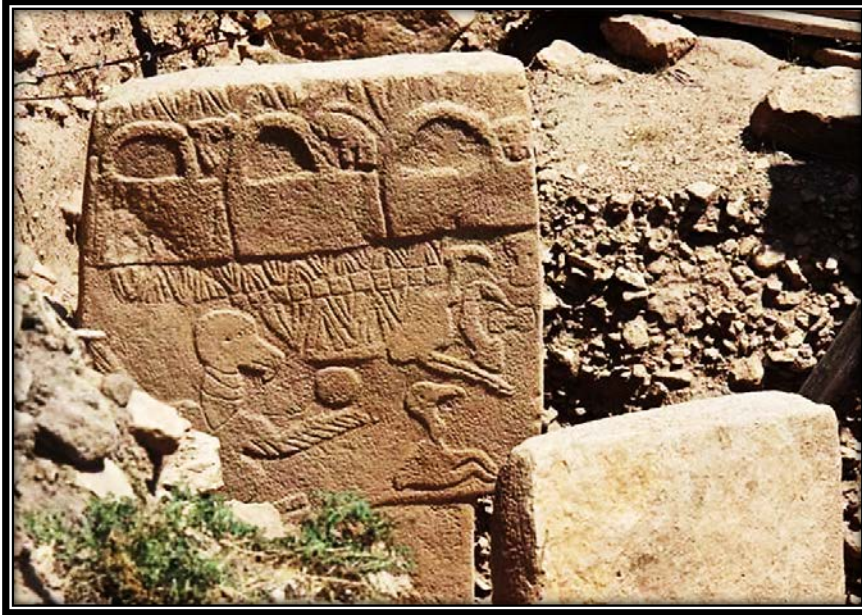


These days, anyone with access to the Internet or a television has probably seen pictures of the famous T-shaped pillars, the circular rooms and magnificent stone, bas-relief animals carved in minute detail at the edifice of Göbekli Tepe, and more recently Karahan Tepe. What has now seen the light of day, however, is estimated to be only about five per cent of what remains below the surface. Over the last decade or so, the story has been recorded, filmed, and told in just about every language on earth. Until a pandemic closed down much of world travel, the Turkish tourist industry flourished.

A Medieval Cemetery?

If one zooms in on the most famous example of the Stone Hills, the one that has been most thoroughly excavated, what is Göbekli Tepe, or “Potbelly Hill.” How was it used? What was its function? Here are just a few of the theories relating to the discovery.

When the site was first surveyed by a team of archaeologists from Istanbul, it was assumed to be nothing more than a cemetery, perhaps dating back to the Middle Ages. This idea had to be updated in 1994. Klaus Schmidt discovered T-shaped limestone pillars, bearing artistic carvings of lions, bulls, spiders, scorpions, snakes, gazelles, and various enigmatic figures. He also discovered stone tools and bones from both animals and humans. These were part of the evidence that revealed carbon dates from the late Paleolithic era, when the area was inhabited by hunter-gatherers. It soon became obvious that he was dealing with something far more significant than a simple cemetery.



Archaeologists have already found animal carvings at Karahan Tepe similar to the well-known Vulture Stone and others at Göbekli Tepe. (Sue Fleckney / CC BY-SA 2.0)

A First Temple

There is an old joke in archaeological circles that assumes any unrecognized, unknown, and

mysterious artifact must have been used for ‘ceremonial purposes’. Indeed, that seems to be the go-to, default position of so-called temples found around the world. But in this case, Göbekli Tepe seems to fit the bill. It was certainly the opinion held by Klaus Schmidt. *“This is the first human-built holy place,”* he once said. Its proximity to biblical sites, including the mythical Garden of Eden and Mount Ararat, places it firmly in religious tradition. Predating the pyramids by a good 6,000 years, it stands solidly in a spiritual tradition that spans three great world religions. Nearby Şanlıurfa, with its tales of the patriarch Abraham, lends a heavily accented voice to this belief. Although separated from those traditions by thousands of years, mysterious Göbekli Tepe nevertheless seems to stand on holy ground. The animals pictured in exquisite bas-relief seem to be religious icons. If Schmidt was right, this might very well be the first example of a long line of cathedrals built on a scenic, sacred hill.

The fact that Schmidt initially found no cooking hearths, no trash pits, and no signs of houses of any kind, seemed to confirm his analysis. But he did find indications of wild sheep, along with wild grains. The implications seemed to be that a temple of this sort brought people here, who then began the practice of agriculture.

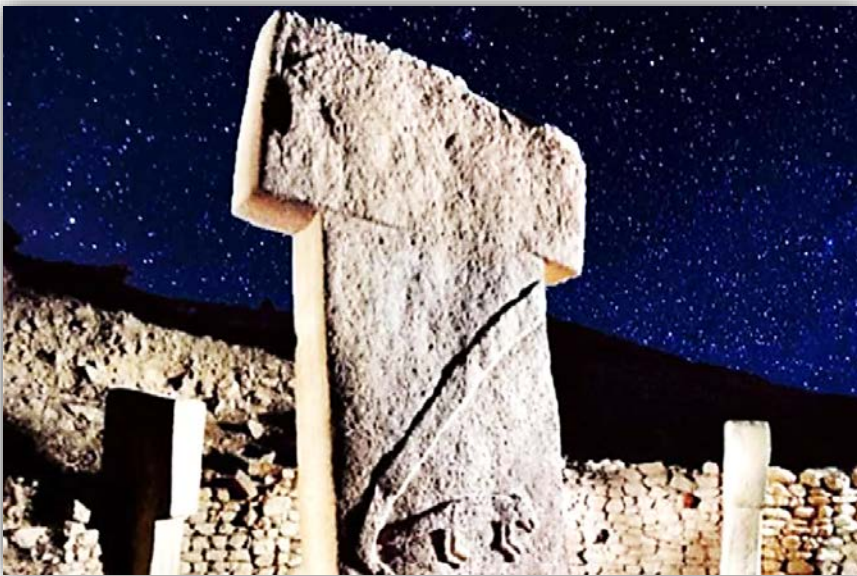


Çatalhöyük after the first excavations. (Omar hoftun/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

Religion, in other words, sparked the invention of agriculture, which then led to the birth of cities and, eventually, a settled civilization on the road to the complex societies of modern day. It does not seem probable that bands of subsistence hunter-gatherers could have developed the kind of social infrastructures needed to carry out this kind of advanced building without a powerful motivation.

Religion would have fit this requirement. In the words of Stanford University archaeologist Ian Hodder, who excavated Çatalhöyük, a prehistoric settlement 300 miles (482 kilometers) from Göbekli Tepe. *"You can make a good case this area is the real origin of complex Neolithic societies."*

Another initial clue was that Göbekli Tepe's builders seem to have deliberately buried the complex only a few generations after the original project was completed. Although some consider this to be simply an indication that new construction covered older building, a common practice in years to follow, it could just as well imply that the structure had somehow gone out of date, so to speak, or lost its original holiness.



*Pillar in Gobekli Tepe
(Deriv.) (sebnemsanders)
with a starry night sky.
(CCO)*

The World's First Observatory

As archaeological work on the project continued, it soon

became obvious that Göbekli Tepe demonstrates uncanny astronomical alignments. Some suggest it is aligned with the night sky, in particular the star Sirius. Local people revered that star system thousands of years later. Others see a connection based on the fact that Göbekli Tepe's initial construction coincides with a comet that hit the earth shortly before construction began, ending the Younger Dryas Ice Age. The temple could have been built as a tribute to this event – the sacred offering of a culture who experienced what seemed to be a sign from the gods. If this is the case, it would be a powerful religious symbol, built by those who intended to warn future generations that what happened before might happen again. Allusions to Atlantis, which Plato placed at this precise time in history, have been convincingly argued.

This theory suggests an answer to a nagging question: How did primitive hunter-gatherers in Anatolia suddenly develop the ability to undertake such a massive project? Perhaps they did not *invent* the techniques. Perhaps they *inherited* them from a previous advanced civilization that flourished before the Younger Dryas comet obliterated its existence. If this is true, Göbekli Tepe can be seen as either the *last* temple of that civilization's religion, or the *first* temple of a new civilization's *adoption* of that religion. When the new religion lost its power to influence generations long separated from their past, it was buried, either because the religion no longer "worked," or because it was to serve as a kind of time capsule for the future, when the Younger Dryas comet might return.

In 2017, evidence for this view was presented by a group of chemical engineers who claimed to connect the various animal effigies of Pillar 43 with the night sky that would have been visible almost 13,000 years ago. This date coincided



with ice core samples taken from the Greenland ice cap, which prove that a segmented comet indeed struck the earth with devastating results just before the building of Göbekli Tepe.



The theory is challenged by those who are presently working at the site. They claim that Göbekli Tepe was not always open to the skies. It was once roofed. That would eliminate any possibility of it serving as an observatory. The argument, now very heated, continues.

A Neolithic pole from Göbekli Tepe, with portions of humanoid figures. Layer II, 8800–8000 BC - Şanlıurfa (Urfa) Museum (Cobija / CC BY-SA 4.0)

A Gathering Site

If Göbekli Tepe was not primarily a temple or an observatory, might it have served as a seasonal gathering place, similar to Stonehenge, in England? It stands right at the northern apex of the Fertile Crescent, which stretches from Mesopotamia in the east to Egypt in the west. This is the wide swath of geography which has long been associated with the Agricultural Revolution – with farming and animal husbandry. Was Göbekli Tepe where people gathered, perhaps every season, to compare notes, trade ideas, find mates for new generations of young people, and integrate their developing cultures?

Although a few decades ago it did not seem as though a significant population lived here for any long periods of time, a small but powerful religious elite might have maintained the site, readying it every year for the pilgrims who could have journeyed to the meeting place.

While searching for evidence of this religious elite, archaeologists may have discovered, in the surrounding area, sites that were even older, but showed evidence of both ceremonial *and* settled functions. Hence, the newly discovered *Taş Tepeler*, the “Stone Hill” sites. In other words, Göbekli Tepe might only be understood when the other surrounding areas are sufficiently excavated. It might prove to be part of a whole, interlocking complex, demonstrating a highly evolved social significance.

*Puzzle of Ancient Anatolia,
Istanbul Archaeological
Museum (Image: Courtesy
Micki Pistorius)*



The Enigma Remains Unsolved

Thus, the questions continue: was Göbekli Tepe deliberately buried?

What was its function? How does it fit into the complex arena of the *Taş Tepeler*? What happened here, around 12,000 years ago. And why?

To date, there are simply no definitive answers to these questions. But consider just one aspect of the trajectory of the timeline now put forth: First a temple complex of some kind, beginning about 12,000 years ago, then the invention of agriculture, then, probably in conjunction with that process, settled communities. It sounds like a neat and clean progression of cause and effect.

But history develops that conveniently only in textbooks. The reality is that it is usually a lot messier than the books imply. It unfolds in fits and starts, with man. Take, for instance, the whole concept of the agricultural “revolution.” It seems fine to say that large numbers of construction workers needed a lot of food, so agriculture was “invented” to supply their needs. But anyone who has ever planted a garden knows it does not work like that. To develop and refine planting areas, to separate and nurture seed, and to discover what grows best in a particular area, takes generations, not months. Temperatures in this part of the world range from below freezing to upwards of a hundred degrees Fahrenheit (more than 37 degrees centigrade). Snow is usual in the winter. Droughts are common. And the weather may have been cooler and dryer, thus less conducive to agriculture 12,000 years ago. The Ice Age was just ending, after all.

All this is to say that what is commonly tossed off as the “invention” of agriculture might have consumed hundreds of years, at the very least. Meanwhile generations of workers needed food. How did they obtain it? Hunting and gathering works fine for small groups. But a sizable population can outstrip their resources in a matter of weeks or months. It must have been difficult and discouraging. What kept calling them back to the gigantic task they had begun?

The same kinds of arguments can be leveled at theories about religion. What kind of spiritual vision would have suddenly transformed hundreds, if not thousands, of isolated hunter-gatherers to coalesce in one spot in order to build a temple? And even if such a vision were experienced by a great many people over a very large area, what kind of conception of gods or a god would have prompted such an endeavor? A huge stone temple would be quite a foreign concept to people who would have surely envisioned a deity more suited to open plains and far-seeing vistas.

As for the theory that Göbekli Tepe is an observatory from which to view the heavens, there are easier ways to build site lines situated for such a purpose. And although there are many such site lines that have been proposed, there are many structures that lay completely outside such seemingly perfectly situated observation points.

Meanwhile, what about the other structures of the *Taş Tepeler* that have yet to be excavated? What secrets remain still hidden from sight? In short, the whole field of study in this area is in its infancy. Theories have, and will no doubt continue to be, proposed and argued for years. Perhaps the best course of action at this point is to simply stand in awe, and wonder. Something happened 12,000 years ago that changed the course of human history. That much is obvious. It is a great mystery. But such mysteries are what drive the whole field of archaeology. No one knows what will be unearthed when the next spade is plunged into the ground. Meanwhile, all one can do is wait.

Top Image: A human head in an ancient wall at the Karahan Tepe site in Turkey. Source: Ancient Architects / YouTube screenshot

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