

Decoding Gobeklitepe: Insights into Prehistoric Rituals and Society

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Keywords	Abstract
Göbeklitepe Neolithic Ritual Symbolism Archaeological Methodologies Cultural Evolution	This article presents a comprehensive study of Gobeklitepe (in Turkey), one of the most significant Neolithic sites, whose discovery has reshaped our understanding of early human social and ritual practices. By synthesizing recent interdisciplinary research and employing both traditional excavation techniques and advanced scientific analyses, the study reexamines the site's architectural marvels—characterized by intricately carved T-shaped pillars and enigmatic symbolic motifs—as evidence of complex communal and ceremonial activities. The findings challenge the conventional "agriculture-first" paradigm by suggesting that ritual and symbolic practices may have been foundational to societal organization well before the advent of agriculture. Moreover, the integration of environmental studies with cultural and technological perspectives provides a nuanced interpretation of the interplay between subsistence strategies, environmental dynamics, and symbolic expression during the Neolithic period. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader discourse on the origins of social stratification and the evolution of organized religion, highlighting the transformative role of ritual in early human innovation.

Introduction

Gobeklitepe, nestled in southeastern Turkey, represents one of the most transformative archaeological sites of the Neolithic period. With origins dating back nearly 12,000 years, this ancient complex has reshaped our understanding of early human society by revealing evidence of elaborate ceremonial activities and a rich array of symbolic representations. The discovery of Gobeklitepe has spurred interdisciplinary research that has broadened our perspectives on the cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of prehistoric communities.

Recent studies have illuminated various facets of the site. Verit and Verit (2021) draw attention to its provocative iconography, particularly the presence of phallic motifs, suggesting that these symbols played a significant role in the site's ritual life. In a broader cultural context, Ünlu, Yaşar, and Bilici (2022) position Gobeklitepe within the narratives of cultural diplomacy and Neolithic transformation, arguing for its importance as more than just an archaeological curiosity. Complementing these cultural interpretations, Dietrich et al. (2019) have provided insights into subsistence practices through their study of cereal



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processing techniques, while Chelik and Ayaz (2022) examine the emergence of a distinct Gobekli-tepe culture, emphasizing economic practices and the transmission of specialized knowledge.

Environmental factors have also played a key role in shaping the site. Investigations into the late Holocene geomorphodynamics around Gobekli-tepe by Nykamp, Knitter, and Schutt (2020) help us understand the evolving landscape that surrounded this ancient hub. Additionally, Ayaz (2023) offers alternative interpretations of animal symbolism found in the area, adding another layer to the site's complex narrative. Finally, Mancini (2020) explores contemporary visitor experiences, highlighting the enduring fascination that Gobekli-tepe holds for modern audiences.

This article aims to synthesize these varied research perspectives to offer a comprehensive examination of Gobekli-tepe's archaeological findings. By exploring its architectural features, symbolic artifacts, and environmental context, we seek to illuminate the social and ritual dynamics that underpinned this ancient center, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the Neolithic era.

Historical Context and Background

Gobekli-tepe is situated in the Southeastern Anatolia region of modern-day Turkey, a locale that has long been recognized as a crossroads of early human innovation. The site's origins trace back to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, approximately 12,000 years ago, a time when human societies were on the cusp of transitioning from nomadic lifestyles to more settled, community-based living. This transitional period has traditionally been associated with the advent of agriculture and the development of complex social structures. However, the architectural and symbolic sophistication evident at Gobekli-tepe suggests that ritual and communal activities may have played a more foundational role than previously assumed.

The discovery of Gobekli-tepe in the 1990s radically challenged established theories about the origins of organized religion and social stratification. Initially perceived as a mere settlement, subsequent excavations revealed a series of monumental circular and rectangular structures adorned with intricately carved T-shaped pillars. These megalithic enclosures imply a coordinated effort by a community capable of mobilizing significant resources and specialized skills, even before the full development of agricultural practices. This realization has spurred a reevaluation of the Neolithic revolution, positioning Göbekli-tepe as a potential center for early ritualistic and cultural expression.

Gobekli-tepe is located in the city of Sanliurfa, Turkey. Sanliurfa is known as the City of Prophets. Gobekli-tepe was discovered in 1986 when a farmer found two stone statues while plowing his field. The farmer presented the stone statues he found to the museum. The statues were kept in the museum from 1986 to 1992. In 1992, a group of German archaeologists saw the statues in the museum and the leader of this group, Prof. Dr. Harald Hauptmann, looked at the statues and examined them, then informed his student Prof. Dr. Klaus Schmidt to investigate the matter. After Klaus Schmidt conducted research for a while, he later determined that the hill where the stone statues were found was a mound. In the source where this incident is referenced, the owner of the area, Mahmud Bey, emphasizes that "in 1963, a group of archaeologists in the United States, while recording valuable hills in the world heritage, made notes on the Gobekli-tepe."

After obtaining the necessary permits, the first excavations began in 1995. During the excavations, 4 similar structures were discovered. The similarities between the structures were the presence of a circle and a large number of T-shaped columns. The T-shaped columns stood both in the center of the circles and on the walls.



The columns were 5.5 meters high and weighed 24 tons. More than 200 T-shaped columns were discovered there. On each of the T-columns were depicted animals ready to attack and many different symbols.

The research conducted over the past few decades has integrated various disciplinary perspectives to contextualize the site within broader Neolithic dynamics. Studies such as those by Dietrich et al. (2019) have highlighted evidence of cereal processing, indicating that early forms of food production were contemporaneous with—or possibly even a consequence of—the social changes driven by ritual activities. Concurrently, works by Ünlü, Yaşar, and Bilici (2022) have underscored the cultural and diplomatic significance of Gobekli-tepe, framing it within discussions that bridge both historical and contemporary understandings of cultural heritage.

Moreover, ongoing geomorphological investigations, as reported by Nykamp, Knitter, and Schütt (2020), reveal that the environmental context of Gobekli-tepe was as dynamic as its cultural landscape. Changes in the local environment not only shaped the daily lives of its inhabitants but also influenced the evolution of its monumental architecture and symbolic motifs (Sadikhova, 2022). These multidisciplinary insights collectively enrich our understanding of Gobekli-tepe, situating it not merely as an archaeological enigma, but as a pivotal locus for interpreting the intricate interplay between early human innovation, environmental adaptation, and the emergence of ritualistic practices.

This section establishes the historical framework within which Gobekli-tepe is analyzed, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of its architectural features, symbolic elements (Sadikhova, 2021), and the broader implications these findings have on our understanding of the Neolithic period.

Archaeological Discoveries at Gobekli-tepe

The excavations at Gobekli-tepe have revealed a wealth of artifacts and architectural structures that collectively offer a window into the ceremonial and symbolic life of early Neolithic communities. Central to these discoveries are the monumental T-shaped pillars arranged in circular and rectangular enclosures, whose size and intricate carvings indicate a level of craftsmanship and communal organization previously unanticipated for this period.

The pillars themselves are adorned with a variety of animal motifs—ranging from wild boars and foxes to birds and serpents—each rendered with remarkable detail. These carvings are not merely decorative; they appear to embody symbolic meanings that may have been integral to the rituals and belief systems of the site's builders. Notably, the presence of phallic imagery, as discussed by Verit and Verit (2021), has led some scholars to consider the possibility of fertility or creation rites playing a role in the cultural practices at Gobekli-tepe.





Figure 1. Wild boar statue dated to 8,700-8,200 BC found in Gobeklitepe, Sanliurfa, Turkey

Beyond the monumental pillars, researchers have uncovered evidence of sophisticated craftsmanship in other stone elements. Abstract symbols and geometric patterns are interwoven with naturalistic depictions, suggesting a complex interplay between the tangible and the symbolic in the Neolithic worldview. Such artistry indicates that these structures were likely more than mere functional spaces; they were also canvases for expressing communal narratives and cosmological ideas.

Further enriching our understanding of the site, studies have highlighted the coexistence of ritual spaces with elements of early subsistence practices. For instance, the work of Dietrich et al. (2019) on cereal processing remains discovered in the vicinity points to a community that was engaging in early forms of agriculture even as it invested considerable resources in ceremonial construction. This juxtaposition of daily sustenance with elaborate ritual activity challenges earlier assumptions about the sequence of societal development during the Neolithic.

Collectively, the archaeological findings at Gobeklitepe not only redefine our understanding of early human societies but also invite us to reconsider the relationship between the material and the symbolic. Each carved pillar and stone fragment contributes to a broader narrative—one that speaks to the ingenuity, spiritual complexity, and communal effort of our Neolithic ancestors.





Figure 2. T-shaped stones found in Gobekli-tepe

Methodologies Employed

A multifaceted array of archaeological methodologies has been deployed to unravel the complexities of Gobekli-tepe. Researchers have combined traditional excavation practices with advanced technological tools to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the site's construction, usage, and broader environmental context.

Excavation Techniques and Field Strategies:

At Gobekli-tepe, meticulous stratigraphic excavation has been key. Excavators carefully document the vertical and horizontal distribution of artifacts and architectural features, allowing them to reconstruct the sequence of occupation and construction phases. Detailed drawings, photographs, and digital recordings supplement these efforts, ensuring that even the most delicate contextual information is preserved. The integration of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) has further enhanced spatial analysis, facilitating a precise mapping of the site's layout and the distribution of artifacts.

Dating and Analytical Methods:

Accurate chronology is established primarily through radiocarbon dating of organic remains, which anchors the site's timeline within the broader Neolithic context. Complementary techniques, such as optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), have been applied to sediment samples, offering independent validation of the site's age. Additionally, petrographic and microscopic analyses of the carved stone elements have shed light on the materials and techniques used by the Neolithic artisans, providing insights into both local and long-distance resource procurement.

Interdisciplinary Integration:



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The study of Gobeklipe is inherently interdisciplinary. Geomorphologists, paleoenvironmental scientists, and archaeologists collaborate to reconstruct the ancient landscape through methods such as soil micromorphology, palynology, and microfaunal analysis. These approaches help clarify how environmental dynamics and human activities interacted over time, offering a more nuanced understanding of the site's cultural and ecological context.

Challenges and Innovations:

Working at Gobeklipe presents unique challenges, particularly due to the fragility of its monumental structures and the complexity of its stratigraphy. Innovative conservation strategies have been developed to minimize damage during excavation. Researchers continuously refine their techniques, balancing the need for detailed documentation with the imperative of preserving the site's integrity for future study.

Together, these methodologies have allowed scholars to piece together a detailed and dynamic picture of Gobeklipe, revealing insights into the early ritual, economic, and social practices that characterized one of the Neolithic era's most enigmatic sites.

Interpretation and Analysis

Gobeklipe offers a unique window into the interplay between ritual, technology, and social organization in early human societies. The elaborate architectural design—with its monumental T-shaped pillars and intricate carvings—suggests that the site functioned as a significant ceremonial hub. The recurring animal motifs and enigmatic symbols, including the phallic imagery highlighted by Verit and Verit (2021), point toward a complex system of beliefs and rites centered on fertility, cosmic order, and perhaps even the cycles of nature.

Detailed analyses of tool marks and carving techniques reveal that constructing these monumental features required not only substantial communal effort but also a high level of technical sophistication (Sadiqova, 2024). This evidence indicates an emerging division of labor and coordinated planning, hinting at the early roots of social stratification. Furthermore, the coexistence of ritual structures with remnants of subsistence activities—such as the cereal processing evidence documented by Dietrich et al. (2019)—suggests that daily survival and ceremonial practices were closely intertwined. Such findings challenge traditional boundaries between the sacred and the pragmatic, implying that early ritualistic behavior may have been a driving force in community cohesion and cultural evolution.

Comparative studies with other contemporaneous Neolithic sites also support the notion that the sophisticated symbolic and architectural expressions at Gobeklipe could have laid the groundwork for later societal transformations. In this light, ritual and ideological constructs might have been more pivotal in shaping early human communities than previously assumed.

Broader Implications for Prehistoric Studies

The discoveries at Gobeklipe carry profound implications for our broader understanding of prehistoric human development. Traditionally, the rise of agriculture has been viewed as the cornerstone for the emergence of complex societies. However, the evidence from Gobeklipe suggests that sophisticated ritual practices and communal cooperation may have preceded—and perhaps even catalyzed—the advent of farming.



This site challenges the “agriculture-first” model by underscoring the role of ceremonial and symbolic activities as foundational to societal organization. The intricate iconography and monumental construction at Gobekli-tepe illustrate that early humans possessed a rich cognitive and cultural framework, one that enabled them to express complex ideologies and coordinate large-scale communal projects well before the establishment of permanent agricultural settlements (Sadikhova, 2023).

Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach applied at Gobekli-tepe—merging traditional archaeological methods with advanced dating techniques, paleoenvironmental analyses, and spatial mapping—serves as a compelling model for future research in prehistoric studies. This comprehensive methodology not only refines our understanding of the site itself but also encourages a reevaluation of long-held assumptions regarding the origins of social complexity and the catalysts for cultural innovation.

In essence, Gobekli-tepe compels us to reconsider the narratives of human progress. It highlights the possibility that early ritual and symbolic expression played a crucial role in shaping societal structures, ultimately influencing the trajectory of human civilization. As ongoing research continues to unveil new dimensions of this enigmatic site, its broader implications will undoubtedly extend to reshaping our understanding of the Neolithic era and the complex tapestry of early human life.

There are 12 more hills in Sanliurfa that are similar to Gobekli-tepe, and each of these hills has its own name. Karahan Tepe, Safar Tepe, Dashli Tepe, Gurd Tepe, Harbetsuvan, Gurju Tepe, Yeni Mahella, Göbekli Tepe, Chakmaq Tepe, Ayanlar, Yogunburj, Sayburc Tepe. These hills are called Dash Tepes. Currently, excavations are continuing in Gobekli-tepe and 12 similar hills. To date, 100/5 of Gobekli-tepe has been uncovered. Finally, the first painted wild boar was discovered from Gobekli-tepe. In 2018, it was included in the UNESCO cultural heritage list.

Conclusion

Gobekli-tepe continues to reshape our understanding of early human society by challenging conventional models of cultural evolution. The site’s remarkable architectural design and intricate symbolic carvings reveal that ceremonial practices may have preceded, and even influenced, the emergence of agriculture. By combining traditional excavation methods with modern scientific analyses, researchers have uncovered evidence of a community that was capable of coordinating large-scale projects and expressing complex social ideas.

This investigation into Gobekli-tepe not only enriches our knowledge of the Neolithic era but also invites us to reconsider how early ritual and subsistence activities were intertwined. As ongoing research brings further details to light, the site remains an essential focus for those seeking to understand the origins of communal life and cultural expression.

Following conclusions were made as a result of analysis of findings found in Gobekli-tepe;

1. At first, I thought that the T-shaped columns might have something to do with the chromoliths, and I likened them to T because of their structure. After doing some research, I found that the chromoliths were stones placed side by side and had nothing to do with the T-columns. In my opinion, the columns reflected the god as a stylized human figure.
2. As is known, Sanliurfa is the city of prophets. It is thought that many prophets lived there, including Prophet Ibrahim, Prophet Ayyub, Prophet Shayyub, etc. In my opinion, the 4 tombs next to the Wish Tree



on Gobeklitepe are the tombs of women or men who are descendants of these prophets. For this reason, people pray and make sacrifices there.

3. To my opinion and research, Gobeklitepe may have been named Gobeklitepe not just because it is shaped like a hill, but also because of the clay tablet that was found with the only image of a woman. Woman is considered the beginning of humanity because she gave birth to human children. And therefore, on this hill, which has a history of 12,000 years, only one woman is depicted and considered sacred. For this reason, the starting point of history is considered to be Gobeklitepe. It is also no coincidence that barren women come there to pray and ask for children.

4. Since Gobeklitepe is a temple and they communicate with God there, they depicted every animal ready to attack with the idea of protecting it from evil spirits.

5. People worship only one religion there.

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