NO PREP

Gobekli Tepe

The Temple That Rewrote History

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Name: Period: Date:

Gobekli Tepe: The Temple That Rewrote History

A Hill with a Secret

In the 1960s, a survey team from the University of Chicago and Istanbul University visited a limestone ridge near the town of Sanliurfa in southeastern Turkey. They noted a hill covered with flint chips and the tops of carved limestone slabs poking through the surface. They wrote it up as a medieval cemetery and moved on. The carved stones, they assumed, must be gravestone markers. They were wrong by approximately eleven thousand years. When German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt visited the site in 1994, he recognized the limestone formations for what they were: not medieval gravestones, but the tops of T-shaped pillars, massive and deliberately carved, protruding from a hilltop that had been intentionally buried in antiquity. Schmidt began excavating the site, which he named Gobekli Tepe (Turkish for 'potbelly hill'), in 1995. What

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The World's Oldest Temple: Before Farming, Before Cities

Gobekli Tepe dates to approximately 9600 BCE, making it more than 6,000 years older than Stonehenge and more than 7,000 years older than the Egyptian pyramids. It is the oldest known large-scale stone monument complex in the world. Its builders were not farmers. They were hunter-gatherers: mobile groups of people who followed animal herds and gathered wild plants, with no permanent settlements and, as archaeologists had always assumed, no capacity for the organized collective labor required to build something like this. The site consists of multiple circular enclosures, each containing a pair of massive T-shaped limestone pillars at the center (some standing 5.5 meters tall and weighing up to 20 tons), surrounded by rings of smaller pillars. The surfaces of the pillars are carved with images of

animals: foxes, boars, cranes, aurochs (wild cattle), spiders, vultures, and abstract symbols. Some pillars appear to be stylized human figures, with arms carved in low relief along the sides and belts indicated around the 'waist' of the T-shape. These figures may have represented gods, ancestors, or spirits. Whatever they represented, they were clearly significant enough to justify an enormous investment of collective labor.

The Problem With Everything We Thought We Knew

For decades, the standard model of human prehistory went roughly like this: first, humans developed agriculture and settled into permanent communities. Then, freed from the constant effort of finding food, they had surplus time and resources that made possible larger-scale social organization, specialization, and eventually monumental architecture. Temples and cities, in other words, came after farming: they were products of it. Gobekli Tepe blew this model up. Here was monumental architecture (complex, coordinated, requiring sustained collective effort over centuries) built by people who had not yet developed agriculture. The site was in active use from approximately 9600 BCE to 8000 BCE, and the evidence suggests that thousands of people may have gathered there, requiring someone to feed them. Bones of wild animals found at the site, such as aurochs, gazelle, and red deer, suggest massive communal feasting on a scale that required organized hunting across a wide area. The provocative implication is that the causal relationship may have run in the opposite direction from what archaeologists assumed. Maybe agriculture did not make temples possible. Maybe temples, or whatever Gobekli Tepe was, made agriculture necessary. If large numbers of people regularly gathered at a ritual site, they would need a reliable local food supply. That pressure might have driven the early domestication of plants and animals in exactly the region where the world's first agriculture is known to have appeared. The site is in southeastern Turkey, at the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent, where wild wheat and barley grew in abundance.

What Gobekli Tepe Was — and Was Not

Schmidt was clear that Gobekli Tepe was not a settlement. No evidence of permanent habitation — no hearths embedded in floors, no middens (trash heaps) indicating long-term domestic occupation, no storage pits for grain — has been found at the site. It appears to have been visited periodically, perhaps seasonally, for

ritual purposes, and then intentionally buried around 8000 BCE. The deliberate burial preserved the pillars and their carvings extraordinarily well, but it also raises questions: why would people put enormous effort into building something, use it for hundreds of years, and then bury it? Only about 5% of the site has been excavated. Ground-penetrating radar surveys indicate that at least 20 additional enclosures remain underground. Klaus Schmidt died in 2014 before the full extent of the site could be understood. Work continues under the direction of the German Archaeological Institute, and Gobekli Tepe was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2018. What it ultimately means — how it changes our understanding of human cognitive and social development — is still being debated. The certainty is that it changed the conversation.

Key Information: Gobekli Tepe

Detail	Information
Location	Southeastern Turkey, near Sanliurfa
Date	c. 9600-8000 BCE (oldest layer); 11,000+ years old
Builders	Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (pre-agriculture)
Structure	Multiple circular enclosures with massive T-shaped limestone pillars
Largest Pillars	Up to 5.5 meters tall, weighing up to 20 tons each
Animal Carvings	Foxes, boars, cranes, vultures, aurochs, spiders, abstract symbols
Excavator	Klaus Schmidt (German Archaeological Institute), beginning 1995
Key Implication	Challenges the assumption that agriculture preceded monumental architecture

Case Study: The Day the Textbooks Were Wrong

Professor Andrea Marchetti had been teaching Introduction to Archaeology at a state university for seventeen years. The chapter on the Neolithic Revolution had always been one of her favorites to teach because the narrative was so clean: first farming, then settlements, then specialization, then monuments. Cause and effect, logical and satisfying. In 2008, a colleague sent her a copy of Klaus Schmidt's latest report on Gobekli Tepe. She read it over a Saturday morning, and then she read it again. By the afternoon she had gone back to check her textbook, just to make sure she hadn't been teaching something subtly wrong this whole time. She hadn't been teaching it wrong. The textbook said exactly what every textbook said. It just turned out that the textbooks might all be mistaken. 'This changes everything,' she wrote in the margin of her notes. Then she crossed it out, because it was not quite accurate. It didn't change everything — most of what the textbook said about the Neolithic Revolution was still probably broadly true. What it changed was the sequence. And in archaeology, sequence is almost everything. She rewrote the lecture from scratch over the weekend. Monday morning, she walked into class and said: 'I want to tell you about a site in Turkey that makes me think I've been teaching this unit slightly wrong for seventeen years. Let's figure out what it actually means together.'

1. Professor Marchetti writes that in archaeology, 'sequence is almost everything.' Based on the reading about Gobekli Tepe, explain why the sequence of agriculture versus monument-building matters so much for how we understand the development of human civilization.

2. Marchetti tells her students she may have been teaching the material 'slightly wrong' and invites them to figure out what the discovery means 'together.' What does this approach reveal about how scientific and historical knowledge actually works, compared to how textbooks often present it?

Multiple Choice

1. Gobekli Tepe fundamentally challenged the standard model of prehistory because it showed that:

    a) Hunter-gatherers built large-scale monumental architecture before farming existed

    b) Agriculture was practiced in Turkey thousands of years earlier than anywhere else

    c) Writing was developed independently in Turkey 11,000 years ago

    d) The first cities in the world appeared in Turkey rather than Mesopotamia

2. Why was Gobekli Tepe initially misidentified by the 1960s survey team?

    a) Political restrictions prevented proper excavation at the time

    b) The top of the stone pillars looked like medieval gravestone markers

    c) The site was covered entirely by water and thus could not be examined

    d) They did not have the technology to date the site accurately

3. The deliberate burial of Gobekli Tepe around 8000 BCE is significant because:

a) Burial was the standard Neolithic method for retiring a sacred site after a fixed period of ceremonial use

b) It proves the site was used as a cemetery for an entire hunter-gatherer society

c) It preserved the pillars and carvings, but raises questions about why people buried a site they had built

d) It shows that a catastrophic earthquake forced the inhabitants to abandon and cover the site

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Gobekli Tepe	A) A person who lives by moving seasonally to follow game and collect wild food rather than farming
2. ___ T-pillar	B) German archaeologist who recognized and began excavating Gobekli Tepe in 1994-1995
3. ___ Hunter-gatherer	C) A 11,000-year-old stone monument complex in Turkey, the oldest known of its kind in the world
4. ___ Neolithic Revolution	D) A massive carved limestone column with a distinctive T-shaped cross-section found at the site
5. ___ Klaus Schmidt	E) The period when humans began domesticating plants and animals and transitioning to settled life

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Gobekli Tepe dates to approximately _____ BCE, making it more than 6,000 years older than Stonehenge.

2. The builders of Gobekli Tepe were not farmers but _____, mobile people who lived by hunting animals and gathering wild plants.

3. Only about _____ percent of Gobekli Tepe has been excavated, with ground-penetrating radar indicating at least 20 additional enclosures remain underground.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain the 'provocative implication' that Gobekli Tepe raises about the relationship between temples and agriculture. Why would this represent such a significant shift in how archaeologists understand human prehistory?

_____

_____

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2. What does the fact that only 5% of Gobekli Tepe has been excavated tell us about the current state of archaeological knowledge, and what should we expect to learn as excavations continue?

_____

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3. The initial survey team in the 1960s misidentified Gobekli Tepe as a medieval cemetery. What does this mistake tell us about the importance of expertise, context, and open-mindedness in archaeological interpretation?

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