

THE FORGOTTEN WISDOM OF  
EARTH'S LOST CIVILIZATION

MAGICIANS  
OF THE  
GODS



GRAHAM  
HANCOCK

BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
*FINGERPRINTS OF THE GODS*

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GRAHAM HANCOCK



# Magicians of the Gods

The Forgotten Wisdom of Earth's  
Lost Civilization

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For Santha, my soul mate.

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And last but not least, thanks to my loyal and supportive readers all around the world who have stuck with me for more than twenty years as I've pursued my quest for the lost civilization. *Magicians of the Gods* is the latest destination on that journey and while it is a new work I have inevitably, at a few points, had to revisit ground that I first explored in *Fingerprints of the Gods* and in my other books in order to place the new evidence I present here in its proper context.

[Graham Hancock](#)

Bath, England, September 2015

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# Introduction

## *Sand*

A house raised on sand will always be in danger of collapse.

The evidence is mounting, though most of the later construction is of high quality, that the edifices of our past built by historians and archaeologists stands on defective and dangerously unsound foundations. An extinction-level cataclysm occurred on our planet between 12,800 and 11,600 years ago. This event was global in its consequences and it affected mankind profoundly. Because the scientific evidence that proves it happened has only emerged since 2007, and because its implications have not yet been taken into account at all by historians and archaeologists, we are obliged to contemplate the possibility that everything we have been taught about the origins of civilization could be wrong.

In particular it must be considered as a reasonable hypothesis that worldwide myths of a golden age brought to an end by flood and fire are true, and that an entire episode of the human story was rubbed out in those 1,200 cataclysmic years between 12,800 and 11,600 years ago—an episode not of unsophisticated hunter-gatherers but of advanced civilization.

Did that civilization, if it existed at all, leave any traces that we might still be able to identify today, despite the passage of so much time? And, if so, does its loss have any real significance for us?

This book is an attempt to answer those questions.

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Part I  
*Anomalies*



Figure 1: Location of Gobekli Tepe and its regional setting

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## Chapter 1

### *“There is so much mystery here...”*

Göbekli Tepe is the oldest work of monumental architecture so far found anywhere in the world, or any rate the oldest accepted as such by archaeologists.

And it's *massive*.

Awesome, magnificent, numinous and overpowering are among the adjectives that dismally fail to do it justice. For the last couple of hours I've been wandering round the site with its excavator Professor Klaus Schmidt, and my mind is frankly boggled.

“How does it feel,” I ask him, “to be the man who discovered the temple that's rewriting history?”

A rubicund German archaeologist with a barrel chest and a grizzled beard, Schmidt is wearing faded jeans, a blue denim shirt with a streak of mud on the sleeve, and scuffed sandals on his bare, dirty feet. It's September 2013, three months before his sixtieth birthday and although neither of us know it yet, he'll be dead in less than a year.

As he ponders my question he wipes a bead of sweat from the glistening dome of his forehead. It is not yet mid-morning but the sun is high here in Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia region, the sky is cloudless and the ridge of the Taurus mountains on which we stand is baking hot. There's no breeze, not even a hint or a breath of air, nor is there any shade to be had. In 2014 a roof will be erected to cover and protect the site but in 2013 only its foundations are in place so we're standing exposed on a makeshift wooden walkway. Down below us in a series of semi-subterranean, more or less circular walled enclosures are the dozens of giant T-shaped megalithic pillars that Schmidt and his team from the German Archaeological Institute have brought to light here. Before they began their work the place had the appearance of a rounded hill—in fact “Göbekli Tepe” means “Hill of the Navel” sometimes also translated as “Potbelly Hill”<sup>2</sup>—but the excavations have removed most of the original profile.

“Of course we cannot say that Göbekli Tepe is a temple exactly,” Schmidt answers eventually, obviously choosing his words with care. “Let us call it a hill sanctuary. And I do not claim that it's rewriting history. Rather I would say that it is adding an important chapter to existing history. We thought that the transition from hunter-gatherers to farmers was a slow, step-by-step process, but now we realize that it was a period when exciting monuments that we didn't expect were made.”<sup>3</sup>

“And not just monuments,” I prompt. “At the beginning the local people were hunter-gatherers and there was no sign of agriculture.”

“No,” Schmidt concedes, “none.” He gestures expansively at the circles of pillars. “But the people who came to Göbekli Tepe, and who did all this work, *invented* agriculture! So we see a connection between what happened here and the later emergence of Neolithic societies dependent on farming.”

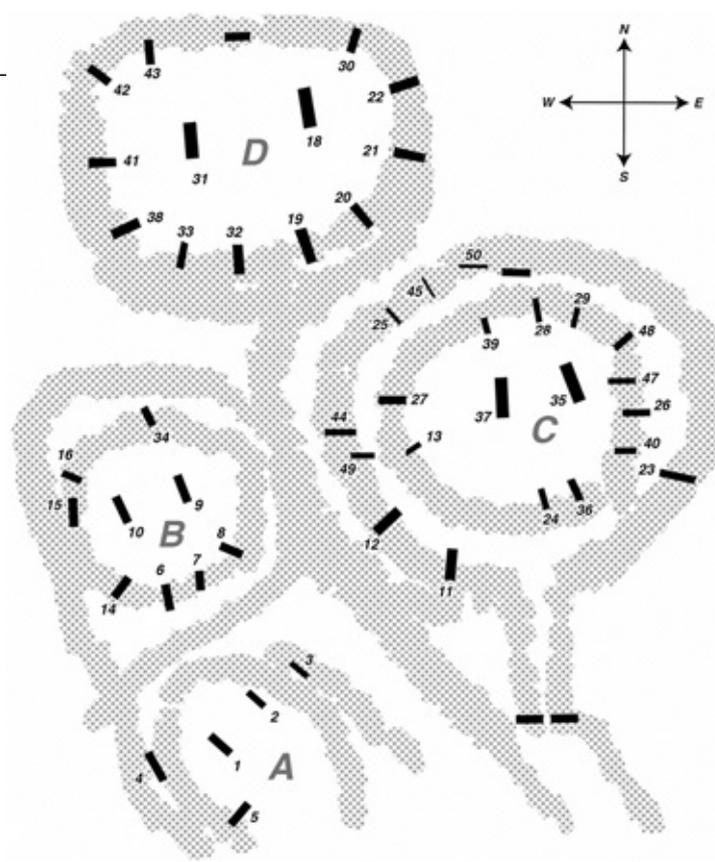


Figure 2: The central group of excavated enclosures—A, B, C and D—at Göbekli Tepe. All the pillars have been numbered, for ease of reference, by the German Archaeological Institute.

My ears prick up at that word “invented.” I want to be sure I’m getting this right. “So,” I emphasize, “you go so far as to say that the people who made Göbekli Tepe actually *invented* agriculture?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Could you elaborate on that?”

“Because in this region we have the early domesticates, both animals and plants. It’s done in the same region. So they are the same people.”

“And as far as you are concerned this is the first—the oldest—agriculture in the world?”

“The first in the world. Yes.”

I sense that Schmidt is becoming impatient at the way I’m probing this point, but I have my reasons. The areas of Göbekli Tepe that have been excavated so far are close to 12,000 years old which makes them (according to orthodox chronology) more than 6,000 years older than any other megalithic sites anywhere—sites like Gigantija and Mnajdra in Malta, Stonehenge and Avebury in England, or the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Yet those sites all belong to that phase of the evolution of human civilization that archaeologists call the “Neolithic” (the “New Stone Age”) when agriculture and the organization of society along structured, hierarchical lines were already well advanced, permitting the emergence of skilled specialists who had no need to produce their own food because they could be supported from the surpluses generated by farmers. Göbekli Tepe, by contrast, belongs to the very end of the “Upper Paleolithic,” the late “Old Stone Age” when our ancestors are supposed to have been nomadic hunter-gatherers living in small, mobile bands and incapable of tasks requiring long-term planning, complex division of labor and high-level management skills.

Schmidt and I are standing at a point on the walkway that overlooks both Enclosure C and Enclosure D, where I’ve learned from my background research of an intriguing image carved on one

of the pillars. I intend to ask the archaeologist's permission to climb down into Enclosure D so that I can take a closer look at this image, but I want to get his views about the origins of agriculture, and its relationship to the megalithic architecture, completely clear first. Enclosure C, the largest of the four main pits so far excavated, is dominated by two huge central pillars, both of which are broken. In their original state they would each have been more than 6 meters (20 feet) high and weighed around 2 tons. Inset into the wall around them stand a dozen other pillars. They're slightly smaller but still prodigious. The same goes for Enclosure D—again a ring of smaller pillars surrounding two towering central pillars, in this case both intact. Their T-shaped tops, angled slightly down to the front, have no facial features but are nonetheless eerily reminiscent of giant human heads—an impression that is reinforced by the faint outlines of arms, crooked at the elbow, running down the flanks of the pillars and terminating in carefully carved human hands with long fingers.

“All this,” I say, “the megaliths, the iconography, the general conception and layout of the site . . . to be honest it looks to be as big a project as a place like Stonehenge in England, yet Stonehenge is much younger. So how does what you've found at Göbekli Tepe fit in with your notion of a hunter-gatherer society?”

“It's much more organized than we expected,” Schmidt allows. “What we can see here are hunter-gatherers who obviously had a division of labor because the work on the megaliths is specialist work, not for everybody. They were also able to transport these heavy stones and erect them, which means they must have had some engineering know-how, and again we didn't expect that for hunter-gatherers. It's the first architecture really, and it's architecture on a monumental scale.”

“So if I understand you correctly, Professor Schmidt, you are saying that we are standing at the place where both monumental architecture and agriculture were invented.”

“Yes, that's right.”

“And yet you don't see anything really revolutionary in this? You see it as a process which you can fit comfortably into the existing frame of history?”

“Yes. Into existing history. But this process is much more exciting than we expected. Especially since what we have here at Göbekli Tepe belongs more to the world of the hunter-gatherers than to the farming societies. It's toward the end of the hunter-gatherers but not yet the beginning of the Neolithic.”

“It's a time of transition then. A cusp moment. And maybe more than that? What I'm getting from our conversation, and from what you've showed me of the site this morning, is the notion that Göbekli Tepe was a kind of prehistoric think-tank or a center of innovation, perhaps under the control of some sort of resident elite. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, yes. It was a place where people came together. People were gathering here and it was undoubtedly a platform for the distribution of knowledge and innovation.”

“Including knowledge of large-scale stone working and knowledge of agriculture. Would you dare to describe those who controlled the site and disseminated these ideas as a sort of priesthood?”

“Whoever they were, they certainly were not practicing simple shamanism. They were a bit more like an institution. So, yes, they were on the road to becoming a priesthood.”

“And since Göbekli Tepe was in unbroken use for well over a thousand years, would this be one continuous culture with its own institutions, with the same ideas and the same 'priesthood' which continued to manage the site throughout that whole period?”

“Yes. But the strange thing is that there was a clear collapse in the effort that was made as the centuries went by. The truly monumental structures are in the older layers; in the younger layers they get smaller and there is a significant decline in quality.”

“So the oldest is the best?”

“Yes, the oldest is the best.”

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“And you don’t find that puzzling?”

Klaus Schmidt looks almost apologetic. “Well, we hope that eventually we will discover even older layers and that there we will see the small beginnings that we expect but haven’t yet found. Then we will have this monumental phase, and later a decline again.”

It occurs to me that “hope” is the operative word in what Professor Schmidt has just said. We are accustomed to things starting out small and simple and then progressing—*evolving*—to become ever more complex and sophisticated, so this is naturally what we expect to find on archaeological sites. It upsets our carefully structured ideas of how civilizations should behave, how they should mature and develop, when we are confronted by a case like Göbekli Tepe that starts out perfect at the beginning and then slowly *devolves* until it is just a pale shadow of its former self.

Nor is it so much the process of devolution that we object to. We know that civilizations can decay. Just look at the Roman Empire, or the British Empire for that matter.

No, the problem at Göbekli Tepe is the pristine, sudden appearance, like Athena springing full-grown and fully armed from the brow of Zeus, of what appears to be an already seasoned civilization so accomplished that it “invents” both agriculture *and* monumental architecture at the apparent moment of its birth.

Archaeology can no more explain that than it can explain why the earliest monuments, art, sculptures, hieroglyphs, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and architecture of Ancient Egypt are perfect at the beginning without any traces of evolution from simple to sophisticated. And we might well ask of Göbekli Tepe, as my friend John Anthony West asks of Ancient Egypt:

How does a complex civilization spring full-blown into being. Look at a 1905 automobile and compare it to a modern one. There is no mistaking the process of “development.” But in Egypt there are no parallels. Everything is right there at the start.

The answer to the mystery is of course obvious but, because it is repellent to the prevailing cast of modern thinking, it is seldom considered. Egyptian civilization was not a “development,” it was a legacy.<sup>4</sup>

Could this be the case, also, at Göbekli Tepe?

Klaus Schmidt has no time for ideas of a lost civilization that was the progenitor of all later known civilizations, so when I press him he reiterates his point that most of Göbekli Tepe remains unexcavated. “As I said,” he growls, somewhat testily, “I expect when we get to the earlier levels we will find evidence of evolution.”

He could be right. One of the stunning things about Göbekli Tepe, which had already been the subject of *eighteen years* of continuous excavation when Klaus Schmidt showed me round the site in 2013, is that so much of it still remains under the ground.

But how much?

“It’s hard to say,” Schmidt tells me. “We’ve done a geophysical survey—ground-penetrating radar—and from this we can see that at least sixteen further large enclosures remain to be excavated.”

“Large enclosures?” I ask. I point at the towering megaliths of Enclosure D. “Like this one?”

“Yes, like this one. And sixteen is the minimum. In some areas our geophysical mapping did not give us complete results and we cannot really see inside, but we expect there are many more than sixteen. Maybe in reality it will turn out to be double that number. Maybe even as many as fifty.”

“Fifty!”

“Yes—~~fifty of the big enclosures, each enclosure with fourteen or more pillars. But, you know, it~~ not our target to excavate everything. Just a little part, because excavation is destruction. We want to keep most of the site untouched.”

It dilates the imagination to reflect on the scale of the enterprise undertaken at Göbekli Tepe by the ancients. Not only are the circles of megalithic pillars already excavated here at least 6,000 years *older* than any other known megalithic sites anywhere in the world, but also, I now realize, Göbekli Tepe is *huge*—occupying an area that might eventually prove to be as much as thirty times larger than the fullest extent of a big site like Stonehenge, for example.

We are confronted, in other words, by vast, inexplicable antiquity, immense scale, and unknown purpose—and all of it seeming to unfold out of nowhere, with no obvious background or preparation shrouded utterly in mystery.

## Enclosures of the giants

I’m used to archaeologists making the sign of the evil eye and turning their backs on me when I show up at their excavations. But Professor Schmidt is refreshingly different. Although he knows very well who I am, he permits me and my wife, the photographer Santha Faiia, to climb down into Enclosure D and explore it. All four of the main enclosures so far excavated at Göbekli Tepe are strictly off limits to the public and under the eye of watchful guards, but there’s an image on one of the pillars in Enclosure D that I need to take a much closer look at than the walkway affords—indeed I can’t even see it from the walkway—so Schmidt’s generosity of spirit is welcome.

We enter the enclosure along a plank which leads to an as yet unexcavated two-meter-high partition of rubble and earth separating the two main central pillars, one to the east and the other to the west. Quarried from the very hard crystalline limestone of the region, and polished to a flawlessly smooth finish, these colossal pillars glow mellow gold in the sun. I know from Professor Schmidt that they are about 5.5 meters (18 feet) tall and that each of them weighs more than 15 tons.<sup>5</sup> Scrambling down onto the floor of the enclosure I note that they stand on stone plinths each about 20 centimeters (8 inches) high that have been carved directly out of the living bedrock. In a row along the front edge of the plinth under the eastern pillar, squatting back on their tails with no wings evident, seven seeming flightless birds have been sculpted in high relief.

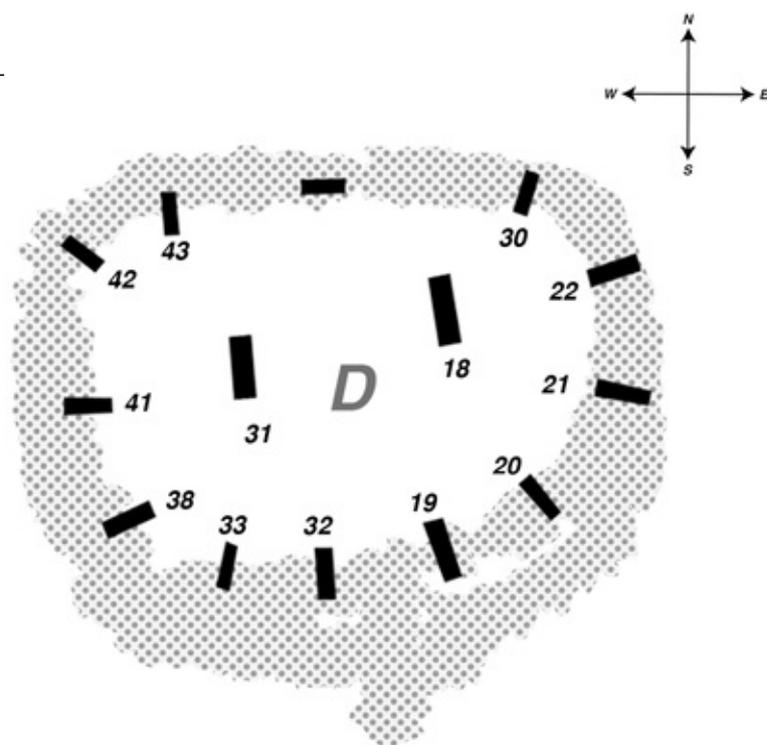


Figure 3: Layout of the pillars in Enclosure D at Gobekli Tepe. Pillar 43 is of the greatest interest.

With their stylized anthropomorphic appearance enhanced by their angled T-shaped “heads” the central pillars loom over me like twin giants. Though they are not my primary target, I seize the opportunity to examine them closely.

Their front edges, representing their chests and bellies, are quite slim—only about twenty centimeters wide—while their flanks measure a bit over a meter (about 4 feet) from front to back. Both figures, as I’d noticed from the walkway, have arms carved in low relief at their sides, crooked at the elbows and terminating in hands with long, thin fingers. These fingers wrap round the fronts of the pillars, almost meeting over their “bellies.”

Above the hands, covering their “chests” are hints of an open-fronted garment. Just below the hands, both figures also wear a broad belt—again carved in low relief—decorated with a distinctive buckle. In both cases what appears to be part of an animal skin—thought by Schmidt to represent the hind legs and tail of a fox pelt<sup>6</sup>—is shown hanging suspended from the buckle so that it covers the genital region.

Both figures also wear necklaces. In the case of the eastern figure the necklace is decorated with a crescent and disc motif and in the case of the western figure with a bull’s head.

In addition both pillars stand on their pedestals in exactly the same peculiar way—not securely fixed but resting precariously in slots just 10 centimeters (4 inches) deep. Klaus Schmidt and his team have stabilized them with wooden props and I can only imagine that they must also have been held upright in a similar way in antiquity—unless, perhaps, there was a frame over the enclosure in which the heads of the figures were somehow fixed. Since the builders of Göbekli Tepe were clearly masters of fashioning, moving and positioning large megaliths, it is mysterious that they chose not to cut deeper slots in which the pillars could have been securely mounted. There must have been some purpose to this, but I cannot fathom it.

So much for the similarities between the two central pillars, but there are also differences. For example, the eastern figure has an almost life-sized depiction of a fox carved in high relief on its right flank so that it appears to be leaping forward from the crook of its elbow. And whereas the belt of the

western pillar is undecorated other than by its buckle, the belt of the eastern pillar bears a number of intriguing adornments including a series of glyphs like the Roman letter “C” and others like the Roman letter “H.” As I study them I reflect that we cannot possibly know what these symbols mean to the people of Göbekli Tepe, from whom we are separated by a vast span of more than eleven thousand years. It is far-fetched to imagine that they had any kind of writing—let alone writing in the alphabet we use today! Nonetheless there is something strangely modern and purposive about the way these pictograms are used and displayed and it seems to me that they are more than merely decorative. Nothing else like them exists anywhere in the world of Upper Palaeolithic art, and the same is true of the animal and bird figures. At this early period, such a combination of megaliths and sophisticated sculptures is utterly unique and unprecedented.

I move on to examine the dozen pillars disposed around the edges of the Enclosure D, which form more of an ellipse than a strict circle, measuring approximately 20 meters (65 feet) from west to east and just over 14 meters (46 feet) from north to south. The surrounding pillars are generally about half the height of the central pair and for the most part are not free-standing but rather are embedded in the enclosure wall. Most, though not all, are T-shaped and most are richly decorated with images of birds, insects and animals as though the cargo of Noah’s Ark has been turned to stone: foxes, gazelle, wild boars, numerous species of birds including several cranes with serpents at their feet, many more serpents both individually and in groups, a spider, a wild ass, wild cattle, a lion with its tail curving forward over its spine—and many more.

Making the most of our *laissez-passer*, I take my time but eventually, on the northwestern side of the enclosure I come to the pillar I particularly want to see. For ease of reference Schmidt and his colleagues have numbered all the pillars at Göbekli Tepe and this is “Pillar No. 43.” I know from my prior research that it has a large depiction of a scorpion carved in relief on its base; some have suggested it might be an image of the zodiacal constellation that we call Scorpio today.<sup>7</sup> However, to my great disappointment the figure is no longer visible. The archaeologists have covered it with rubble—to protect it from damage, Schmidt claims. I tell him of my interest in a possible astronomical connection but he scoffs at this—“There are no astronomical figures here; the zodiacal constellations were not recognized until Babylonian times, nine thousand years after Göbekli Tepe”—and he refuses point-blank to allow me to clear the heaped-up rubble away.

I’m about to get into an argument with him—there is in fact excellent evidence that the zodiac was codified long before Göbekli Tepe<sup>8</sup>—when I notice a group of other figures higher up the same pillar that have not been covered with rubble. These include a prominent depiction of a vulture with its wings outstretched in the manner of a human arm and with a solid disc poised over that arm-like wing, though being upheld or cradled by it. Another human characteristic of the vulture, quite dissimilar to any examples of this bird that I have ever seen in nature, is that it is portrayed with its “knees” bent forward and with strangely elongated flat feet—a bit like some of the cartoon representations of the “Penguin” character in the old Batman comics. It is, in other words, a therianthrope (from the Greek *therion*, meaning wild beast, and *anthropos*, meaning man), a hybrid creature—part human and part vulture.<sup>9</sup>

Above it are more of the H-shaped pictograms arranged in a row between a series of upright and inverted “V” shapes. Again there is a sense of some message, some communication here, that is impossible to interpret. Finally, at the top of the pillar, are depictions of what appear to be three large handbags—rectangular containers, at any rate, with curved handles. Separating them, positioned over the front of the handles in each case, are three figures—at the left a bird with long, human-like legs,

that mark it out almost certainly as another therianthrope, a quadruped with its tail arched forward over its body, and a salamander.

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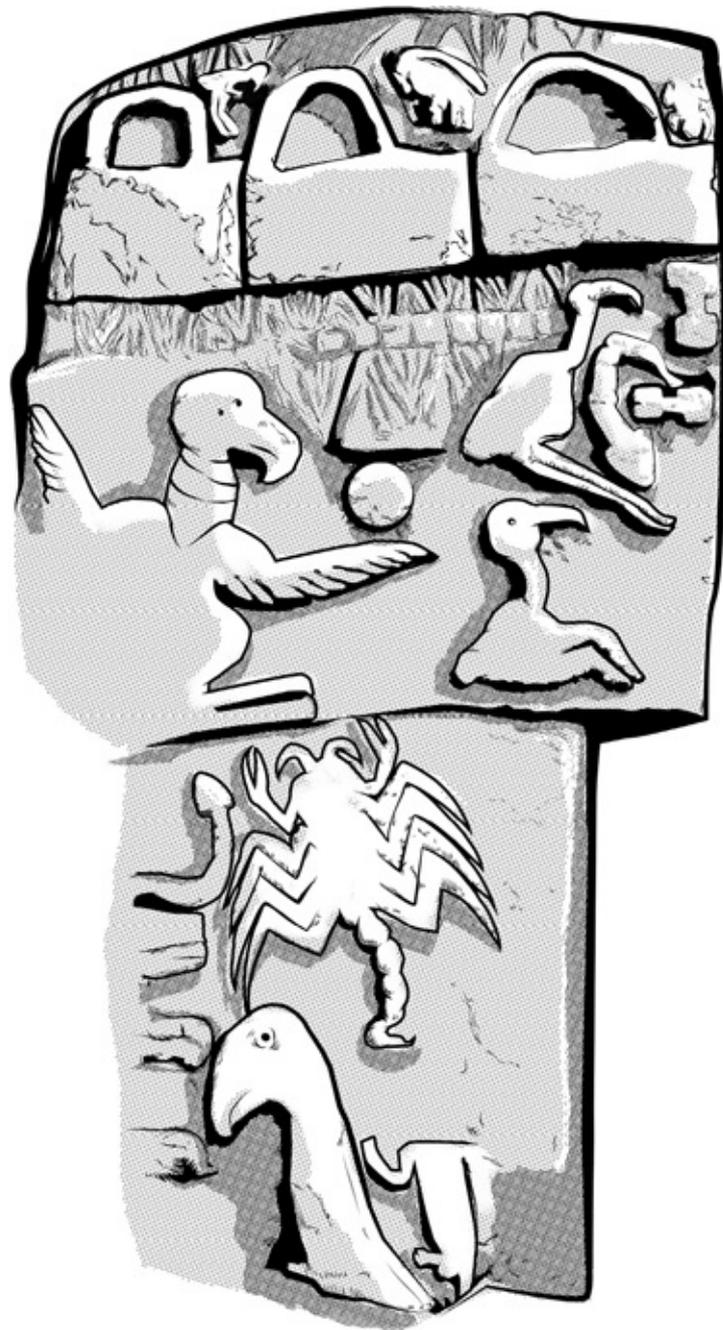


Figure 4: Pillar 43 in Enclosure D. The lower part of the pillar was covered by rubble at the time of my visit, but has been reconstructed here from earlier photographs (see Plate 7).

There is something hauntingly familiar about the whole ensemble, and I feel certain that I have seen it—or something very like it—somewhere before. The only problem is I can't remember where or what! I ask Santha to take detailed photographs of the pillar and when she is done Schmidt suggests that we accompany him to a different part of the site a few hundred meters to the northwest on the other side of the ridge where he and his team have an active excavation underway. It's just one of the dozens of buried enclosures with large pillars that they have identified with ground-penetrating radar and the first of these that they are investigating.

## Paradigms

As we walk I ask the Professor how and when he became involved with Göbekli Tepe. Ironically, given his firm views on the evolution of architecture, it turns out that he got his big break because other archaeologists also had firm views on the same subject! In 1964 a joint team from the University of Chicago and the University of Istanbul visited the area with a specific brief to search out and discover Stone Age sites. However when they saw the top of a large T-shaped pillar sticking out of the ground, and the remains of other broken limestone pillars that had been plowed up by local farmers lying nearby, they dismissed Göbekli Tepe as irrelevant to their interests and moved on elsewhere.

The reason?

The American and Turkish team had judged the workmanship on the pillars to be too fine—to advanced, too sophisticated—to have been produced by Stone Age hunter-gatherers. In their opinion, despite the presence of worked flints lying alongside the limestone fragments, Göbekli Tepe was nothing more than an abandoned medieval cemetery and therefore of no prehistoric interest whatsoever.

Their loss was to be Schmidt's gain. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s he had been involved in another project in Turkey—the excavation of an early Neolithic site called Nevali Cori which was soon to be flooded by the waters of the Ataturk Dam. There he and a team of archaeologists from the University of Heidelberg discovered, and rescued from the advancing floodwaters, a number of finely-worked T-shaped limestone pillars that were conclusively dated to between 8,000 and 9,000 years of age. Some had arms and hands carved in relief along their sides. “Soon we recognized that this region had something about it that was different from other sites known from this period. Nevali Cori was our first hint of the existence of large-scale limestone sculptures during the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to early village farming communities.”

A little later, in 1994, Schmidt came across the report of the Turkish-American survey done thirty years earlier and stumbled upon a single paragraph that mentioned the presence of worked flint alongside fragments of limestone pillars lying on the surface at Göbekli Tepe. “I was a young archaeologist,” he explains, “I was looking for my own project, and I immediately realized that there could be something of significance here, perhaps even another site as important as Nevali Cori.”

“Which your predecessors had missed, because flints and architectural pillars are not normally associated in the minds of archaeologists?”

I'm hoping he'll get my hint that he, too, might be missing something at Göbekli Tepe because of the established paradigm, but he seems oblivious and replies, “Yes, exactly.”

I glance ahead. For the past few moments, as we've been walking and talking, we've approached a scene of intense activity. I hadn't been aware of it from the four main enclosures because it had been concealed from us by the summit of the ridge, but now we've hiked north over the ridge line and are making our way down the other side into the new excavation, nominated as Enclosure H, that Schmidt has opened at Göbekli Tepe.<sup>10</sup> Here five or six German archaeologists are busily at work, some scraping away layers of soil with trowels or pouring buckets of earth and stones through sieves, others directing the efforts of a team of thirty Turkish laborers. The focus is on a large rectangular cavity. Perhaps half the size of a football pitch, it's internally subdivided by knee-high walls of earth into a dozen or so smaller segments. From the floor of these, at several points, hulking limestone pillars protrude. Most are T-shaped but my eye is drawn to one that has a smooth curved top, marred only by a small broken segment, and upon which is carved a particularly fine figure of a male lion. Like the lions in Enclosure D, its long tail sweeps forward over its spine but the workmanship of this piece is of a higher order than anything I've seen so far today.

“That's a very substantial pillar,” I say to Schmidt. “Can we take a look at it?”

He agrees and we pick our way through the excavations until we're just a couple of meters from the lion pillar. It's leaning at an angle against a remnant of the rubble of cobble-sized stones and earth that had clearly filled the entire enclosure before the archaeologists began work here. Right at the edge of this segment of the dig, the head of another pillar can be seen, while in the middle of the segment a deeper trench has been cut—to expose what I guess is the top third of the lion pillar—and this trench, too, is lined by the same rubble of cobbles and earth.

I ask Schmidt about the rubble. “All those cobbles,” I say. “How did they get there? They don't look like the result of natural sedimentation.”

“They're not,” he replies. He's looking, I think, a little smug. “They were put there deliberately.”

“Deliberately?”

“Yes, by the makers of Göbekli Tepe. After the megaliths were put in place, and used for a period of unknown duration, every one of the enclosures was deliberately and rapidly buried. For example, Enclosure C is the oldest we have found so far. It appears that it was closed, filled in from top to bottom so that all the pillars were completely covered, before ‘D,’ the next enclosure in the sequence was made. This practice of deliberate infilling has been a great advantage to archaeology because it effectively sealed each of the enclosures and prevented the intrusion of later organic material thus allowing us to be absolutely certain about the dating.”

I'm thinking rapidly as Schmidt talks. The point he makes about dating is interesting, for at least three reasons.

First, the implication is that at megalithic sites around the world where this “sealing” procedure *didn't* happen, the dates archaeologists have arrived at could be falsely young as a result of the intrusion of later organic materials (which, by the way, is the only kind of material that is subject to carbon dating; because of course you can't carbon date inorganic materials like stone). Theoretically, this could mean that famous megalithic sites that were not deliberately buried by their builders (the temples of Malta, for example, or the *taulas* of Menorca, or the stone circles of Avebury and Stonehenge in England) could turn out to be much older than we are presently taught.

Secondly, if the bulk of the dates at Göbekli Tepe are derived from organic materials in the fill—fact that I'm later able to confirm from Schmidt's published papers<sup>11</sup>—then this tells us only about the age of the fill; the megalithic pillars themselves must be at least that old, but they could be older since they stood in place before being buried, for “a period of unknown duration.”

Thirdly, and perhaps most important, *why* was the site infilled? What could possibly be the motivation for going to all this trouble to create a series of spectacular megalithic circles only to end up deliberately burying them so thoroughly and so efficiently that more than 10,000 years would pass before they were found again?

The first thought that comes to my mind is ... time capsule—that Göbekli Tepe was created to transmit a message of some kind to the future and buried so that its message could be kept intact and hidden for millennia. It's a thought that will return to haunt me many times as I continue my investigation, but another full year will pass before it comes to fruition, as we'll see in later chapters. Meanwhile, when I put the question to Klaus Schmidt he offers a completely different explanation for the deliberate burial of the circles of pillars.

“In my opinion this was their program,” he says. “They made the enclosures to be buried.”

“Made to be buried?” I'm intrigued. I'm waiting for him to say “as a time capsule” but instead he replies, “Like, for example, the megalithic cemeteries in Western Europe—huge constructions and then a mound on top.”

“But then they're for burial of bodies. Is there any evidence of burial of bodies here?”

“We don’t have burials yet. We have some fragments of human bones mixed in with animal bones within the filling material but no burials at the moment. We expect we will find some soon.”

“So you believe Göbekli Tepe was a necropolis?”

“It still has to be proved. But that’s my hypothesis, yes.”

“And those fragments of human bones you’ve found mixed with animal bones in infill. What do you make of those? Sacrifice? Cannibalism?”

“I don’t think so. My guess is that those bones are evidence of some special treatment of the human body after death—perhaps deliberate excarnation. Such rites were practiced at a number of other known sites in this region that are of about the same age. For me the presence of human bones in the filling material strengthens the hypothesis that we will find primary burials somewhere at Göbekli Tepe, burials that were opened after some time for a continuation of very specific rituals performed with the dead.”<sup>12</sup>

“What, then, was the function of the pillars?”

“The T-shaped pillars are certainly anthropomorphic, yet often with animals depicted on them, perhaps telling us stories connected with the T-shaped beings. We cannot be sure, of course, but I think they represent divine beings.”

“And even when they’re not T-shaped?” I point to the lion pillar. “Like this one? It too has an animal depicted upon it.”

Schmidt shrugs. “We cannot know for sure. Perhaps we will never know. There is so much mystery here. We could excavate for fifty years and still not find all the answers. We are just at the beginning.”

“But even so you do have some answers. You clearly have some ideas. This lion pillar, for example. Are you at least able to say how old it is?”

“Honestly we don’t know. When we excavate beneath it we will hopefully find some organic material that we can carbon date. But until we do we can’t be sure.”

“But what’s your impression from the style?”

Schmidt shrugs again before conceding, a little begrudgingly, “It looks similar to some of the pillars in Enclosure C.”

“Which are the oldest?”

“Yes—so something of that age.”

“And that would be what exactly?”

“Exactly 9600 BC, calibrated, is the earliest date we have.”

Radiocarbon years and calendar years drift further and further apart as time goes by because the amount of the radioactive isotope carbon-14 in the atmosphere and in all living, *organic*, things varies from epoch to epoch. Fortunately scientists have found ways—too complicated to go into at this point—to correct for such fluctuations. The process is called calibration so when Schmidt says “9600 BC calibrated” he is giving me calendar years. What “9600 BC calibrated” means in 2013 when I’m talking to him is therefore 9600 years plus the 2013 years that have elapsed since the time of Christ—i.e. 11,613 years ago. I am writing this sentence in December 2014 and you might not read it until 2016, by which time that oldest date that Schmidt is referring to will work out at 11,616 years before the present.

You get the idea.

In other words, put simply, and in round numbers, the oldest parts of Göbekli Tepe to have been excavated so far are a little over 11,600 years old. And, despite all the cautions and qualifications he has expressed, what Schmidt is telling me is that in his informed opinion, on stylistic grounds, the lion-pillar we are looking at is likely to be at least as old as anything hitherto excavated at Göbekli

Tepe.

Indeed, although he hasn't said so much—there's very little evidence one way or the other—the possibility has to be considered that it might even be *older*. After all, he's already admitted that the best work at Göbekli Tepe is the oldest. It's troubling, therefore, despite the hope he's expressed that further excavation will reveal “the small beginnings that we expect but haven't yet found,” that the first piece of further excavation has in fact uncovered no such “small beginnings.” On the contrary, what it has brought to light is a massive, superbly executed megalithic pillar, with a lion rampant carved upon it in exquisite high relief, that appears, at least on stylistic grounds, to be extremely old.

Perhaps, rather than Schmidt's hoped-for “small beginnings,” further excavations will only uncover more of the same?

“We know the end,” the Professor tells me firmly. “The youngest layers at Göbekli Tepe date to 8200 BC. That's when the site is abandoned forever. But we don't know the beginning yet.”

“Except that date of 9600 BC, 11,600 years ago, that you have from Enclosure C. That's the beginning—at least as far as you've been able to establish it up to now?”

“The beginning of the monumental phase, yes.” There's a glint in the Professor's eye. “And you know, 9600 BC is an *important* date. It isn't just a number. It's the end of the Ice Age. It's a global phenomenon. So since this goes in parallel—”

The date Schmidt is putting such emphasis on rings a sudden bell in my mind, relating to other research I've been doing, and I feel compelled to interrupt.

“9600 BC! That's not just the end of the Ice Age. It's the end of the Younger Dryas cold spell that starts in, what—10,800 BC?”

“And ends in 9620 BC,” Schmidt continues, “according to the ice cores from Greenland. So how likely is it to be an accident that the monumental phase at Göbekli Tepe starts in 9600 BC when the climate of the whole world has taken a sudden turn for the better and there's an explosion in nature and in possibilities?”

I can only agree. It doesn't seem likely that it's an accident at all. On the contrary, I feel certain there must be a connection. We'll explore that connection, and the mysterious cataclysmic period that geologists call the Younger Dryas—and what those Greenland ice cores tell us—in Part II.

Meanwhile, back in 2013, I close my interview with Klaus Schmidt with some praise. And in December 2014, as I sit at my desk going through the transcript of the recording I made at Göbekli Tepe, and knowing that Klaus died of a massive, unexpected heart attack on July 20, 2014, I'm glad I did so. “You're a very humble man,” I say. “But the fact is you've discovered a site that has caused us all to rethink our ideas of the past. This is a remarkable thing and I believe that your name, as well as the name of Göbekli Tepe, will go down in history.”

## **The bringers of civilization**

After leaving Göbekli Tepe in mid-September 2013, I make an extensive journey throughout the length and breadth of Turkey before I finally return home.

The lion pillar sticks in my mind, but what particularly haunts me is the scene on Pillar No. 43 in Enclosure D—the scene showing the vulture with its bent human-like knees, and its wing that so much resembles an arm, holding up a solid disc.

I download Santha's photographs onto my computer and call up that scene. It has many remarkable elements as well as the disc. Both wings of the vulture are shown, I now realize, the other stretched out behind its body. To the right of the vulture is a serpent. It has a large triangular head, as do a

serpents depicted at Göbekli Tepe, and its body is coiled into a curve with its tail extending downward toward an “H”-shaped pictogram. The serpent is nestled close to another large bird—not a vulture but something more like an Ibis with a long, sickle-shaped beak. Between it and the vulture is yet another bird, again with a hooked beak, but smaller, with the look of a chick.

I turn my attention to the disc. I don’t know what to make of it, but the obvious guess from its shape is that it’s meant to represent the sun.

There’s something else that interests me more, however, if I can just put my finger on what it is—something evocative, something hauntingly familiar, about the imagery on this ancient pillar from Göbekli Tepe. Santha has shot hundreds of frames of it, from every possible angle, and obsessively keep going through them, hoping for some clue. The vulture ... the disc ... and in the next register above the vulture, that weird row of bags, with their curved handles ...

Bags.

Handbags.

Suddenly I get it. I go to the shelf in my library where I keep reference copies of my own book, pull out *Fingerprints of the Gods*, and start leafing through the photo sections. The first section deals with South America and what I’m looking for isn’t there. But the second section is devoted to Mexico and, on the fifth page, I find it. It’s image number 33 with the caption: “Man in Serpent sculpture from the Olmec site of La Venta.” It’s Santha’s photograph, taken way back in 1992 or 1993, of an impressive relief carved on a slab of solid granite measuring about 1.2 meters (4 feet) wide and 1.2 meters (5 feet) high. The relief features what is believed to be the earliest representation of the Central American deity whom the Maya (a later civilization than the Olmecs) would call *Kukulkan* or *Gucumatz*, and who was known by the even later Aztecs as *Quetzalcoatl*.<sup>13</sup> All three names mean “Feathered Serpent” (sometimes translated as “Plumed Serpent”) and it is such a serpent, decorated with a prominent feathered crest on its head, that we see here. Its powerful body coils sinuously around the outer edge of the relief, cradling the figure of a man who is depicted in a seated position, though he is reaching for pedals with his feet. In his right hand he is holding what I described at the time as “a small, bucket-shaped object.”<sup>14</sup>



Figure 5: “Man in Serpent” sculpture—the earliest surviving representation of the Central American deity later known as Quetzalcoatl.

I return to Santha’s images from Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe and am immediately able to confirm what I suspected. The three bags on the pillar closely resemble the “bucket-shaped” object from La Venta in Mexico. The same curved handle is there in both cases and the profile of the “bags” and of the “bucket”—slightly wider at the bottom than at the top—is also very similar.

If that were all there was to it, this would surely be a coincidence. The “Man in Serpent” relief from La Venta is thought by archaeologists to date to the period between the tenth and the sixth centuries BC<sup>15</sup>—about nine thousand years younger than the imagery from Göbekli Tepe—so how could there possibly be a connection?

That’s when I remember a second curious image I reproduced in *Fingerprints of the Gods*. I checked the index for the name Oannes, turn to Chapter Eleven, and find another figure of a man carrying a bag or bucket. I hadn’t noticed the resemblance between it and “Man in Serpent” before but it’s obvious to me now. Although not absolutely identical, both bags have the same curved handle that is also depicted on the Göbekli Tepe pillar. Quickly I scan through the report I wrote twenty years earlier. Oannes was a civilizing hero revered by all the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia. He was said to have appeared there in the remotest antiquity and to have taught the inhabitants:

the skills necessary for writing and for doing mathematics and for all sorts of knowledge: how to build cities, found temples ... make laws ... determine borders and divide land, also how to plant seeds and then to harvest their fruits and vegetables. In short [he] taught men all those things conducive to a civilized life.<sup>16</sup>

The fullest account we have of Oannes is found in surviving fragments of the works of a Babylonian priest called Berossos who wrote in the third century BC. Fortunately I have a translation of all the

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