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Which came first, monumental building projects or farming?

G^bekli Tepe is a hill-top Neolithic site in southeastern Turkey whose circles of huge decorated T-shaped stones are at least 5,000 years older than any other monumental structure ever found. The German archaeologist who has been excavating the site since 1994 sums up four more months of digging. "In 14 years, we have uncovered barely five percent of what is here. There are decades of work ahead, " Klaus Schmidt says.

Apart from a new transverse cut to the left of the main dig, and the excavation of a small, late circle that probably dates from about 8,500 BCE, little appears to have changed since March. But there have been striking discoveries: a U-shaped stone sculpted with leopards and a boar that Schmidt compares to the Lion Gate at Mycenae; two almost life-size sculptures of a boar and wild cat found embedded within the rubble walls surrounding one early enclosure. Schmidt and his team have also uncovered a hollowed-out stone, roughly four-foot square, lying cracked in the middle of one of the circles. "We found similar stones in other enclosures, and we assumed they are some sort of door", Schmidt says. "The position of this one makes us wonder whether the circles weren't vaulted," like the trulli of southern Italy, or the famous bee-hive houses at Harran, just south of G^bekli Tepe.

Potentially much more significant, although almost invisible to the untrained eye, archaeologists have also uncovered evidence that the builders of at least one of the oldest circles had dug roughly five meters down through the mound before erecting the standing stones on the bedrock. "For the time being this is just hypothesis, but this leaves us wondering whether the site dates back to before [c. 9500 BCE], when the earliest circles were built," Schmidt says. "Piling up a five-meter mound is not the work of one night."

Whatever the carbon-dating eventually shows, G^bekli Tepe stands at the cusp of what is arguably the biggest social revolution in human history - the transformation of semi-nomadic hunters into settled farmers. Archaeologists now know a great deal about the whens and wheres of the birth of agriculture. DNA tests on wild wheat growing on Karacadag, a mountain just east of G^bekli Tepe, suggest it may have been the source of early cultivated strains. At Nevali Cori, a Neolithic village 40 miles northwest of Schmidt's site, archaeologists found seeds of domesticated einkorn wheat dating from 9000 BCE.

But debate still rages about what it was that led Neolithic groups to transfer almost all their energies into farming.For many experts, climate change was behind the transformation. Global temperatures had been warming gradually since the last Ice Age. Between 10,800 and 9,500 BCE, they suddenly plummeted again. "The region where grasses could be cultivated shrank to the very upper edges of the Middle East, northern Syria and southeastern Turkey," says Ofer Bar-Yosef, MacCurdy Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at Harvard and a doyen of paleolithic studies. "Even there, resources were limited - people wanted to keep them for themselves."

But the location, age and sheer size of G^bekli Tepe have led some to posit a radically different explanation for the change. "The intense cultivation of wild wheat may have first occurred to supply sufficient food to the hunter-gatherers who quarried 7-ton blocks of limestone with flint flakes," writes Stephen Mithen, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading, in the UK. The move to farming may "have been driven as much by ideology as by the need to cope with environmental stress."

"There is no doubt this was a place of huge feasts, and hunter-gatherers would have had difficulty gathering together enough food to feed large groups," Klaus Schmidt says. "Some American colleagues say such feasts may have been the origin of domestication." His caution stems from growing evidence uncovered over the last five years or so that domestication was a much longer process than previously believed.

Experts now think farmers probably sowed grain for at least a thousand years before domesticated strains appeared. In 2004, French archaeologists showed how Neolithic settlers had corralled wild cattle in southern Turkey before transporting them to Cyprus. Professor Bar-Yosef has had his doubts about the theory of ideological farmers since the start. "First you need to get your economy working," he says. "Then you build the monuments that justify the complex social

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organization that requires." Complex, he adds, can sometimes mean unjust. "You can't build places like Gˆbekli with kibbutzim," he says. "I wouldn't be surprised if somebody somewhere in the Fertile Crescent finds evidence of slave labour in the near future."

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