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## Gobekli Tepe - Paradise Regained?

One of the most important archaeological digs in the world, Gobekli Tepe in Turkey has revolutionised our understanding of hunter-gatherer culture. But could it also be the site of the Garden of Eden?

Text: Sean Thomas / Images: Sean Thomas

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Klaus Schmidt shows a wild boar carving on one the stones.

I am in a rusty Turkish taxi. Ahead of me, the brown hills roll endlessly towards Syria; from my car I can see a little village of mud houses and open drains.

It's not the most auspicious of places. Yet, if reports are correct, I am heading for the most amazing archaeological dig in the world. Even more remarkable, this site might be intimately connected with the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

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**Gobekli Tepe is so stupefyingly old that it actually predates settled human life**  
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Finally, my swearing cabbie scrapes us round another corner, and I see a solitary mulberry tree, stark against the cloudless sky. As we park, I notice dozens of workers and archaeologists, all across the hillside. They are hefting buckets of rock, and digging away at the soil. The sense of exalted archaeological effort, in this hot and intense remoteness, reminds me of the opening scenes of *The Exorcist*.

I climb out of the car, and a genial, 50-something German man approaches. His name is Klaus Schmidt. He is the chief archaeologist here at Gobekli Tepe.

Shaking my hand, Schmidt leads me away from the main dig. In the shade of a tented area, we drink sweet Turkish tea from tulip-shaped glasses. Mopping his brow, Schmidt tells me the story of his dig.

The modern history of Gobekli Tepe (the second word is pronounced *tepp-ay*; the phrase means "the hill of the navel" in Turkish) begins in 1964, when a team of American archaeologists was combing this remote province of southeast Turkey. The archaeologists noted that several odd-looking hills were blanketed with thousands of broken flints, a sure sign of ancient human activity. Despite this, the US scientists drifted away and did no excavating. Today, they must feel like the publisher who rejected the first Harry Potter manuscript.

Three decades after the Americans' near miss, a local shepherd was tending his flock when he spotted something odd: a bunch of strangely shaped stones, peeping out of the sunlit dust.

The 'rediscovery' of the site reached the ears of the museum curators in the city of Sanliurfa, 50km (30 miles) away. The museum authorities contacted the relevant government ministry, who in turn got in touch with the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul.

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Probably the oldest life-size statue yet discovered anywhere.

Animal carvings on the "sun stone".  
 Image: Deutsche Archaologische Institut



Excavating a stone circle at Gobekli Tepe.



The author's taxi driver during the journey to Gobekli Tepe and Sanliurfa.



Another view of the stone circle.



Uncovering the megaliths at Gobekli Tepe.



The pool in Sanliurfa linked in local legend to the Prophet Abraham.



This solitary mulberry tree stands out in the sparse landscape at Gobekli Tepe.

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And so, in 1994, Klaus Schmidt came here, to begin excavations. "I was intrigued. The site already had emotional significance for the villagers," he smiles. "The solitary tree on the highest hill is sacred. I thought we might be onto something".

Then Schmidt got out of the cab and had a closer look. "Within the first minute, I knew that if I didn't walk away immediately, I would be here the rest of my life."

He stayed. What he has since uncovered is quite extraordinary.

### Temple of the Hunt

The eerie stones turned out to be the flat oblong tops of awesome megaliths. These T-shaped ochre stones loom abruptly from the exhausted earth. Most of them are carved with bizarre and delicate images – mainly of animals and birds. One image is a sexualised representation of a woman. Sinuous serpents are another common motif. The stones themselves seem to represent men – some have stylised 'arms', which angle down their sides.

So far, 43 stones have been dug out. They are arranged in circles from 5–10m (16–32ft) across. Around the circles are benches of rock, smallish niches, and walls of mud brick. The unearthed megaliths stand 1–4m (3.3–13ft) high.

There are indications that more is to come. A few years ago, Schmidt and his team found a very weathered, half-quarried, T-shaped stone lying in a limestone bed, 1km (0.6 miles) from the main site. This enormous stone is 9m (30ft) long, and was, it seems, designed to join the other pillars at Gobekli. "The stone is cracked, so it must have broken," Schmidt explains. "When this happened the builders probably left it and started on another."

All of which means there may be other stones of similar size as yet undiscovered; indeed, geomagnetic surveys of the various artificial hills at Gobekli Tepe imply that there are at least 250 more standing stones waiting to be excavated.

So far, so remarkable – and if this were all there was to Gobekli Tepe, it would already be a dazzling site: a Turkish Stonehenge, or a Kurdish Carnac. But Gobekli Tepe isn't just this. One unique factor puts it in the archaeological stratosphere.

Gobekli Tepe is staggeringly ancient. Carbon dating of organic matter adhering to the megaliths shows that the complex is 12,000 years old. That is to say, it was built around 10,000–9,000 BC. By comparison, Stonehenge was built around 2,000–2,500 BC. Prior to the discovery and dating of Gobekli Tepe, the most ancient megalithic complex was thought to be in Malta, dated around 3,500BC.

Gobekli Tepe is thus the oldest such site in the world, and by a considerable margin. In fact, it's so stupefyingly old that it actually predates settled human life. It is also pre-pottery. Gobekli Tepe hails from a part of human history that is unimaginably distant, right back in our hunter-gatherer past.

So how did 'cavemen' manage to build something so ambitious? Klaus Schmidt speculates that bands of hunters would have gathered sporadically at the site, through the decades of construction. During the building season, the hunters may have lived in animal-skin tents, slaughtering the local game for sustenance. The many flint arrowheads found around Gobekli support this thesis; they also support the dating of the site.

This revelation – that early Neolithic hunter-gatherers could have built something like Gobekli – is world-changing. Hitherto, it was presumed that agriculture necessarily preceded civilisation, and that complex art, society and architecture depended on the reliable food supplies derived from farming. Gobekli Tepe shows that the old hunter-gatherer life, at least in this region of Turkey, was far more advanced than was ever conceived.

Nonetheless, even for the most resourceful and organised of pre-farming societies, constructing something as refined as Gobekli must have been a powerful challenge, and a serious drain on manpower. They must have had a very good reason to build Gobekli. But what was it?

Schmidt thinks he knows. "Gobekli Tepe is not a house or a domestic building. Evidence of any domestic use is entirely lacking. No remains of settled human habitation have been found nearby. That leaves one purpose: religion. Gobekli Tepe is the oldest temple in the world. And it isn't just a temple; I think it is probably a funerary complex."

Schmidt's thesis has supporting data. In the latest season of digging, his team have found human bones in soils that once filled the niches behind the megaliths. "I believe the ancient hunters brought the corpses of relatives here, and installed them in the open niches by the stones. The corpses were then excarnated: picked clean by wild animals."

There is more evidence that Gobekli had a religious purpose: the circular arrangement of the stones echoes much later Neolithic temples, like Stonehenge and Avebury. The many rock carvings on the stones also appear much more ritualistic than domestic.



Sean Thomas is a journalist and novelist. He writes regularly for The Times, The Guardian, Sunday Telegraph and Maxim.

### ARTICLE SOURCES:

- ▶ Michael Balter, *The Goddess and the Bull, Catalhoyuk: An Archaeological Journey to the Dawn of Civilisation*, Simon & Schuster, 2005.
- ▶ Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunter-gatherers, Farmers and the Shaping of the World*, Faber & Faber, 2002.
- ▶ Steven Mithen, *After The Ice: A Global Human History 50,000–20,000BC*, Phoenix Press, 2004
- ▶ Klaus Schmidt, *Sie Bauten Die Ersten Temple ("You Built The First Temple")*, CH Beck, 2006.
- ▶ Visit [www.dainst.org](http://www.dainst.org), the website of the German Archaeological Institute, for updates on the Gobekli Tepe dig.



Sipping his tea, Schmidt elaborates: "So many of the carvings seem to celebrate the chase – we have found many images of prey, of boars, foxes and gazelles; also images of ducks being hunted with nets. Gobekli Tepe was probably a site for funerals, but it was also a place to celebrate the life of the hunter, and the hunt itself."

### **After the Fall**

Our tea-glasses are empty. We leave the calm of the open tents, and return to the dust and hubbub of the dig. Looking at the circles of enigmatic stones, and their exquisite carvings of lions and boars, it is easy to believe the theory that Gobekli Tepe is a temple dedicated to the hunting lifestyle. What is less easy to believe is the idea that this region of Turkey, these dusty brown hills all around us, once supported a large 'civilisation' of hunter-gatherers. Indeed, it is hard to believe that this semi-desert once supported enough animals to justify any hunting at all.

Gazing across the arid hilltops, Klaus Schmidt explains: "It wasn't always like this. We know from remains of animals and plants that this was once a rich region, ecologically speaking. There were dozens of mammal species, green meadows and woods. The climate was wetter and lush, but still warm. The herds of game were enormous. A paradisaical place."

His eyes are twinkling as he says this. We are approaching the extraordinary connection with the Eden story.

But before we get there, an obvious question is posed. What happened to the landscape? Why is the region now so eroded and barren, if it was once so lush and Edenic?

Schmidt picks up a knapped piece of flint from the weary earth. There are thousands of flint pieces – man-made – littering these hills. He says: "To build such a place as this, the hunters must have joined together, in great numbers. After they finished building, they probably congregated for worship, and for funerals. But then they found that they couldn't feed so many people with the game. So I think they began cultivating the grasses on the hills. Einkorn wheat, a forerunner of domestic wheat, grows wild here. So they domesticated it." Schmidt looks at the solitary mulberry tree on the hill. "In other words, they began farming to support their religious community. But it was the farming that maybe caused their downfall."

According to Schmidt, it seems that agriculture began here, in the province immediately surrounding Gobekli, sometime around 8,000BC.

This indeed was one of the very first places in the world where people farmed. We know roughly when and where farming began, because of the archaeological evidence: domestication is a shock to the physiology of man and beast. The skeletons of people change, they temporarily grow smaller and less healthy, as the human body adapts to a protein-poorer diet and a more arduous lifestyle. Likewise, newly domesticated animals get scrawnier at first.

But 8,000BC, it seems, was also the time when the local landscape began to alter. As the trees were chopped down, and the soil leached away, the area became arid and bare. What was once a glorious pastoral region of forests and meadows, rich with game and wild grasses, became a toilsome place that had to be worked ever harder.

Schmidt and I descend a ladder to the floor of the dig, where the ancient dust is banked against the T-stones. He continues: "The really strange thing is that in 8,000BC, during the shift to agriculture, Gobekli Tepe was buried. I mean deliberately – not in a mudslide. For some reason the hunters, or the ex-hunters, decided to entomb the entire site in soil. The earth we are removing from the stones was put here by man himself: all these hills are artificial."

The link is becoming irresistible: a lost paradise, a forsaken lifestyle, a terrible 'mistake', even a solitary tree. Could there really be a connection between Gobekli Tepe and the Garden of Eden story?

I have more investigation to do, before I reach a conclusion. Promising Klaus that I will return in a day or so, I climb back in the cab, and head off down the dusty road.

### **Putting the Ur into Sanliurfa**

On the way, I consult my notes. The idea that the Eden narrative in the Bible is an allegory for the transition from a hunter-gather lifestyle to agriculture is not a new one. Several writers and thinkers, like Hugh Brody, have canvassed the idea in the past. What is new is the accumulation of data that locates this allegory precisely in the Gobekli Tepe region.

One strand of evidence relates to early farming. Finds in neighbouring Turkish digs show that all Eurasian agriculture might have started around here. For instance, the very first pigs were domesticated at Cayonu, 90 km (56 miles) away. Likewise, wheat species worldwide seem to descend from einkorn wheat, first cultivated on these same brown hills.

The taxi accelerates, as the road flattens out. We are heading through cotton fields, irrigated by water from the Euphrates. On the distant horizon I can see the blue Taurus Mountains.

In the Bible, it is said that Eden is situated at a point where four rivers descend. Believers have long taken this to mean the Fertile Crescent

between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Similarly, the Book of Genesis claims that Eden is ringed by mountains.

And there are further links. Forty minutes' drive brings me to the large and vibrant Kurdish city of Sanliurfa. The place seems relatively modern, but it has, according to reports, an extraordinary lineage.

My first port of call in Sanliurfa is the local museum. A few pence buys me entrance: a small price to pay for what I am about to see.

Tucked inside the first gallery, under the stairs and hard by the fire extinguisher, is a weird, life-size, creamy-grey limestone statue of a man. This statue was exhumed in the ancient heart of Sanliurfa, when foundations were being laid for a bank.

Recent carbon dating of the Neolithic temple, wherein the statue was found, confirms that this bizarre effigy dates from 10,000–9000BC. This makes it probably the oldest life-size statue of a man ever discovered: the earliest human carving in stone. The stare of its obsidian eyes is shockingly sad: it seems to be looking across the æons with anguished regret, as if foreseeing the tragic mistakes of mankind.

Another quick car ride brings me to the site of the statue's discovery. It is a local beauty spot known as Balikli Gol, a long and limpid fishpond, surrounded by golden-stoned mosques, teahouses and even a converted Crusader church. Tourists like to feed the fat and excitable fish in the ponds; the legend is that the fish were put here by the Prophet Abraham. The locals also believe that Sanliurfa is the Ur of the first books of the Bible.

These are just legends, of course. Yet we now know, if only because of the strange statue in the museum, that Sanliurfa is incredibly old. There has been human activity here for 12,000 years, perhaps continuously. Is it so unlikely that the Book of Genesis would refer to this ancient region, this fons et origo of civilisation? In fact, it's not unlikely at all – because we know that some places near Sanliurfa are definitely mentioned in Genesis.

Next morning, I take a longer cab ride, across the brown flatlands, into the desert wastes further south. The fields are being tilled by Kurdish women in their typical lavender-coloured headscarves. They look weary from the intense heat. This region is so sultry that people sleep outside their houses on raised metal platforms.

Eventually we reach Harran, where a ruined tower rises from the roadside. This was once the oldest Islamic University in the world. It dates from the 9th century AD. But Harran's ancestry is even nobler than that. This is the same Harran mentioned – and twice at that – in the Book of Genesis. This is where Abraham once lived, according to the Bible.

### **Something old, something new**

Back in the taxi, I make my final journey to Gobekli. On the way, I put all the jigsaw pieces together. Taking into account the Biblical links, the history and topography of the region, the evidence of very early domestication hereabouts, and the data from the site itself, Gobekli Tepe is arguably a temple located within the "Garden of Eden".

Or, let's put it another way: the story of Eden is a folk-memory, and an allegory, and it tells us of our glorious hunter-gatherer past in this once-fertile corner of Anatolia, before our own activities cast us into a harsher world. Gobekli Tepe celebrates and remembers a wonderful time of plenty, when we had leisure enough to learn the arts, and to cultivate a complex religion, even if we didn't know how to make pots. And then we fell into farming.

As God says to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life."

Of course, all this is speculation, and highly debatable. What is unquestionable is that Gobekli Tepe is one of the greatest archaeological discoveries since World War II. Every day, Klaus Schmidt and his team find something new, something never seen before, something marvellous. As I am about to discover.

When my cab stops, and I walk towards the dig, I sense a drama in the air. Excitement is mounting. Some Turkish workmen are uncovering a new stone relief, on a just-unearthed megalith: it shows birds, scorpions and water life; it is exquisitely carved, as fresh and delicate as the day it was chiselled. A group of us gather around to have a closer look. I suddenly realise that we are the first people to see this remarkable artwork in 10,000 years.

Klaus Schmidt nods thoughtfully at the new relief. Then he says: "You think that is amazing? Komm!" He strides across the dig and points downwards: "We found this yesterday." At the foot of another megalith is a perfect sculpture of an animal, actually attached to the standing stone. It is like nothing anyone has ever seen before. It was carved long before the wheel was invented, and it was found yesterday.

"What is it?" I ask.

Klaus Schmidt shakes his head.

"Maybe it is a crocodile, or maybe a cat. But the claws, the paws – they look perhaps like a wolf."

We are done. My heart is actually pounding. Together, Klaus Schmidt and I retreat to the tents for a final cup of tea. We discuss the Eden idea. He is adamant that it is just a theory, albeit a very intriguing one. As he says: "Gobekli Tepe is important enough without any speculations."

I have just one question left. Why did the hunter-gatherers of Gobekli deliberately entomb the complex? It seems a bizarre act, as well as a vastly laborious one. Again Klaus Schmidt shrugs.

"We don't know."

Sometimes those three simple words can be the most exciting of all.

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