

Cue: Slide 1 with animation

There is a small hill that overlooks a valley on the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent that German Archeologist Klaus Schmidt, would make a startling discovery that started to upend our understanding of the birth of civilization. There he found circular buildings and massive carved pillars constructed over 11,000 years ago. They predate Stonehenge and the Pyramids by 7,000 years. The people that crafted and arranged these megaliths had not yet developed metal tools, pottery, writing or agriculture. The place is called Gobekli Tepe, Turkish for Pot Belly Hill.

Cue: Slide 2 Where is Gobekli Tepe exactly, well it is about 4 clicks away from these goats.

Cue: Slide 3 Seriously, it is in southern Turkey, 11 miles northeast of the city of Urfa.

In 1963 Archeologist from the Universities of Chicago were surveying upper Mesopotamia.

Regional farmers from told the surveyors about a hill with a rounded top, that was littered with broken slabs of limestone.

Cue Slide 4 This shows the limestone slabs Chicago researchers might have seen.

The Chicago researchers dismissed that the limestone slabs as gravestones from an abandoned Byzantine cemetery, which was-a dime a dozen, in the ruin rich Levant region. In 1994 Schmidt was working on a dig at nearby Nevali Cori and had read a brief mention of the site in the

Chicago report and decided to go the Gobekli Tepe himself. He immediately recognized that the gently rounded hill contrasted with the stark plateaus nearby was a gigantic stone age site.

Klaus and his colleagues returned and began to excavate the hill. The first megaliths they found were so close to the surface that they had been scarred by the local farmers plows. As they dug deeper, they unearthed central pillars with surrounding walls that were arranged in circles and had been backfilled with rocks, soil, and tens of thousands of wild animal bones. Researchers compared the tools found scattered amid the site's rubble to similar artifacts found in other sites and determined the largest of the circles to be at least 11,000 years old.

However, what they did not find was also puzzling, there was no evidence of firepits or the clay fertility figurines that could be found at other sites in the region.

Schmidt believed the rounded hilltop was created as, the builders buried the older circles and pillars and placed new ones on top. Over time they repeatedly built over the top of each structure giving form to a mounded hill, potbellied in shape, Gobekli Tepe.

He believed that the thousands of wild animal bones in the rubble to be remains of feasts, Feasts that were designed to attract workers to a T-Pillar raising party, a sort of pre-historic Amish Barn raising. The absence of firepits an indication of no permanent inhabitants.

Cue Slide 5 Building D

There are more that 20 light colored limestone structures that climb the hill at Gobekli Tepe.

Some of the structures are rounded spaces enclosed by sturdy walls., others rectangular.

Many of them have standing T shaped pillars that are located just off center of the middle and place around the edges of the structure.

The largest circle, which archeologist call building D, measures no less than 65 feet across and contains two 18-foot free standing pillars, each weighing eight tons.

Cue Slide 6 T Pillar

The pillars rest on pedestals carved directly out of bedrock. The pillars are stylized depictions of people with massive carved reliefs of arms with hands folded, a fox pelt loin cloth, stola and belt. They are topped off by a cap stone with no face.

Cue Slide 7 Menacing Male Animal

Surrounding these central pillars are Eleven smaller T-Pillars pillar figures are detailed with carvings featuring a menacing zoo of crawling, flying, and running wild beasts.

Cue: slide 8 Vulture Stone

Snakes, vultures, and foxes dominate the carvings along with mesh nets, phalluses and what appear to be disembodied heads.

One wonders, was this site, with its giant human stylized pillars and its the carvings of fearful animals, a place for ritual and deaths?

Cue: slide 9 Menacing Creature

Stanford Archeologist Ian Hodder is fascinated by the pillar carvings and notes that they are not dominated by edible prey or cattle but by menacing creatures. Conversely, in the nearby Neolithic site of Nevali Cori the inhabitants were more interested in Farming and Fertility, Ian thinks that these hunters were trying to master their fears by building this complex at Gobekli Tepe.

Cue: Slide 10 Vulture Stone Carrying the dead to the heavens.

Additionally, Archeologist Danielle Storder, emphasizes the significance of the vulture carvings found at the site. Some ancient cultures believed that the high-flying carrion birds transported the flesh of the dead to the heavens.

Perhaps says Schmidt, the site was a burial ground or the center of a death cult, the dead laid out on the hillside among the stylized pillar gods and amidst afterlife animal spirits.

In 2006 After nearly 10 years of archeology on the site Klaus Schmidt had concluded that he had found "a cathedral on the hill". He suggested that in the Neolithic period between 9500 and 8200 BC, bands of Nomadic hunter gatherers would set up the stone circles, carve stone pillars and have a feast under the open sky. When they were done, they would deliberately cover the structure up with rocks, gravel, and animal remains before coming back decades later to do it all over again. He did not believe the builders of Gobekli Tepe not lived there. He imagined a place for Cult and death where the hunter gatherers came together to bid farewell to their dead and staged rituals to emphasize their shared identity.

Prior to the discovery of Gobekli Tepe. Archeologist believed that only after permanent settlement and plant and animal domestication, could societies have the luxury of complex social organization, construction of monumental buildings, and carrying out complex rituals. Civilizations, it was thought, developed only after there was a surplus of food and a place to call home.

However, Klaus Schmidt's Gobekli Tepe challenged that assumption, the construction at Gobekli Tepe was 9000 BC, centuries long before the first domesticated grains appeared in the

region. The evidence of domesticated grain at the nearby Neolithic settlement of Nevali Cori only overlaps the very latest of the time frame of the occupation of Gobekli Tepe.

Klaus Schmidt believed that complex social organization and the performance of rituals predated settlement and agriculture at Gobekli Tepe. It was the demand of constructing the monuments that led to domesticating plants and animals to create a more dependable food supply. These agricultural innovations he argued, were then spread from this hilltop throughout the region and to the rest of the world. "First the temple, then the city" was how Klaus summed it up.

Klaus Schmidt continued to lead the excavations at Gobekli Tepe from 1996 to 2014. He died on July 20, 2014. After his death Archeologist continued to study at the site and began reaching some very different conclusions.

Cue Slide 11 Building D

In 2017 when DAI archaeologist Moritz Ketel began examining old excavation reports done under Schmidt, he began to question whether the buildings had been built sequentially, then filled with rubble and new building built on top. Trained as an architect he found that the idea that the rubble filling the building was filled in all at once by the sites builders and then topped with the remains of a feast puzzling. For if the structures had been filled in all at once the damage to the walls would have been consistent all the way around, instead the wall closest to the slope of the hill are in the worst condition, showing slope slide and those farthest to the slope are much better preserved. In addition, Archeologist Kinzel and Clare noticed that many of the T-pillars leaned in same direction as if they were knocked off balance by the same event. They believed that the site had been rocked by earthquakes over the centuries and each time

was rebuilt, and that the wild animal bones that were found and interpreted as feasting deposits, are accumulated remains over many generations not a giant feast.

Klaus Schmidt believed that the smaller rectangular buildings found next to the circular structures at the site were for ritual use because he could find no evidence of firepits used for cooking. However, the team believes that the structures would have been covered with flat roofs, with entrances on top. These dwellings would be like other houses from the ninth millennium in Syria and Turkey. The place for cooking and eating was on the top floor and when the buildings collapsed the grindstones, charred wood and tools mixed in with the rubble below.

Moreover, when Laura Dietrich a German archeologist went back and examine thousands of grindstones, mortars and carved stone vessels that had been excavated at the site and previously ignored. Whereas Klaus that the hunter gatherers brewed a little beer from the surrounding wild grasses and grains She came to a different conclusion, there was beer and lots of it.

Cue: Slide 12 Beer!

The vessels they found had grey-black adhesions, that tested positive for calcium oxalate, which develops during the soaking, mashing, and fermenting of grain. They found artifacts used to process grains with one vessel large enough to make 43 gallons of beer.

For all that beer they would also need water. The archeologists discovered a pit carved from the bedrock that was 8 feet deep and 25 feet across, that could have served as a cistern for people living on the hilltop. The evidence of grindstones, beer vats and water capture,

points to large scale food processing for both special occasions and daily life. A good indication that Gobekli Tepe had both a large brewery and homes and was not just a cathedral on a hill.

Thus Gobekli Tepe was not the beginning of a new civilization leading to the development of agriculture and domesticated animals but a final gasp of an old one. Gobekli Tepe was built in a place and time that other societies in the region around them were adopting a new way of life.

Moreover, were the inhabitants of Gobekli Tepe resisting change? DAI Archeologist Dr. Lee Clare believes the carvings of the threatening animals are not just decorative. They are unique and are not found at the other Neolithic sites. Some of the pillars that combine a vulture, fox and severed human head tell a frightening story whereas the nearby Nevali Cori has pottery depicting two people dancing with a turtle, possibly a fertility story. Klaus thought the worshippers may have gathered around the T-Pillars under open skies, archeologist now believe the spaces were covered, based upon discovering markings found at the top of the pillars. Was this a special Alhambra for the purpose of scary storytelling?

Cue: Slide 13 In the words of Indiana Jones, Snakes, why does it always have to be snakes?

Thomas Zimmerman of Bilkent University says these enclosed spaces would have been dark and gloomy with flickering light illuminating the pillars. He says "it's all male, male, male. It's a theater of horror filled with abrasive male animals ready to attack". It represents a staunch, conservative, male dominated hunter gather culture. A sort of pre-historic Athenaeum Society. There is a reason there are no domesticated grains or tools typical of the Neolithic period at Gobekli Tepe, according to Zimmerman and Clare, it was because they were forbidden. The threatening imagery was meant to keep the Gobekli Tepe residents in line. Narratives a very

important in keeping groups together and creating identity.' Clare says, "This is about the promotion of group identity in the face of advancing Neolithization". Everyone have their tie on?

By the time the builders abandoned Gobekli Tepe for good in 8200 BC, the Neolithic period was in full swing with farming and domestication of animals. Rather than serving as an inspiration for agriculture and settlement in the region the communal structures at Gobekli Tepe were built as the last stand of hunter gathers.

At this point I say the science is settled, except, is it?

Cue: Slide 14 Vulture Stone

Here is the vulture stone I showed you earlier. Perhaps the carving is not about vultures carrying corpses to the heavens but rather a timestamp and a depiction of a global climate change about to happen.

In a 2017 Martin B. Sweatman and Dimitrios Tsikritsis proposed a bold new theory: the pillars at Gobekli Tepe are telling the story of a comet hitting the earth and triggering an ice age some 13,000 years ago. The Younger Dryas Impact Event is hypothesized to have set off a global cooling period that depleted hunter-gatherer resources and forced humans to settle into areas where they could cultivate crops.

By combining the approaches of astronomy and archaeology, Sweatman and Tsikritsis claim that the animals carved on the pillars depict constellations, with the vulture stone providing a time stamp of the night sky at the time of the catastrophe. Using computer software,

Sweatman and Tsikritsis matched the animal carvings to star constellations, yielding a matching star pattern at 10,950 BCE.

Cue: Slide 15 Vulture Stone Constellation Map

The year of 10,950 BCE aligns with the latest hypotheses as to when the Younger Dryas Impact Event occurred, lending credence to Sweatman and Tsikritsis' interpretation that the Vulture Stone depicts what Sweatman calls "probably the worst day in history since the end of the Ice Age."

Cue: Slide 16 Asteroid moving toward Green Land

The younger dryas impact hypothesis that a comet strike served as the catalyst for the Ice Age that followed is controversial. However, an impact crater has been found in Greenland whose generating comet would have had an explosion with the packed the energy of 700 1-megaton nuclear bombs which may have been enough to shift the oceans current and cool the environment.

Critics claim that Sweatman and Tsikritsis' study cherry picked information to make their case. Archaeologist Jens Notroff, a researcher at the Gobekli Tepe site, notes that Sweatman and Tsikritsis fail to mention that the headless man on the vulture stone, which they claim symbolizes the devastating loss of human life after the comet, also possesses an erect phallus—hardly a robust indicator of loss of life.

Furthermore, "There's more time between Gobekli Tepe and the Sumerian clay tablets [etched in 3300 B.C.] than from Sumer to today," says Gary Rollefson, an archaeologist at Whitman

College in Walla Walla, Washington. "Trying to pick out symbolism from prehistoric context is an exercise in futility.

Cue Slide 17 Sumerian Clay Table

"Perhaps Gary Rollefson is unaware of the Sumerian cuneiform clay tablet that has puzzled scholars for over 150 years that has been translated for the first time. The tablet is now known to be a contemporary Sumerian observation of an asteroid impact at K fels, Austria. The back plume from the explosion (the mushroom cloud) would be bent over the Mediterranean Sea re-entering the atmosphere over the Levant, Sinai, and Northern Egypt. Some speculate the heat from the impact plume would have been enough to incinerate the citizens of Sodom and Gomorra.

Cue: Slide 18 T-Pillar

We are often mistaken in our assumptions about the complexity and historic trajectory of ancient civilizations. Archeologist went from thinking Gobekli Tepe was a Byzantine graveyard, to a cathedral on the hill spawning new civilization, to the dying gasp of an old civilization, to a place that may have observed the worse day on earth. To date only about 10% of the Gobekli Tepe site has been excavated, and because these excavations have focused on the T-pillars and the monumental buildings, any future discoveries may compel further reevaluation of what really happened at Gobekli Tepe and perhaps time will tell. Until then, the monuments of Gobekli Tepe should serve as a reminder that our distant ancestors were, perhaps not as different from us as we would like to think. They were complex, communal, often contradictory, and capable of building great things.

