

Göbekli Tepe – World Sensation between Scientific Research and Media Demands

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Abstract

Göbekli Tepe's re-discovery in 1995 was a scientific sensation, especially in the field of Neolithic research. However, public awareness started when Klaus Schmidt's book "Sie bauten die ersten Tempel" was published in 2006, accompanied by more popular publications in magazines like *Geo* and *National Geographic* with spectacular night sight photography. Since then the public debate around the site on the one hand, and scientific research on the other, have taken quite different trajectories: While the popular narrative around Göbekli Tepe was built around a central Neolithic meeting place with lavish work feasts, including beer brewing and the beginning of agriculture, the ongoing archaeological fieldwork is now revealing a much more

complex story. More recently, in the course of its UNESCO World Heritage nomination, the site's official sponsor began to market Göbekli Tepe as the "Zero Point in Time". People now arrive at the site expecting to experience this starting point of "civilization". Prior to the onset of covid-19, some 1.000 people per day were visiting Göbekli Tepe, a number which increased following the inclusion of the site in a Turkish Netflix series production about an ancient mystery.

The Visitor Centre built by Doğus located south-west of the archaeological site reflects the fragile balance between tourist demands and research needs: The exhibition shows the excavation documentation and a loose interpretational multimedia show aimed at preparing visitors for what they may not see on site. This contribution will present the challenges of mass tourism, on-going research, and conservation at a fragile Neolithic site.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Göbekli Tepe is located in south-eastern Turkey, about 13 km northeast of Şanlıurfa and 2.5 km east of Örencik village (fig. 1). Göbekli Tepe was discovered in 1963 the frame of an archaeological survey project undertaken by the University of Istanbul and the Orient Institute at the University of Chicago. Field and laboratory research was initiated in 1995 under the directorship of Harald Hauptmann (then first director of the Istanbul Department at the German Archaeological Institute) in close collaboration with the Şanlıurfa Museum. First excavations focused on the Southeast Hollow, also referred to as the Main Excavation Area. Following the appointment of Klaus Schmidt as the new excavation director (*kazı başkanı*) in 2006, excavations were extended to the north-western part of the site (NW-Mound and NW-Hollow) from 2009/10. Following the untimely death of Klaus Schmidt in 2014, the directorship of the site passed to the Şanlıurfa Museum and in 2020 to Necmi Karul (Istanbul University). The current German (DAI/DFG) research project is coordinated by Lee Clare (DAI Istanbul), in cooperation with the Şanlıurfa Museum. It is overseen by an academic advisory board. Between 2017 and 2019 two permanent shelters were constructed over the SE- and the NW-areas of the site. In the run-up to the construction of the shelters deep soundings were excavated that revealed the complex and long history of the Neolithic settlement.¹ The site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2018 under criteria: i, ii, and iv.²

In accordance with the UNESCO Operational Guidelines³ for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention Parag. 99–102, the boundary of the Property was drawn up to include all those areas and/or attributes which are direct tangible expressions of its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The Property covers the archaeological mound and its immediate surroundings upon a natural limestone plateau, including the earliest known remains of monumental megalithic buildings from the Early Neolithic Period (c. 9.600–8.000 BC).

The settlement mound, measures ca. 300 m² and lies at the heart of the larger Göbekli Tepe Site, and covers an area of approximately 9 ha. The remaining part of the plateau is an archaeological landscape, featuring numerous archaeological features and finds. The archaeological mound and the adjoining limestone plateau make up the protected 1st degree archaeological conservation area which covers approx. 126 ha. The legal boundaries of the UNESCO World Heritage Site follow the natural topography of the plateau, including its slopes. A buffer zone (461 ha) encompasses its visual setting and safeguards against inappropriate development following the requirements of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention Parag. 103–107. This buffer zone, which includes the limestone plateau around the archaeological mound and its immediate surroundings, was designated as a third degree archaeological conservation area by the Decision No. 1940,



Fig. 1: Göbekli Tepe Aerial shot from West, 2019 (Göbekli Tepe Project Archive)

23/02/2016 of Şanlıurfa Regional Council for Conservation of Cultural Properties. Although the boundaries are defined by law, it will take time and further stakeholder consultation meetings before the buffer zone is fully recognized by the local population, especially as it impedes the grazing of livestock in areas that were previously accessible to local communities.

The physical fabric is in good condition. The Site Management Plan (SMP) identifies actions to further protect and enhance the condition of the physical fabric. Key among these is the development of a conservation plan for the Site (Göbekli Tepe Management Plan, Policy 14, Action 1.1) based on the understanding of the cultural significance of Göbekli Tepe and its vulnerabilities, which is further detailed below.

Tourism Development and Facilities

Following its inscription on the World Heritage list the site received an average of 1000 to 1250 visitors per day and about 37,500 visitors per week. In 2019 over 336,000 visitors visited the site between February and October. At least one third of these visitors arrive in private cars and the other two third with coaches – via Şanlıurfa.

To cope with the increasing numbers of visitors a visitor centre was established at the limits of the first degree archaeological zone, but within the buffer zone. The walls of the two circular structures were made of rammed local earth. The two buildings house the ticket counter, a cafeteria, a museum shop, prayer rooms, as well as toilet facilities. The second structure contains the offices of the site management and the exhibition centre, which features a display that introduces guests to the Neolithic period and the site, including its excavation history, using multi-media presentations (fig. 2).

Adjacent to the exhibition center there are two large parking areas which provide space for up to 11 coaches and 42 individual cars. All visitors have to change here to a local shuttlebus in order to continue to the archaeological site. Currently four shuttle busses are in service which limits the numbers of visitors at the site at any one time to around 60 persons. On-site there is a small shop and café welcomes the visitors and marks the start and ending point of the wooden walkway that takes the visitors around the site. The wooden walkway follows the standard design for archaeological sites as issued by the Turkish Ministry of Culture. The fixed walkway prevents visitors from entering into sensitive areas of the site, including the archaeological trenches and ruins. The walkway connects the various Point of Interest on site (fig. 4). In the site management plan, future extensions of the track system are foreseen to allow access to areas still under excavation.



Fig. 2: Göbekli Tepe Visitor Center from west, 2019 (Göbekli Tepe Project Archive, Courtesy of Sanliurfa Museum)

Fig. 3: Balloons over Göbekli Tepe, 2020 (Courtesy of Sanliurfa Museum)



Just before and during the covid-19 pandemic, efforts were made to maximize the visitor experience, though these are not directly linked to the archaeological remains: A prime example are the recently initiated hot-air balloon rides, as already known from other regions, such as Cappadocia (fig. 3).

Göbekli Tepe as Popular Culture

Since its discovery Göbekli Tepe has served as an inspiration for a multitude of stories relating to the site and its finds. Meanwhile, some of these interpretations have taken on a whole life of their own, culminating in hypotheses which have extremely little to do with the results from state-of-the-art archaeological research and analyses. This is especially obvious when entering “Göbekli Tepe” into Google and other internet search engines; in the case of Google such a search produces more than 5.260.000 results. The popularity of Göbekli Tepe is also linked to the promoted labels “First temples” or “Zero Point in Time”. Furthermore, there are also a number of films and television productions with a focus on the site, including the Turkish Netflix series “Atiye” (The Gift) (fig. 5). These productions can be seen as part of a larger global media campaign to promote Göbekli Tepe and to generate an interest to visit, if not the archaeology, then the film sets and locations. Art exhibitions⁴ and a large number of documentaries inspired by the site and its archaeological finds accompanied the “Year of Göbekli Tepe” in 2019 which not only celebrated the inscription of the site on the World Heritage list, but were also designed to promote the site as a tourism destination.

Fig. 5: Poster of Netflix Series *Atiye/The Gift* (Netflix)

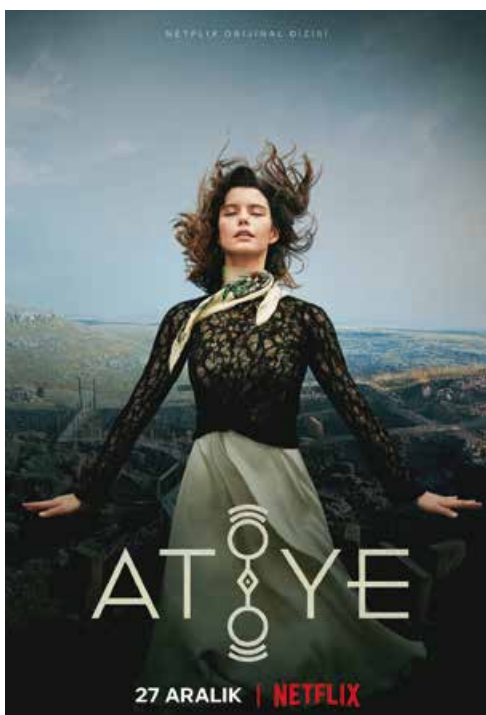


Fig. 4: Göbekli Tepe, Wooden walkway, 2019 (Photo: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), Lee Clare)

Conservation Concept and Measures

Since the start of archaeological excavation in 1995, protection measures have introduced individual features such as temporary supports (e. g. for the pillars) and protective dry-walling for other architectural remains. The current conservation concept for Göbekli Tepe was developed in the framework of the UNESCO World Heritage nomination process. The general aim of the concept is to preserve the remains as excavated. A guiding principle for the conservation and consolidation measures is that mainly local materials and traditional methods should be applied, which should not involve too complicated restoration mortar recipes, techniques or chemical additions. Currently, there are no plans to reconstruct major parts of (or entire) buildings. Only when and where necessary will additional measures be implemented to ensure the structural integrity, stability and safety of building remains; previously, and in only very few cases, have T-shaped pillars been re-positioned for this reason. The re-fitting of pillar fragments will be decided on a case to case basis. Consolidation measures for the Neolithic rubble stone walls, including the repointing of joints, have recently been tested using a conservation mortar made with sieved sediment from the excavation spoil. In other words, this method sees the re-use of eroded prehistoric (Neolithic) mortar. Wherever possible, structures and trenches, especially any deep soundings, have been backfilled with limestone debris from excavation spoil, thus reducing the risk of collapsing trenches. Additionally, the backfilling of rooms and spaces serves to minimize the danger of erosion to baulks and profiles. Backfill is also foreseen for areas which are of no special interest to visitors.

The topography of the site presents special challenges during the wet winter seasons when rainwater runoff flows down the slopes of the mound into the excavation trenches. In order to reduce the erosional impacts to trenches caused by surface run-off water, dry stone walls combined with geo-textile were recently (2019) installed at particularly



Fig. 6: Göbekli Tepe newly built Shelter GT1 over main excavation area, 2019 (Photo: DAI, Lee Clare)

vulnerable locations around the site. These walls, which channel the rain water away from the trenches, have since proven extremely effective. Temporarily placed sandbags complete the barrier system in the winter months.

In areas not protected by the recently built permanent shelters (see below) the exposed Neolithic plaster floors will be with geotextile and/or diffusion-open membranes and a layer of compacted, levelled-in crushed limestone. These coverings will not only protect the fragile surfaces but also match the appearance of the original prehistoric floors. Finally, regular cleaning of the site and removal of vegetation in and around the excavation areas serve to reduce the risk of wildfires in the hot summer and autumn months and also improve the appearance of the site (fig. 6).

Shelter Constructions at Göbekli Tepe

The most visible protective measures at Göbekli Tepe are the shelter structures installed over the excavated areas of the site. In the course of the last two decades different shelter types have been implemented. The first shelter, constructed in 1999, used a modular metal system that was designed to be removed during excavation works and re-installed at the close of the fieldwork season. However, as excavations progressed and baulks were removed to expose the Neolithic ruins in larger areas, this shelter structure became obsolete due to its limited module span of max. 10 m. Nevertheless, it is still used today and covers areas L9-80 and L10-71 (with space R38). Subsequently, in 2013 a larger wooden and felted roofed structure was constructed over the main excavation area. This shelter incorporated an improved visitor walkway, providing better access to the visiting public.⁵ The same wooden shelter later served as the work platform during the construction of the permanent oval shaped steel and

membrane structure GT1. The design for GT1 resulted from a design competition organized by DAI in 2010. The winning design was submitted by the Berlin-based architects at kleyerkoblitz.letzel.freivogel Gesellschaft von Architekten mbh and EiSat GmbH⁶ who were also responsible for the second new shelter (GT2) which now covers the north-western excavation area of the site (north-west hollow). Shelter construction was co-financed by the European Union and undertaken as part of the “Revitalization of History in Şanlıurfa” Project implemented by the Ministry of Industry and Technology of the Republic of Turkey. Building works were executed by the building contractor Trans-T İnşaat A.Ş. with building supervision by UBM (Uluslararası Birleşmiş Müsavirler Müsavirlik Hizmetleri A.Ş.). The DAI team was present at the site for the entire building process, providing advice and guidance in all issues related to the monitoring and protection of the prehistoric monument during the construction process and undertaking all manner of archaeological operations related to the shelter works. Steel works for the two new shelters commenced in 2017 and were finalized in 2019.

The design of the shelter reduces the impact of the harsh local environment upon the prehistoric ruins. Notably, both shelters, which do not cover all excavated areas of the site, are not closed structures but are open on all sides; in this way the creation of an artificial in-door climate (with all its negative impacts for the archaeological remains) was avoided. The GT1 structure also incorporates a walkway that leads visitors around the periphery of the excavated area and provides large viewing platforms adjacent to the excavated special buildings as points of interest. Therefore, visitors are now able to observe archaeologists and conservators at work, therefore increasing the overall transparency and the flow of information to the visiting public. On the other hand, GT1 marks prominently the location of the “invisible”, sunken archaeological buildings.

The second shelter GT2, which is currently not open to the public, was designed to provide better working conditions in the northwestern area of the site. The location of the shelter was defined according to the results of the geophysical prospection prior to the excavations. Excavations here (north-west hollow) were initiated in 2011 and have revealed further evidence for a monumental (megalithic) building (Building H) with characteristic T-shaped pillars. Archaeological fieldwork in this area is at an early stage and the new shelter will provide archaeologists with laboratory-like conditions for undertaking sensitive fieldwork, including excavations, consolidation and conservation measures.⁷

Shelter structures always appear to promise significant advantages for an archaeological site; however they often fail to deliver on all of the original expectations.⁸ Indeed, shelter design and implementation is not an easy task and the resulting structures are often compromises: On the one hand they protect the remains that are directly beneath them, on the other they can pose a threat to those adjacent areas that are not sheltered, e. g. due to insufficient rain water drainage or visual impact.⁹ The larger the area is, the more challenging it is to find appropriate solutions for design, drainage and maintenance.¹⁰

Conclusions

The management of the World Heritage Site of Göbekli Tepe is without doubt a challenge. On the one hand the site is still an active archaeological excavation site with all intermediate stages of excavation processes, and on the other hand there are the well-preserved but fragile remains of an early Neolithic settlement with its monumental special buildings which must be preserved and consolidated; this stands in contrast to the development of a major tourist attraction to promote economic growth in the region. The latter tends to use simplified narratives, instead of telling the long and complex history of Göbekli Tepe (c. 9.500–8.000 BC). The key to the a long-term appreciation and protection of the authenticity and integrity of the site must consider all these factors and bring them into balance: Excavations required to answer specific research question must also take into account conservation and consolidation and at the same pinpoint locations that may also improve the overall appearance of the excavation areas for visitors. This can only be achieved in a close dialogue with all involved stakeholders.

¹ Clare, L., *Göbekli Tepe, Turkey – A brief summary of research at a new World Heritage Site (2015–2019)*, eDAI-F 2020-2, § 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.34780/efb.v0i2.1012>; as well as Kinzel, M./Clare, L., *Monumental – Compared to what? A perspective from Göbekli Tepe*, in: Gebauer, A. B./Sørensen, L./Teather, A./Valera, A. C. (eds.), *Monumentalising Life in The Neolithic*, Oxbow Books (Oxford 2020) 29–48.

² Clare, L./Tuna Yüncü, Z./Uludağ, C., “Göbekli Tepe”, in: Ertürk, N./Karakul Türk, Ö. (eds.), *UNESCO World Heritage in Turkey 2019*, UNESCO Türkiye Milli Komisyonu (Ankara 2019) 522–547.

³ UNESCO (ed.), *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (Paris 2013).

⁴ For example, the exhibition “Hollows and Mounds: A Take on Göbekli Tepe” by Sinem Disli in autumn 2019 at the Ara Güler Müzesi, Istanbul.

⁵ Dietrich, O./Köksal-Schmidt, Ç./Notroff, J./Schmidt, K., „Göbekli Tepe (Türkei). Die Arbeiten der Jahre 2012 und 2013“. e-Forschungsberichte des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts 2014, 131–135.

⁶ Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (ed.), *Ein Schutzdach für den Göbekli Tepe* (Berlin 2011). About the project: http://www.kklf.de/projekte.html?name_de=Schutzd

https://www.kklf.de/projekte.html?name_de=Schutzdach (accessed at 02.06.2020); arge göbekli tepe: kleyerkob-litz.letzel.freivogelgesellschaft von architekten mbh und EiSat GmbH.

⁷ Müller, M./Otten, Th./Wulf-Rheidt, U. (eds.), *Schutzbauten und Rekonstruktionen in der Archäologie. Von der Ausgrabung zur Präsentation*. Xantener Berichte 19 (Mainz 2011); accessible at: https://apx.lvr.de//media/apx/lvr_archaeologischer_park_/forschung/publikationen/Xantener_Berichte_Band_19.pdf (accessed at 03.06.2020).

⁸ Schmidt, H., *Schutzbauten. Denkmalpflege an Archäologischen Stätten*. 1. Architekturreferat des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts (Stuttgart 1988); Ranelluci, S., *Strutture Protettive e Conservazione dei Siti Archeologici* (Pescarqa 1996).

⁹ Cassar, J./Cefai, S./Grima, R./Stroud, K., *Sheltering archaeological sites in Malta: lessons learnt*. In: Heritage Science volume 6, Article number 36, 2018.

¹⁰ Aslan, Z./Court, S./Teutonico, J. M./Thompson, J. (eds.), *Protective Shelters for Archaeological Sites: proceedings of a symposium*, Herculaneum, Italy, 23–27 September 2013 (London 2018).