In 1995, just a short distance from the city of Şanliurfa in South East Turkey a Kurdish shepherd noticed a number of large, embedded stones, stones which had clearly been worked - and which turned out to be the most astonishing discovery. These stones turned out to be the site of Göbekli Tepe, the world’s oldest example of monumental architecture; a ‘temple’ built at the end of the last Ice Age, 12,000 years ago.

Anatolia is described variously as a melting pot of civilisations and cultures, a bridge between Asia and Europe, a fusion of East and West and many other familiar and over used descriptions, all now rather pedestrian but accurate nonetheless.

It is certainly a fact that Anatolia has the unnerving habit of turning up ‘Lost Civilisations’ and ‘Vanished Cultures.’ It’s unnerving for two reasons: in the modern age we have covered so much ground, physically and intellectually, that we think we should know everything by now, and it is unnerving because, intrinsically, an entire civilisation is a hard thing to lose, especially in a place that is supposed to be a ‘bridge’ and has been tramped across by so many peoples since the very dawn of civilisation itself.

But Anatolia still does it. The story of Schliemann’s discovery of Troy in 1870/71 had the benefit in Western Culture and in the Western literary canon, of being very well known and its discovery was a revelation and a cause for great popular wonder and excitement. The discovery and excavation of Boğazkale was another revelatory event, if less celebrated by the general public. After all, the Hittites were just bit players in a Biblical narrative; not wholly unfamiliar, but more of a footnote. However, academics and scholars were aware of the fact that there was a significant missing component to ancient Near Eastern history, a lacuna just hinted at by tantalising discoveries made in the late 19th century. The discovery and excavation of the Hittite capital, locked away in its Central Anatolian mountain vastness, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries filled in a huge gap, a gap reduced even further by the translation of the Hittite language by the Czech linguist Hrozny in 1915, and the wealth of documentary evidence that had been turned up during excavations at the Royal Library in Hattusha, and which could now be read. However, the discovery of Göbekli Tepe was just a massive shock!

And what has emerged since that day in 1995 is nothing short of extraordinary; a site of significant size containing first circular ‘enclosures’ and then rectangular ‘rooms’ dominated by remarkable carved and decorated monoliths. So far, over 25 of these enclosures have been identified and two of the earlier ones have now been fully excavated down to floor level revealing an unknown and unimagined culture that turned the archaeological world on its head.

The site of Göbekli Tepe
The most startling thing about this site is its great age. Going back to the end of the last Ice Age and first constructed around 10,000 BCE, the site is known as Göbekli Tepe (or in Kurdish, Gîrê Navûkê meaning Pot Belly Hill, or more poetically perhaps, Built 12,000 years ago, Göbekli Tepe is the site with the world’s first monumental architecture. Excavated since 1995, Nicholas Kropacek explores this amazing site and tells the story so far
Göbekli Tepe is a prehistoric site located in Turkey, in the region of Şanlıurfa, near the border with Syria. It is known for its monumental architecture, consisting of circular enclosures with 'T' shaped pillars, which are believed to date back to the early Neolithic period, approximately 12,000 years ago. The site was abandoned around 10,000 years ago, and it was not rediscovered until the late 20th century. The construction of the site was a huge effort, and the stones used for its pillars were transported from a nearby location, indicating a high degree of organization and planning.

The monuments were abandoned for a period of 2,500 years, during which time they were covered by sediment and then buried. This burial evidence has been found at the site, indicating that it was purposefully covered, possibly for religious or symbolic reasons. The site was not actively used for 6,000 years or more before it was rediscovered, and its discovery has led to a rethinking of our understanding of human history, particularly in terms of the development of agriculture and the rise of complex societies.

Göbekli Tepe is a testament to the achievements of early humans, who were able to construct such magnificent structures with the tools and techniques available to them at the time. It is a site that continues to fascinate scholars and the general public alike, as it challenges our understanding of the origins of human civilization and the role that architecture and art played in the development of early societies.
consistent feature and possibly the fox has some totemic value for important members of this culture although, unlike the snake, the fox does not appear to have survived with a significant folkloric role in the wider region today.

Another pillar depicts a grouping of an auroch (a very large and now extinct bovine), a fox and a crane, positioned one above the other in what may represent a narrative of some description. This is a thought-provoking narrative because the depiction of the crane is anatomically incorrect if the carver was depicting what he actually saw in the wild, as the knees of the crane articulate backwards in the same fashion that a human knee does. Any member of a hunting and gathering society would know from an early age that a bird's knee articulates forward, and with a long-legged bird such as a crane this forward movement is very marked indeed. What in fact may be depicted here is a human dressed as a crane. Could this be a hunting scene or possibly a depiction of a dance to invoke the attributes of the creatures being depicted?

This anatomical puzzle is repeated elsewhere. The central pillars in Enclosure ‘A’ do not have the anatomical features such as arms that we see on other pillars at this site and elsewhere but the animal depictions are particularly vivid. Nor do the pillars have any obvious structural purpose.

Enclosure ‘B’ is in the shape of a rough oval measuring about 10 - 15 m (north/ south) and about 9 m (east/ west) and has a constructed terrazzo floor. This enclosure is called the ‘Fox Pillars Building’ because the image of the fox predominates. The two central pillars each have a life-sized fox carved on them, both facing inwards and given their posture, in mid-leap. But interestingly on one of the stones, the fox appears to be pouncing upon a small rodent-like creature that was etched into the pillar at a later date.

Enclosure ‘C’ is dominated by superb renderings of wild boar and birds. Curiously, snakes are completely absent from this enclosure and appear to have been replaced in terms of use and positioning by images of the boar. Along with the two central pillars there are 22 in the inner circle and, so far, eight in the outer circle; several may have been removed prior to the site’s burial. This construction is a little different in that the enclosure is built as a series of up to three concentric circles, one could even describe it as a sort of spiral. At some point after the burial of Enclosure ‘C’ (possibly post Neolithic, but this is uncertain), a large 10 m diameter pit was dug in the central area of the enclosure and both standing central stones were smashed into several pieces. It is impossible to know the circumstances of this episode of iconoclastic vandalism and it is repeated elsewhere at Göbekli Tepe. It has been determined that the violence of this attack was considerable because the eastern pillar was cracked apart by an intense fire.

We do, of course, have numerous examples in our own more recent history to refer to of religious change driving destructive forces: the violence directed by English Puritans against the decorative
elements in England’s great medieval cathedrals and churches right down to the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by Taliban iconoclasts in Afghanistan and the cultural atrocities carried out by ISIL are merely three examples of many. The reconstruction of the western pillar from fragments of the original is adorned with a life-sized fox relief on the inward face in mid-leap southward towards the entrance. The eastern pillar, most of which is missing was adorned with a bull on its inward face. It is fortunate that the violence was only directed at the central pillars, because around the perimeter wall of Enclosure ‘C’ are to be found some of the highest quality stone work at Gobekli Tepe including an extraordinary high relief (Pillar 27) of a free standing feline above a wild boar. The enclosure is built onto the plateau’s surface on the natural bedrock.

Enclosure ‘D’ is referred to as the Stone Age Zoo because of the wide variety of animal imagery. The dominating feature of this enclosure is the massive pair of central ‘T’ shaped stele, clearly intended to represent human figures and monumental in scope. They face south and are set on an ornamental pedestal, one of which is decorated with what appear to be ducks, and stand at an impressive height of at 5.5 m. Both standing pillars have arms clasped at the belly just above a decorated belt and a fox pelt loin cloth with the tail hanging down at the front. The pillar standing eastwards has a life-sized fox in the crook of its right arm leaping to the south. But significantly there are no facial features. Apart from the belt and loin cloth, both figures have what could be described as neck adornments which are clearly symbolic.

This enclosure also has, as one of its perimeter stones, the most discussed, and possibly disturbing set of Gobekli Tepe images of all. This is pillar no. 43, the ‘Vulture Stone.’ The bizarre images on this pillar include, on the left hand side, a vulture holding an orb or egg in an outstretched wing, and lower down there is a scorpion and the imagery is further complicated by the depiction of a headless ithyphallic man. The enclosure is also built on natural bedrock which was levelled and smoothed to construct the central pillars’ pedestals and floor.

There is one further enclosure, Enclosure ‘E’ which is about 100 metres east and slightly south of this grouping of enclosures. Nothing remains except the floor plan and foundation sockets for the central pillars. The floor is carved directly from the bedrock. Just adjacent to the enclosure there are some carved depressions which may be small cisterns carved from the rock; there are other larger examples found along the ridge of Gobekli Tepe. There are no springs in the vicinity, so water supply would have been a problem. There is also a grouping of cup-like depressions carved into the rock which are replicated at other Neolithic sites in the regions but there are no real theories as to what they may have been for.

**Destruction and re-use**

All the enclosures at Level III were filled in prior to the constructions on Level II. It is unclear why this was done but there seems to be a conscious ‘decommissioning’ of the structures at Level III because some pillars were damaged or moved in an organised and controlled manner, while some pillars seem to have been removed entirely. Small artefacts remained and statues were left in situ but toppled. Some of the tops of the pillars in Enclosure ‘C’ are completely broken off. The tops of the intact central pillars have carved, cup-like depressions. It appears that when the Level III structures were buried, just the tops remained above ground and these cup-like depressions were carved once burial was complete.

Once again, the purpose of this is speculative, but receptacles for votive offerings or candles are a reasonable
sorts in the ritual life of the people who ancient enclosures still played a role. It is reasonable to conclude that, although buried, the stones just below. It is also reasonable to use on Level II, people were clearly using the buried enclosures, the tops of which suggest. With the construction and use on Level II, people were clearly using the site and would have been aware of the buried enclosures, the tops of which were protruding just above the surface, evidence of the convocation of standing stones just below. It is also reasonable to conclude that, although buried, the ancient enclosures still played a role of sorts in the ritual life of the people who continued to build and gather here. One cannot be absolutely precise but it would seem that Level III, original construction around 7,500 BCE, was buried in phases after hundreds of years of use. The content of the material used to fill the enclosures in is a huge source of hard data. The composition of the in-fill material is simply refuse produced by hunting, food preparation and consumption mixed in with in-fill material which included the residue of construction, stone working, thousands of flint tools and the remnants of tool manufacture. The spoil tells us some important things about these people. The tools themselves, in the absence of the archaeologist’s basic dating tool, pottery, can be used to produce a broad cultural and chronological context in which data from other sites can be used to produce rough dates.

Level II is a different environment both conceptually and artistically. It is evident that the society and the culture are undergoing an important series of changes while important cultural markers remain. The enclosure spaces are far smaller and much more modest while decorations are simpler and are executed with less skill. They are also far more numerous and are constructed, almost in a jumble of competing floor plans, on top of Level III and sometimes cutting into Level III. They are certainly considerably less ambitiously monumental than before. This is possibly a society that has exhausted itself both economically and spiritually with Level III. It may be a evidence of a transitional period before the abandonment of Göbekli Tepe and the evolution of more settled societies, such as the one at Catalhöyük in the Konya Plain which is dated from about 7,500 BCE.

However, speculation aside, the most elaborate of these now more modest rectangular enclosures is the so-called ‘Lion Building,’ identified by the carving on one of its principle stones. While probably still a purely cult or religious site with no evidence of domesticity, the enclosures are square and in many respects resemble the domestic buildings in other places such as Nevali Çori. It could be that economic and cultural changes are reflected in construction patterns here. Over the 2013/14 season, archaeologists were uncovering another enclosure, Enclosure ‘H,’ about 250 m away from the original Level III excavations and on the other side of the hill towards the North West. This is referred to as the ‘North West Depressions’ and, at first glance, looks almost to mirror the original existing excavation. Also built on Level III this enclosure possesses good sized central stelle set in an oval shaped structure. As with Enclosure ‘C,’ representations of wild boar seem pre-eminent. The enclosure, like all the others, was buried after its useful life. However, somebody, as with Enclosure ‘C,’ took the time and effort to excavate a pit, locate the central standing stones… and destroy one (the other one still awaits investigation).

Why? Clearly what connects Enclosures ‘C’ and ‘H,’ and possibly enclosures yet to be discovered, are design (oval and with an accessing stair case), level (age) and artwork but above all, these two enclosures are connected by identical acts of desecration carried out long after the enclosures were buried! These acts of desecration would suggest a number of possible scenarios none of which necessarily exclude the others. Clearly the act of burying enclosures on Level III and the evolution of the structural design changes seen on Level II indicate a conclusion of life cycle for these structures, and a change of political and economic, although not cultural, hierarchy, fundamentals. The question of deliberate, targeted and heavy destruction in enclosures but continued site use suggests both a continuity of belief for a considerable period of time but with major change in the power dynamics of the society represented at and by this extraordinary site.

The origins of Göbekli Tepe There are many theories contributed by non-academic and ‘alternative’ writers of popular books about the origins of Göbekli Tepe and its builders, most of which are understandably concerned with the amazing and very photogenic remains on Level III. They range from an ‘ancient civilization of amazing complexity’ via vaguely Biblical references to, quite literally, the stars. In terms of stellar alignments, the archaeological team, being careful people, who rely on slowly accumulated and assessed evidence, will not rule this out but do gently point out that there is no evidence of alignment with any star or constellation.

The site is clearly orientated, but the Level III enclosures are orientated southwards and down the Plain of Harran from where the people might have approached and not in relation to the night sky or any apparent astronomical feature; looking at the topography of the area this would seem reasonable. Even today, the most logical approach is from the south. It is possible that this southern alignment faces a processional approach. It is true that the act of processing features strongly in the ritual lives of ancient peoples, evidenced by ancient sites such as the proposed transition between Woodhenge and Stonehenge of the men street to where the Nazca Plains right up to modern times with religious rites such as the Stations of the Cross or state ceremony such as the Stare Opening of Parliament in the United Kingdom. Level II enclosures display no particular alignment pattern.

After the abandonment of Level II, we see nothing happening at Göbekli Tepe other than the slow evolution of Level I which represents the establishment of a rugged agricultural and semi-nomadic life across the environment we see today, with minor contributions during the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods and which hid the drama of the numerous and silent convocations of monolithic beings just below the surface.

The name, Göbekli Tepe, or Hill of the Navel, could well be a faint cultural echo to those very distant times. It is certainly true that many Neolithic cultures were characterised by a symbolic connection to the earth via a magical navel or umbilical cord. Even today, this is a respected and venerated location to which the adorned wishing tree at the top of the mound attests. But we can only speculate as to the precise nature of the seminal changes that went on during this ancient time and which are tantalisingly represented in this amazing place. But to paraphrase a popular warning we hear today in our own rapidly evolving culture… please speculate responsibly.

Professor Klaus Schmidt
Dr Klaus Schmidt first identified the site of Göbekli Tepe in October of 1994. After leading the team excavating the site for nearly 20 years, Professor Schmidt (below) sadly died on 20th July 2014 aged only 60. The uncovering of Göbekli Tepe can be no greater monument to a man’s life’s work.
Getting there

**Flying**
Several international airlines fly into Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city. These include Turkish Airlines, Pegasus, British Airways, Malaysian Airline Systems, Singapore Airlines and Emirates.

**Border crossings**
It is possible to enter Turkey via road at border crossings from Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Georgia and Iran. The border with the Republic of Armenia has been closed since 1993 and currently it is not recommended to attempt to cross from either Syria or Iraq.

**Visas**
From April 2013, Turkey introduced an electronic visa system to replace the previous system of issuing visas on arrival. Applicants are required to log on to www.evisa.gov.tr, make the online payment and download their e-Visa. Further information about cost and permitted length of visit can be found at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Visa Information For Foreigners: www.mfa.gov.tr/visa-information-for-foreigners.en.mfa

**Getting around**
Within Turkey, domestic flights are operated by Anadolu Jet, Borajet and Sun Express, and offer a quick and relatively cheap method of travel. For those on a tighter budget, Turkey also has an extensive network of comfortable inter-city buses, connecting all the major cities with Ankara and Istanbul.

**Weather**
 Summers are very hot and humid in some areas. As soon as one moves away from the sea, temperatures can be scorching. At altitude, however, the climate is almost tropical in some respects and the vegetation is very dense.

Essentials

**Time difference:** GMT + 2.

**Language:** The official language is Turkish, and while English is widely spoken in the capital and coastal resorts, it may be less widely spoken in the country areas.

**Dress:** By contrast with cosmopolitan Istanbul and the coastal resorts along the Aegean and Mediterranean, dress in eastern Turkey remains modest and conservative. Travellers should respect local sensitivities and avoid wearing shorts and sleeveless tops. Women should dress appropriately and cover their heads when entering mosques.

**Electrical current/plugs:** 220 AC volts. Plugs are rounded two-pronged variety.

**Religion:** Constitutionally, Turkey is a secular country, but over 98% of the Turkish population is nominally Muslim. Christians (principally Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox) and Sephardic Jews comprise the tiny remaining minority.

**Water:** It is safe to drink the tap water (and safe to use it for teeth cleaning) but it is recommended to buy bottled water.

**Politics:** The Republic of Turkey has a secular, parliamentary democracy. Former Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was elected President in August 2014 in Turkey’s first direct presidential election.

**Currency:** The local currency in Turkey is the Turkish Lira (TL) available in the following denominations: banknotes: 1, 10, 20, 50, 100 TL; coins: 10, 25 & 50 kuruş and 1 TL. Cash can usually be exchanged without commission at bureaux de change (döviz), banks and hotels. (Note that Scottish notes are not accepted in Turkey.) Exchange rates are published daily in Turkish newspapers and can also be found at www.xe.com/ucc.

**Credit cards:** Throughout Turkey the use of credit cards is becoming more widespread and the network of ATMs is constantly expanding, but outside the main cities in eastern Turkey, travellers are well advised to carry local currency. It is advisable to inform your bank in advance that you are travelling to Turkey as some will automatically put a stop on cards after the first use abroad in an attempt to combat fraud.

Holidays

Fixed holidays are Apr 23, May 19, Aug 30 and Oct 29.

There are also religious festivals whose dates change according to the Muslim lunar calendar and thus occur 12 days earlier each year. These are Ramazan Bayrami / Sugar Feast and Kurban Bayrami / Slaughter Feast.

Getting to Göbekli Tepe

Göbekli Tepe lies 12 km north east of Şanlıurfa near the village of Örençik and can only be reached by car. Alkans Tours offer individual tours to the site on a number of their itineraries plus they offer individual tours or day tours.

To visit the site see www.easternturkeytour.org/tour-gobekli-tepe.htm

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Money

Getting to

This is the end of the reproduction.