HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGY
E-JOURNAL • 2026/1 – SPRING
www.hungarianarchaeology.hu

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Building Community: Göbeklitepe, Taş Tepeler and Life 12,000 Years Ago

Réka Gulyás[1]
Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 15 (2026), Issue 1, pp. 47–52.

For more than thirty years now, news reports and research summaries have continuously appeared concerning the excavations carried out at Göbekli Tepe in south-eastern Türkiye, at Karahan Tepe located 60 km further south, and at a further thirteen Neolithic settlements, together with the remains of the unique culture discovered there. In recent years these reports have become more frequent and have attracted increasing public attention; however, only a few objects from these sites have so far been displayed in European museums. For this reason, the archaeological exhibition 'Göbeklitepe, Taş Tepeler und das Leben vor 12.000 Jahren', which opened in early February at the James Simon Gallery on Berlin's Museum Island, is of particular importance and interest. The exhibition offers a comprehensive insight into the everyday life, architecture, art and belief system of one of the earliest settled societies (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Göbekli Tepe, Building C (photo by Yusuf Aslan)

The team of German and Turkish archaeologists led by curators Dr Barbara Helwing and Necmi Karul placed great emphasis on making the experience of these sites tangible for visitors through modern exhibition technology and a wide range of media. One of the exhibition's major strengths is that it presents not only the finds themselves, but also the situations in which former hunter-gatherer communities may have found themselves during the process of settling down some 12,000 years ago. In addition, the exhibition draws attention to the theme of community building, an issue that has once again become highly relevant today. In eight thematic sections, the exhibition presents the world of the first settled communities through the various stages of life, from birth and everyday existence to death.

SPACE AND TIME

The first section serves as an introduction and provides general orientation; its primary aim is to place the excavated sites within their spatial and chronological context. A timeline clearly illustrates the archaeological phases of the south-west Asian Epipalaeolithic, spanning the period between 20,000 BC and 10,000/9,500 BC. Following the amelioration that came after the Last Glacial Maximum, another cold phase lasting more than a thousand years – the Younger Dryas period – began around 10,900 BC. During this time, the carrying capacity of the Near East (the Levant) declined drastically, affecting hunter-gatherer communities particularly severely.

Special attention is drawn to the detailed map showing the region termed the "Fertile Crescent" by the Egyptologist James Henry Breasted in 1916, whose favourable climate enabled permanent settlement (*Fig. 2*). Following the last Ice Age, the Holocene warming period began. Owing to the exceptionally favourable climatic conditions, a rich flora and fauna developed, allowing hunter-gatherer groups to remain in one place for longer periods. Sedentary life brought about a number of consequences: wild plants were

[1] Independent researcher; e-mail: greka67@hotmail.com

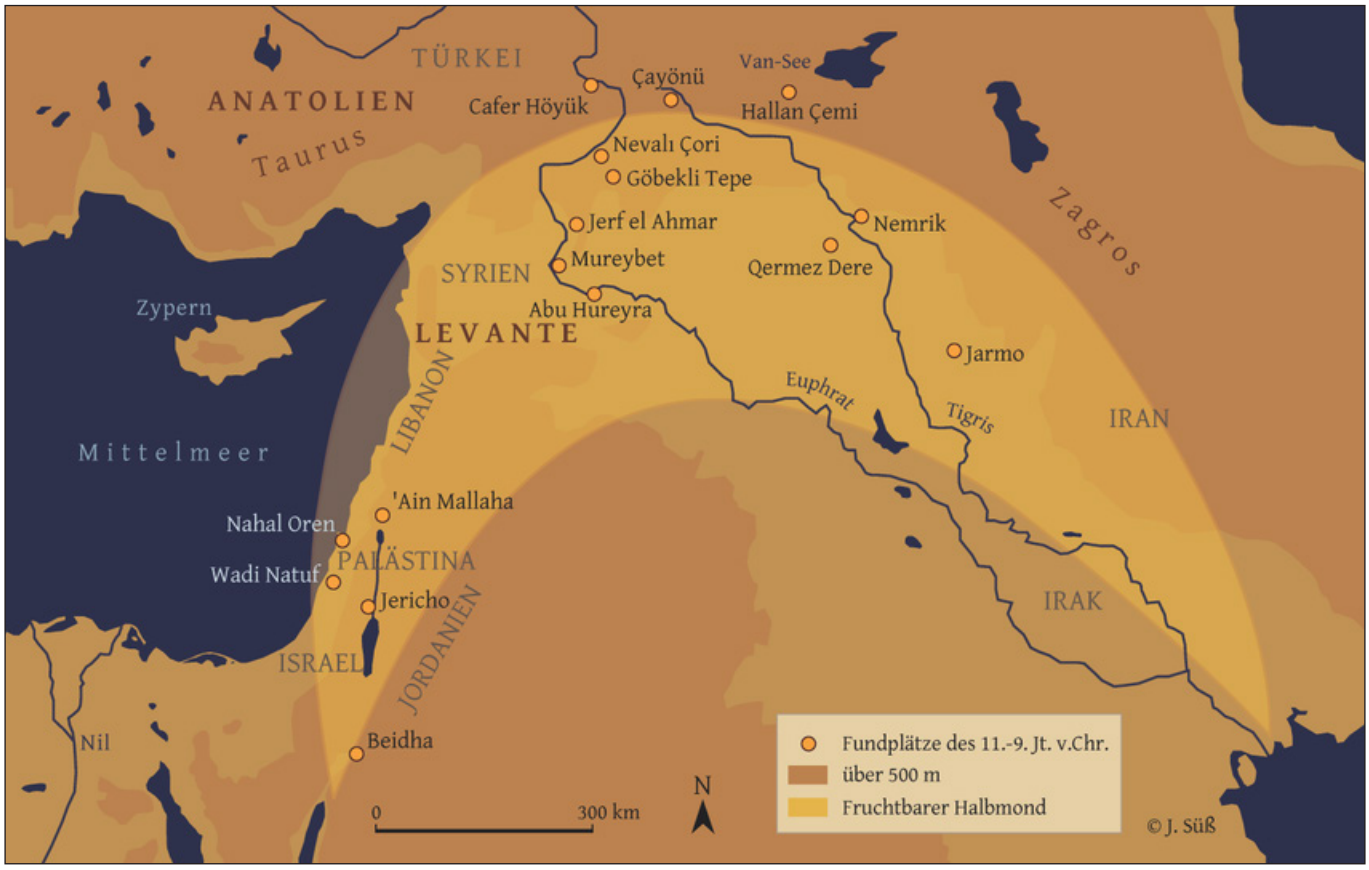

Fig. 2. The Fertile Crescent (© Research Gate)

gradually domesticated into cultivated crops, and wild animals were tamed. The population grew rapidly and people organised themselves into groups performing different tasks. Meeting places became necessary in order to discuss and distribute responsibilities. In the region of Göbekli Tepe, in present-day Türkiye, enormous building complexes were created for this purpose, where ritual ceremonies were also held, as suggested by the human and animal depictions found on the structures. Several examples of these can be seen in the following rooms of the exhibition.

Another important aspect of the introductory section is the presentation of the international Taş Tepeler ('Stone Hills') project, which has now been operating for five years. Hungarian specialists had already been introduced to the project two years earlier through a digital exhibition organised at the Hungarian National Museum within the framework of the Turkish–Hungarian cultural year. An international team of researchers is investigating various aspects of the period between the 10th and 7th millennia BC using interdisciplinary methods, ranging from environmental reconstruction to ethnoarchaeological documentation. In recent years, numerous sensational discoveries have already been made, allowing a more accurate understanding of Neolithic life and customs.

Fig. 3. The central hall of the exhibition with the T-shaped pillars and projected carvings (photo by David von Becker)

Leaving the first room, visitors are confronted with a theatrical scene. Carvings associated with the T-shaped pillars are projected onto white columns and replicas of the original excavated pillars. Between these columns stand display cases, monitors, and installations that provide detailed informa-

tion on the everyday life of this Stone Age society. Although these white replicas may appear somewhat "sterile" in comparison with the originals, the solution is nevertheless highly effective in conveying a sense of space (*Fig. 3*).

BUILDINGS

At the Neolithic settlements of the Şanlıurfa region in south-eastern Anatolia, both small pueblo-like dwellings and monumental buildings were constructed from local limestone. The latter, like artificial caves, were dug deep into the ground and therefore remained largely dark inside. Access to the buildings was gained either through an opening in the roof or through a side entrance. In the centre of the main space stood two large T-shaped stone pillars supporting the roof. With their lateral 'arms' and 'hands clasped in front of the body', the pillars resemble abstract human figures. Smaller pillars stood along the outer walls, often decorated with reliefs depicting animals; in the flickering light of torches these sculptures created the illusion of movement. The curators reconstructed this phenomenon in a video installation, allowing visitors to experience something of this extraordinary atmosphere. The construction of these gigantic buildings and the erection of the pillars required the well-coordinated work of large numbers of people, providing yet another example of the organised functioning of prehistoric communities.

The next section introduces visitors to the process of settlement itself. This includes house construction, the domestication and keeping of animals, and agriculture. As the curators emphasise, this process laid the foundations of present-day civilisation. At the same time, however, they also point out that these activities represented a major intervention in the formerly untouched natural environment, the effects of which were not entirely positive.

PEOPLE

But who visited these structures, and how did they perceive themselves? The faces looking out from the pillars appear highly simplified. In the Neolithic period, a straight nose and two incisions marking the eyes and eyebrows were sufficient to represent the human face. Yet in some cases distinctive individual features were nevertheless emphasised, such as deeply furrowed foreheads or broad smiles (*Fig. 4*). Alongside the depiction of motionless solitary individuals, representations of groups also appear, for example in dancing scenes. The finds suggest that the inhabitants of the settlements were largely equal in status, although jewellery indicating special social positions had already begun to appear. Some of these objects were made from exotic stones: artefacts carved from green jade probably served as status markers of individuals occupying a higher position within the hierarchy.

Fig. 4. Human head from Karahantepe, 9400–8000 BC (© Karahantepe Excavation Archive, Bekir Köşker)

HUNTING

The first settled communities still lived primarily from hunting. Animals were captured and killed not only with weapons but also by means of so-called 'desert kites': migrating herds, such as gazelles and wild asses, were driven by hunters between stone

walls. The animals fled further and further inward until they became trapped in the semicircular enclosure at the narrow end of the funnel-shaped structure, where they could easily be captured. The drivers and hunters worked together in a highly coordinated manner. The advantage of this method was that the animals were generally only injured rather than killed outright. This allowed the hunters to select which individuals to slaughter and use for meat.

In addition to these traps – still clearly visible today in aerial photographs – flint and obsidian chipped stone tools were found, which prehistoric hunters used in killing and processing the animals. Over time the technique was refined to such an extent that animals could be captured unharmed, including young specimens, which were then kept around the settlement, tamed and eventually bred. As animal husbandry spread, the importance of hunting declined, although the killing of large game remained a significant event for a long time.

FOOD

The collective acquisition, sharing and communal consumption of food formed another bond between individuals and contributed to the development of community cohesion. Food for festive occasions was prepared in kitchens located beside the monumental buildings. Grain was ground, roots and spices were crushed and rubbed, and the technique of fermentation was already known, making it possible to produce alcoholic beverages among other things. The size of the vessels also suggests that huge quantities of food were prepared both during the construction of the monumental buildings and for ceremonial occasions, in order to feed workers or large celebratory gatherings.

With the population increase that accompanied settlement, it became essential to ensure a constant and reliable food supply. Initially wild cereals were used, followed later by their domesticated forms, which became one of the staple components of the diet. Cereals had many advantages: they could be stored easily, provided considerable energy and could be processed in various ways. Yet cereal consumption also had disadvantages. Skeletal remains, particularly those of women, show traces of heavy labour – especially on the shoulders and legs – caused by carrying sacks and grinding grain. Dental evidence also reveals the effects of anaemia and iron deficiency resulting from reduced meat consumption and more frequent childbirth.

ANIMALS

Animals occupied a central role in the imagery of the Neolithic period. Through hunting and capturing them, people observed animal behaviour with great precision, and those possessing artistic talent created remarkably detailed representations of them, generally carved from limestone. Dangerous animals in particular inspired the artists: leopards are shown baring their teeth (*Fig. 5*), aurochs lowering their heads ready to charge, and wild boars captured in the midst of an uncontrolled trot. Interestingly, these are all male and aggressive animals, in some cases highlighted with coloured pigments. Gazelles, however, despite being among the most frequently hunted species, are absent from the imagery. The intention, therefore, was not primarily to represent the contemporary fauna, but rather a world full of danger. Certain sculptures also combine human and animal figures, such as the leopard crawling across the back of a human figure. The meaning of these sculptures remains unresolved. It is unclear whether they symbolised danger or, conversely, some form of protection.

Fig. 5. Leopard statue from Karahan Tepe (© Şanlıurfa Museum, Yusuf Aslan)

CROSSING BETWEEN WORLDS

Living in close proximity to nature meant that people not only observed plants and animals with exceptional attentiveness, but also developed a special relationship with them. Certain individuals were more sensitive than others to signs and phenomena arising from nature; they attempted to interpret them, translate them into their own symbolic language, and establish connections between worlds. Wearing masks and costumes, they themselves transformed into hybrid beings, bird-people or fox-people, thereby partially transcending the boundaries of reality. This was not done for its own sake, but always for the benefit of the community, in the hope of securing better hunting, weather, harvests and thus improved living conditions. According to the curators, it is still too early to speak of religion in the strict sense in these societies, since supernatural beings and gods had not yet appeared, nor consequently any worship directed towards them.

HUMAN REPRESENTATIONS

Human depictions are characteristic throughout the Neolithic period. While male figures dominate the earlier phases of the Neolithic, female figures become more prominent in the later period, following the spread of settled life. Both sexes are portrayed 'in the fullness of their strength': men frequently with exaggerated phalluses, women with features and poses associated with fertility and reproduction. Alongside these relatively explicit sculptures, however, more schematic and gender-neutral figurines have also been found, whose interpretation still remains uncertain.

LIFE AND DEATH

The finds indicate that Neolithic people maintained close relationships with their dead. Although burials are relatively rare, it is nevertheless clear that the deceased were cared for and that their graves were revisited. Mummified corpses and skeletons were well known, and the depiction of ribs and collarbones also appears in their art. The vulture played a special role in the cult of the dead. Several depictions show headless human bodies accompanied by vultures. Male, female and child skeletons without skulls have been

Fig. 6. Aerial view of excavations at Karahan Tepe (© Karahantepe Project Archive/Yusuf Aslan)

recovered from burials. The skulls were remodelled with clay and painted with ochre. Some were hidden in niches, while others were strung on cords and suspended: people presumably believed that the soul resided not in the body but in the skull. What may seem shocking to us today probably formed part of a respectful commemorative tradition within their own worldview.

After making their way through the galleries and forming their own impressions of this extraordinary culture, visitors may admire, in the exhibition's final section, the photographs of Isabel Muñoz. The Spanish photographer visited the excavations on several occasions and captured the depictions on the pillars with great artistic sensitivity and in exceptional quality. These photographs have been enlarged to monumental size, allowing the public to admire the carvings from multiple viewpoints and in minute detail.

Excavations continue at all of the sites, and it is to be hoped that the latest discoveries will soon be presented elsewhere as well (*Fig. 6*).

The exhibition in Berlin is open to visitors until 19 July 2026.