


GöbekliTepe: A Window into Early Human Rituals, Animal Symbolism, and Possible Pre-Veterinary Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study explores GöbekliTepe (sometimes spelled “Göbekli Tepe”), a prehistoric site in southeastern Turkey, widely regarded as a transformative discovery in understanding early human civilization. Dated to approximately 12,000 years ago, GöbekliTepe challenges traditional views that monumental architecture and complex societies emerged only after the advent of agriculture. Its monumental T-shaped pillars and intricate carvings reflect advanced social organization and religious or ritualistic significance within a hunter-gatherer context. This study examines GöbekliTepe’s ritual architecture and symbolism, the cosmological and spiritual significance of animal figures, and early evidence of animal care, revealing the complex belief systems and large-scale cooperative capacities of hunter-gatherer societies. These findings highlight that early Neolithic communities had multifaceted relationships with animals, integrating practicality, spirituality, and social identity before the advent of settled agricultural life. Further interdisciplinary research is recommended to deepen our understanding of GöbekliTepe’s symbolic, social, and potential proto-veterinary practices, thereby continuing to redefine the trajectory of human history.

Keywords: Animals, Archaeo-zoological, GöbekliTepe, Veterinary Medicine.

INTRODUCTION

GöbekliTepe, located in southeastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), has been hailed as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. Dated to around 12,000 years ago—preceding the advent of agriculture—it upends conventional assumptions about the origins of civilization (1, 2, 3, 4). Formerly, it was believed that large-scale architectural projects and social complexity emerged only after established farming communities. However, GöbekliTepe’s massive T-shaped pillars, intricate animal carvings, and potential ritual significance highlight a sophisticated hunter-gatherer society (5, 6, 7).

Recent scholarship has also considered the possibility of early human-animal relationships at GöbekliTepe, including rudi-

mentary veterinary or animal-care practices (4, 8, 9). In this review, key themes and findings from the literature are compiled to illustrate the following:

- How GöbekliTepe’s architecture and art reflect ritualistic functions.
- The diversity of animal depictions and their potential symbolic connotations.
- Archaeo-faunal evidence and the suggestion of pre-veterinary or proto-veterinary practices.
- Broader implications for our understanding of early Neolithic societies.

1. Overview of GöbekliTepe and Its Significance

Discovery and Context

GöbekliTepe was first identified in the 1960s by American archaeologist Peter Benedict, though its importance was not fully realized until the 1990s excavations led by German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt (10). The site features multiple circular or oval enclosures constructed with towering T-shaped limestone pillars, some weighing several tons and quarried from nearby outcrops (3, 10, 11). The lack of domestic structures (e.g., storage rooms and clear residential units) has led many researchers to conclude that GöbekliTepe operated primarily as a ceremonial center rather than a permanent settlement (2, 3, 12).

GöbekliTepe as a Ritual Centre

Scholars emphasize that the absence of everyday artifacts or food-production installations suggests periodic gatherings for social or religious ceremonies (3, 10, 12). The enormous effort required to shape and transport the pillars indicates advanced social organization and a shared religious or cultural motivation (1, 3). Some interpret the T-shaped pillars as anthropomorphic, possibly representing deities, totemic beings, or ancestral spirits central to the beliefs of early Neolithic societies (2, 5, 13).

2. Animal Representations in GöbekliTepe's Art

Symbolism and Carving Styles

Animal motifs carved on GöbekliTepe's pillars are a prominent feature of the site, suggesting a complex symbolic repertoire. Scholars have discussed how these depictions likely encoded both cosmological beliefs and social identities (2, 5, 14). The animals most frequently identified in the carvings include:

- Snakes: Often shown in coiled or spiraling forms, frequently associated with chthonic (underworld) symbolism, regeneration, or fertility (2, 14).
- Foxes: Common in both carvings and faunal remains, pointing to possible totemic or mythic significance—perhaps as tricksters or intermediaries (5, 10).
- Wild Boar: Prominent in artwork but less abundant in bone assemblages, suggesting these animals had symbolic status beyond nutritional value (1).
- Aurochs (Wild Cattle): Notable in both art and faunal remains, likely revered for their strength and also valued as a substantial food resource (4, 9, 15).
- Cranes: Their depiction may reflect seasonal cycles or migratory patterns important to hunter-gatherers (3).
- Dodo: The idea that certain large, flightless bird carvings might represent a Dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) has arisen in some commentary, though *Raphus cucullatus* was endemic to Mauritius and is widely believed extinct by the late 17th century

(18). Most specialists consider these carvings more plausibly local birds or vultures.

- Felids (Leopards/Lions): Emblems of power or protection, reflecting the predators' formidable presence (5, 10).
- Gazelles: Often associated with dry, open landscapes, possibly revered for speed and grace (2).
- Hemione (Asiatic Wild Ass): Indicative of open steppe environments and resource exploitation (14).
- Wild Sheep: Although not as common in the art, their occasional presence suggests a symbolic or ritual role (1).

3. Archaeofaunal Evidence: Insights from The Literature

Faunal Assemblages and Butchery

Archaeo-zoological studies of GöbekliTepe show a large number of animal bones with clear butchery marks, underscoring skilled meat processing and possibly organized feasting (10, 15, 16). Some species—like the aurochs—appear central to both subsistence and ceremonial activities, with carefully executed slaughter or cut marks that may signify sacrifice (9, 16). Fox remains in particularly high frequency could suggest their pelts or bones were utilized for tools, clothing, or ornaments (3, 5).

Pathological Findings and Possible Animal Care

Some faunal remains display signs of healed fractures or bone pathologies, indicating that animals survived injuries long enough for bones to heal—hinting at human intervention or care. Such observations have prompted suggestions of rudimentary “pre-veterinary” practices, wherein injured animals were protected to maintain their symbolic or utilitarian value (4, 8, 9). Snake venom or oils may have been used medicinally or ritually (14), and powerful animal bones (e.g., from bulls or sheep) could have been crafted into talismans or healing amulets (17).

4. Possible Pre-Veterinary Practices

Theoretical Context

While formal veterinary science would not emerge until much later in human history, evidence from GöbekliTepe alludes to early forms of animal management. This hypothesis aligns with anthropological theories on shamanic or healing roles within preliterate societies (5, 14). A caretaker or “proto-veterinarian” might have recognized the importance of tending to certain animals—be it for ritual, symbolic prestige, or practical resources such as milk, hides, or bone tools (1, 4).

Examples from the Literature

- Medical Use of Animals
 - o Snake Products: In many ancient cultures, snakes represent regeneration and healing; venom or snake oils

might have been applied in ceremonial or medicinal contexts (14).

o Bones/Skins: Strong animals (e.g., wild cattle, sheep) could be used as protective charms or therapeutic items (17).

• Animal Sacrifice in Rituals

o Selecting Healthy Specimens: Officials or spiritual leaders may have inspected animals for offerings to ensure their ritual purity (2, 16).

o Slaughter Techniques: Specific butchery methods—observed through cut marks—point to ritual protocols that also ensure the meat’s hygienic processing (1, 15).

5. Broader Impact On Prehistoric Studies

GöbekliTepe has reframed scholarly debates about the Neolithic Revolution, highlighting how monumental construction and intricate ritual frameworks could precede established agriculture (1, 6, 7, 9). The site’s emphasis on animal iconography and the possibility of early animal care challenges the traditional notion that humans viewed animals solely as sources of sustenance. Instead, it suggests a more complex and reverent relationship, merging practicality, spirituality, and communal identity (8, 9).

CONCLUSION

GöbekliTepe stands as a milestone in our understanding of early Neolithic societies, illustrating that hunter-gatherer groups could indeed undertake massive building projects and maintain intricate belief systems. The site’s extraordinary animal carvings—ranging from snakes and foxes to aurochs—reveal a vibrant symbolic world, where fauna was interwoven into the spiritual and communal fabric of daily life.

Moreover, the archaeo-faunal record indicates organized consumption, potential ritual sacrifice, and even traces of possible animal care or “pre-veterinary” intervention. While conclusive evidence of veterinary practices remains open to interpretation, the presence of healed animal bones and symbolic emphasis on certain species strongly points to early—and quite sophisticated—forms of human–animal interaction.

Future research might focus on comparing GöbekliTepe’s faunal assemblages and symbolic motifs with those of other contemporaneous sites, refining our grasp of the social, spiritual, and potentially medical significance of animals in the prehistoric Near East. By integrating archaeological, zoological, and anthropological scholarship, investigations at GöbekliTepe continue to challenge and enrich our understanding of the factors that shaped the trajectory of human civilization.

DECLARATIONS

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