

Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy in Göbekli Tepe:

A Comparison of Scientific and Supernatural Interpretations

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Abstract

This paper will use recent interpretation of the Göbekli Tepe (GT) archaeological site to outline some of the best markers of scientific research, focusing on the following: referencing a reliable source, presenting reasonable skepticism, and providing accurate correlations to other sites. In the process, it will also highlight telltale signs of pseudoarchaeology. In order to do this, some texts of dubious academic quality have been referenced. They will be considered accurate in their presentation of common fallacies in reasoning and interpretation as opposed to actual analysis of archaeological sites. This paper will also discuss some of the unique issues facing a site so young in the excavation and interpretation process. Throughout this paper the abbreviation KYO may be used to represent the phrase thousand-years-old.

Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy in Göbekli Tepe:

A Comparison of Scientific and Supernatural Interpretations of Turkish Archaeological Anomaly

Rarely is the world of archaeology shaken the way it has been since the unearthing of the monument site in Turkey named Göbekli Tepe. It is estimated that only 5% of the entire site has been excavated (Curry, 2008). What little has been uncovered, however, is more than enough to indicate that the work done at this site will challenge the long-held assumptions about human cultural development, especially as it relates to agriculture. A site of this magnitude, unfortunately, also draws the attention of individuals with devoted interest in the supernatural. Given Göbekli Tepe's already profound implications for archaeological understanding, it is important to lay a scientific foundation for all analysis and interpretation of the incredible monuments and artifacts found therein.

Site Overview

Göbekli Tepe, meaning “navel hill” (Curry, 2008) or “potbelly hill” (Mann, 2011), is situated near the Euphrates River, East of the Taurus Mountains in modern-day Turkey. Its location is close to Nevalı Çori, a previously discovered Turkish site. While the symbols found at GT bear some resemblance to those found in Nevalı Çori and Jerf el-Ahmar, a second site south of GT in modern-day Syria, GT stands out in the fact that it appears to have no residential or settlement structures. It is made up solely of large limestone pillars with predatory animals engraved throughout. Excavation of the site began in 1995 under the direction of Klaus Schmidt, a German archaeologist working under the German Archaeological Institute. Preliminary interpretation of the site catalogs it as a religious temple complex.

What makes Göbekli Tepe truly remarkable however is that radiocarbon dating indicates the site is 11,000 years old, predating both the Pyramids of Giza and Stonehenge by several millennia. Its construction also precedes the known evidence of agricultural development. Clearly, the implications of this site are massive in understanding the development of early human civilization. The magnitude of this discovery invites amateur archaeologists and supernatural spiritualists to offer their own interpretation. There are several markers of objective science that can be used to judge the trustworthiness of a given book or article about GT. Three of the easiest to identify are: referencing a reliable source, presenting reasonable skepticism, and providing accurate correlations to other sites.

Reliable Source

While Curry and Mann provide slightly varying explanations for the monuments and symbols at GT, they consistently reference Klaus Schmidt directly. They both treat Schmidt as the expert of the site, and rightly so. Collins, in contrast, rarely references Schmidt's own interpretation of Göbekli Tepe, preferring instead to lean on the ideas of fellow pseudoscientists like Graham Hancock (2014). When Collins does mention Schmidt, it is only in passing as he describes the history or ongoing work done at GT. If one were to read Collins text alone, one could easily assume that Schmidt's thoughts on his work aligned succinctly with Collins; this is not the case.

Curry and Mann also reference established scientific techniques and standards for information like dating of the site. While Collins may list dates and ages of various sites throughout his writing, he does not demonstrate an understanding of how these facts are determined. In this way, Collins fails to establish himself as a credible scientist, though his author biography would suggest otherwise. Collins seems to enjoy referencing obscure sites and

cultural anomalies, but does little to provide a source for the information or its relevance to GT. This tendency for weakly linking various sites to GT will be discussed in further detail below.

Reasonable Skepticism

Another marker of scientific objectivity present in Curry and Mann's work, but missing from Collins's is the frequent introduction of reasonable skepticism. Curry is quick to use the word "if" before presenting potential interpretations of the site. For example: "If Göbekli Tepe is truly 11,000 years old, it also challenges the idea that symbolism and agriculture were first developed in the Levant—the area that includes modern Jordan, Israel, and Syria—and spread north." (2008). Mann likewise is hesitant to make broad, definitive statements about GT, preferring instead to remind the reader that any analysis of GT will be limited due to the limited amount of excavation done.

Collins, in contrast, has based his entire book around huge, challenging ideas that would be hard to prove even in a site that were completely excavated. Instead of prefacing his ideas with a statement about uncertainty and preliminary work, he uses words like "clearly" and "undoubtedly" to present his outlandish claims as the only possible explanation for what has been unearthed at GT. While his linguistic choices are meant, no doubt, to instill a sense of confidence, they, in fact have the opposite of casting Collins as a con-man. Everything sounds too-good-to-be-true and his lack of consideration for alternative leaves the reader questioning Collins's ability to critically analyze any theory, especially his own.

Accurate Connections to Other Sites

From the start of his book, Collins is quick to compare Göbekli Tepe to other monumental sites like Stonehenge and the Pyramids of Giza. Curry and May make comparisons

as well, but they differ in style. While May uses Stonehenge and the Pyramids to illustrate the kinds of information such sites provide, and Curry uses nearby sites like Nevali Çori and Jerf el-Ahmar to show logical similarities in symbols, Collins argues that the Giza Pyramids and the pillars of Göbekli Tepe were built for the same purpose under the direction of the same, supernatural beings. Collins even claims that both sites were oriented to honor the constellation Leo, even though GT predates the earliest references to the Leo by five to seven thousand years (Pasachoff, 2006). These absurd connections and claims make it very difficult for the reader to view Collins as a reliable source of information regarding any archaeological site.

Conclusions

Göbekli Tepe is very easily one of the most important and profound archaeological discoveries of this century. It will continue to play a very important role in understanding human culture, religion, and history. It is the magnitude of this site that is also its downfall. It attracts fringe “scientists” eager to hijack the work being done to bolster their own implausible theories. Such hijacking could, perhaps, be tolerated if authors like Collins would at least maintain a scientific framework to their arguments. Unfortunately (or fortunately) they rarely do, making it relatively easy to determine the reliability of a given piece of writing. Göbekli Tepe will likely remain a beacon of “evidence” of supernatural machinations, but in time such farfetched theories will be outshined by the real interpretation of the site. In the case of GT, fact is truly far more compelling than fiction.

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