

Göbekli Tepe's Pillar 43. Does it show a comet impact or the journey of the soul?

GÖBEKLI TEPE'S PILLAR 43: AN ASTRONOMICAL INTERPRETATION

Andrew Collins and Rodney Hale

No feature at Göbekli Tepe has aroused more interest than Enclosure D's Pillar 43, popularly known as the "Vulture Stone." Just recently it has become the focus of worldwide attention with claims in a peer-reviewed paper that its relief imagery is a detailed snapshot of the night sky on the day in 10,950 BCE when the earth was devastated by a comet impact (Sweetman & Tsikritsis, 2017). Although finding favour among science journalists, these ideas have received a cold reception from the archaeological team responsible for excavations at the site (Notroff, 2017). So what is really being conveyed by the pillar's compelling imagery, created as much as 11,500 years ago? Does it really show the moment of a comet impact, or could there be a more realistic solution to this baffling mystery?

Ancient mysteries writer Andrew Collins and chartered engineer Rodney Hale take a fresh look at this subject, realising the key to understanding Pillar 43's astronomical nature is the ball over the left wing of the principal vulture shown among its carved relief. Almost certainly it represents the northern celestial pole, long seen in shamanic tradition as the "hole in the sky" through which human souls could access the Upper World. With this knowledge, it becomes clear that the pillar's carved relief is a multi-layered signboard created to aid the soul's journey from its physical environment to the land of the dead.



Göbekli Tepe's Pillar 43 (pic credit: Andrew Collins, 2017).

Identifying the pillar's main vulture is always going to be central to this debate, a realization that has preoccupied the minds of every investigator who has examined the stone since Spanish archaeoastronomer Juan Antonio Belmonte identified its carved scorpion as a representation of the constellation of Scorpius (Belmonte, 2010). The vulture's close proximity to the scorpion has suggested to some that it is Sagittarius ((Burley, 2013; Hancock, 2015: 318-27), while to others it is Cygnus (Vahradyan and Vahradyan, 2103; Collins, 2014: 98-104).

Yet theories are simply theories. Just because a relief might look like an asterism known to the Mesopotamians or ancient Greeks does not mean the match has been proved. More substantial evidence is needed to take the matter further. In the case of Pillar 43, this must include, for instance, the suspected construction date of Enclosure D within which it has, presumably, stood since the time of its manufacture (see fig. 1). Knowing this can help us better determine what the Göbekli builders actually saw when they looked up into the night sky. Radiocarbon dating of organic materials removed from the walls of the installation offer a series of dates in the range of 9745-9314 BCE (Schmidt & Dietrich, 2010), implying that its construction took place sometime around 9600-9500 BCE.

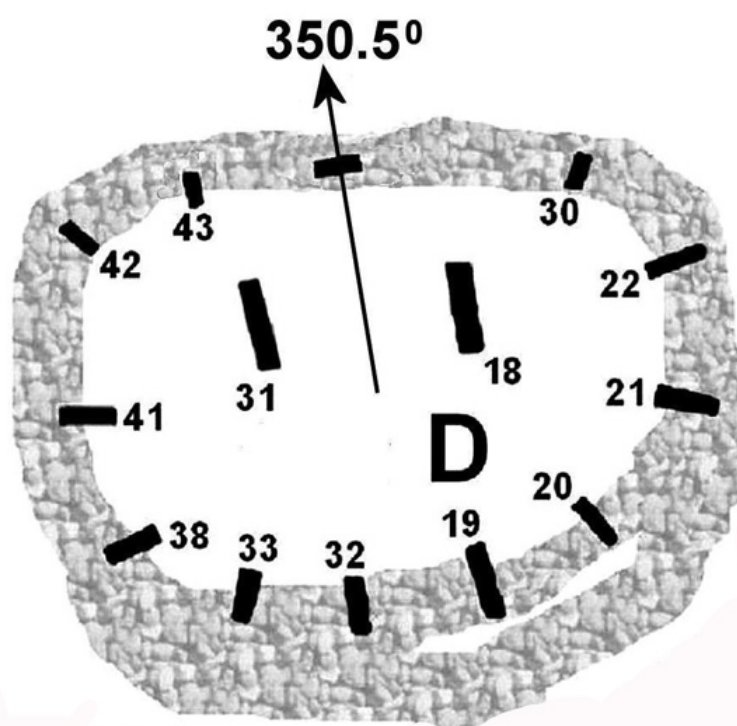


Figure 1. Gobekli Tepe's Enclosure D with Pillar 43 marked. The porthole stone is immediately to its east.

Points of Coordination

Aside from the vulture, scorpion and several other strange creatures seen on both the head and stem of Pillar 43 (see fig. 2), two other key features within its carved relief could provide fixed points of coordination between the skies of 9600 BCE and the positioning of any astronomical figures shown as carved relief. These are the horizontal dividing line between the head and stem and the ball above the wing of the vulture. Those who interpret the vulture as a representation of Sagittarius identify this circle as the sun. Yet if the Göbekli builders had wanted to depict the sun they would have ensured there was no ambiguity as to what the observer was seeing when examining the pillar's relief imagery, especially as filled circles were regularly employed at prehistoric sites across southern Anatolia to represent the human soul (Uyanik, 1974: 12).

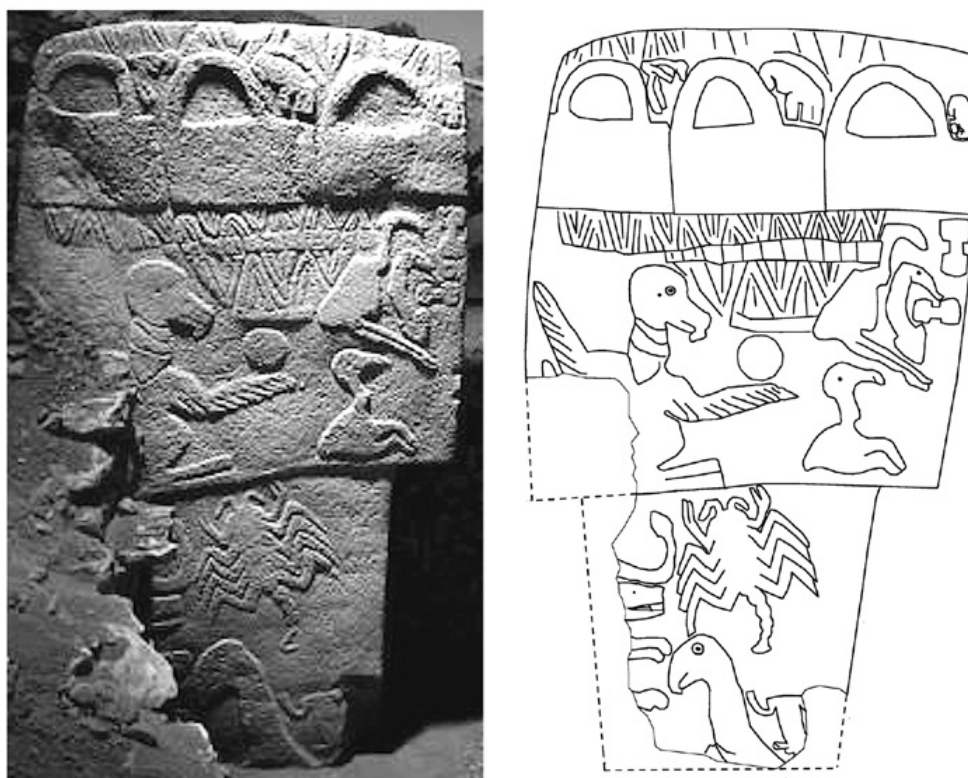


Figure 2. Left, Göbekli Tepe's Pillar 43 and, right, its individual features highlighted as a line drawing. Drawn by Rodney Hale from a mixture of photos of the stone from slightly different angles.

A more plausible explanation is needed, one that also makes sense of the ball's possible role as the disembodied head and soul of the headless individual at the base of the pillar, a theory proposed by Andrew Collins (2014) and separately by the archaeological team working at Göbekli Tepe (Dietrich, 2016). Since the vulture's W-shaped wings appear to tilt toward the ball positioned over its left wing it could suggest that the latter is located somewhere in the same area of sky, presuming, of course, that all these components are indeed astronomical in nature. So if the pillar's main vulture, scorpion, dividing line and ball are all elements of the same celestial picture, can they be matched with key features of the night sky of 9600 BCE? Using a suitable sky program provides a quite simple solution. If the dividing line between the two sections of the pillar is taken to be the local horizon and the constellation of Scorpius is lined up with the approximate position of the stone's scorpion, the ball above the wing of the vulture corresponds perfectly with the northern celestial pole, the turning point of the heavens (see fig. 3). During the epoch of 9600 BCE the northern celestial pole was located in the constellation of Hercules, although no bright star was close enough to act as pole star.

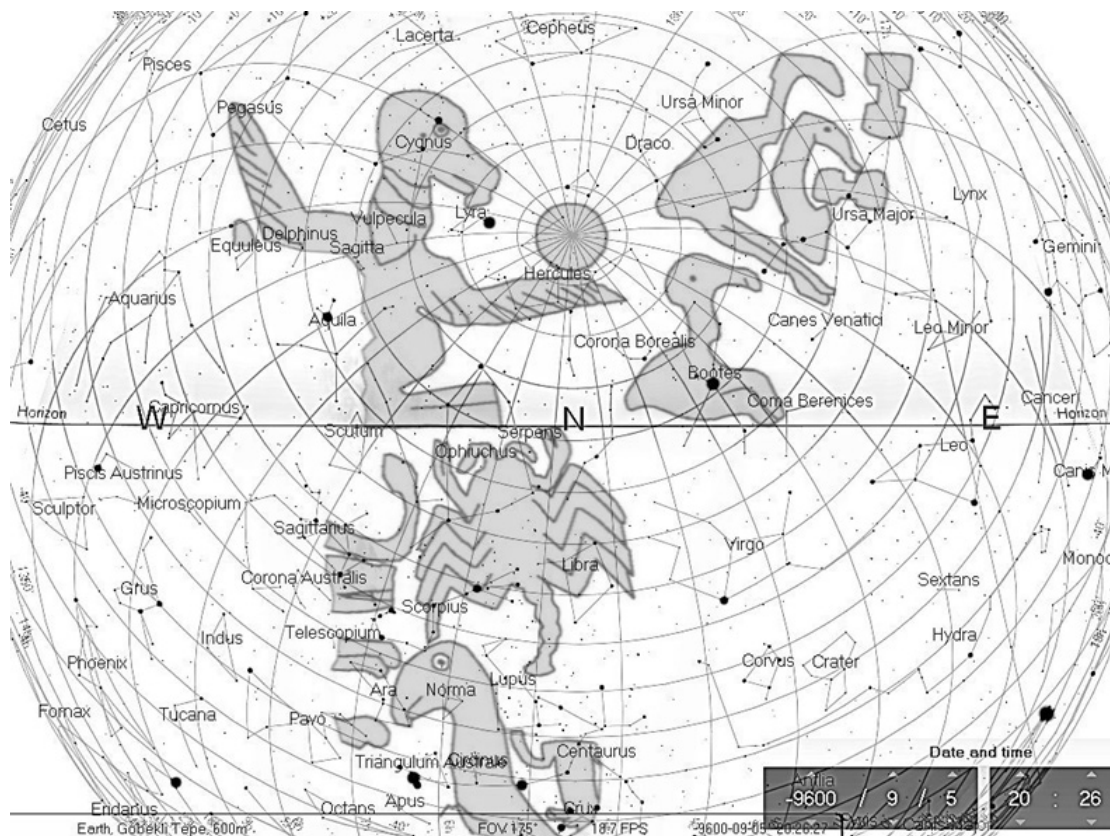


Figure 3. Schematic overlay of key features of Pillar 43 overlaid on a snapshot of the sky taken from the Stellarium sky program for the latitude of Göbekli Tepe for a date of 9600 BCE, its approximate date of manufacture based on radiocarbon dating evidence.

Hole in the Sky

Identifying the ball as the turning point of the northern night sky makes sense of its role as the disembodied head and soul of the headless figure seen at the bottom of Pillar 43. In the shamanic-based beliefs and practices of tribal cultures in Siberia, such as the Chukchee and Altaians, the northern celestial pole is seen as a hole through which the soul passes to gain entry to the afterlife. Indeed, this "hole in the sky" was compared with the round smoke hole of a yurt or tent, through which the soul of the shaman, and presumably those who have died inside the yurt, navigate to reach the Upper World (Eliade, 1987: 17, 19, 30). Indeed, in shamanic tradition all three worlds - the Below World, Middle World and Upper World - are linked via similar such holes.

Identifying the Vulture

If the ball on Pillar 43 does constitute the northern celestial pole then, with the very slightly askew dividing line between the head and stem acting as the local horizon and the scorpion as Scorpius the main central vulture corresponds with the region of sky occupied by the constellation of Cygnus. What is more, its stars match very well the vulture's general appearance, angle and overall proportions (see fig. 4). This surmise seems particularly apparent in the case of the vulture's wings, which resemble those of Cygnus in its role as a celestial bird. In addition to this, the eye of the vulture corresponds closely to the astronomical position of Deneb (Alpha Cygni), Cygnus's brightest star.

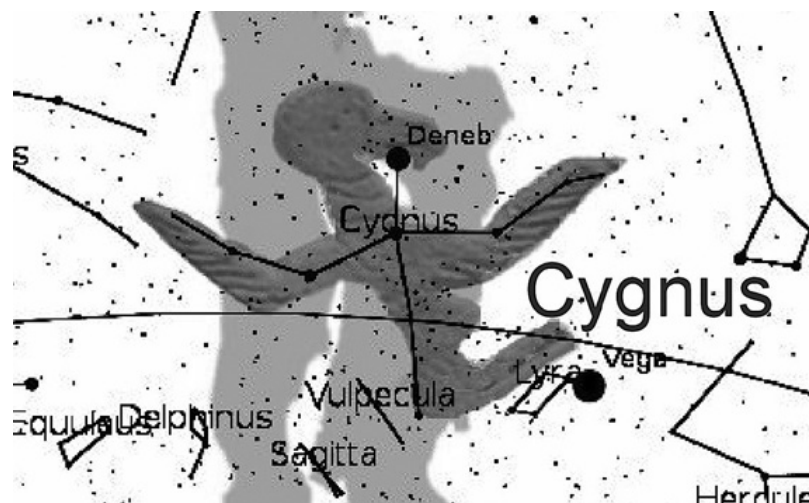


Figure 4. The outline of Pillar 43's main vulture overlaid on the constellation of Cygnus for the epoch 9600 BCE.

However, if the stone's dividing line is matched with the local horizon and the ball synchronized with the northern celestial pole the vulture becomes enormous, embracing a number of different constellations including Vulpecula, Sagitta, Delphinus, as well as stars from Pegasus, Hercules and Lyra. What is more, the fact that part of the vulture is still obscured by Enclosure D's ringwall means that its rear half, including its back and spine, would have included the constellation of Aquila. In this manner, Pillar 43's vulture embraces all three constellations whose brightest stars - Deneb in Cygnus, Altair in Aquila and Vega in Lyra - form what is known as the Summer Triangle. Interestingly, all three constellations were identified in Greek Hellenic tradition as vultures (see Allen, 1899: s.v. "Aquila, the Eagle," 55-61; s.v. "Cygnus, the Swan," 192-8, and s.v. "Lyra, the Lyre or Harp," 280-8). These are recalled in Greek Hellenic myth as the monstrous winged creatures known as the Stymphalian birds or Harpies, which were part human, part vulture. In Armenian sky lore Cygnus was anciently known as Angegh, the Vulture (Najarian, 2016), and in the knowledge that the former Armenia Major embraced parts of southeast Anatolia this identification could be of some importance.

The Serpent Bearer

Moving on to the scorpion in this schematic overlay, we can see that it embraces not only the stars of Scorpius and Libra, which once formed the sky creature's claws, but also those belonging to the neighbouring constellation of Ophiuchus, the serpent holder or serpent bearer. In Greek Hellenic mythology he holds within his hands the stars of Serpens, the serpent. An upright fox is seen on Pillar 43 to the left of the scorpion, above which is a curling snake. The latter corresponds with at least some of the stars of Serpens (its tail area), while we note with interest that a constellation known as the Fox is shown as one of the three asterisms or decans in the house of Scorpius on the astronomical "sphere" of Petosiris, a priest of Thoth, who lived in the fourth century BCE. This now lost constellation, alluded to also in a list of "Decani" by the fourth-century CE prose writer Maternus Julius Firmicus (Gore, 1909: 222), is thought to have been located to the north of Scorpius in the vicinity of Ophiuchus (Ibid; Allen, 1899: s.v. "Ophiuchus vel Serpentarius," 297-302;). If this is the case, then the fox on Pillar 43 could well represent this lost constellation, the snake above it signifying the stars of Serpens, the snake.

Matching Other Constellations

Seeing Pillar 43's vulture, scorpion, dividing line and soul ball as, respectively, Cygnus and the constellations in the vicinity of the Summer Triangle, Scorpius, the local horizon and the northern celestial pole makes good sense. What is more, it allows us to try and envision what some of the other relief figures on the stone might have signified to the Göbekli builders.

In the schematic diagram showing the different components of Pillar 43 overlaid onto the skies of 9600 BCE the creature on the stone to the right of the main vulture, which appears to be a vulture chick, sits, exactly like the main vulture, on the dividing line, which we will take to be the local horizon. If this is correct, then its position on the right-hand side of the ball as the northern celestial pole suggests it could be a star or asterism that has just risen on the northwestern horizon. It does in fact synchronize on the overlay with the stars of the constellation of Boötes. The problem, however, is that in Eurasian star lore Boötes is not a bird; it is most usually seen as a human hunter of the Great Bear, which is, of course, the nearby constellation of Ursa Major. Only among the Micmac peoples of the east coast of Canada is Boötes seen as a bird. To them it is the

chickadee, which with a number of other sky figures leads the hunt to catch and kill the Great Bear (Sasaki, 2003: s.v. "Boötes," 26).

Nothing here explains the vulture chick's correlation on the overlay with the constellation of Boötes. Nor can sky lore explain apparent correspondences on the schematic overlay between the relief of a flamingo and the stars of both Draco, the celestial dragon, and Ursa Minor, the Little Bear, or between the bird-headed snake and some of the stars of Ursa Major. Indeed, there are no known sky figures matching either the flamingo or any bird-headed snake. In addition to this, there seems to be no obvious reason why the headless man on the back of the vulture-like bird seen at the base of the pillar should correspond on the overlay with the southern constellations of Centaurus and Crux, the so-called Southern Cross.

Meridian Line

Very clearly, another approach is necessary to explain the presence of these additional sky figures on Pillar 43. The first clue comes from the fact that there appears to be some kind of mirror relationship between the main vulture and the vulture chick. Both sit on the dividing line each side of the north-south meridian line suggested by the ball in its apparent role as the northern celestial pole. If the meridian is drawn as a vertical line from the centre of the ball down to the base of the stone it passes perfectly through the neck of the headless man (see fig. 5). Indeed, it is almost as if the disembodied head of the man has shot vertically upward to its position in the centre of the pillar's T-shaped head. This cannot be coincidence and shows that the line between the headless figure and the ball marks the meridian, the clear inference being that the soul of the headless individual has ascended to the northern celestial pole. Its presence here is acknowledged, honoured even, by the vulture, whose wings are tilted down in the direction of the ball.

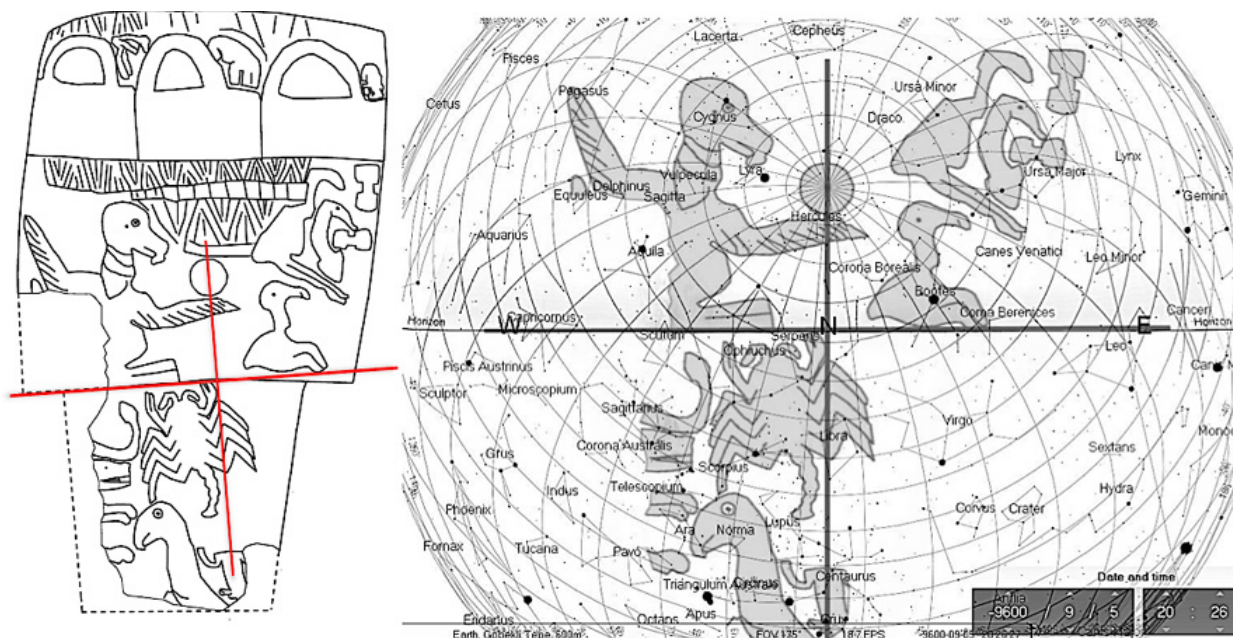


Figure 5. Left, outline of Pillar 43 showing the suspected horizon line and meridian, both of which are around 4 degrees askew in an anticlockwise direction. Right, schematic overlay of the carved relief of Pillar 43 on the night sky of 9600 BCE (courtesy of Stellarium) with the local horizon and meridian in place. Note how the meridian intersects both the centre of the ball on the vulture's wing and also the neck of the headless individual on the back of the second vulture-like bird at the base of the pillar. Very likely this shows that the ball is the head and soul of the headless person having ascended from its terrestrial environment to the northern celestial pole.

Why should the vulture's wings be tilted in this manner? The answer is that it represents an asterism that, having already crossed the meridian on its upper transit, is slowly turning about the northern celestial pole. This means it is in the northwestern sky heading toward the local horizon, symbolized by the dividing line between the stone's head and stem. If this is correct, the scorpion is seen beneath the local horizon about to cross the meridian completely out of sight.

In the Underworld

Why Scorpion is depicted below the local horizon might well have something to do with the fact that the constellation has traditionally been seen as an underworld creature, and even as guardian of the land of the dead (see Santillana and von Dechend, 1969: 243-4, and also Collins, The Cygnus Key, in press).

The carved relief on Göbekli Tepe's Pillar 43 showing the scorpion beneath the dividing

line between the head and stem perhaps reflects a similar theme. In other words, rites concerning the transition of the soul from the land of the living to the realm of the dead could only take place after Scorpius had disappeared below the horizon.

The fact that directly below the scorpion on Pillar 43 is the headless figure seemingly riding on the back of a vulture-like bird also cannot be without meaning here. Either it too is beneath the local horizon, or, more likely, the two figures are meant to be seen outside of the rest of sky figures. That they are positioned right at the base of the pillar could suggest they are in fact in the physical world, arguably even at Göbekli Tepe. Just possibly this particular vulture is being shown as a psychopomp, or "soul-carrier," initiating the soul's journey from this world to the next, the pillar's main vulture being viewed as guardian of the northern celestial pole, in other words the "hole in the sky" of shamanic tradition.

Elsewhere the current authors have shown that at least four of Göbekli Tepe's most accomplished installations are aligned toward the setting of the Cygnus star Deneb (Collins, 2014, 81-5; Collins, *The Cygnus Key*, in press, and see also Lorenzis & Orofino, 2015). These alignments are emphasized by porthole stones in the north-northwest sections of the ringwalls in Enclosures C, D and H—the example in Enclosure D being located just a few metres to the east of Pillar 43. Very likely the apertures in these porthole stones were considered *seelenloch*, or soul holes, points of communication between this world and the next. The fact that Enclosure D's Pillar 43 is located immediately to the west of its porthole stone is also not without meaning. If a person were to stand in front of Pillar 43's western face, where its carved relief is situated, their x-ray eyes would be able to look through the stone toward the enclosure's porthole stone, which faces the centre of the installation in one direction and the setting of the Cygnus star Deneb during the epoch 9600 BCE in the other (see Collins, 2014, 85-6, 88; Collins, *The Cygnus Key*, in press). Although this shows that the porthole stone is not aligned to the northern celestial pole, it could well mean that the soul on exiting the enclosure had first to go to Cygnus before it could access the "hole in the sky," in other words the northern celestial pole located in the nearby constellation of Hercules.

Vulture Chick Symmetry

Returning now to the vulture chick and its perceived relationship to the pillar's main vulture there is an additional symmetry that might help us better understand some of the stone's remaining features. The fact that the two reliefs seem to mirror each other's position across an imagined meridian line, and as such possess similar maximum declinations, or distances, from the ball in its role as the northern celestial pole, could well hint at the fact that they are one and the same sky figure. If correct, the fact that the main vulture is setting in the northwest, while the vulture chick is rising in the northeast could suggest they represent, respectively, the death and resurrection of the constellation, which, as we have seen, is either Cygnus or a super constellation in the proximity of the Summer Triangle.

This then would explain why there is no correlation between the vulture chick and its corresponding constellation of Boötes in the schematic overlay presented above. It might also explain why the bird-headed serpent and flamingo also have no obvious corresponding constellations, because they reflect celestial objects that do not appear in their ascendance at the same time that Cygnus as the main vulture is descending toward the horizon and Scorpius as the scorpion is completely beneath the horizon. If this is the case, it makes identifying them that much more problematic, especially since there are no bird-headed snakes or flamingos in the sky lore of the ancient Near East (the southern constellation known as *Grus*, the Crane, was called "the Flamingo" for a short while in the seventeenth century, but this was not an ancient attribution).

So we can see that Pillar 43's carved relief is not a snapshot of the sky at a given moment, but the employment of certain key sky figures to illustrate a gradually emerging story involving the soul's journey from the physical world to the afterlife. This conclusion is brought home by the fact that the headless figure at the base of the stone is connected to his head, the ball corresponding to the northern celestial pole, by the north-south meridian line. It is this same line that in so many shamanic-based cultures is seen as the link between the Lower World, the Middle World and Upper World, each of which are accessed via perceived holes, like the one thought to mark the northern celestial pole.

What all this tells us is that the cosmological structure behind the beliefs and practices of the earliest peoples to occupy the site of Göbekli Tepe sometime around 9600 BCE, a date corresponding to the end of the 1,200-year Younger Dryas cold spell, has striking parallels with those of the shamanic-based tribes of Siberia. If so, then we need to look toward this direction for answers regarding the origins of southeast Anatolia's Pre-Pottery Neolithic culture.

Summary

Most likely Pillar 43's carved relief illustrates the journey of the soul from its mundane, physical environment, seen in terms of the installation itself, to the sky-world, reached via the celestial bodies of the northern night sky. In all likelihood the soul's ultimate destination was the northern celestial pole, the "hole in the sky," represented by the ball at the centre of the T-shaped head's relief imagery. Its principal guardian on this journey was the vulture, both in its celestial form as the constellation of Cygnus or - but less likely - a super constellation made up of the stars of several constellations in the vicinity of the Summer Triangle, and in its mundane form as the psychopomp, or "soul carrier," derived from the vulture's role in the act of excarnation or sky-burial. Highlighted also is the role of the scorpion, the constellation of Scorpius, as a presumed inhabitant of the Lower World, was ever ready to consume the soul on its hazardous journey to the afterlife.

These ideas not only take into consideration every facet of Pillar 43's carved relief, but also its relationship to the installation in which it stands as well as the cosmological ideas that might well have come to bear on the construction of Göbekli Tepe in the wake of the Younger Dryas event. We therefore believe they make far better sense than interpreting arbitrary elements of the stone's carved relief as a snapshot of the moment when a comet impact devastated the world over 1,300 years before the creation of Göbekli Tepe.

Please note that this article forms part of a more detailed scholarly article to be published in due course.

References

- Allen, Richard Hinckley, *Star Names: Their Lore and Meaning* [1899]. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1963.
- Belmonte, J. A., "Finding Our Place in the Cosmos: The Role of Astronomy in Ancient Cultures," *Journal of Cosmology* 9 (2010): 2052-62.
- Burley, Paul, "Göbekli Tepe-Temples Communicating Ancient Cosmic Geography," March 8, 2013, Graham Hancock website, <http://grahamhancock.com/burleypl/>.
- Collins, Andrew, *Göbekli Tepe: Genesis of the Gods*. Rochester, VM: Inner Traditions, 2014.
- Collins, Andrew. *The Cygnus Key*. Rochester, VM: Bear & Co., in press.
- Dietrich, Oliver, Of animals and a headless man. Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 43, Tepe Telegrams, 2016, <https://tepetelegrams.wordpress.com/2016/10/14/of-animals-and-a-headless-man-gobekli-tepe-pillar-43/>
- Eliade, Mircea. "Shamanism and Cosmology," In Nicholson, 1987, 17-46.
- Gore, J. Ellard. *Astronomical Curiosities: Facts and Fallacies*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1909.
- Hancock, Graham. *Magicians of the Gods*. New York, NY: Coronet Press, 2015.
- Lorenzis, Alessandro de, and Vincenzo Orofino, "New Possible Astronomic Alignments at the Megalithic Site of Göbekli Tepe, Turkey," *Archaeological Discovery* 3, 2015, pp. 40-50.
- Najarian, Moses, "Starry heavens and geography", Harmony House, 2016, http://nerdashnaktun.org/mn_article_nh. Available only through Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web/> (choose date September 13, 2016). A link to a PDF version is offered by the current author on request.
- Nicholson, Shirley. *Shamanism*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987.
- Notroff, Jens, "Archaeoastronomy, meteor showers, mass extinction: What does the fox say? (And what about the crane? The aurochs?)," Tepe Telegrams, 2017, <https://tepetelegrams.wordpress.com/2017/04/21/archaeoastronomy-meteor-showers-mass-extinction-what-does-the-fox-say-and-what-the-crane-the-aurochs/>.
- Sasaki, Chris. *The Constellations: Stars and Stories*. New York, NY: Sterling, 2003.
- Santillana, Giorgio de, and Hertha von Dechend. *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time*. Boston: Gambit, 1969.
- Schmidt, Klaus, and Oliver Dietrich. "A Radiocarbon Date from the Wall Plaster of Enclosure D of Göbekli Tepe." *Neo-Lithics* 2/10 (2010): 82-83.
- Sweatman, Martin B., Dimitrios Tsikritsis, "Decoding Göbekli Tepe with Archaeoastronomy: What Does The Fox Say?" *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 17: 1 (2017), 233-250.
- Uyanik, Muvaffak, *Petroglyphs of South-eastern Anatolia*, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria, 1974.
- Vachagan Vahradyan and Marine Vahradyan, "About the Astronomical Role of 'Qarahunge' Monument," Anunner.com, 2013, http://www.anunner.com/vachagan.vahradyan/About_the_Astronomical_Role_of_'Qarahunge'_Monument_by_Vachagan_Vahradyan,_Marine_Vahradyan.

Thanks to Catherine Hale and Dr Greg Little for their help in the preparation of this article.