

Searching for the Dawn and Demise of Ancient Civilisation

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When and where did civilisation begin? How far back in time does high culture go? Indeed, what do we mean by such terms as civilisation, or sophisticated and high culture?

When I was in college, more years ago than I perhaps care to remember, I learned the standard story which still holds sway in many circles: Civilisation and high culture date back to, at most, perhaps five or six thousand years ago. A handy marker for recognising a true civilisation was written language, and it was generally agreed that the earliest true writing could be dated to the late fourth millennium BCE (that is, circa 3500 to 3000 BCE).

The Sumerians are generally credited with developing writing about 3300 to 3200 BCE, although the earliest Egyptian hieroglyphics may date back to the same period, or even a century or so earlier, and there is also evidence of writing possibly from as far back as 3500 BCE found at Harappa, the Indus Civilisation, in what is now modern Pakistan.¹

But then there are reports of much earlier possible writing from Henan Province, China, dated to 6600 to 6200 BCE, inscribed on tortoise shells.² I recollect a book I read while still an undergraduate, *The Roots of Civilization* by Alexander Marshack, which argued that various lines, notches, and "scratches" on ancient bone artefacts dating to 10,000 BCE and earlier, before the end of the last Ice Age, were in fact symbolic systems, including lunar calendar notations.

Head-on view of the Great Sphinx. The author, Robert Schoch, appears on the right side by the left paw of the Sphinx. Visible in the background are the walls of the Sphinx Enclosure.

Maybe our ancestors were not so primitive and stupid after all.

Maybe defining civilisation and high culture in terms of a written language (or more accurately our knowledge of a recorded language; we can easily miss things in the archaeological record) simply is not a fruitful approach. This is the conclusion I have come to while pursuing my own research.

RE-DATING THE GREAT SPHINX OF EGYPT

I first came to the problem of the origin of civilisation through my studies of the Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt. Combining a Ph.D. in geology and geophysics from Yale University (1983) with a lifelong enthusiasm for ancient cultures, on my first trip to Egypt in 1990 I was primed to take a careful look at the Sphinx.

As I have recounted elsewhere,³ my colleague and friend John Anthony West had suggested to me various silly notions that the Great Sphinx might be older than the standard Egyptological attribution of circa 2500 BCE.



Image courtesy of the author



Overview of the Great Sphinx.

Indeed, the attacks and criticisms, forcing me to carefully scrutinise and enlarge my dataset, have served only to reaffirm my conclusions.

THE SPHINX UNDER WATER, OR UNDER FIRE?

Recently my work on the Great Sphinx has come under fire from a self-described anti-Establishmentarian. Given the number of people who have been asking me about this latest "Sphinx theory," I feel it is imperative that I briefly address it here.

Robert Temple⁵ has proposed a moat theory (that is, the Sphinx Enclosure was purposefully filled with water such that the body of the Sphinx was submerged and sat as a statue in a small artificial lake) to explain the clear signs of water

weathering and erosion on the body of the Great Sphinx and on the walls of the Sphinx Enclosure.

Temple contends that the moat theory explains the data adequately without hypothesising that the Great Sphinx dates back to a much earlier period during which there was more rainfall than at present. (Here I will not address his hypotheses, which I do not find persuasive, that the Sphinx was the jackal [wild dog] Anubis and the face seen on the Sphinx is that of the Middle Kingdom pharaoh Amenemhet II, though I would point out that the original Sphinx has been reworked and the head has been re-carved, perhaps more than once.)

The body of the Sphinx, carved from the bedrock, sits largely below ground level, and various moat, pool, or artificial fountain hypotheses have been suggested for

I figured that through a careful analysis of the geology, I could show the error in such thinking. Surely all those professional Egyptologists could not be wrong. It turns out they were.

Based on my geological and seismic analyses, utilising the weathering and erosion patterns correlated with the palaeoclimatology and subsurface features,⁴ I concluded that the oldest portions of the Great Sphinx date back to at least the period of 7000 BCE to 5000 BCE, and perhaps back to 9000 BCE or earlier. To oversimplify a bit, the core body of the Great Sphinx shows features that place it well back before the onset of the current arid regime (the Giza Plateau is on the edge of the Sahara Desert) some 5,000 years ago.

Such a conclusion has deep implications, suggesting that high culture and civilisation dates back much earlier than previously believed. I have been told on more than one occasion that my conclusions cannot be true because if they are, then "history must be rewritten." Certainly, we cannot have that, can we? Vested interests run high, and I have been attacked from many sides, both by orthodox Egyptologists and historians, and by various people not as closely associated with mainstream academia.

Through it all over the last two decades, I have looked at the alternative theories suggested to explain the data, and I continue to maintain that the evidence clearly points to the origins of the Great Sphinx being much older than 2500 BCE.

The southern wall of the Sphinx Enclosure showing the erosion and fissures.



the Sphinx from time to time. I considered such notions carefully as far back as my early analyses of the geology of the Sphinx, starting in 1990. In summary, such moat and related theories do not hold water (to use a bad pun) and are not compatible with the features of the actual Great Sphinx, the Sphinx Enclosure, and the general geology and palaeohydrology of the Giza Plateau.

SCRUTINISING THE SPHINX

While in Egypt recently (March 2009) I made it a point to look at the Great Sphinx and Sphinx Enclosure with fresh eyes to see if there could be anything to the moat class of theories. I will summarise briefly a half dozen points.⁶

1) Based on my observations and analyses, the Sphinx Temple (built out of blocks removed from the Sphinx Enclosure when the body of the Sphinx was initially carved) and the so-called Valley Temple to the south of the Sphinx Temple show clear signs of heavy precipitation-induced weathering on the limestone core blocks. These limestone temples were subsequently refurbished with Aswan granite ashlar during the Old Kingdom (as evidenced by an Old Kingdom inscription still found on a block located at the Valley Temple). The moat theory cannot explain the nature of the very ancient weathering seen under the Old Kingdom granite veneer.

2) There is much heavier surface erosion on the western end of the Sphinx Enclosure, and the surface erosion tapers off dramatically toward the eastern end of the enclosure. This is exactly what is to be expected based on the palaeohydrology of the Giza Plateau and is incompatible with a moat theory where it is hypothesised that water was brought in from the Nile to the east. Furthermore, the nature of the surface erosion throughout the enclosure and on the body of the Sphinx is as expected if there were water running over or raining down on the rock layers. The erosion actually observed is not compatible with pooled water in the enclosure.

3) The highest levels of the middle member strata, as seen in the Sphinx Enclosure on the western end, are most severely eroded, which is compatible with the agency of precipitation. If the moat theory were true, then the lower strata on the eastern end of the Sphinx Enclosure would be most heavily eroded (caused by water being brought in via canals from the Nile), but the opposite is seen in reality.

4) The subsurface seismic data demonstrating the depth of weathering below the floor of the Sphinx Enclosure, based on my analyses (using areas excavated during the Old Kingdom for comparison), even when calibrated very conservatively, gives an age of initial carving for the core body of the Great Sphinx of at least 5000 BCE. More than one geological colleague has suggested to me that a more realistic calibration gives a date thousands of years earlier. And no, standing water in the Sphinx Enclosure would not accelerate the depth of weathering below the floor of the enclosure.

5) The vertical fissures observed in the walls of the Sphinx Enclosure show diagnostic signs of having been formed by precipitation and water runoff. In my opinion, they do not show any characteristics that are diagnostic or even suggestive of having been formed by artificial dredging of the Sphinx Enclosure, as some have suggested.

6) If the Great Sphinx actually had sat in an artificial pool or lake, either the water level around the Sphinx would have had to have been the same as that of the surrounding water table, or the walls and floor of the pool in which the Sphinx sat would have had to have been sealed up and watertight (and any artificial walls, such as on the eastern end, would have had to have been strong enough to withstand the pressure of the water). Clearly, the ancient water table was well below the level of the floor of the Sphinx Enclosure (or else the Sphinx Temple, for instance, would have been flooded). The Sphinx Enclosure, if simply carved from the bedrock (as all the evidence suggests) would not have held a deep pool of standing water. The bedrock in the enclosure is highly faulted, and characterised by a karst morphology that would leak like a sieve (another bad pun, perhaps). The enclosure would have had to have been fully sealed up (with some kind of mortar or cement, perhaps), and there is no evidence of such sealing. Furthermore, if the enclosure had been sealed in such a manner, this would not be compatible with the dredging theory for the vertical fissures mentioned in the previous point. I would also note that the chambers and tunnels under the Great Sphinx would have been flooded from above if the Great Sphinx had been sitting in a pool of water, unless the Sphinx Enclosure had been watertight; yet the evidence suggests the enclosure was not watertight.

COULD THE SPHINX BE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS OLD?

Even as my re-dating of the Great Sphinx has been attacked as impossible by some authorities, other serious researchers have suggested that I have underestimated the true age of the oldest portions of the Great Sphinx by a factor of ten or more!

For instance, two members of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Vjacheslav I. Manichev and Alexander G. Parkhomenko,⁷ citing my work, have reinterpreted the geology and erosional features on the Great Sphinx to mean that the core body of the statue could date back as far as 800,000 years ago. And they are not referring to simply a natural outcropping that may have existed 800,000 years ago that was later shaped into a statue. (Remember, too, that to carve the core body of the Sphinx huge multi-ton blocks were removed from the Sphinx Enclosure and assembled as the Sphinx Temple, so the original Sphinx Temple is as old as the core body of the Great Sphinx).

The dating of Manichev and Parkhomenko could push the age of the Great Sphinx into a very remote



An assembly of stone slabs found in Egypt's Sahara Desert at Nabta Playa that date from about 6,500 years to 6,000 years ago has been confirmed by scientists to be the oldest known astronomical alignment of megaliths in the world.

time period, one that has been suggested for possible, but ambiguous, ancient structures, sculptures, or simulacra that are found in many parts of the world, such as Markawasi in Peru,⁸ the Romanian Sphinx,⁹ or a possible stone circle dubbed Adam's Calendar by researchers Johan Heine and Michael Tellinger with a claimed date of 75,000 years ago.¹⁰ Personally, I am not convinced that the Great Sphinx is anywhere close to the age postulated by Manichev and Parkhomenko, or that various claimed very ancient, very eroded statues are anything more than natural formations, but the prospects are intriguing. Without going off on such limbs, there is clear evidence for early high culture at a remote period beyond just that of the Great Sphinx.

NABTA PLAYA

In the Sahara Desert of southern Egypt, west of Aswan, is an area known as Nabta Playa. Here an ancient stone calendar circle, as well as many other megalithic erections and structures, was identified by archaeologist Fred Wendorf (Southern Methodist University) and his team and dated to circa 4000 BCE and earlier.¹¹

Thomas Brophy¹² has carried out extensive analyses of Nabta. According to Brophy, three stones inside the Nabta calendar circle represent the belt of Orion (just as the three pyramids of Giza represent the belt of Orion according the research of Robert Bauval¹³). The stones on the Playa and the corresponding stars in the sky aligned on summer solstice nights between about 6400 BCE and 4900 BCE. Brophy found even more correlations, however. Three other stones in the Nabta calendar circle correspond to the configuration of Orion's head and shoulders as they appeared in circa 16,500 BCE, about half a precessional cycle earlier than the previously mentioned alignment. Based on these and other analyses of monoliths in the area, Brophy concludes that the early inhabitants of Nabta Playa possessed incredibly sophisticated knowledge, the type of knowledge we associate with high culture and civilisation. Furthermore, the

dates of the Nabta structures are in line with my dating of the oldest portions of the Great Sphinx, and at both Giza and Nabta the constellation of Orion (which represented the god Osiris during dynastic times) was of prime importance.

GÖBEKLI TEPE

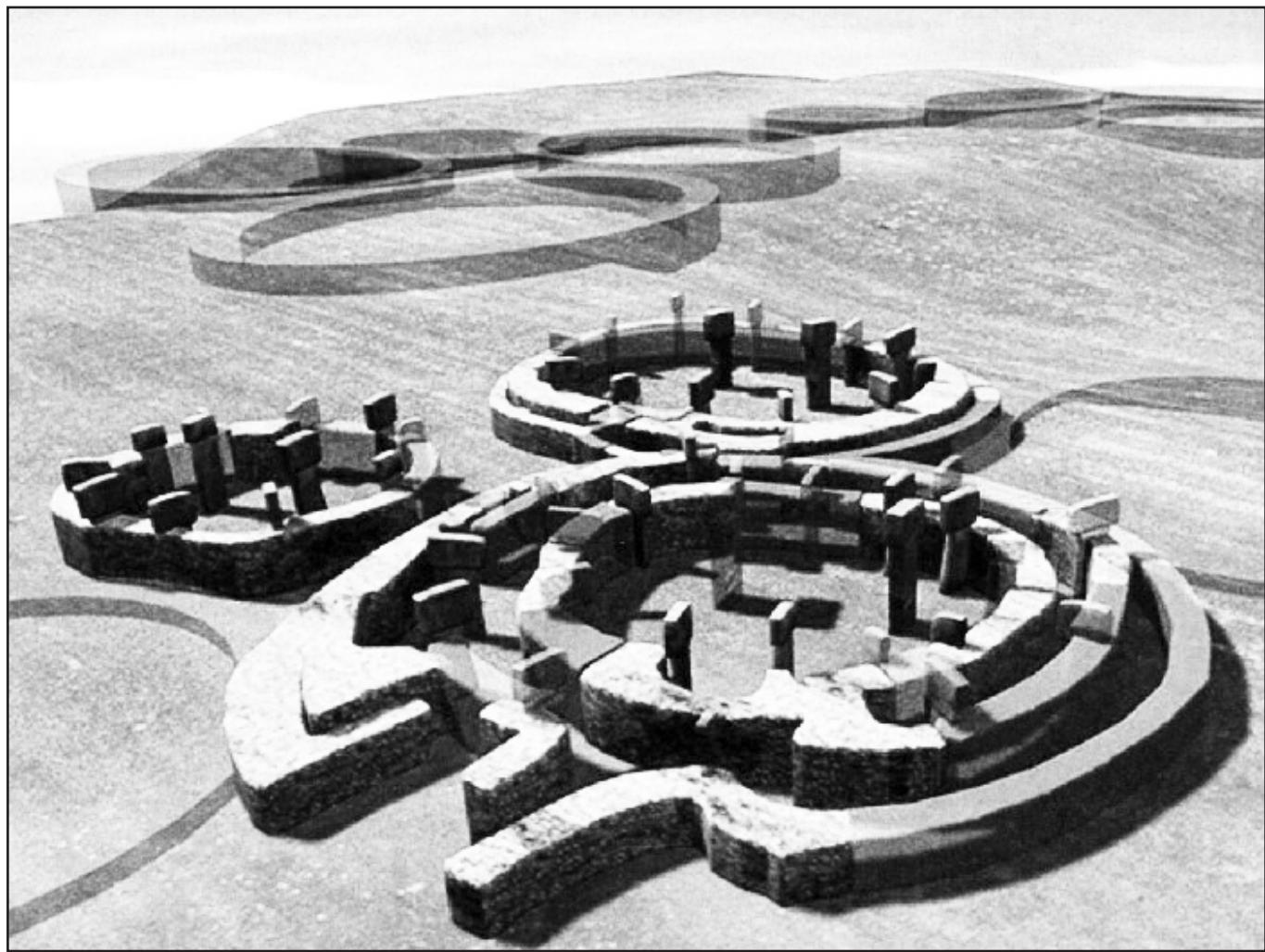
If the dating of the Great Sphinx remains controversial (after all, old ideas die hard), and the analyses of Nabta Playa are questionable in the eyes of some researchers, there is one site that even the most ensconced conventional archaeologists cannot ignore.

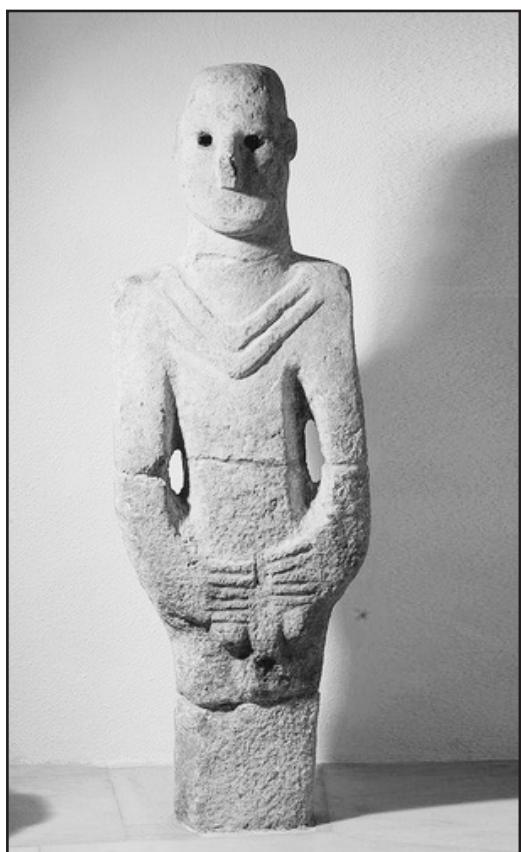
In modern Turkey, just north of the border with Syria, is a site known as Göbekli Tepe that has yielded dozens of carved limestone megaliths, many of which date back to the extraordinarily early period of 9000 BCE to 10,000 BCE.¹⁴ Klaus Schmidt, of the German Archaeological Institute, has been heading an excavation team there since 1994, and there is no doubt as to the importance, authenticity, and dating (based in part on radiocarbon) of Göbekli Tepe. This is a discovery made by mainstream academics.

Göbekli Tepe boggles the imagination on many accounts. The date is incredibly early, even earlier than my "conservative" estimate for the date of the Great Sphinx. Göbekli Tepe dates back to the end of the last Ice Age. The monolithic megaliths are in the range of two to seven metres high (the latter is the height of an unfinished megalith left where it was being quarried). Sculpted onto the surfaces of the monoliths are a variety of animals, including snakes, boars, foxes, vultures, spiders, scorpions, a centipede, and a three-dimensional figure that has been interpreted as a lion. The megaliths excavated thus far had been erected into four distinct stone circles, ranging from ten to thirty metres in diameter. Based on geo-physical surveys, the entire site may cover three dozen hectares (about 90 acres) and contains another twenty or so stone circles.

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Göbekli Tepe offers incontrovertible evidence of advanced human activity at a time when our ancestors are said to have been still at the hunter gatherer stage – thousands of years earlier than we have been told was possible. Top right is an artist's impression of the site's design. Below is a reconstructed section of the complex.





Is there a lost primordial ancient civilisation, one that was destroyed in some cataclysmic natural catastrophe? Perhaps at the end of the last Ice Age, Earth was bombarded by comets.

Although very different from the Great Sphinx and the Sphinx Temple, in my estimation, taking the entire Göbekli Tepe site as a whole into account, just as much effort, social organisation, and sophisticated or high culture must have been required to construct the Göbekli Tepe complex as the Sphinx complex. When I first presented my findings on the age of the Great Sphinx, I was told over and over again by mainstream archaeologists and historians that my dating was simply impossible because it was well known that nothing so elaborate and sophisticated, requiring an advanced level of social organisation, could occur so early. Göbekli Tepe proves these assertions false and helps place the Great Sphinx in a larger context.

The work at Göbekli Tepe has literally just begun. Most of the site has yet to be excavated and who can predict what surprises might be in store for us? Who were the people that built the site, and why did they build it? So far there is no evidence that the site was inhabited; no living areas have been excavated, though the thousands of animal bones found (the most common animal represented is the aurochs, a type of extinct ox) are evidence of feasting at the site. Was it a holy, sacred site? An area for religious pilgrimages? Or perhaps an ancient centre of knowledge? My instinct is that the positions of the monoliths, and the specific carvings on their surfaces, probably encode information... but what? And what happened to the people who built and used Göbekli Tepe? Curiously, the site did not simply fall into disuse and gradually decay. It was intentionally buried somewhere around 8000 BCE. Why? The mystery only deepens.

THE ORIGIN AND DEMISE OF EARLY HIGH CULTURE

There has been space here to mention only a few examples of archaeological sites that challenge the conventional view of when high culture, advanced knowledge, and civilisation arose. Admittedly, I have dwelt on those that most interest me, including the Great Sphinx with which I have become entwined. Put all the evidence together and there is no doubt in my mind that what we can term high culture existed at least 11,000 years ago (and possibly much earlier).

Profusely and skillfully decorated with carvings of animals and abstract pictograms are numerous T-Shaped limestone monoliths, from 2 to 7 metres tall and weighing as much as 25 tons, still standing about the vast and sophisticated site of Göbekli Tepe on Roman-like terrazzo floors.



Where did early civilisation originate? And what happened to it? Is there a lost primordial ancient civilisation, one that was destroyed in some cataclysmic natural catastrophe? Could the legend of Atlantis have some truth to it? These are questions I have pondered long and hard for many years.

Being a geologist, I view Earth and our environment as unstable, full of unexpected surprises, at least over the long term. Climates change, sea levels rise and fall, volcanoes erupt, earthquakes rock the land and sea, and objects fall from the sky. I have discussed how such natural cataclysms may have influenced the history of ancient civilisations,¹⁵ and in particular I have pointed out that Earth has experienced a series of encounters with comets during historical and prehistoric times.¹⁶

Depending on the severity of the encounter (size of the comet, whether it actually touched the surface of Earth or perhaps resulted in a mid-atmosphere explosion, and so forth), dramatic climatic changes could be affected on Earth, which in turn could affect sea levels, and weather extremes can wreck havoc on animal and human populations, causing famines.¹⁷

In 2003 I suggested that the end of the last Ice Age may have been brought about in part by comets bombarding Earth,¹⁸ and this hypothesis has received dramatic support with physical evidence for an impact around 10,900 BCE.¹⁹ There is also evidence for impacts around 7600 BCE, 4400 BCE, 3150 BCE, 2345 BCE, 1628 BCE, 1159 BCE, 207 BCE, 536 CE, and 1178 CE.²⁰

Bottom line, based on all the evidence, there is no doubt in my mind that these incidents, these cosmic catastrophes, had a profound influence on ancient civilisations. In some cases migrations were sparked, in other cases entire cultures may have been wiped out.

At the end of the last Ice Age, from before around 18,000 BCE to perhaps 11,000 BCE or later (dates at such a far remove are approximate), when sea levels were significantly lower (by seventy-five to a hundred and twenty metres), a sub-continental expanse of land was exposed in Southeast Asia where there is now only water in the area bounded by Indochina, the Malay Archipel-

ago, the islands of Indonesia, and Borneo. To geologists this drowned region is known as Sundaland, and there is a variety of evidence that here an early civilisation was located; they fled as the waters rose and the comets came down.²¹ Could this be the primordial lost civilisation that so many of us suspect once existed?

And what about that intentional burial of the structures at Göbekli Tepe? Did they see their fate in the skies? As the comets rained down did those ancient builders do their best to cover and preserve that which they had so carefully created, perhaps hoping to return one day to uncover their monuments? Or did they leave them for us to recover?

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ROBERT M. SCHOCH, Ph.D., is renowned for his work on re-dating the Great Sphinx. Based on his geological studies, he determined that the Sphinx's origins date prior to dynastic times. He has also focused his attention on the Great Pyramid and various other temples and tombs in Egypt, as well as studying similar structures around the world. Dr. Schoch is an author and coauthor of both technical and popular books, including the trilogy with R. A. McNally: *Voces of the Rocks: A Scientist looks at Catastrophes and Ancient Civilizations* (1999), *Voyages of the Pyramid Builders: The True Origins of the Pyramids from Lost Egypt to Ancient America* (2003), and *Pyramid Quest: Secrets of the Great Pyramid and the Dawn of Civilization* (2005). Dr. Schoch's most recent book is *The Parapsychology Revolution: A Concise Anthology of Paranormal and Psychical Research* (2008, compilation and commentary by Robert M. Schoch and Logan Yonavjak). Website: www.robertschoch.com