

## Traces of Obstetrics at the Zero Point of History

### Tarihin Sıfır Noktasında Obstetrinin İzleri

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**ABSTRACT** Göbeklitepe: a temple or a gathering place, or perhaps a gigantic burial tumulus. It could be all or none. What is certain is that it is one of the greatest archaeological discoveries in history. The only female figure in Göbeklitepe, perhaps the first in history; Women Figured Piece. She lies naked on her back with her legs drawn to her stomach. Although some archaeologists say that this drawing indicates preparation for sexual intercourse given the woman's highly enlarged labia, others believe this depiction reflects the woman giving birth. This article is about woman and labor at zero point in history from an obstetricians' eye. After examining the image, as obstetricians, we propose a similar possibility: breech delivery. This means that the female figure Tin Göbeklitepe may have been incidentally depicting a condition that the medical community could only define, predict, and correctly approach after thousands of years. Women Figured Piece represents the symbiotic relationship between art, medicine, and history. This drawing, which we can safely call the only legacy of women in the first known settlement in human history, may also be one of the first depicted medical events in world history. In addition, the best indicator that gynecology and obstetrics were born with humanity and will continue as long as human beings exist is this woman, who gave birth at this zero point in history.

**Keywords:** Göbeklitepe; women figured piece; labor

**ÖZET** Göbeklitepe: Bir tapınak veya bir toplanma alanı, belki de devasa bir gömme höyüğü. Hepsisi olabilir, hiçbiri de. Kesin olan, tarihin en büyük arkeolojik keşiflerinden biri olduğudur. Göbeklitepedeki kadın figürü, neolitik çağda kireçtaşı üzerine kazınarak yapılmış bir kadın figürüdür. Kadın, sırtüstü bacakları kamına çekili pozisyonda çıplak yatmaktadır. Bazı arkeologlar, bu çizimin oldukça büyütülmüş üreme organlarına ait ferç dudakları ile cinsel ilişkiye hazırlığı işaret ettiğini söylese de diğer arkeologlar, bu tasvirle kadının doğum anının yansıtıldığını düşünüyor. Görüntüyü inceledikten sonra, kadın doğum uzmanları olarak benzer bir olasılık düşünüyoruz: Makat doğum. Demek ki Göbeklitepe'deki kadın figürü, tıp camiasının ancak binlerce yıl sonra tanımlayabildiği, öngörebildiği ve doğru şekilde yönetebildiği bir durumu tesadüfen tasvir ediyor olabilir. Bu makale, bir kadın doğum uzmanının gözünden tarihin sıfır noktasındaki kadın ve doğum hakkındadır. Bu çizim; sanat, tıp ve tarih arasındaki bağlantılı ilişkiyi temsil etmektedir. İnsanlık tarihinde bilinen ilk yerleşimde, kadınların tek mirası diyebileceğimiz bu çizim, dünya tarihinde ilk tasvir edilen tıbbi olaylardan biri de olabilir. Ayrıca kadın hastalıkları ve doğumun insanlıkla birlikte doğduğunun ve insanlık var olduğu sürece devam edeceğinin en iyi göstergesi de tarihin sıfır noktasında doğum yapan bu kadındır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göbeklitepe; kadın figürü; doğum

## GÖBEKLİTEPE

Göbeklitepe: a temple or a gathering place, or perhaps a gigantic burial tumulus. It could be all or none. What is certain is that it is one of the greatest archaeological discoveries in history. This grouping of gigantic obelisks was carved from stone 12,000 years ago, when human beings still lived in the Stone Age

and did not yet know what metal was. Göbeklitepe is the oldest of all the megalithic structures discovered thus far and was built especially for ceremonies.<sup>1-3</sup> It demanded much labor and time to build the obelisks and the reliefs on them, requiring the surrounding population to come together at certain periods and live together for weeks or months.<sup>1-3</sup> Therefore, this monument may be the best proof available that the

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communities that built it witnessed the transition from the hunter-gatherer to agricultural lifestyle, one of the most important transformations in human history.

Göbeklitepe consists of a terrazzo floor, which is very difficult to make, made of polished lime plaster that resembles concrete; 2 obelisks in the middle; and several other obelisks on both sides. During excavations, 4 different circular structures were unearthed over time. These structures are of different sizes, and the stone columns were named structures A, B, C, and D according to the date of their discovery. Structure C, also called the “Boar structure” because of the pigs in the motifs, is the largest and oldest of these, with a diameter of 30 meters.<sup>4-6</sup> It was designed as 2 circular structures within each other and consists of a stone base and circular walkway with obelisks between its 2 walls. This structure does not have a passage from the outer to inner circle, but it does have an entrance door framed with double lions. Göbeklitepe explorer Klaus Schmidt interpreted this gate as protected by predators and an “entrance to the land of the dead.”<sup>7</sup>

All but one of the drawings in this region symbolize masculinity and men as symbols of power and potency. This drawing is on the surface of a 30 cm high stone between the symmetrical columns defined as the lion gate and is the only image that clearly describes the “woman” of 12 millennia ago. This drawing even differs from the others in how it was made:

while most of the stones’ motifs are in relief, the most striking example of the engraved figures is Structure C’s female motif, which is thought to be death-themed.

### WOMEN FIGURED PIECE

In this so-called *Women Figured Piece*, we see a woman figure engraved on Neolithic limestone (Figure 1). The woman lies naked on her back with her legs drawn to her stomach. Although some archaeologists say that this drawing indicates preparation for sexual intercourse given the woman’s highly enlarged labia, others believe this depiction reflects the woman giving birth.<sup>7,8</sup> After examining the image, as obstetricians, we propose a similar possibility: breech delivery. This means that the female figure in Göbeklitepe may have been incidentally depicting a condition that the medical community could only define, predict, and correctly approach after thousands of years.

We believe that the details demonstrated in the drawing support this argument. The woman’s short hair goes down to her shoulders, and her 2 eyes, represented as points, correspond to the orbital area. The appearance of this face, which has no nose or mouth or saw them eroded away over time, is not clear. As it is known, one of the most important elements that contributes to understanding facial expressions is the lower part of the face (cheeks, nose, mouth, lips, and chin); however, since there is no lower part of the face in this drawing, we cannot understand what the woman feels, such as happiness or pain.<sup>9</sup> While her right arm



FIGURE 1: Women figured piece.

and hand are very clear in the continuation of her thin, neatly drawn neck, her left arm is flexed at the elbow, and her left hand is not observed. This drawing reminded us of the moments in which we may support (physically and mentally) a woman giving birth by holding her hand while she pushes. Maybe another woman, such as a midwife, was providing this same support to the depicted woman 12,000 years ago.

Another element that draws our attention is the sagging of the woman's breasts. Assuming there were no birth control methods 12,000 years ago, we assume that this woman had probably given birth before. We do not know for certain the age of sexual maturity, common number of sexual partners, or understanding of marriage in the Neolithic age. Women 12,000 years ago may have conceived and delivered from their first menstrual cycle during adolescence. We relate the woman's sagging breasts to breastfeeding. Sucking for babies and the breastfeeding instinct inherent in mothers are old enough that they've been depicted in ancient art. A bronze naked woman breastfeeding a baby found in a grave in Horoztepe from 2300 BC is the best proof of this (Figure 2). Moreover, in ancient Egypt, the nursing goddess put the king or heir of the throne under protection and sanctified him by breastfeeding him (Figure 3). Therefore, instinctively breastfeeding may have been important even in a society that did not know its benefits or optimal duration. Although it is impossible to estimate the age of the woman in the Göbeklitepe drawing and therefore the number of children she gave birth to due to the drawing's inadequacy, we defend that she was multiparous and breastfed her babies.

When we look at the woman's lower extremities as well, the first thing that catches our attention is the hyperextension of the legs. The second is that the genital area is a warped motif that hangs downward, which is not clearly understood at first glance. But after careful examination, it is clear that the strips hanging from the genital area are not the elongated labium or vagina, but the soles of a baby's feet. The heel is above (the part closer to the genital area), the toe is below, and a thumb separation occurs on the right side (Figure 1). In obstetrics, such cases are called incomplete breech presentation (foot breech with one or both feet below the breech plane).<sup>10</sup> How-



FIGURE 2: A bronze naked woman breastfeeding a baby found in a grave in Horoztepe from 2300 BC.



FIGURE 3: The nursing goddess in ancient Egypt.

ever, by performing certain maneuvers in suitable patients, babies in this position can be born alive without complications.

### BREECH PRESENTATION

The breech presentation is still seen in 3-4% of 21<sup>st</sup> century term deliveries, though some conditions such as gestational age, hydramnios, high parity-triggered uterine relaxation, are known predisposing factors for

breech presentation.<sup>10</sup> Especially incomplete breech presentation may increase obstetric complications, such as maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality.<sup>11,12</sup> As a result, breech deliveries are unpredictable obstetric emergencies that contribute to birth trauma and perinatal morbidity and mortality, as well as lead to panic-stricken moments even for experienced obstetricians. In modern obstetric approaches, fetal position is determined via intrauterine ultrasonography. As such, patients today who are not in a position suitable for vaginal delivery—for example, in cases where the fetal head is hyperextended—can be admitted for a cesarean section under elective conditions. Obstetric outcomes have improved due to these careful, pre-delivery evaluations and caused a significant increase in cesarean indications.

The position of this Neolithic woman's legs is called the McRoberts maneuver in modern obstetrics. The McRoberts maneuver was first introduced in 1721 to manage breech deliveries and reported by Gonik in 1983 to treat shoulder dystocia.<sup>13</sup> The maneuver is simply the sharp flexion of the thighs onto the maternal abdomen, which straightens the maternal lumbar and lumbosacral lordosis and thereby removes the sacral promontory as an obstruction to the inlet. In addition, it removes all weight-bearing forces from the sacrum in the lithotomy position and permits the inlet to open to its maximum dimension. Moreover, the inlet is brought into the plane perpendicular to the maximum maternal expulsive force.<sup>14</sup> With this drawing, we can confirm that the McRoberts maneuver, first described in 1721, is actually a birthing position that women have used spontaneously for 12,000 years.

A foot-presented breech delivery is considered a cesarean indication for obstetricians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it may lead to serious obstetric complications in vaginal deliveries.<sup>15</sup> It is thus very meaningful that this woman is located in Structure C, which was

thought of as “entry into the land of the dead.” This makes us think that this woman may have died during this delivery, meaning perhaps the most prevalent cause of death for women in the Neolithic age was obstetric complications. However, there are scientists who say that this drawing indicates that Göbeklitepe could have been a holy maternity hospital instead.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, though, we can never be sure of the meaning of prehistoric drawings and images.

## CONCLUSION

*Women Figured Piece* represents the symbiotic relationship between art, medicine, and history. This drawing, which we can safely call the only legacy of women in the first known settlement in human history, may also be one of the first depicted medical events in world history. In addition, the best indicator that gynecology and obstetrics were born with humanity and will continue as long as human beings exist is this woman, who gave birth at this zero point in history.

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*No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.*

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