

Tell Kurdu Project Newsletter

FALL 2001

Now that autumn has come to Turkey, we are settling in to begin the analysis of the finds of last summer's excavation season. It has been a wonderful two month season, with unexpected yet highly fascinating and important finds. This has confirmed to us once again that Tell Kurdu in the Amuq Valley is a key site for the study of a central region in Near Eastern prehistory, at the crossroads of Anatolian, Mesopotamian, Syro-Palestinian and Mediterranean civilizations.



In this newsletter we would like to tell you about our exciting discoveries of this season. It is still a very early stage in our research, much of the analysis and writing up is just beginning. But fresh out of the field, we also feel that there is already much to tell you about.

Rana Özbal and Fokke Gerritsen
co-project directors

A surprise discovery and quick change of plans

In 1999 the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago excavated a small area of the northern part of the mound of Tell Kurdu. This indicated that this part of the mound yielded relatively well-preserved architecture dating to the so-called Halaf period (ca. 5,300 to 5,000 BC) directly below the surface. Mapping the subsurface features of the site through magnetometry analysis (see *Underground discoveries without excavating*) suggested that the excavations had uncovered a small corner of a large, square building with thick walls. We decided to focus our efforts this season on uncovering this building, as monumental architecture (perhaps an elite residence, a temple?) from such an early period is almost completely unknown from Anatolia and the Near East.

In archaeology, however, you can never predict what you will find; fortunately, one should say, because that is what makes archaeological excavation so exciting. Only a few days into the season, after exposing the first trenches, our theory of a monumental building proved to be completely wrong: what had appeared on the magnetometry plan as the wide walls of a building turned out to be the narrow alleys in between the walls of

numerous buildings!

So we quickly realized that we had the opportunity to excavate not one building but a whole neighborhood. Small parts of settlements and bits of neighborhoods of larger villages (towns and cities did not yet exist in this period) have been excavated elsewhere, but Tell Kurdu is a rare example of a site where levels of these early periods are not covered by later occupation levels. As a result, we were able to expose 800 sq. m. of a neighborhood, with a number of buildings and a network of little streets and alleyways in between.

The buildings consist of rectangular, single and multiple-room structures. Some were clearly residential in character, with food preparation areas, ovens and courtyards. The function of other buildings is still unclear. Judging from the elaborate plan, with niches and buttresses, and from the lime-plastered walls and floors one could speculate that these rooms had other functions. Further analysis is needed, however, and for this we are relying on three new techniques for reconstructing the functions of rooms and buildings (see *developing techniques*).



Copper Age societies between the Agricultural and Urban Revolutions

Two themes of research have since long been at the top of the agenda of archaeologists working in Anatolia and the Near East. This is on the one hand the transformation from a nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle to a sedentary agricultural lifestyle during the 10th-8th millennia BC (traditionally called the Agricultural Revolution), and on the other hand the development of the first state societies with urban centers, kings and writing systems at the end of the 4th millennium BC (the so-called Urban Revolution). The period in between, including the centuries during which Tell Kurdu was inhabited, has until recently been somewhat neglected by archaeologists.

Only in recent years have scholars realized that the cultural developments taking place during that period deserve to be studied in their own right. Moreover, current views of the so-called Urban Revolution hold that in order to come to a better understanding of what happened at that time, it is crucial that we also become better informed about the many seminal developments in the preceding periods. This insight has resulted in a focus on sites with extensive occupation during the Halaf (ca. 5,500 to 4,800 BC) and Ubaid (ca. 4,800 to 4,400 BC) periods in eastern Syria as well as in southeastern Anatolia. The Tell Kurdu project plays an important role in this trend.

One of the most remarkable and still enigmatic aspects of Copper Age societies is that they produced and used similar styles of material culture over vast regions. From western Iran, through Mesopotamia and Syria, and into the Anatolian highlands, people made a very distinct, beautifully painted pottery style that we call Halaf pottery. This enormous 'cultural horizon' suggests that there was a great increase in this period in long-distance interaction and exchange. And this, many centuries before the invention of the wheel! Many of the details of this remarkable phenomenon, however, are still unclear. Tell Kurdu is in a prime location to begin elucidating its background. It is near the western margins of the cultural horizon, but in many ways still firmly part of the Halaf world. In other categories of material culture, local styles predominate, while influences from central Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean are apparent as well. Tell Kurdu offers an opportunity, therefore, to study how a single community created its own distinct lifestyle, incorporating and building on influences from several parts of the Near East.

Life at an excavation

An excavation project is always a team effort, and the Tell Kurdu project is no exception to this. Our team this year consisted of 16 researchers, coming from 5 countries and 11 universities. Most were archaeologists, several working as 'trench supervisors', others working in the field lab as ceramic, lithic and archaeometric specialists. In addition, we had several archaeology students from Mustafa Kemal University of the nearby town of Antakya on our team, as well as a governmental representative overseeing the excavation. In the field, we would have been helpless without 17 workmen and 4 pottery-washing ladies from the surrounding villages.

Because the Tell Kurdu project is still a young one, we have not established our own 'dig-house' yet. Luckily, the president of Mustafa Kemal University in Antakya allowed us to live in the guest house of his university and use part of the sports arena as our field lab. With the exception of Saturday (our holiday), our days began at 4:00 am when we woke up in the dark and stumbled to the lab where we had a small breakfast of coffee and cookies. Getting up at this hour was necessary to be at the site by dawn, as we had a 45 minute drive to the site.



Dawn at the dig, 5:30 am

There were many mornings when we felt lucky to have such a long ride; some used it to catch up on sleep, others to slowly wake up. It is important to be at the site before the sun comes out to avoid the worst of the afternoon heat and because the early morning light is better for photography. Moreover, light of dawn enables us to see the slight differences in soil color which are essential to identify mudbrick walls. Differentiating walls from the collapse and other deposits that fills the rooms and houses after they have been abandoned for over 7000 years is difficult, sometimes even for the best

trained archaeologists. But it is precisely this challenge that makes it so exhilarating to discover individual walls, then whole buildings along streets and before long, a neighborhood.

Excavation involves exposing ancient buildings and artifacts, but it also means removing those finds from their original context. It is therefore of crucial importance to record in as much detail as possible where finds come from and which artifacts were found together. It is this 'contextual' information that allows archaeologists to discover the stories behind the artifacts they excavate. The high standards of

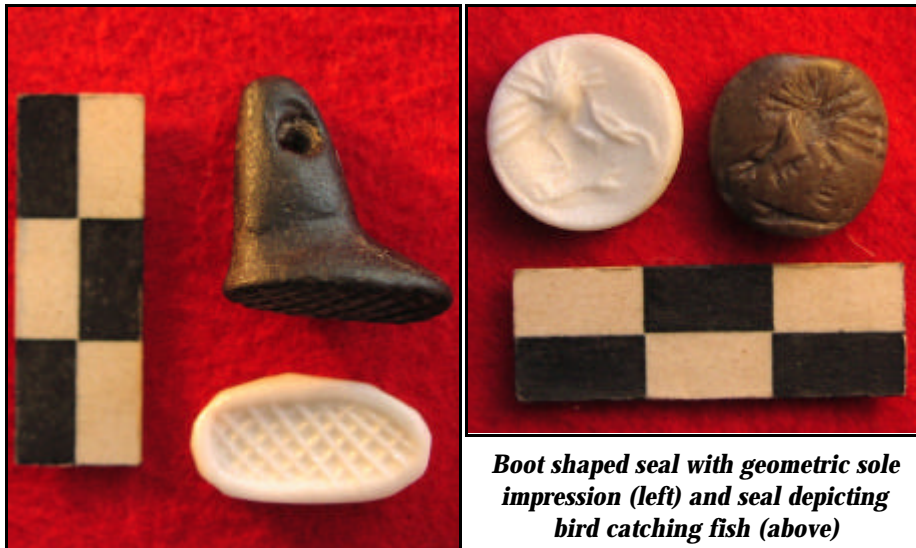


Aerial shot of houses and streets at Tell Kurdu

Unearthing exciting finds

Our excavations yielded a wide array of different artifacts, some of which are quite rare. Several classes of artifacts are worth mentioning. One of the most exciting artifact groups is stamp seals. While most of the seals have a geometric design as is common for this period, some were of interesting shapes, namely one in the shape of a boot and another of a human. Absolute highlight among the artifacts was one non-geometric seal, depicting a bird-of-prey about to grab a fish with its claws. The fine craftsmanship used to carve this tiny stone is outstanding. There are several other finds made of stone. This includes a number of stone axes of different shapes and sizes that may have served as prestige goods in this period and most unusually, a large macehead made of a hard stone, possibly of diorite which has been elaborately incised.

Objects made of other material classes such as a large collection of obsidian tools, bone tools, mostly awls as well as painted ceramic vessels were found.



Boot shaped seal with geometric sole impression (left) and seal depicting bird catching fish (above)

Developing new techniques of analysis

How do archaeologists determine what activities took place in ancient houses and other architectural structures? Knowledge about where cooking, eating, living, ritual activities, storage, and craft production took place may provide important information concerning how peoples of the past organized their living space and structured their belief systems.

Traditionally, archaeologists have relied on the physical buildings, the types of fixed features such as hearths, bins, basins, altars etc. as well as the artifacts found within these structures to determine how spaces were used. However, interpretations are often imprecise and controversial. Recent developments in micro-archaeological techniques provide an alternative and less controversial means for investigating the nature of architectural structures.

At Tell Kurdu three micro-archaeological methods for analyzing floors of buildings, namely micro-artifact analysis, soil chemistry and soil micromorphology are used as complements to the study of architecture and macro-artifact distributions. These techniques are much more

sensitive and allow us to detect a finer range of activities as well the intensity of use of different spaces and the history and changes in room use. Samples for analyses were taken from the floors of all rooms and will be analyzed in the upcoming months. We pride ourselves in the fact that Tell Kurdu is one of the few excavations in Anatolia and in fact, in the entire Near East that has begun to use these finer techniques. Below is a description of each one of these techniques:

Microartifacts: Microartifacts are small artifacts (less than 1 cm in size) that become embedded within packed earth floors and occupational surfaces. Systematic analysis of microartifacts may help determine room and ultimately building function. Further, fraction sizes may reflect the degree of trampling and hence the access patterns within architectural complexes, important when determining the private or public nature of rooms. The analysis involves the patient sorting of these artifacts from the soil samples.

Micromorphology: In addition to

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Underground discoveries without excavating

Archaeologists have developed several techniques to gain an idea of the subsurface features without putting a single spade to the ground. These kinds of techniques are of great assistance to archaeology, as they are relatively cheap, non-destructive and make it possible to decide on the most suitable excavation strategy before the digging even starts.

One of these techniques, magnetometry analysis, was used in 1998 and 1999 at different parts of the Tell Kurdu mound. This technique measures minute differentiations in the direction of the magnetic field. These are caused by variations in the material, consistency and character of the soil. Stone wall foundations, baked clay ovens, pits, mudbrick wall or trash deposits each affect the magnetic field in a slightly different way. The resulting map does not show well-defined and easily identifiable features, but gives an indication about where to expect walls and other underground structures.

History of the Tell Kurdu excavations

We are not the first ones to investigate Tell Kurdu. In fact, the site has long had a certain fame among pre-historians. This is thanks to the work of the famous Professor Robert Braidwood of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. He excavated at the site in 1938 for a full 11 days, and used the artifacts and those from other excavations in the Amuq Valley to establish a chronological sequence that is still widely used today by archaeologists working in Anatolia and Syria. In his scheme, the occupation levels at Tell Kurdu represent Amuq phases C, D and E, or the Copper Age.

After this brief episode, it was almost 60 years before archaeologists turned their attention to the Amuq Valley once again. In 1995 Professor Aslıhan Yener of the same University of Chicago initiated the Amuq Valley Regional Project, of which the Tell Kurdu project is part. In 1998 and 1999 there were two seasons of excavations at Tell Kurdu under the direction of Dr. Yener. Those seasons were used to gain a general sense of the occupation history of the mound, through small-scale excavations in different parts of the site, through magnetometry analysis and systematic mapping of the topography of the mound and initial material culture studies.

These investigations have prepared the ground for a new phase of the Kurdu project that began with the excavation season of 2001 and is set to continue for a number of years.

New techniques

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determining activity areas and traffic patterns, micromorphological thin sections can provide time-depth, making it possible to reconstruct the use history of a room or building. This determination is important since the function of ritual structures usually remains consistent through time, whereas in domestic architecture one expects a greater fluctuation in activities.

Soil Chemistry: Since many activities leave identifiable chemical residues, soil samples were collected from all floors to reconstruct room function. Using a 50 cm grid soil was collected in sterile bags and brought to the Bođaziçi University Archaeometry Research Laboratory for analysis.

Ayşen Uygur and Gülçin Çakmakçý
patiently sorting micro-artifacts in the
lab after a day of excavation.



Future plans for the Tell Kurdu Excavation Project

The Tell Kurdu project is a long-term research project. Based on the previous campaigns, we expect that the site will continue for many years to yield important discoveries and scientific insights into the early history of the Amuq Valley, and the beginnings of Anatolian civilizations.

For the next season, we have two major goals. Firstly, our plan is to begin building a 'dig house' at the site. This will include rooms where the team members live during the excavations, lab rooms for our specialists and conservators, object photography and find registration, as well

as storage space. The land around the site belongs to the Ministry of Culture in Ankara, and is available to us for the construction of a dig house. For the building itself, however, we are presently looking for funds.

Secondly, we plan to expand the excavated area on the northern part of the site, in order to complement our findings from this year. This will be at a somewhat smaller scale than this year's undertakings, but funds are sought for this part of the project too.

A new phase of excavations is planned for 2003 and after, once we have

established good facilities at the site. Our efforts have been concentrated until now on the northern part of the site. This part of the settlement was abandoned around 5,000 BC, while occupation continued on the southern part of the site for several centuries longer. This will present a rare opportunity to study the changing character of the settlement throughout a sequence of occupation levels, which will contribute greatly to our understanding of developments in the social, political and economic organization of this key period in early human history.



Kurdu Newsletter ***Incised stone mace head (right) and three painted ceramic vessels recovered from the excavation of a burial (above)***
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Life at an excavation

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today's excavations require meticulous drawing, photography and mapping of finds before they are taken out of the soil. This kept us and the trench supervisors busy in the field every day.

The weather in the Amuq Valley is extremely hot especially in the summer months when we were excavating. To avoid the scorching afternoon heat, we ended our excavations at 1:00 pm and returned to our guest house. The kitchen staff prepared us a hot lunch and we devoured these meals even though we were usually still covered in dust and sweat. After lunch we showered and took a short nap before we began working on our notes and the processing of the finds. The lab work went smoothly as everyone had an assigned task and we managed to keep up with the registration and preliminary analysis of the influx of artifacts. Meanwhile, our specialists used the lab to study the ceramics and chipped stone tools that we brought in every day, and our illustrator drew all the small finds.



Rana and Hadi Özbal taking floor samples for chemical analysis.

Acknowledgements

We owe many thanks to countless people and institutions for their help and assistance with the season's excavation. First of all, the season would not have been possible without Aslıhan Yener, the permit holder for Tell Kurdu and the director of the 1998 and 1999 excavation seasons, who had confidence and trust in our ability to co-direct the season.



We would also like to thank the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute for overall support. In addition, we are grateful to the Rector of Mustafa Kemal University, Prof. Dr. Haluk Yipek who provided housing and laboratory facilities for us and assisted us with countless issues throughout the season. Our appreciation to the Ministry of Culture who issued the permission to excavate as well as the Antakya Museum who offered advice and assistance cannot go without mention. We would also like to acknowledge the help of both governmental representatives, who monitored our project, Ünal Demirer from the Antalya Museum, and Hakkı Alhan from the Gaziantep

Museum.

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How to contact us

We would like to hear your reactions! If you have any questions or remarks about the Tell Kurdu project and its future plans, please contact us.

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