

Domuztepe 2011

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We have known since the start of the Domuztepe project in 1995 that, between ca 6100 and ca 5500 BC, Domuztepe was one of the largest settlements in the Middle East. This gives it particular importance in the study of how large communities formed prior to urbanism. This is an era in which the elaborately painted Halaf pottery is the most prominent characteristic of the material culture of the site. The 2011 season of excavation at the site was particularly exciting because it has given us a compelling glimpse into the earlier history of the settlement. Much of the excavation was concerned with the Ceramic Neolithic, between ca 6800 and ca 6100 BC, and we now suspect that, during this period, Domuztepe may already have been a very large site indeed. Certainly the total depth of the seventh millennium deposits is much greater than those previously excavated from the Halaf period.

Excavation at the site took place between mid-July and mid-September. The work was once again a joint project of the University of Manchester and the British Museum, directed by Stuart Campbell with Alexandra Fletcher as deputy director. Core financial support came from both institutions as well as the British Institute at Ankara. We were very happy to be joined in 2011 by our new Turkish assistant director, Mücella Erdalkiran from Ege University. We were also fortunate to have a truly excellent temsilci, Fatih Mehmet Yıldırım from Kayseri Museum. The staff of the Kahramanmaraş Museum under the direction of Ayşe Ersoy provided, as always, patient and valued support for the project. The project team, both staff and workmen, carried out the real hard work of the season. In 2011, excavations were confined to Operation I, on the southern summit of the site. This work fell into three distinct sections.

In the north of the area, we continued excavation below the layers which are transitional between the earliest Halaf and the preceding Ceramic Neolithic. Painted pottery was extremely rare and the ceramic assemblage was dominated by dark, burnished wares. Some were very well made and decoration by fine incision was relatively common. This type of material has been known previously from the early 20th century British excavations at Sakce Gözü (only 20km south of Domuztepe) but not as a well-documented assemblage. The architecture from this phase was also very different. In the Halaf levels of the site, architecture was generally flimsy and, apart from stone foundations, often rather ephemeral, probably being made substantially from organic materials that do not survive. In contrast, this season we excavated parts of a well-preserved Ceramic Neolithic building complex with mud walls standing up to 50cm high. It was a multi-phase structure composed of small rectangular rooms opening onto a courtyard, which had some sort of low, rectangular platform at its centre. This more substantial architecture certainly suggests that other cultural features may have changed in parallel to the shifts in pottery



Excavating the upper portion of the Ceramic Neolithic building

traditions. It also offered a first hint that archaeological deposits may have accumulated faster and to greater depths during the Ceramic Neolithic than in the later Halaf.

The second aim was to complete the excavation of a late Halaf well in the centre of Operation I. In 2009, excavation in the well had stopped about 2m below the surface due to safety concerns. The Curtiss T. Brennan & Mary G. Brennan Foundation provided funding in 2011 for the complete excavation of the well, most of which was devoted to appropriate management of the obvious risks. When it was fully excavated the well cut over 8m through the archaeological strata of the site until it reached the water table below the modern plain. Standing at the bottom of a well, underneath a substantial höyük, is a remarkable and rather unique experience! What was even more unusual was that the well appears to have been backfilled almost as soon as it had been dug. Interpretation is still at its early stages but it appears that the well may have been dug either to extract a very small amount of water from this specific location or perhaps to deposit something.



A rare example of a painted pot from the late Ceramic Neolithic building



Emerging from the late Halaf well

It was equally unexpected that the inhabitants of Domuztepe backfilled the lower part of the well entirely with material excavated from the lower strata of the site, presumably obtained during the digging of the well. Both the pottery and the lithics from this fill are distinctively early Ceramic Neolithic. This suggests at least limited awareness by the Halaf well diggers that the site had a previous occupational history and also had had a changing material culture; this may offer an important clue to the interpretation of the well.

Since the sides of the well shaft had to be reinforced during excavation, we were able to take the opportunity to cut the sides back to create a very narrow sounding through the whole 8m of settlement deposits. Although the data are clearly limited, this has provided a deep sequence that would otherwise have been unthinkable. All the deposits down to the natural soil contained ceramics, although the earlier phases are probably very early in the seventh millennium BC. We were also fortunate that the early material which had been returned to the well shaft by its original excavators considerably augmented the collection from cutting back the sides of the well. This provided an excellent assemblage of material from the early phases of Domuztepe. Based on our new knowledge of the Operation I sequence at Domuztepe and our existing information on the later deposits elsewhere on the site, it now seems highly probable that a long and well-preserved Ceramic Neolithic phase underlies the Halaf occupation across most of the site.

The final area we excavated in 2011 was also in the middle of Operation I and was the continuation of work started in 2009 to define the date and nature of the occupation south of the Red Terrace, a major feature that ran east-west across the area for at least 500 years. Perhaps the biggest surprise here was the discovery that all our work in 2009 had been carried out within a very extensive pit. Two Halaf period crouched burials were also discovered, along with an isolated skull. Both had been truncated by later prehistoric activity but they provide rare examples of individual on-site burials at Domuztepe. This area also produced one of the finds of the season. This was a lozenge worked out of a piece of silver; this is probably native silver, beaten thin and folded to shape. While we have previously found two native silver beads at Domuztepe, this slightly predates them and can currently be considered the earliest piece of worked silver in the world.

Alongside the excavations at Domuztepe, Ben Geary from the University of Birmingham also took a series of environmental samples from around the site, with funding from the Wainwright Fund for Near Eastern Archaeology. Two deep sample trenches were machine cut beyond the site boundaries, and a further core was taken from the bottom of the well. These have provided important samples that should contribute to the reconstruction of the ancient environment around the settlement of Domuztepe.



Unique stone bucrania pendant, found on the surface of the site near to Operation I